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Visual Representation of Black Individuals at the Forefront of Underground Railroad Interpretation

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Visual Representation of Black Individuals at the Forefront of Underground Railroad Interpretation:

A Visual Case Study of the 'One More River to Cross' Exhibition

A Thesis in
Museum Studies

By
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Abstract

This thesis is grounded in a reflection and analysis of the building of an institution whose foundation and visuals position the narratives of Black individuals at the forefront of Underground Railroad interpretation. In 2018, the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center opened to the public after decades in the making. Its permanent exhibition, *One More River to Cross*, set in motion a shift in power – of whose stories are represented and shared – generated by visual activism.

"Between the American Revolution in 1776 and the end of the Civil War in 1865, thousands of freedom seekers escaped slavery in the southern United States. Many relied on a network of people and places called the Underground Railroad."[1] The nature of the Underground Railroad was to operate just out of view, to aid and create the opportunities for enslaved persons to make it to free states and Canada. Because it was necessary to keep the movement hidden, evidence of these operations is rarely depicted visually. This thesis explores the creation of the *One More River to Cross* exhibition and calls for exhibit design and interpretation to be more inclusive utilizing a critical lens, to generate a shift in how we understand the Underground Railroad.

I argue that by only exhibiting visuals that are readily available, the most critical elements of history are left out. This in turn continues systemic oppressive practices and behaviors. Throughout the last half century, exhibitions in museums and other educational and public settings rely on visuals used again and again, or that are easily accessible, to depict the stories of the Underground Railroad. These visuals are most often photographs or paintings of

[1] Network Wall, *One More River to Cross* Exhibition. Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center, 2018.

white abolitionists, sympathizers and Quakers, and their homes, properties, or material possessions. Black individuals are most often depicted on the run or hiding and are rarely specific persons recognized in a non-demeaning light. This is a result of the continued systemic oppression of Black individuals stemming from slavery, who would not have had the privilege to record, document and display their own stories. When only the visuals most readily available or easily accessible are used in the interpretation and presentation of the Underground Railroad narratives, we often fail to capture the reality of those whose experiences defined the fight for freedom. These experiences are not only representative of the past, but they are also intertwined within our cultures and communities to this day.

Museums and caretakers of public history need to expand how they think of utilizing visuals – of whom, by whom, for whom, who is there, and who is not. Every image has power.

Acknowledgments

All of those who have come before us;
Their stories of strength and resilience have built our foundation for the future.

This publication is important in that it is one of few published documentations of the collective work used to build the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center. It is my hope that over time, this story, and the many other pieces that are not told in this thesis, are shared with wider audiences. In every word written is Bill, Denise, Chris, Sara C., Judy, Tom, Seth, Zach, Barry, Cait, Sara S., Tim, Braden, Saladin, Guinevere, Deirdre, Kiara, Karolyn, and the hundreds of people who lent their expertise to make it a reality. I am forever grateful to have learned from you and to have worked alongside you.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

On a cold day in January 2017, a group of us sat at plastic tables inside the former 1863 United States Customs House in Niagara Falls, New York, just steps away from the Whirlpool Bridge that connects the United States to Canada. The heat was turned off in the building and we worked with coats and gloves on as the snow fell outside. This was the launch for the exhibition design process for the new Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center and its permanent exhibition, *One More River to Cross*. The name follows the journey of thousands of freedom seekers across the Niagara River and is a nod to the Black American spirituals of the same name. The goal of this exhibition design process was to build the institution into a space that innovatively highlights Black individuals' stories at the forefront of the Underground Railroad in Niagara Falls – stories that have been untold and undiscovered by the general public since the time of the American institution of slavery.

Exactly 160 years ago, the walls around us and the floors beneath us were being constructed in an area of Niagara Falls formerly known as Suspension Bridge Village. It is less than 25 feet from the front doors sat the Niagara Falls Suspension Bridge, built by renowned architect John Roebling in 1848, and incorporated rail traffic in 1855. This bridge funneled thousands of freedom seekers across the Niagara River from the border of the United States to Canada. This bridge was all that stood between slavery and freedom. The Niagara River was the last obstacle, one more river to cross. This significance cannot be overstated.

I have chosen to write this thesis based upon the building of the exhibition with a focus on visual curation. My experience, recollection and research serve as the basis for my position. I was involved directly in the project beginning in 2015 as the Project Manager and continued as the Interim Director after opening to the public in the spring of 2018. At the time, I had recently

completed all my graduate coursework, with the exception of my thesis. Now, writing years later, I have had the opportunity to see the project from design, fabrication, installation, and all the way through five years of operations. This experience brings a unique perspective for a thesis, one that can serve as a model for others. Throughout this thesis, I will discuss the processes of visual selection and creation to make the argument for the continued need to address inadequacies and lack thereof of visual representation of Black individuals in Underground Railroad interpretation.

Chapter III, "One More River to Cross," focuses on the history of the Underground Railroad in Niagara Falls and how the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center was created. It is a story mostly unknown to the public except for a small group of Niagara Falls residents, descendants, and historians. It documents my introduction to the project and the next steps taken by the design and stakeholder team to bring these stories to life through exhibition design and interpretation.

Chapter IV, The Power of Visuals, addresses the process of rethinking how we use historical visual assets. I focus on five key areas of image use in the exhibition design. Starting with the "Beginning," I share a sample of the images that were used by the Heritage Center in materials before the exhibition was designed (pre-2018). The focal image shows a group of Black male waiters from the Central Hotel in Cooperstown, about 250 miles from Niagara Falls, in approximately 1890. This was one of only a handful of images that were used to show Black individuals in any relation to the Underground Railroad in Niagara Falls before 2018. The second image was the "Discovery" of the sketch of John Morrison, the head waiter at the Cataract House Hotel during the height of the Underground Railroad. Following, I provide examples of images showing the critical importance of "Visibility" of Black freedom seekers,

activists, and abolitionists, the process of an "Active Shift in Power," and the Heritage Center's Freedom Gallery connecting "Past to Present."

Chapter V, E.B. Lewis Watercolors, examines the power of creating something new as a solution to the lack of representation in the historical record. With the goal of fostering a creative solution and process, the design team reached out to award-winning watercolor artist and illustrator, E.B. Lewis. Lewis was instrumental in creating a strategic effort to center Black freedom seekers in the Underground Railroad narrative through artistic creation.

Chapter VI, Challenges, Barriers, or Not Really? presents a critical lens on museums' inadequate visual representations and explores an experience visiting the Museum of Fine Arts Boston through such a lens. With a thoughtful process and using thinking-outside-the-box approaches, we can actively shift the power to the people for whom it always belonged through visual representation.

I argue that it is necessary to actively change the way we approach interpretation and the representation of Black individuals. There are cases across diverse mediums where people, organizations and institutions are taking a strong stance on who gets to be represented in our public sphere. However, it does not happen in enough spaces and places. Exhibition design and interpretation need to be approached with a new critical way of thinking, specifically, the practice of utilizing images that position benevolent white individuals as the heroes of history. It is time to re-imagine and shift to a more accurate and authentic lens positioning Black individuals at the forefront as the heroes of their own and our collective stories.

Identity and Language Usage

Throughout this thesis, I use the racial identifiers of Black, white and Indigenous. I have chosen to do this based upon many hours of conversations with Black colleagues, community

members and friends. While the use of Black to identify a person of African descent is not as common amongst scholarship, I have made this decision to align with the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center and those whose lived experiences have determined that Black is often a preferred racial identifier.

When discussing the history of the Underground Railroad, the term “slave” has historically been used to describe those held against their will in bondage. Unfortunately, it is still used in commonplace vernacular today. Why does this matter? “It is important to consider who produced the traditional Underground Railroad lexicon of ‘slave’ and ‘owner’ and to determine whether the values reflected in that vocabulary should be reinforced today.”[2] Slavery was and is a condition imposed upon individuals against their will and is not a sole identifier to their being. We use the terms 'freedom seeker' and 'enslaved', instead of 'slave' or ‘fugitive’ as these terms prioritize a condition that was forced upon them. The term 'freedom seeker' exudes the self-agency of Black individuals who were active in obtaining their own freedom and not waiting to be freed. Appropriate use of language helps us open a dialogue about the lasting effects of slavery and fosters empathy.

“For example, when talking about enslaved people who are escaping to freedom in the North, we don’t refer to them as fugitives,” Guinevere Blue, Heritage Center team member (2018-2019), shared in an online educational video for the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center. “‘Fugitives’ implies that they have done something terribly wrong. [But] here we refer to the enslaved as freedom seekers, and what we are doing here is showing that African

[2] Rethinking Underground Railroad Terminology: Teacher’s Guide. Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Commission Inc., 2018. https://www.niagarafallsundergroundrailroad.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Teachers-Guide-to-Rethinking-UGRR-Terminology.pdf

Americans were not waiting to be free, but they were freeing themselves. And also giving them that autonomy and agency that has been taken away from them."[3]

Saladin Allah, community leader and Heritage Center team member (2018-present), explains the Heritage Center's approach, "In learning about the incredible stories of freedom seekers and abolitionists here in the City of Niagara Falls, we wanted to make sure that our guests connected with their stories of resilience, perseverance, and the ability to overcome obstacles by recognizing their infinite potential. An important part of that is making sure that the language connects, that people are able to relate. So, one of the phrases that we use in our Heritage Center is 'freedom seeker' – that's a universal theme." Allah goes on to say, "It also points to the reality that there are many people today that still find freedom a very elusive concept."[4] Note the importance of connecting the past to the present to recognize and understand freedom in our world today.

Terminology

Preferred Language	**Traditional Language**
Freedom Seeker	Slave
Freedom Seeker	Runaway
Enslaved / Held in slavery	Slave
Enslaver*	Owner
Refugee	Fugitive
Abolitionist*	Abolitionist

*Not always white.

[3] Guinevere Caitlin Blue, "Defining Language", Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center educational video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tA9qr7rNoS4

[4] Saladin Allah, "An Introduction to Language", Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center educational video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rk6G9uRO3GM

Chapter II: Literature Review

> Naming is a form of power, and visual images have the persuasive power to identify and define place and personality.
>
> – Guy C. McElroy, *The Art of Exclusion; Representing Blacks in the Nineteenth Century*

This literature review includes scholarship from fields of photography, art history, history, and contemporary art to paint a picture of the shaping of identity of Black individuals and the essence of Blackness during the time of the Underground Railroad. Albert Boime explains that, "the African slave trade, beginning in the mid-fifteenth century and continuing for the next four hundred years, was one of the most important phenomenons in the history of the modern world, and no single human being attempting to make a verbal or visual statement about it could be free from bias."[5] In fact, more often than not, visuals of Blackness and Black subjects are represented by those holding power and control, and those who oppress and enslave. To further quote Boime, "Prejudices, fears, hopes, and every type of moral assumption are channeled through images that serve as instruments of persuasion and control."[6] Despite the overwhelming amount of visuals created by oppressors, who were themselves not Black, a minority of works were created of, by and for Black individuals during the time of the Underground Railroad. Creating and utilizing visual works by Black individuals is a goal that is still sought today, in 2023.

The emphasis of this literature review is primarily on images created during the Underground Railroad with a brief touch on emancipation. Art historians, Guy C. McElroy and Albert Boime, additionally focus on Reconstruction and the Jim Crowe eras, as does Anna

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[5] Albert Boime, *The Art of Exclusion; Representing Blacks in the Nineteenth Century* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), xiii.
[6] Albert Boime, *The Art of Exclusion; Representing Blacks in the Nineteenth Century* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), xiii.

Arabindan-Kesson, whose historical understanding is shaped and presented through contemporary art by Black artists. Their scholarship goes beyond the scope of this thesis and should be viewed in the greater context of the American identity throughout the past two centuries since the ending of American slavery.

To research and comprehend the visualization of Blackness in America, scholarship has focused on a few key artworks. *Watson and the Shark*, by John Singleton Copley from 1778, has been a subject of great study for its inclusion of a Black man in the triangular focal zone of the painting at such an early year in America's history and at a time when Black individuals were rarely represented, or if so, were represented to control the narrative of who Black individuals were and were not. Guy C. McElroy and Albert Boime decipher the meaning of *Watson and the Shark* in their books, *Facing History; The Black Image in American Art 1710-1940*, and *The Art of Exclusion; Representing Blacks in the Nineteenth Century*, respectively. The most profound element of the painting is the position of the Black man at the top of the pyramidal composition. Boime writes about this shift in composition for Black individuals. "History is conceived of as an irreversible and momentous impulse in the direction of social progress. Progress in this dynamically channeled movement requires the emancipation of the most oppressed member of society, now removed from the bottom of the social pyramid and installed on the summit – the point of deliverance."[7] This detail, a rarity and first of its time, is worthy of a more widespread understanding. While art historians McElroy and Boime dedicate a significant amount of interpretation to the Black man in *Watson and the Shark*, the Museum of Fine Arts Boston,

[7] Albert Boime, *The Art of Exclusion; Representing Blacks in the Nineteenth Century* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), 53.

where the painting is held and exhibited, does not make note of the significance of the Black man, or acknowledge his presence. I will discuss this further in Chapter VI.

Throughout the scholarship of art historians who study artworks inclusive of Black individuals, many more examples are available that depict Blackness from a white and oppressor lens. It can be challenging to discern without studying the greater context of who created these images and who had the privilege and access to learn how to create these images and then do so. This can skew our understanding of Blackness in the past two centuries.

McElroy and Boime both present an art history of Blackness in America during the time of the Underground Railroad, and effectively ensure adequate representation. Their research and theories allow for a foundation from which to build upon as further research continues on the subject. McElroy includes artwork by Black artists, specifically noting Joshua Johnson who was born in 1770. Johnson's "*Portrait of a* Man is one of only two surviving portraits of blacks by Johnson," claims McElroy. He goes on to say, "Nineteenth century Baltimore sustained a thriving black middle class, and the lack of a successor to Johnson can probably be traced to the rise of Black Codes, progressively restrictive economic limitations placed on blacks in many American cities as early as the 1820s."[8] This example of scholarship goes beyond presenting only the immediate visual evidence, but dives deeper into what was happening at the time that had influence over the creation of artwork for the public, and of by whom and for whom.

In the painting, *Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences*, by Samuel Jennings, 1792, we see a more romanticized view of abolitionism and equality. The comparison of *Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences* and *Watson and the Shark*, is explored by Guy C. McElroy in

[8] Guy C. McElroy, *Facing History; The Black Image in American Art 1710-1940* (San Francisco and Washington D.C.: Bedford Arts, Publishers, in association with The Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1990), 11.

Facing History; The Black Image in American Art 1710-1940. While the artwork is the first abolitionist painting, the narrative is typical of the standard or traditional Underground Railroad visual interpretation we still see today. The focus is on the altruistic support of white abolitionists whose efforts overshadowed those of Black individuals themselves in securing their own freedom and livelihood. The painting depicts a white noblewoman with a severed chain at her feet and freed enslaved persons kneeling in gratitude, positioning Black individuals at the bottom. McElroy states, "In spite of the well-intentioned benevolence of Jenning's composition, *Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences* avoids presenting images that describe individual black people." McElroy continues, "nor does it suggest the capacity of blacks for defining their own destinies."[9] This last point is key to understanding the history of visual representation of Black individuals in America.

Building upon historical scholarship, Cheryl Finley explores the visualization of Black individuals during the time of the Underground Railroad and how artists have re-envisioned and resecured Black identity and ownership over history in her 2014 article, "Visual Legacies of Slavery and Emancipation."[10] Finley begins by discussing two works by artists who created artworks post-slavery, in 1945 and 1993 respectively. Finley goes on to theorize the practice of "symbolic possession of the past," of artists who reclaim past injustices through imagery and reassign their meaning and reinterpret identity, memory and history. This practice, she shows, is evident in the 1993 artwork, *Runaways*, by Glenn Ligon, whose artwork references the most

[9] Guy C. McElroy, *Facing History; The Black Image in American Art 1710-1940* (San Francisco and Washington D.C.: Bedford Arts, Publishers, in association with The Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1990), 8-9.
[10] Cheryl Finley, "Visual Legacies of Slavery and Emancipation" Callaloo 37, no. 4 (2014): 1023–32. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24265081.

accessed visual representation of enslaved persons – "runaways." The perspective is that of the oppressor, and only in a contemporary or post-slavery reimagining does the power begin to shift.

A far cry from this shift of power and ownership of one's own identity is the traditional representation of an enslaved person. We so often see images of slaves running away, shackles, enslaved persons picking cotton, and whips and chains employed upon human skin. This is how many people visualized and still see Black individuals, and "these images expressed an inability to comprehend a people whose appearance and behavior were judged to be different from their own, and thus inferior."[11] Representations of Black individuals during slavery and the Underground Railroad were most commonly envisioned, created and circulated by those who held power. It is most often their perspectives, opinions and preferences we see through the images. Boime writes extensively about the cruelty shown in images of the time to explain and showcase slavery to wider audiences. He writes, "Scenes of cruelty to black people in the United States both before and during the Civil War [also] focused on flogging."[12] A common photograph we typically see in interpretation is of the formerly enslaved person known as Gordon. Gordon is shown with his scarred back at a medical examination in a photograph taken in 1863.[13] While this photograph shows the horrors and cruelty of slavery, it also shows a Black man who succumbed to the condition of abuse forced upon him. This image is traumatic to many, and for others perpetuates the visual of Black individuals as oppressed.

The perspectives of these images transcend centuries, and today, we are most familiar with a fabricated identity by those in power whose objectives were to keep Black individuals in

[11] Guy C. Elroy, *Facing History; The Black Image in American Art 1710-1940* (San Francisco and Washington D.C.: Bedford Arts, Publishers, in association with The Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1990), xi.
[12] Albert Boime, *The Art of Exclusion; Representing Blacks in the Nineteenth Century* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), 77.
[13] Photograph by McPherson & Oliver, "Escaped slave Gordon, also known as "Whipped Peter," showing his scarred back at a medical examination", Baton Rouge, Louisiana, April 2, 1863.

the system of slavery. “It is impossible,” Anna Arabindan-Kesson writes, “to look and not see plantations and back-breaking labor, not see centuries of racial exploitation and oppression, not see this history repeated in the carceral system, in police brutality, in the economic and legislative marginalization of African Americans.”[14] In her work, *Black Bodies White Gold; Art, Cotton, and Commerce in the Atlantic World*, Arabindan-Kesson explores how the thing itself, cotton, and the visual representation of it, was a prime motivating factor behind the garnering of wealth through the enslavement of Black individuals.

Referencing contemporary art as well as artworks created and circulated during the time of the Underground Railroad, Arabindan-Kesson establishes the making of Blackness through the development of the United States. Similar to this thesis and the *One More River to Cross* exhibition at the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center, *Black Bodies White Gold*, combines a plethora of historical research alongside art – visual representation – to connect the past to the present. In fact, more historians and cultural theorists have begun to weave the threads of visual identity of the past with that of our world currently.

A descendant of an enslaved man named Renty recently brought a lawsuit against Harvard University for the continued ownership of degrading daguerreotype photographs showing enslaved people nude without their consent, including Renty. Tamara Lainer, great-great granddaughter of Renty, argued the court case, *Lainer vs. Harvard* in 2022. Ultimately, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court did not order Harvard University to return the photographs, however it upheld the motions related to the physical and emotional consequences Lanier suffered as a result of Harvard’s actions. Scholarship of these daguerreotypes,

[14] Anna Arabindan-Kesson, *Black Bodies White Gold; Art, Cotton, and Commerce in the Atlantic World* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2021), 2-3.

orchestrated by Harvard University professor Louis Agassiz (1807–1873), has been extensive in the years since the discovery of the photographs in the Harvard Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology by a librarian in 1976. In 2010, Molly Rogers published her book, *Delia's Tears; Race Science, and Photography in the Nineteenth Century America*, demonstrating a full history of the daguerreotypes and the people in them, including Renty and his daughter, Delia. Rogers writes, "The daguerreotype promised to show Americans the Truth about themselves and their nation, but there was a problem with this project of forging identity with the aid of a camera."[15] Rogers refers to the project of Louis Agassiz, where he set out to establish through scientific research utilizing the new medium of photography that Black individuals were inferior due to their race. Not only is this science absurd, traumatic and untrue, it adds to a visual narrative that continued to oppress enslaved persons and created a legacy that has continued through today as evident in Tamara Lainer's losing her court case against Harvard University.

While the objective of the daguerreotypes was to oppress and control Black individuals' identities, there were efforts by Black individuals themselves to utilize the new medium of photography to solidify their own identity. Frederick Douglass led the movement and effort to accomplish this. His efforts and those of others are discussed in several chapters of, *Pictures and Progress; Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity*, edited by Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith. Wallace and Smith write, "…Douglass imagined a [much more] autonomous African American viewer, seeking progress and improvement through a study of the self-objectified as image. In Douglass' account, African Americans are the primary

[15] Molly Rogers, *Delia's Tears; Race Science, and Photography in the Nineteenth Century America (*New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), 14.

and most important viewers of their own image."[16] This is where the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center's story begins – shifting the Underground Railroad narrative to self-agency of Black freedom seekers and formerly enslaved persons through visual representation.

[16] Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith, *Pictures and Progress; Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012), 8.

Chapter III: 'One More River to Cross'

> When I found I had crossed that line, I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person. There was such a glory over everything; the sun came like gold through the trees, and over the fields, and I felt like I was in Heaven.
>
> – Harriet Tubman

> Loud roared the waters of Niagara, but louder still ascended the anthem of praise from the overflowing heart of the freeman. And can we doubt that the strain was taken up by angel voices, and that through the arches of Heaven echoed and reechoed the strain:
>
> Glory to God in the Highest,
> Glory to God and Jesus too,
> One more soul is safe.
>
> – Harriet Tubman, *Scenes of the Life of Harriet Tubman*

Niagara Falls. We know it. Maybe we have traveled there as children with family to gaze in awe at the amazing force of water pouring over the edge. Or maybe a visit to the Falls is on our bucket list, and we often imagine what our first visit will be like. The natural beauty and power of the waterfall is captivating to all those who visit. For freedom seekers who were enslaved in the United States or escaping on the Underground Railroad before 1865, Niagara Falls held an all too pertinent meaning. The place where millions of visitors from all over the world have stood and still stand today to view the Falls, is one of the most important, yet mostly unknown place on the Underground Railroad. It is a place where there was one more river to cross – the Niagara River – from the land of slavery to the land of freedom.

"Between the American Revolution in 1776 and the end of the Civil War in 1865, thousands of freedom seekers escaped slavery in the southern United States by any means possible."[17] The institution of slavery in the United States was intentional, purposeful, horrific, and economically lucrative for those who held people in bondage. The system grew over time,

[17] Network Wall, *One More River to Cross* Exhibition. Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center, 2018.

since the beginnings of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and through the building of the foundation of the United States. The Underground Railroad formed as the resistance and was and is the network of people and places that assisted freedom seekers on their journey to freedom. In Niagara Falls, the Underground Railroad is the story of resistance, resiliency and of self-agency of freedom seekers themselves.

The network of assistance for freedom seekers arriving in Niagara Falls included Black individuals who worked as wait staff in the flourishing Niagara Falls hotel and tourism industry. These waiters formed the core of Underground Railroad activism and made Niagara Falls one of the most dramatic crossing points and important locations of the powerful struggle between slavery and freedom. Unlike the common notion that the Underground Railroad solely operated out of basements, attics, and tunnels – the stories of Niagara Falls took place out in the open and amongst the hustle and bustle of daily life in the small city.

Why Niagara Falls?

Dating back to before the land of the Niagara Falls region was occupied by European explorers and settlers, Indigenous communities known as the Haudenosaunee, nurtured the land and navigated the waters. Tuscarorans, of the Tuscarora Nation, built early stairs and a crossing point at the base of Niagara Falls. Over time the stairs were modified and ferry boats were introduced to create a regular crossing across the Niagara River. The geography of the Great Lakes give way to the Niagara River, which is one of the narrowest crossing points in this section of North America. Looking at a map, you will see that there were few places between the United States and Canada on the eastern side of the continent that allow for a narrow crossing along the waterways. It made Niagara Falls one of the most probable places for cross-water

transportation, and following, one of the most important crossing points on the Underground Railroad.

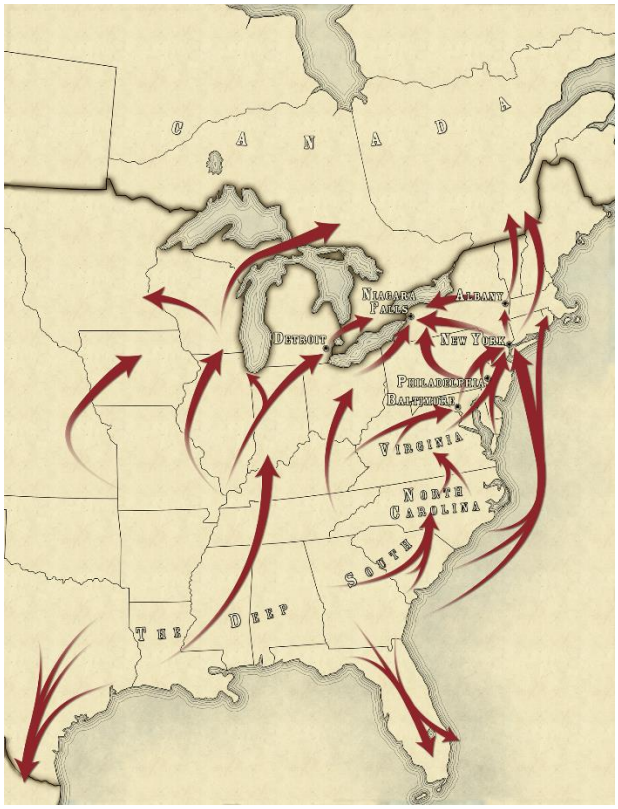

Figure 1. Routes of the Underground Railroad. Digital Graphic, 2017. Courtesy of the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center.

The Ferry Crossing, as it came to be known, was at the base of Prospect Point, located slightly south of where the Maid of the Mist is located today. In 1818, the first stairs built by Europeans were installed, and in 1820, Niagara Falls resident and hotel owner, Parkhurst Whitney, began a ferry service to Canada. There are various accounts and documentation of the stairs, ferry boats and later an inclined railway. Visual and written accounts provided by tourists and travelers document the use of the stairs and ferry to cross back and forth. Through historical records, historians have confirmed that freedom seekers used these same methods to cross the river. William H. Siener and Thomas A. Chambers explain, “We know from a number of

narratives published by the Philadelphia abolitionist and Underground Railroad organizer, William Still, that Niagara Falls was both an Underground Railroad crossing point into Canada, and a place in which refugees, and those who assisted them, regularly stayed."[18]

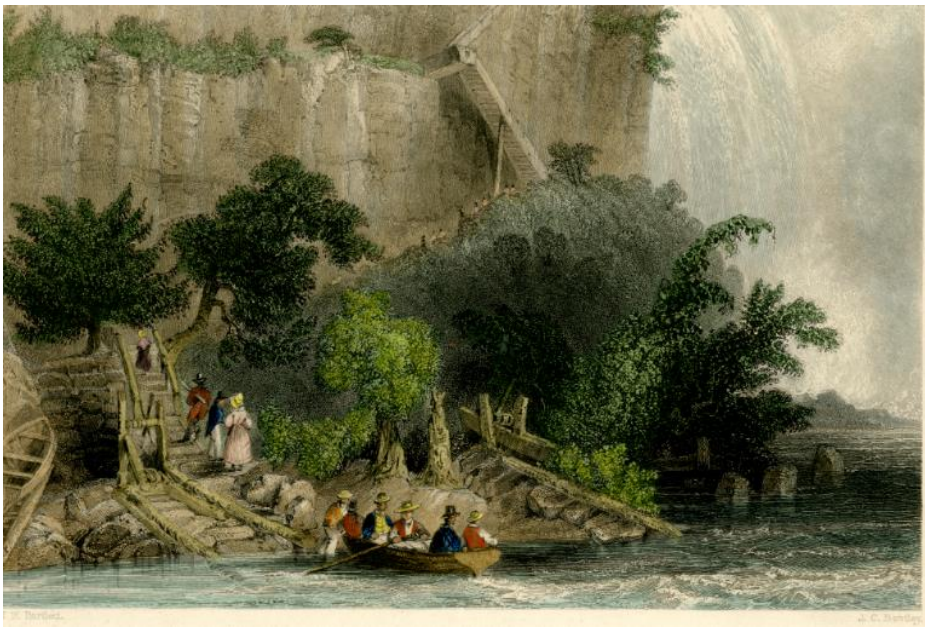

Figure 2. Travelers utilizing the stairs and a ferry boat to cross the Niagara River into Canada at the base of Niagara Falls. Bartlett Print, 1835. Courtesy of the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center.

About a mile north of the powerful flow of Niagara Falls was another major crossing point. It was the Suspension Bridge, built in 1848 as a carriage and foot bridge, and rebuilt in 1855 to incorporate rail traffic on the upper deck. This bridge was the spectacular design of engineer John Roebling and was intended to change the way goods and services could travel across the Niagara River connecting it with larger transportation networks. It did just that, and more importantly became a major crossing point on the Underground Railroad that funneled

[18] William H. Siener and Thomas A. Chambers, *Harriet Tubman, the Underground Railroad, and the bridges at Niagara Falls* (Afro-Americans in New York Life and History. 36.1 (Jan. 2012), 34.

thousands of freedom seekers to freedom in Canada. From the Suspension Bridge, freedom seekers could see the Falls on their left, the rushing rapids below, and freedom ahead of them. Harriet Tubman was one of the many freedom seekers to cross the Suspension Bridge via train. Historians have authenticated at least four instances of Tubman crossing, one of which she recounts in her autobiography to Sarah Bradford[19]. Tubman was assisting Joe Bailey and other freedom seekers out of Maryland. Joe was a large man, and the man who had enslaved him was motivated to capture Joe and enslave him once again. During the journey, Joe became despondent and started to believe that they would never make it to freedom in Canada. As they were riding the train about to cross the Suspension Bridge, Tubman beckoned to Joe to lift his head up and look at the Falls. Joe did not, however, as soon as they reached the Canadian side, Joe followed the conductor off the train and began crying and singing as his feet touched the ground.

[19] Sarah H. Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* (Auburn, New York: W.J. Moses, Printer, 1869).

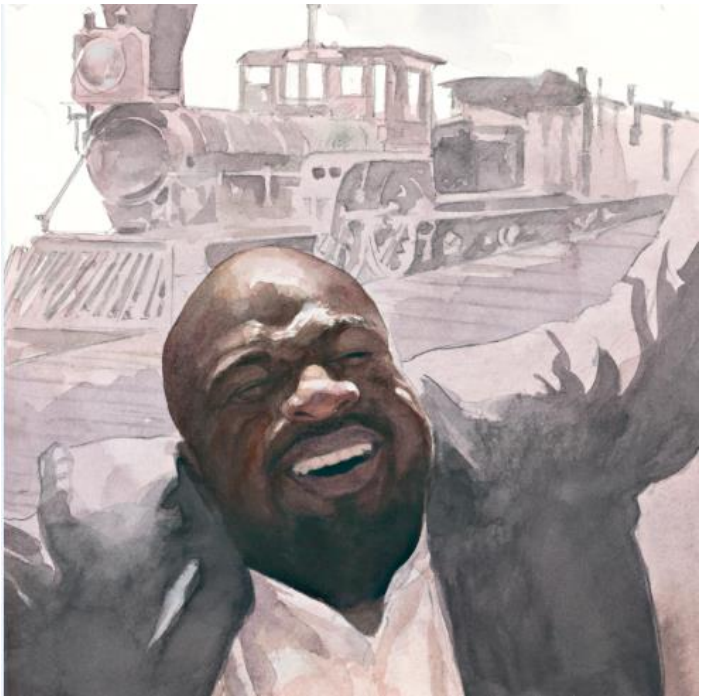

Figure 3. Joe Bailey arriving to Freedom after crossing the Suspension Bridge via train at the Clifton Depot, Canada. Illustration by E.B. Lewis for the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center, 2017.

In addition to the two major crossing points, there was most importantly a network of people ready to assist freedom seekers upon their arrival in Niagara Falls, orchestrated by the waiters at the Cataract House Hotel. The waiters at the Cataract House led double lives. While working in the dining rooms, they gave highly professional and efficient service. Behind the scenes, they escorted enslaved "property" across the Niagara River to freedom[20]. The wait staff was an entirely male workforce, many of whom had been born enslaved before finding freedom in the North. Freedom seekers often found their way to the Cataract House Hotel through the Underground Railroad network, traveling by foot, train or other means from hub cities. "Some [freedom seekers] were forwarded to Suspension Bridge near Niagara Falls by train; others from

[20] Cataract House Gallery, *One More River to Cross* Exhibition. Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center, 2018.

Elmira went by wagon until 1851 and thereafter went by train; and those who came from a more westerly direction went up through Pennsylvania by wagon to Black Rock [Buffalo] and Niagara Falls."[21] When they arrived in Niagara Falls, the waiters were ready to assist them. The head waiter, John Morrison, personally rowed freedom seekers to the other shore. In some cases, waiters banded together to prevent people from being recaptured.[22] According to 1860 census records, by this time there were over 60 Black waiters working at the Cataract House Hotel.[23]

Occasionally, freedom seekers came as captive servants with their enslavers to Niagara Falls as part of a honeymoon or family vacation from the South. On numerous occasions, waiters would assist freedom seekers in escaping to freedom right from the Cataract House. That was the case with a young woman who was enslaved by the Evans family from New Orleans. The waiters helped her escape when she went to the kitchen for milk. Her former enslaver warned others in his local paper, the *New Orleans Picayune*, "[I]t behooves all southern people traveling north to avoid the 'Cataract House' at the Falls of Niagara."[24] Visitors often ask, "if people were aware that the Underground Railroad was operating out of the Cataract House, why would people take a risk by going there with their property?" This brings up an opportunity for discussion around how people may have been thinking back then. It aligns with Evan's account in the *New Orleans Picayune.* He had assumed the hotel staff kidnapped her because he believed she would never leave on her own.

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[21] Don Papson and Tom Calarco, *Secret Lives of the Underground Railroad in New York City: Sydney Howard Gay, Louis Napoleon and the Record of Fugitives* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1856), 108.
[22] Cataract House Gallery, *One More River to Cross* Exhibition. Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center, 2018.
[23] U.S. Census 1860, Niagara County, New York, Population Schedule 1, Town of Niagara, 24-63.
[24] "Abduction of a Slave", *New Orleans Times-Picayune,* August 4, 1841.

Figure 4. Cataract House Hotel, stereoview c. 1860. Courtesy of the Niagara Falls Public Library for the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center.

It would seem with a history this important and a story so powerful that it would be well-known, and tourists would be able to visit a large museum to take in the awe of what happened here at one of the natural wonders of the world. There would be books written about John Morrison and Cecilia Reynolds,[25] the young woman who escaped from the Evans family – to name a few – and they would be celebrated as Harriet Tubman or other historical figures. However, due to over a century of invisibility, corruptness, and economic decline in Niagara Falls, this has not been so. Despite this, the people of Niagara Falls have held onto their stories of their ancestors, and with their determination we are able to remember what had been lost and overlooked for way too long.

[25] Karolyn Smardz Frost details Cecilia Reynolds' life and experience in her book, *Steal Away Home: One Woman's Epic Flight to Freedom - And Her Long Road Back to the South*, and is one of the few published works documenting the stories of freedom seekers in Niagara Falls.

A Community Knows Its History

The beginning of this story starts with the residents of Niagara Falls, as it did during the time of the Underground Railroad. For decades, many Niagara Falls community members recounted, documented, researched and made public, the stories of Harriet Tubman's journeys through Niagara Falls. Additionally, they shared Frederick Douglass' visit to speak here, and the stories of waiters who assisted freedom seekers at the final moments of their harrowing journeys.

In 2008, the work of community members, stakeholders and political leaders successfully brought forth the creation of the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Area, part of the New York State Heritage Area Program. "The Heritage Area preserves the historic role of the people of Niagara Falls in facilitating freedom for the oppressed. It recognizes an unparalleled density of resources, narratives, sites, and experiences related to that history, while celebrating the combination of this rich cultural heritage with the internationally recognized majesty of the Niagara Falls."[26] At the time of its inception, there were twenty New York State Heritage Areas in the program, focusing on preservation, education, recreation and economic revitalization.

The first objective of the Heritage Area in early 2009, was to create the management plan that would guide their work for the next few years. Research efforts were directed by Dr. Judith Wellman, whose research on the Underground Railroad, abolitionism, and the African American experience in Niagara Falls, has informed the basis of the study of Niagara Falls' relationship to the Underground Railroad. In June of 2015, I became directly involved in the project and much of this thesis reflects my experience, along with colleagues, of the creation of the Heritage Center. We did not know it then, but the stage that the project was in at the time was of critical importance. We had the opportunity to choose our course, a choice that we made again and again

[26] Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Area, Management Plan, 2011: 2.

over the next few years that positioned the Heritage Center as an innovative museum making deliberate effort to recenter Black individuals' stories, voices, and visual representation.

My involvement began when I was hired in a shared staff position with the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Area and the Niagara Falls National Heritage Area. The Niagara Falls National Heritage Area is one of 55 National Heritage Areas in the United States. Designated by the United States Congress in 2008, its mission is to preserve, protect and promote the historic, natural and cultural resources of the area stretching from Niagara Falls to Old Fort Niagara in Youngstown, New York. Both organizations came to an agreement to hire a staff person to share responsibilities in order to meet objectives from each to increase capacity.

As I started in my new position with the two heritage areas, I became familiar with the Management Plan that was developed and immersed myself in the stories of the Underground Railroad in Niagara Falls. Each page was a story of heroic action and strength in the wake of perilous danger. I often thought how I had never learned any of these stories in school. Now, I hear similar sentiments and observations from visitors constantly.

When I joined board meetings in 2015, the conversations revealed that the Heritage Area was stuck and unable to move forward. They had spent a couple of years working with a design firm to design the exhibition for a future interpretive center. I took the stance of observing and listening to members of the board and project team to see how they got there and where they were trying to go. I look at this time of listening as a necessary and critical part of our process. Working alongside Judith Wellman and Chairman Bill Bradberry, we revised the exhibition plan that was being developed by the design firm. I heard from Dr. Wellman and Bill Bradberry how disappointed the team was with the progress of the exhibition design. It was clear that the exhibition narrative did not reflect the stories of Niagara Falls. Denise Easterling, vice-chair and

treasurer of the board, lifelong community advocate, and Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Historian, had shared with me on numerous occasions her frustration with the disregard of the Niagara Falls stories[27]. I began to see how the exhibition design and narrative were created as islands of generic Underground Railroad stories. It was nothing like what I had read in the Management Plan a few months prior.

The discussions kept us moving forward because we needed an exhibition designed and the design firm was eager to wrap up their work with us. Unfortunately, that eagerness was obvious to us too. I note this because in my argument for recentering visual narrative, if there is an unwillingness to dedicate the time to listening and understanding the stories and perspectives, the necessary centering of Black lives and experiences will not be possible. Judith Wellman notes in a June 30, 2015, report update to the Heritage Area, "Careful attention from the beginning to themes, stories, people, images, and artifacts that relate to the Underground Railroad in Niagara Falls itself will allow designers to tell the local story with drama, power, and fidelity to current research. The story itself needs to come first. Design carries out and enhances the message that emerges from historical research."[28]

I would go on to continue to work with Judith Wellman and the board to revise the exhibit script, and ultimately recommend concluding work with the original design firm, and

[27] Denise Easterling passed away on January 31, 2021. The Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center was her pride and joy, and the culmination of her life's work in the community and work to recognize the Underground Railroad stories of Niagara Falls. Her memory is honored in the spirit of the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center. Additionally, City of Niagara Falls Resolution No. 2021-, honors her legacy: "NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Niagara Falls City Council and Mayor Robert M. Restaino wish to honor the memory of Denise Yvonne Brewer Easterling and recognize her life, service, dedication and commitment to our City, our children, our history and the community at large by designating April 28, 2021 as "Denise Easterling Day" in the City of Niagara Falls."

[28] Report by Judith Wellman, "Discovering Extraordinary People in Place and Time," June 30, 2015.

seeking a new firm to design the exhibition for the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center. The community was speaking, and the only option was to listen and take action.

Building the Heritage Center

The Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center opened to the public on May 4, 2018, inside of the 1863 United States Customs House that is currently attached to the Niagara Falls Amtrak Station. While not a site on the Underground Railroad, the Customs House sits adjacent to the location of the former Suspension Bridge, allowing for learning in a place where this history happened. The mission of the Heritage Center is to reveal authentic stories of Underground Railroad freedom seekers and abolitionists in Niagara Falls that inspire visitors to recognize modern injustices that stem from slavery and take action toward an equitable society. This thesis focuses on an analysis of the exhibit design process that utilized and created visual assets to further the vision of shifting interpretation to put the story of freedom seekers and Black individuals involved in the Underground Railroad first and foremost.

Figure 5. Courtesy of the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center, photo by Alison Spongr, 2018.

Between October 2016 and May 2018, the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Area and its project team put in motion a shift in interpretation and representation of Black lives and history. We took what we learned from our work with the original design firm and were now equipped with even more determination to tell the story the right way, the way that shows the perspectives and stories of the freedom seekers and the waiters – everyday people doing extraordinary things. We would work to make sure that the language, visuals and storyline are that of Black individuals first and foremost. While there were white abolitionists whose help was essential, that is not the story of Niagara Falls nor our focus. I will now provide an overview of this experience as it relates to my thesis argument in support of a new approach and shift in visual representation.

The project team began our kick-off on a cold winter day in January 2017. We mapped out the basics that would lead us through the design phase:

Audience – who are we aspiring to serve?

Narrative voice – from whose perspective is the exhibition written?

Visuals – what would the exhibit space end up looking like?

Engagement – how would we use the less than 2,000 square feet to engage visitors?

While these questions were necessary to address, we paid special attention to 'Audience.' The direct tie between our audience and the way we made decisions to design the exhibit were synchronized. Our primary audience is the local community within the City of Niagara Falls, with a special focus on residents of African descent. We consciously made this decision as it stemmed from the decades of advocacy and determination from the community to tell the story of ancestors and what happened in Niagara Falls. We knew that tourists from all over the world would be coming to visit the Heritage Center, and while institutions in a major tourist hub may

choose to prioritize tourists to some degree, we wanted to acknowledge them as an audience and did not desire to make them a priority. That would be a disservice to the need of our community to have a space that shares their history.

What do we know about the Underground Railroad in general? Most people may have heard of Harriet Tubman or about safe houses. Many are unaware of the Underground Railroad at all or believe it to be an underground train. We know that the visitors, from all over the world, who come to the Heritage Center, come with every level of knowledge and our team works to meet each visitor where they are. But we also know that the public is mostly familiar with the Underground Railroad from the perspectives of white individuals – northern Quakers, abolitionists, etc. This presentation of history has become imbedded in the way we see how the Underground Railroad operated. We are conditioned to think of white individuals as helpers of Black individuals, which continues to perpetuate the idea that Black individuals are receivers of assistance versus showing the strength and leadership of resistance to oppression and enslavement.

Recentering Freedom Seekers

The Underground Railroad was first and foremost orchestrated by freedom seekers themselves. The assistance and support from white individuals was supportive and I do not discount it, however their stories have been the central focus of what we know, learn and understand about the Underground Railroad. To effectively be universally inclusive in interpretation and shift the balance of power, we must look at all of the pieces – language, imagery, artifacts, art, documents, staffing, marketing, programming – storytelling through all mediums. We must look at what is present and what is omitted. This will be the story that is ultimately told.

For example, after the design build process for the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center, we began to create policies and programs for operations. We started the Philosophical Approach to Interpretation which states:

> As a borderland, Niagara Falls played a unique role in the Underground Railroad. Here, freedom seekers were mere steps away from liberty, after having endured perilous travel for hundreds of miles. Recognizing this, interpretation at the Heritage Center focuses on the strength and agency of the individuals who used the Underground Railroad network to claim their own freedom. Freedom seekers themselves are at the heart of our stories. The Heritage Center's approach to Underground Railroad interpretation is not to ask how communities of African descent survived, but rather to demonstrate how these communities thrived. In alignment with this philosophical approach, in our narratives, freedom seekers are not beleaguered victims of an oppressive system; they are triumphant heroes of subterfuge and resistance. They are the primary actors, and it is their voices and perspectives we have sought to capture with our built exhibits.[29]

The Heritage Center's inception and design of its permanent exhibition, *One More River to Cross,* has demonstrated this commitment and approach to interpretation. As discussed in this chapter, it took an approach with thoughtfulness and teamwork to identify the vision and continue to work towards it throughout the whole process. In the next chapter, I will provide examples of specific instances where the decision making around visuals changed the outcome of the visitor experience and engagement with our exhibitions.

The Network Wall is the first exhibit visitors experience at the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center. The Network Wall contains a series of imagery that begins to tell the story of what the Underground Railroad was and is and was not. On four panels, a series of maps repeats the language, "the Underground Railroad was neither underground nor a train."[30] We wanted to ensure that visitors had a general understanding of

[29] Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center, *Interpretive Plan*, 2018, 2.
[30] Network Wall, *One More River to Cross* Exhibition. Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center, 2018.

what the Underground Railroad was before they would dive deeper into the stories that happened at Niagara Falls. This part of the exhibit is also where we discuss the importance of language usage. On a tour at the Heritage Center, the facilitator, or tour guide, would begin by explaining the types of language that we use and do not use, such as we used the term 'freedom seeker' to describe a person who had been enslaved and was seeking their freedom. We made the decision to not use 'slave,' 'master' or 'fugitive.' These words imply negative connotations and position the oppressors to the forefront of the narrative. I discuss this in the Introduction, and similarly, we applied this approach to our content arrangement of exhibits and image selection, as I will get further into in Chapter IV.

Figure 6. Visitors stand in front of a portion of the Network Wall at the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center. Courtesy of the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center, photo by Alana Adetola Fajemisin, 2018.

When designing for the Network Wall, we looked at the visuals individually and collectively. What kind of messages would we be sending? Would we meet our objective to provide visitors with a general sense of the Underground Railroad? Early in the design when we

began to select images, Denise Easterling had spoken up about how she felt about one of the images. Easterling explained that this image was particularly brutal and traumatic for her and others, and depicting slavery in this way was not appropriate for the first visuals that visitors would be exposed to. The image was a photograph of an enslaved person, Gordon, who is shown with his scarred back at a medical examination in a photograph taken in 1863.[31] I discuss the historical and contemporary use of this image in Chapter II.

The discussions produced a visual narrative for the Network Wall that balanced the representation of the realities of slavery and limited triggering or traumatic imagery. Throughout this process, we realized that there was a lack of images depicting Black individuals with self-agency, actively resisting, and empowered. Most of the images of Black individuals favored the oppressor or showed Black individuals as oppressed. Discussions were focused on how visuals have the power to show who is the most important person in the story, whether by their presence, the lack of their presence, the way their image is displayed, in how large or small, or their frequency. What I am trying to get at here is that this process needs to be applied for every image selected, for every sentence written, and then thought about again when all those sentences and images come together to form an exhibit.

[31] Photograph by McPherson & Oliver, “Escaped slave Gordon, also known as "Whipped Peter," showing his scarred back at a medical examination”, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, April 2, 1863.

Figure 7. Visitors use the Arrival Gallery interactive to learn about the people connected to the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad, Grand Opening Weekend, May 5, 2018. Courtesy of the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center, photo by Alana Adetola Fajemisin.

After visitors experience the Network Wall, they begin their journey to the Underground Railroad in Niagara Falls in the next gallery, the Arrival Gallery. In the Arrival Gallery, the team designed a digital interactive where visitors learn about the types of people that they might meet in Niagara Falls during the time of the Underground Railroad. These individuals are all based on authentic people who lived, worked, or traveled through Niagara Falls. After many discussions throughout the design phase, we decided to begin with a type of person so that they could be relatable to visitors. One person chosen, for example, was Nancy Berry, a freedom seeker who was enslaved when she was taken to the Cataract House Hotel by her enslavers during their honeymoon. When visitors click on the screen to learn more about her story the title is "A Woman Planning Her Escape." Our objective was to make sure that visitors found a way to

relate to Nancy and learn about the authenticity of her life. The digital interactive epilogue contains the primary sources that document Nancy Berry's story.

What is most important in this digital interactive is that it is the first time during the exhibition experience that the visitors are introduced to people in the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad stories. They are depicted through either fabricated, animated or 2D watercolor illustrations. The watercolor illustrations were created by E.B. Lewis, an award-winning children's book illustrator from Philadelphia. The design team was working to come up with creative solutions to represent the stories of the Underground Railroad in Niagara Falls for which there are limited visuals. This is where our conversations during the design process expanded to how Underground Railroad stories are being shown visually, and how they are not what we traditionally see in Underground Railroad interpretation. What is available is often what has been deemed important throughout history by those in a position to make such decisions. For example, there may be images of the houses that freedom seekers escaped to, hid in or in which they received assistance from those homeowners. There may be images of the homeowners themselves who may have been abolitionists or may have been bystanders. Those images have been preserved by those who have deemed them important, such as the homeowners themselves, who could have been in prominent standing within that community, or their house was architecturally significant. Freedom seekers and those enslaved, whose stories we are interpreting, often lack visual evidence. In some cases, it does not necessarily mean that images do not exist, but that they have not been found yet, are not categorized, are located still in somebody's basement or a name is not associated with the person in the photo or painting. Mostly, there were not any images of freedom seekers or Black abolitionists because they were

not in a position to have an image taken or painted of them and their experience due to their status in the system of slavery and oppression.

The challenge and necessity was to expand what was available if we wanted to shift the narrative of the Underground Railroad story to those who were most impacted and made the most impact. In order to do this, some creative problem solving was in order. The creation of E.B. Lewis' watercolor illustrations to help tell the stories of the Underground Railroad in Niagara Falls and position the perspectives of the freedom seekers in the center and the forefront is further described in Chapter V.

Through the digital interactive designs, visitors are introduced to freedom seekers, the waiters who were abolitionists and assisted freedom seekers on their journey, the hotel owners who looked the other way intentionally, the entrepreneurs and the bystanders who knew about the Underground Railroad activity and had power to shut it down but did not. For one of the Arrival Gallery panels, we shifted the header from, "Niagara Falls a Destination for Tourists and Freedom Seekers" to "Niagara Falls a Destination for Freedom Seekers and Tourists." The emphasis in the updated panel is on the freedom seekers, as it comes first before tourists. Freedom seekers are central to this narrative. The change may seem subtle, however, when it is deliberate throughout the exhibition, the narrative in its entirety generates a shift in power.

Continuing through the *One More River to Cross* exhibition, visitors can explore an interactive, Legal Geography, where maps show how the laws changed the experiences of freedom seekers. There are two color coded sections – blue represents freedom and red represents slavery. We are usually familiar with this type of look on a map. In the South were "slave states" and in the North were "free states." However, throughout time, the laws have changed and depending on the place, they affected people differently. Below these maps, there

are buttons that visitors press that light up the map. Each button is an actual image of that law as a document. It may seem rather simple, but there is a direct action between the visitor touching the document and its implications being lit up on the map. This interactive is one we most utilize with school groups as we break down history and the laws and how it affects people then and now. As you will see in this overview, there are examples throughout the exhibition where we use images to shift perspectives, to engage visitors, and position Black individuals front and center in this story.

Figure 8. Exhibit designer, Seth Frankel and Board Chairman, Bill Bradberry, testing out the Legal Geography interactive while in fabrication at Universal Services Associates in Philadelphia, PA. Courtesy of the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center, 2017.

Figure 9. Visitors using the Legal Geography interactive at the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center. Courtesy of the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center, photo by Alana Adetola Fajemisin, 2018.

The next gallery at the Heritage Center that visitors encounter is the Cataract House [Hotel] Gallery. The exhibit features scenic buildouts of the furniture, interior spaces, and facade of the Cataract House. The objective was to create a space where visitors are immersed in the physical and visual space as they learned the stories of the waiters and the freedom seekers that had escaped from there. Sharing the waiters' stories throughout the entire exhibition and in multiple ways is critical to our overall vision. The waiters operated as secret agents, blending in by serving the prominent hotel-goers and vacationers, while working on the Underground Railroad to help many secure their freedom just across the Niagara River in Canada. At various times throughout the exhibition design, we chose to omit some of the white abolitionists and Quakers of the Niagara Region, due to lack of space but also because we prioritized the waiters and other Black individuals. We also chose to limit the focus on Harriet Tubman. This omission may seem counterintuitive, but it was intentional. The waiters' stories have gone untold, and a

balance was designed to show stories of everyday people doing extraordinary things. We also wanted to ensure that through the experience of this history could be connected to the present day and with visitors who visit the Heritage Center. We show the waiters in the forefront in various watercolor sketches, historic photos and through other mediums throughout the Heritage Center.

At the entrance to the Cataract House Gallery, there is an interpretive panel that is situated within a recreated historic sign. On that panel, the Cataract House waiters and freedom seekers are represented through text, and we wanted to show an image of freedom seekers. Since we did not have any images of a freedom seeker, we decided on a different approach. The team decided to include an early daguerreotype, which is an early method of photography, which shows an unidentified young Black woman. We do not know if any provenance is available for this image and are unable to identify her. This was an opportunity within the visual narrative to show representation of Black individuals. If we know that there are not many visuals available of freedom seekers and their journeys based on who preserved history and what is written down, we may not know if there are images out there that are part of the Underground Railroad. It is an assumption, yet a reasonable approach to visual representation.

Figure 10. Visitors exploring the Cataract House Gallery at the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center with information provided by Sara Capen. Courtesy of the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center, photo by Alana Adetola Fajemisin, 2018.

Another example in the Crossing Gallery that illustrates the need for more research of the Underground Railroad is the extradition document of Patrick Sneed. Sneed was a waiter at the Cataract House Hotel who, in 1852, was serving guests when a ruse was posed by some of the guests to capture him in the hallway to force him back into slavery. The person who formerly enslaved Sneed had created a false murder charge against him in order to kidnap him back into slavery. Patrick Sneed ran for his life, and unfortunately was ultimately captured. Sneed was later acquitted in a court of law in Buffalo and made his way to Canada away from the oppressive grasp of slavery. We have been able to document and interpret Sneed's story through many documents, newspaper accounts, and court records. While we were building the exhibition, a colleague had reached out to let us know that there was a document for sale on eBay.[32] The document was the extradition paperwork signed by the Governor of Georgia to bring Patrick

[32] Christopher Densmore, email message to author, Judith Wellman, Bill Bradberry and Sara Capen, September 21, 2016.

Sneed back into slavery. The eBay listing noted that Governor Howell Cobb was the father of baseball great Ty Cobb. The seller was unaware of who Patrick Sneed was or his story, but we did. It was a little bit of luck that allowed us to purchase that document and bring it into the Heritage Center. I share this story to emphasize that there is information, evidence, and documentation out there for us to spend the time, the money and the energy to uncover.

Chapter IV: The Power of Visuals

> The endeavor to affirm the dignity of human life cannot be waged without pictures, without representational justice.
>
> – Dr. Sarah Lewis, *Vision and Justice*

When I first started working with the project team in 2015, we had only a handful of images to work with. Almost all those images are included in Dr. Judith Wellman's research report, *Survey of Sites Relating to the Underground Railroad, Abolitionism and African-American Life in Niagara Falls and Surrounding Area, 1820 – 1880*.[33] Most of the images that had been sourced and were ready to be utilized were historic maps and images of locations, such as the Suspension Bridge or the Falls themselves. The design team, as well as the board of directors, were aware that there were not many images of people available. Of those available images, most were of property or building owners, prominent community leaders, and abolitionists, most of whom were white.

Our team desperately wanted to show visuals of Black individuals in the way that is authentic to how things unfolded historically, not just by what is already immediately and conveniently available to us. We had to get creative. Our team researched a variety of historic images and created contemporary images depicting historical figures in moments that share a much more inclusive history and one that shifts the focus to the self-agency of Black individuals, whether they be freedom seekers fighting for their own freedom or abolitionists or people in other positions where they were could decide to help.

[33] Judith Wellman. *Survey of Sites Relating to the Underground Railroad, Abolitionism and African-American Life in Niagara Falls and Surrounding Area, 1820 – 1880,* Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Area Management Plan Appendix C, 2008. https://www.niagarafallsundergroundrailroad.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/NF-HAMP-Report-Appendix-C-1.pdf

The Beginning

Our journey to find images that most authentically tell the stories of the Underground Railroad in Niagara Falls begins with a photograph of waiters. This photograph is dated to 1896 and is of the wait staff at the Central Hotel in Cooperstown, New York. This image was utilized by the Heritage Center to visually interpret the stories of the waiters in reports, on the website and on printed materials that were produced before the Heritage Center's exhibitions were designed. This set the stage for everything that we did next throughout the design process. The use of this image was our foundation to working towards our goal to focus on the stories of Niagara Falls from the perspectives of Black individuals.

Figure 11. Central Hotel Staff, photographer unknown, about 1890. Courtesy Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, New York, gift of Arthur J. Telfer; Smith and Telfer Photographic Collection, for the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center.

The waiters of the Central Hotel represented a missing foundational piece of the Underground Railroad story. Through their visual representation, we established a way to expand

on the documentations and text narratives regarding the Cataract House waiters. It was always made clear that these waiters were not the waiters of the Cataract House, and we were often explaining our use of this image. The history of the highly-trained Black wait staffs across New York State is documented throughout the 1800s. Sylvea Hollis writes of the waiters in Cooperstown, "The demand for labor brought all of these men and women to Cooperstown– enslaved, free, and recently freed; skilled and unskilled; from the North, the South and the West Indies – and ultimately compelled most to migrate elsewhere."[34] Hollis details the history of Black residents and workers of Cooperstown in the years following the Underground Railroad. This context helps us to visualize and understand how we could employ related images to help address the inadequacy of specific visual representation.

Discovery: The Sketch of John Morrison

Similar to the Niagara Falls we know today, the area during the time of the Underground Railroad was a hub for tourism. People traveled from all over the world to see the Falls plummeting over into the Niagara Gorge. Naturally, the tourism industry created employment and opportunities to bring in revenue. The prominent Cataract House Hotel was frequented by many visitors from all over the world. Their amenities and dining were top-notch. It was here where employees of the hotel were a part of the Underground Railroad.

The wait staff was comprised of Black men, many of whom had been born enslaved or were formerly enslaved and likely escaped on the Underground Railroad themselves. They provided efficient service in an elegant and military fashion that was pleasing to the dining guests. Visitors to the majestic world-class Cataract House could expect the finest service,

[34] Sylvea Hollis, "The Black Man Almost Has Disappeared From Our Country': African American Workers in Cooperstown, New York, 1860–1900." *New York History 88*, no. 1 (2007): 13–31. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23183551.

cuisine and entertainment while staying at the hotel. The wait staff was well trained, following Tunis Campbell's *Hotel Keepers, Head Waiters and Housekeepers Guide*, which provided detailed instructions for waiters.

Figure 12. John Morrison, Head Waiter at the Cataract House, in Pencil Sketches Niagara Falls, attributed to Ruth Howland, August 23, 1853. Courtesy of EarlyAmerican.com for the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center.

At the height of the Underground Railroad, the head waiter was John Morrison. Through census records and documentation, historians have been able to identify a sketch of him. In Michelle Kratt's blog post recounting her research of John Morrison, she writes, "As historians are finding that the true heroes of the Underground Railroad in Niagara Falls were more than likely not benevolent white individuals but the black and mulatto cooks and waiters at the local hotels (especially the beautiful Cataract House that stood perilously close to the river's edge and the brink of the falls)—John Morrison is being revealed as the possible leader of the

movement."[35] The discovery and confirmation of Morrison visually allowed us to position him even further at the forefront of our Underground Railroad interpretation. It created a foundation upon which artist, E.B. Lewis, created watercolor illustrations in his likeness. The physical sketch is now in an unknown private collection after an online auction in 2004.[36] However, we still have the digital image available to use. It is the hope that someday, we will be able to locate the original sketchbook containing the sketch of John Morrison. There is more work to be done.

We Are Here: Visibility

I discovered this image by accident in the exhibition catalogue, *Hidden Witness; African American Images from the Dawn of Photography to the Civil War,* by Jackie Napolean Wilson as part of an exhibition at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Malibu, California, in 1995.[37] I had been conducting research to identify early Black photographers. This research was not directly tied to my work at the Heritage Center but had stemmed from my own interest in early photography, inspired by what we were continuing to uncover about the Underground Railroad while designing the exhibit. When I turned the page and saw the photograph of three men, one of whom was of African descent, with Niagara Falls in the background, my mouth dropped open. How come I had not come across this image before? Did any of my colleagues know about this photograph?

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[35] Michelle Ann Kratts, "Bringing Lost Souls Home: John Morrison, a hero of Niagara," Oakwood Cemetery Blog, entry posted March 26, 2013, https://oakwoodniagara.org/kratts-korner/2013/3/26/bringing-lost-souls-home-john-morrison-a-hero-of-niagara.html (accessed May 16, 2023).

[36] Email from the author to Judith Wellman, Denise Easterling, Bill Bradberry, Michelle Kratts, Tom DeSantis, and Sara Capen, "Update: John Morrison Sketch", referencing communication between Early American Auctions regarding the sale of the sketchbook containing the sketch of John Morrison, November 2, 2015.

[37] Jackie Napolean Wilson, *Hidden Witness; African American Images from the Dawn of Photography to the Civil War*. (New York: St. Martin's Griffon, 1999), 104-105.

Figure 13. Three men posing on the Canadian side of the Falls, ambrotype, photographer unknown, about 1860. Courtesy of Bridgeman Images for the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center.

The photograph, showing three men posing next to a bench with Niagara Falls, and the Cataract House Hotel in the background, felt like finding a clue to the larger story. In the photograph, the viewer can see two key things. First, the men are all wearing raincoats. These raincoats seem to be identical. Second, the men are all wearing suits underneath these raincoats. With little known information about the context of this photograph, we as contemporary viewers can only make informed inferences about what was taking place in this scene.

In the publication, *Hidden Witness; African American Images from the Dawn of Photography to the Civil War*, Jackie Napolean Wilson outlines a narrative of abolitionists assisting a freedom seeker on his journey to Canada. The moment I read the title of the image, it did not sit well with me. I thought, why would individuals involved in the Underground Railroad pose for a photograph in the infancy of photography wearing matching raincoats and suits

underneath? I began to ask around. As it turns out, this photograph was not familiar to any of my colleagues that I was working with. It was agreed that the narrative previously applied to the photograph was most likely inaccurate, however, what was the story then?

To jump ahead, we did not, or have not yet, discovered the story of this photograph. I argue that this photograph shows a tour guide taking two individuals to see the sights of Niagara Falls. Niagara Falls was, and is, a destination for tourists from all over the world. The hotels on both sides of the border employed Black individuals in hospitality positions, including waiters, porters, and cooks. It is less of a leap to suggest that the Black individual shown in this photograph was doing his job, working in the hospitality sector, safely on the Canadian shore. Perhaps he had been a freedom seeker, who had escaped the horrific institution of slavery himself and was building a life in freedom being paid for his work. It is my hope that someday we may learn his story.

When I shared this photograph with our exhibition design team, it was challenging to determine how to proceed. I had immediately requested we add this image into the exhibition as it showed for the first time that I could determine, a Black individual in Niagara Falls or near Niagara Falls as early as 1860 in a photograph. I was surprised when others did not immediately agree. We discussed the challenge of including an image without a known narrative, or even slightly more additional information or context. Ultimately, this image was the catalyst to additional images being added into the exhibition that would show Black individuals.

What we addressed here was the tendency to work only within the known. And as historians, researchers, and caretakers of stories, we must consider what we know to be true and accurate. However, we also know that most people who have been in control of stories have often been white individuals. As such, it is white individuals who have determined what

information should be kept, what information should be shared, and what information is deemed as irrelevant and unimportant, or simply as unwanted or false. Therefore, we must counter what stories we know and have access to, to create spaces for stories of those who were not in positions of power or privilege to write them down, paint them, photograph them, and deem them relevant. To do this, we must take an approach that is honest and says we may not know, but we are here and we are visible.

An Active Shift of Power

Early in the exhibition design development, our team reviewed the objectives of the Network Wall. We were thrilled to utilize the shared public space of the attached new Amtrak Station, as it allowed us to extend our footprint and share more content. We decided that this space needed to be a place where visitors could learn the foundations of the history of the Underground Railroad. The Underground Railroad was, and is, a network of people and places, and it was neither underground nor a train.

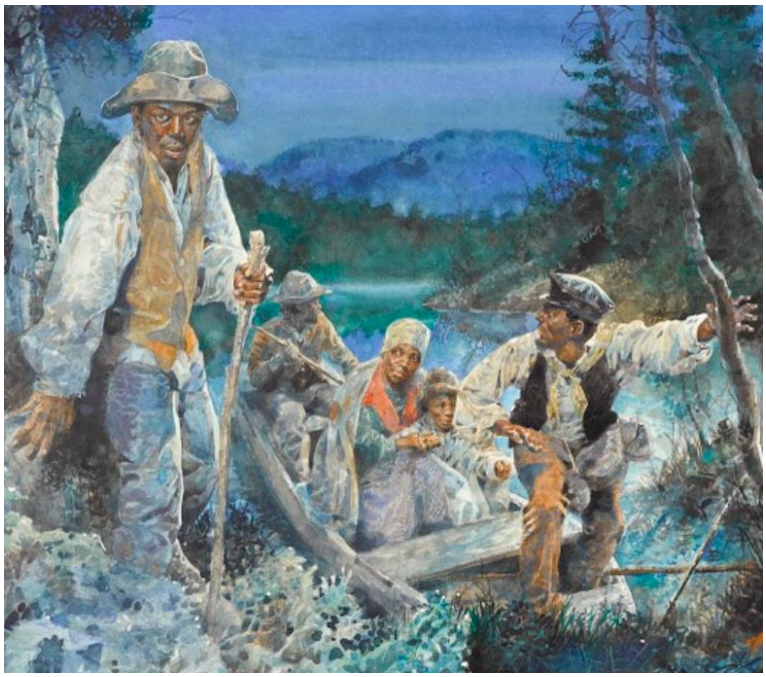

Figure 14. Escape at night, illustration by Jerry Pinkney, 2007. Courtesy of Jerry Pinkney for the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center.

Some of our earliest discussions revolved around what images we put on this wall. What we did not realize early on is that we were still including images that were created from the enslavers and oppressors' perspectives. For example, the largest image, at over 6 feet in height, depicted "slave catchers" on horses chasing a Black man through the grass trying to capture him. In this image the oppressors have the upper hand and the story that is told is about them catching a helpless and "bad" escaped slave. With barely another day in the design process and after the initial approval of the Network Wall designs, we came to realize that too many of the Network Wall images were featuring the oppressor. We had to change that. Without any time to spare, we conducted further image research and identified a replacement image, a painting from 2007 of freedom seekers on the Underground Railroad by artist, Jerry Pinkney. The freedom seekers are shown as independent and strong as they move throughout a lake and forest scene. This is the story we wanted to show at the front and center, and throughout the Heritage Center.

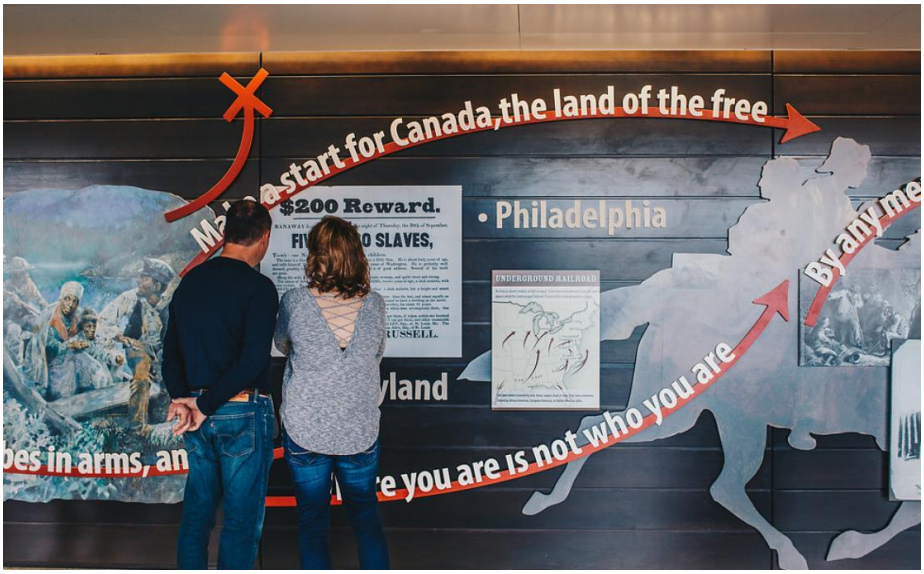

Figure 15. Visitors stand in front of a portion of the Network Wall at the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center. Courtesy of the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center, photo by Alana Adetola Fajemisin, 2018.

Past to Present

One of our main objectives has always been to connect the past to the present through the historical lens of the Underground Railroad. We knew that through history, we could talk about what is happening today. Before we built the exhibit, we started work with the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience to create interpretation and experience that reflects a call to action connected to this historical experience.

Design firm Studio Tectonic had come up with an idea for a final gallery for the Heritage Center, the Freedom Gallery, where we crafted minimal text content and mostly images in a mosaic design, which provide an opportunity for visitors to draw connections in their own personal ways. For example, when they see an image that speaks to them, such as a military father embracing his young daughters after a deployment, or a Black Lives Matter protest, or an image of civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hammer, they start to see that the struggle for freedom has continued and it is not that far off from the past. “Creating relevance is a form of visitor engagement that is the critical transition between visitors simply reading exhibit content versus

really digesting it, and seeing how that content applies to their broader spectrum of life beyond the museum walls," writes Zachary Mosley, a member of the Studio Tectonic design team, in "Room for Relevance – An Exploration of Synthesizing Emotional Space with Transdisciplinary Design Approaches."[38]

To position the historical content to be relevant to contemporary visitors, the Heritage Center employs a facilitated dialogue approach to the visitor experience. Envisioned during the design process and carried through into operations,

> Freedom Conversations [tours] at the Heritage Center have several overarching goals: Provide documented, historically accurate information about the people and events that define the unique role Niagara Falls played in the Underground Railroad as a border crossing between the United States and Canada; Promote active narratives that give agency to the authentic, yet little-known individuals of African descent who lived in, worked in, or passed through Niagara Falls in search of liberty; Help visitors recognize that some modern injustices have direct roots in slavery, while other contemporary struggles parallel those of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century freedom seekers; and motivate visitors to work towards a more just and equitable society.[39]

In other words, the Heritage Center utilizes dialogic approaches to connect the past to the present. The visual curation supports and compliments the ongoing operations and visitor experience at the Heritage Center.

[38] Zachary Mosley, "Room for Relevance – An Exploration of Synthesizing Emotional Space with Transdisciplinary Design Approaches," *Theory and Practice: The Emerging Museum Professionals Journal* 2, 2019: 2.

[39] Christine Bacon, "Freedom Conversations: Connecting Past to Present with Facilitated Dialogue", in *Finding History Where You Least Expect It! Site Based Strategies for Teaching about the Past*, ed. Jill M. Gradwell and Kathryn H. Leacock (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, copyright American Alliance of Museums, 2020).

Figure 16. Young visitors in the Freedom Gallery at the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center. Courtesy of the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center, photo by Kim Smith, 2018.

Chapter V: E.B. Lewis Watercolors

> It seemed an age before the ferry boat arrived, which at last appeared, enveloped in a gigantic wreath of black smoke. Hastily I embarked, and as the boat stole away into the misty twilight and among crushing fields of ice, though the air was chill and gloomy, I felt the warmth of freedom as I neared the Canada shore. I landed, without question, and found my mother's friend with but little difficulty, who assisted me to get work and support myself. Not long afterwards, I married a prosperous farmer, who provided me with a happy home, where I brought my children into the world without the sin of slavery to strive against.
>
> – Nancy Berry, *From the Darkness Cometh Light or Struggles for Freedom*

I first met E.B. Lewis in the empty first floor of the 1863 U.S Customs House, in the same place where we were working to build the *One More River to Cross* and open the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center. E.B. Lewis is an award-winning children's book illustrator and a talented watercolor artist. He is the winner of a Caldecott Medal, is the recipient of an Orbis Pictus Award, and winner of the Jane Addams Peace Award, all prestigious recognitions in education for children's books. His resume and portfolio seemed almost out of reach for a tiny organization like ours, and we wondered, how could a watercolor illustrator in the present-day be able to capture the stories of the waiters, freedom seekers, and Harriet Tubman in an authentic and historically accurate fashion? We were about to find out.

E.B. Lewis came into the project by way of Richard Lewis Media Group. Richard Lewis Media Group was working to solve the challenge of our limited visual evidence and documentation of the Underground Railroad stories of Niagara Falls. As a digital media studio, their objective was to use digital media to work in partnership with the surrounding environment to channel the stories of the past to shared human experiences. The question was how could digital media within our museum space help us tell these stories?

As I've discussed in the previous chapters, working with what's available and thinking beyond the standard or traditional approach is at the core of making this critical shift to accurate and appropriate representation. A solution to the challenge of the lack of visual images available was often to create new. Sometimes this approach can be looked upon as not favorable to historical interpretation, however I argue that it is critical to sharing an inclusive and appropriate history.

Creating a new form of visual interpretation may be necessary to be thoughtful throughout an exhibition development or interpretation process. Richard Lewis Media Group was responsible for discussions surrounding how to create new images and would those images be through media. Early on, the design team had discussions around different techniques that might be effective in creating images of freedom seekers, formerly enslaved persons, abolitionists, and others as part of the stories of the Underground Railroad in Niagara Falls.

In March 2023, I had a conversation with Sara Smith, Director of Business Development at Richard Lewis Media Group. Smith was the lead on digital media development during the creation of *One More River to Cross.* We began by reflecting on how we started working together and I specifically recalled a discussion around reenactments using video as a way to create visuals of the stories, which was collectively not favored. “Reenactments feel dated, hard to do, and non-artistic. There was something about wanting artistry to help with emotional connection.”[40] Smith immediately felt we needed an artist to create something unique. As she led me through her process from 2017, she shared that Richard Lewis Media Group had turned first to illustrators and other artists that they had worked with before. There did not seem to be a good fit.

[40] Sara Smith, interview by author, March 17, 2023.

The design team knew and had actively prioritized that if an artist was to create new visuals to interpret the stories of freedom seekers, the Cataract House waiters, and others along the Underground Railroad, the artist should be of African descent. Determining our foundation right at the start allowed us to have a clear path forward even if we did not yet know what the new visual medium would entail. Sara Smith had located E.B. Lewis' work through the Coretta Scott King Awards for African American illustrators of children books, and felt it was "graceful, beautiful and emotional."[41] The key was emotion. An art medium by an artist whose guiding spirit was embedded in the emotions of the people of the Underground Railroad, what I would argue on reflection was the bond that held all the pieces of the exhibition together.

E.B. Lewis was interested in working in a medium outside of children's books. The process was new to all of us, and we jumped right in with our whole hearts. While Sara and her team worked with E.B., the Heritage Center and design team worked to identify available images and procure historical reference images to help E.B. create illustrations that were as historically accurate as possible. During this process, Dr. Judith Wellman, lead historian on the project, compiled reports containing images of freedom seekers, landscapes, cityscapes, train stations, carriages, clothing, and hairstyles. When we could utilize a specific image, such as the exterior of the Cataract House Hotel or the ferry crossing boats, we would prioritize those. The most challenging aspect was to procure images of many individuals whose stories we were sharing. A useful example is Nancy Berry, freedom seeker formerly enslaved by the H.S. Coxes, who I discussed in earlier chapters.

[41] Sara Smith, interview by author, March 17, 2023.

Nancy Berry was a freedom seeker who was enslaved in St. Louis and brought to Niagara Falls by Mary Berry and H.S. Cox on their honeymoon. Nancy took the first opportunity she had to flee from a hotel, most likely the Cataract House Hotel. Nancy told the story in her on words to her sister Lucy Ann Delaney:

> In the morning, Mr. and Mrs. Cox went for a drive, telling me that I could have the day to do as I pleased. The shores of Canada had been tantalizing my longing gaze for some days, and I was bound to reach there long before my mistress returned. So I locked up Mrs. Cox's trunk and put the key under the pillow, where I was sure she would find it, and I made a strike for freedom! A servant in the hotel gave me all necessary information and even assisted me in getting away. Some kind of a festival was going on, and a large crowd was marching from the rink to the river, headed by a band of music. In such a motley throng I was unnoticed, but was trembling with fear of being detected. It seemed an age before the ferry boat arrived, which at last appeared, enveloped in a gigantic wreath of black smoke. Hastily I embarked, and as the boat stole away into the misty twilight and among crushing fields of ice, though the air was chill and gloomy, I felt the warmth of freedom as I neared the Canada shore. I landed, without question, and found my mother's friend with but little difficulty, who assisted me to get work and support myself. Not long afterwards, I married a prosperous farmer, who provided me with a happy home, where I brought my children into the world without the sin of slavery to strive against.[42]

Nancy Berry's words were the basis for how we looked at interpreting her story. In *One More River to Cross*, visitors are introduced to seven individuals who were part of the Underground Railroad and the enforcement of enslavement in Niagara Falls. The introductions are the first interactive in the Arrival Gallery and are by way of animations of Lewis' watercolor illustrations as described in Chapter III.

[42] Lucy Ann Delaney, *From the Darkness Cometh the Light or Struggles for Freedom* (St. Louis, Missouri: J.T. Smith, 1891?), 17-18. www.docsouth.edu.

Figure 17. Nancy Berry, Illustration by E.B. Lewis for the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center, 2017.

Nancy Berry's introduction starts by giving a general overview of freedom seekers' experiences in Niagara Falls before proceeding with the details of her escape. The decision to position Nancy's introduction in the Epilogue of the interactive was a result of many discussions about historical accuracy and visitor experience. Ultimately, it was decided that the introductions would introduce the role of the person whose story was about to play, and the epilogue would conclude with the actual person and detail the related historic facts. This way, visitors can more openly engage and relate while the historical evidence is still directly available.

Introduction:

> A Woman Planning Her Escape: Many of the people staying in Niagara Falls in the 1830s were treated as property, having come with their enslavers while they were visiting the Falls. Some were able to escape, having planned ahead of time. Others took the opportunity as it arose.[43]

[43] Arrival Gallery Interactive, *One More River to Cross* Exhibition. Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center, 2018.

Epilogue:

> Nancy Berry came to Niagara Falls in 1837 to serve her enslavers, the H.S. Coxes, while they honeymooned. She later wrote her sister in Missouri describing her escape. Nancy found a job in Toronto, married, and raised several children free from slavery.[44]

Between the introduction and the epilogue, a digital media display with E.B.'s animated watercolors, transitions slowly across the screen in front of visitors. It is here that they experience the watercolors for the first time, their first encounter with the stories of the Underground Railroad in Niagara Falls. Visitors can select via a touchscreen which individual's story they would like to play. They may play Nancy Berry's story first, last or not at all. I have used Nancy Berry as an example to show the development process and how we balanced historical accuracy with the opportunity to give faces to individuals.

Figure 18. Screenshot of the Nancy Berry Tight Comp Review by the Niagara Falls Design Team, provided to Richard Lewis Media Group, 2017.

[44] Arrival Gallery Interactive, *One More River to Cross* Exhibition. Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center, 2018.

Throughout the process, historian Judith Wellman, myself and other design team members worked to ensure historical accuracy wherever possible. Attention to detail was critical. As shown in Figure 19, an early sketch, also known as a "tight comp," provided by Richard Lewis Media Group from E.B. Lewis, shows feedback and review in the form of comments and additional visual references. Judith Wellman's feedback on Nancy Berry's attire was provided as one of the comments:

> Like Harriet Powell, who escaped from the Syracuse House in 1839, Nancy Berry escaped in 1837 and was a "waiting-maid" who was most likely well-dressed.
>
> When she left, Harriet Powell wore "a black dress of figured poplin." She carried a "plaid blanket Shawl." She also had a bonnet, but she left that behind. She took with her five dresses: "one green Merino dress; one pink Gingham (checked) do; one French Muslim figured do; one Buff and one light purple Calico do."
>
> In the 1830s, dresses would have had a relatively high waist and sleeves with seams that dropped off shoulder. Since Nancy described "crushing fields of ice" and air that was "chill and gloomy," we assume that she would have worn both hat and either cloak or shawl. For the illustration, we recommend depicting Nancy in a shawl.[45]

[45] Judith Wellman and Alison Spongr, "Tight Comp" review to design team, Richard Lewis Media Group, Studio Tectonic and design team sent in an email message to Sara Smith, August 21, 2017.

Figure 19. Nancy Berry, Illustration by E.B. Lewis for the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center, 2017.

Our work was an exercise in the balance of historical accuracy in visual formats with the balance of creating a human representation in various scenes and environments which were most likely. The human aspect of this process was predominantly facilitated by E.B. Lewis as he was the artist creating a likeness and visual representation of each individual. Lewis brought a sense of connection to each person; he was passionate about the project and became invested in each story he was representing through his artwork. The emotional connection was evident throughout the process and resulted in an inherently deeper and more intimate storytelling approach.

Lewis' process included bringing the stories, information and resources to a group of people who acted out the scenes, and he would photograph them. The collective embodied experience of interpreting the story was shared amongst a group whose lived experience gave an authentic realness to the images created.

Once Lewis created the final watercolor illustrations, Richard Lewis Media Group got to work creating the digital media and animations for the exhibition. The animations were incorporated into the Arrival Gallery, the Cataract House Gallery and the Escape Gallery. Visitors meet Nancy Berry in the Arrival Gallery and will go on to meet the headwaiter John Morrison (whose sketch is discussed in Chapter three) and James Patterson, hotel owner, among others. Each story needs a different emotional depiction and engagement.

Sara Smith reminisced about her long conversations with Lewis. Lewis shared much about his work and process. He always had examples of what he had worked on or was working on for children's books. I recall one of my longer conversations with Lewis where I had reached out about an exhibition component that we had not addressed previously. On the exterior of the north side of the U.S. Customs House is a glass garage door which would be covered up by exhibits on the interior. The design called for a graphic to be installed with backlighting for nighttime viewing. Our team had issued a call for graphic designers to create unique and standalone artwork which proved unsuccessful. When I brought this to Lewis, he was immediately ecstatic and had an idea. He presented a sketch the next morning, and in less than 24 hours, we had one of the features of our exhibition.

Figure 20. James Patterson and John Morrison, Illustration by E.B. Lewis for the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center, 2017.

In the watercolor of James Patterson and John Morrison, figure 21, Lewis chose to depict two of the waiters standing with arms crossed in front of a crossing scene at the base of the Falls. The two waiters' stance is firm and their glare is calm and strong. They stand as protectors - protectors of liberty, of all those who resisted slavery and fought for freedom for themselves and others. The manner in which this image came to fruition aligns with the spirit of this project.

Chapter VI: Conclusion - Challenges, Barriers or Not Really?

> What would it take – what does it take – for you to confront a false history even if it means shattering the stories you have been told throughout your life? Even if it means having to fundamentally examine who you are and who your family has been?
>
> – Clint Smith, *How the Word is Passed*

As a museum professional and art curious person, I revel in the opportunity to visit art in a new city or location. On a visit to Boston in March 2023, I spent an afternoon at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. This had been my first visit and I was looking forward to exploring a diverse range of eras of paintings and discovering new contemporary works of art. I glided through the exhibition halls, seeing familiar works of Monet, Degas, and others as I gathered inspiration. I did not have an objective for this visit other than to spend time in the lively galleries surrounded by art and those encountering art alongside me. In this chapter, I will expound upon two works of art, *The Lady in a Red Shawl*, by an unknown artist, and *Watson and the Shark*, by John Singleton Copley, and will discuss the collective of artworks on display in the Kristin and Roger Servison Gallery (Gallery 133).

I entered into the David and Stacey Goel Gallery (Gallery 239) in the Americas' wing. There was a tour guide giving a tour to a group in another language, but otherwise these galleries were fairly sparse of visitors. As I turned the corner, I saw a beautiful portrait of a Black woman. The painting, *The Lady with a Red Shawl*, stood out immediately in its simple wood frame. A stunning portrait, with deep emotion, displayed limited information of who the sitter was. A label beside the painting established that this painting is by an unknown artist from about 1840. The provenance lists first the artist, followed by Mr. Alan Howe, Salem, Mass, and lastly by John D. Constable, Sherborn, Massachusetts. In 1991, the painting was a gift to the Museum of Fine Arts Boston by John D. Constable and the Visiting Committee of the Department of Paintings.

Figure 21. *The Lady with a Red Shawl*, artist unknown, David and Stacey Goel Gallery, Museum of Fine Arts Boston, about 1840.

As I've discussed in earlier chapters, limited visual depictions of Black individuals were created and are available to us today from the time of the Underground Railroad. Guy C. McElroy writes, "naming is a form of power, and visual images have the pervasive power to identify and define place and personality." *The Lady in a Red Shawl* is of an unknown woman, created by an unknown artist. She is devoid of her identity beyond her visual description in the way that it is accessible to viewers, in the gallery and online. This is not as common and should be uplifted. The artist made the decision to paint her portrait, deeming her identity of importance to capture.

It is not known whether she was free or enslaved, or even whether she had consented to having her portrait painted. Enslaved people most often did not have the ability to make this decision for themselves, as we've seen in the story of Renty, Delia, Jem, Jack, Alfred, Fassena

and Drana. They were enslaved in 1850 at the dawn of photography, when Harvard biologist Louis Agassiz commissioned a southern plantation enslaver to provide enslaved people to be photographed to prove the inferiority of Black individuals. Discovered at the Harvard Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology by a librarian in 1976, the degrading daguerreotype photographs show the enslaved people nude without their consent, as an enslaved person cannot consent. In recent years, the family of Renty have been fighting to have the photographs returned to the families of the people in them. Tamara Lainer, great-great granddaughter of Renty argued the court case, *Lainer vs. Harvard*, in 2022. Ultimately, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court did not order Harvard University to return the photographs, however it upheld the motions related to the physical and emotional consequences Lanier suffered as a result of Harvard's actions "allowing Lanier to bring the case back to Massachusetts's Superior Court and hold Harvard accountable."[46] It is important to note this situation while going into exploration and research to identify individuals.

Given the story of Renty, I do not claim to know or have an inference that *The Lady in the Red Shawl* was enslaved. The museum staff call out questions on the label to the same effect. *The Lady in the Red Shawl* may not have been enslaved. She may have been a part of the upcoming Black middle class in Boston, an abolitionist, or a business owner. The Museum of Fine Arts Boston beckons, "who is this woman, gazing out of the painting under a furrowed brow?"[47] The label goes on to ask the viewer, "can you help us learn more about this remarkable and mysterious portrait?"

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[46] Valentina Di Liscia, "Tamara Lanier May Sue Harvard for "Emotional Distress" Over Images of Enslaved Ancestors, Court Rules," Hyperallergic, posted June 23, 2022, https://hyperallergic.com/742516/tamara-lanier-may-sue-harvard-for-emotional-distress-over-images-of-enslaved-ancestors (accessed April 17, 2023).

[47] Object label for *The Lady in a Red Shawl*, in exhibition at Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA. Seen on: March 24, 2023.

It is evident that the painting evokes more questions than answers. Similarly, in the *One More River to Cross* exhibition, the photograph of a Black man and two white men posing together on the Canadian side of Niagara Falls (figure 13) that I discuss in Chapter four, presents more questions than answers currently. Asking questions is a key component of ensuring that visual representation in a museum setting is equitable and appropriate. It is a starting point. I appreciated seeing this approach at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston in their curation, especially given the painting that is displayed on the same wall, *Rustic Dance After a Sleigh Ride*, painted in 1830 by William Sidney Mount, which portrays three Black Americans. Guy C. McElroy argues that "*Rustic Dance After a Sleigh Ride* set a tone for the inclusion of black Americans in genre painting that would persist in the work of generations of American painters." McElroy continues, "The seated fiddler, with his grinning face, dark skin, and wide-eyed visage, is a racial type – the comic musician – that was popularized by minstrel performers such as T.D. Rice and Dan Emmett." These types of portrayals were common practice throughout the mid-1800s and were based on stereotypes perpetuated to keep Black individuals as objects of entertainment and deem lesser. This paper does not dive deeper into the full range of visual representation of Black individuals throughout the last two centuries, however, noting these instances provides further context for understanding the need for authentic and appropriate representation and curation.

Figure 22. Kristin and Roger Servison Gallery, Museum of Fine Arts Boston. Photograph by Alison Spongr, March 26, 2023.

After encountering *The Lady with a Red Shawl* and deciding to bring her visual presence to this thesis, I entered into the Kristin and Roger Servison Gallery (Gallery 133), still in the Americas' wing. Only a few galleries over, I was delighted to see the work of Kara Walker, a prolific contemporary Black woman artist. Walker's artwork, *Resurrection Story with Patrons,* 2017, was positioned among early American paintings of and by mostly white Americans. Walker's depiction of figural forms through her signature silhouette style reflects on slavery and calls for the depiction of enslaved individuals to be reimagined and reframed. "Since 1994, Walker has used the aesthetic of the cut-paper silhouette—an art form used mainly for portraiture that thrived in the eighteenth century—to create powerful works that engage the history and legacy of slavery in America,"[48] writes Jennifer Farrell in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's blog entry regarding the acquisition of Walker's *Resurrection Story with Patrons* print. Major art

[48] Jennifer Farrell, "Traditional Form and a Contemporary Lens: Kara Walker's Resurrection Story with Patrons," The Metropolitan Museum of Art Blog, entry posted on January 15, 2019, https://www.metmuseum.org/blogs/now-at-the-met/2019/kara-walker-resurrection-story-with-patrons (accessed April 16, 2023).

museums across the United States have recently acquired a print. In fact, I encountered this print a few weeks prior on a visit to the Legion Museum of Honor, a Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco. I note this because, while Walker's work is extraordinary, and contemporarily creating power in the Underground Railroad context, as well as contemporary context, I am wondering if there might be additional artists whose work warrants a similar acquisition and display.

I thought about this as I was taken aback by the two large-scale paintings of George Washington immediately across the gallery from Kara Walker's *Resurrection Story with Patrons*.[49] These larger-than-life depictions, in two locations none the less, overshadow Walker's work. It was important to me, as a visitor, to see Walker's work placed in this gallery to provide some balance to the Americans who are shown in the gallery. However, as I looked around, I noticed as is typical in an exhibition about early American paintings, that the paintings were all of prominent white men. I took a closer look and dug deeper. In this gallery, there are a significant number of artworks depicting and honoring enslavers. The Museum of Fine Arts Boston included an exhibition panel with a description of Walker's *Resurrection Story with Patrons,* which referenced only one other painting in the gallery in relation to it. That painting is *Manumission of Dinah Nevil,* by Jeremiah Paul from about 1795, portraying the story of Dinah Nevil, who "publicly asserted her freedom for herself and her children in Philadelphia based on her Indigenous ancestry, as enslaving Native Americans was illegal in Pennsylvania."[50] The panel briefly describes the paintings and concludes with an ephemeral comparison of the two, "While Nevil kneels in subjection, nearly nude among clothed white men, the woman in

[49] The two large-scale paintings of George Washington include *The Passage of the Delaware*, by Thomas Sully, 1819, and Washington at Dorchester Heights, by Gilbert Stuart, 1806.
[50] Exhibition Panel, "Aesthetics of Freedom" for *Resurrection Story with Patrons* and *Manumission of Dinah Nevil,* in exhibition at Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA. Seen on: March 24, 2023.

Walker's central panel is raised to a position of power and equality, as Walker calls for repentance and rebirth."[51] I argue, why are the other white men in this gallery not called out for forcing Black Americans into slavery as depicted in both of these artworks? There are missing pieces here.

I bring this experience visiting the Museum of Fine Arts Boston to this thesis as an example of the power of interpretation, both visual and textual, and of who is the voice or curator of the content. The Museum of Fine Arts Boston holds and displays *Watson and the Shark,* a painting by John Singleton Copley in the Norma and Roger Alfred Saunders Gallery (Gallery 128). As referenced in this paper's literature review, the painting features a Black man on a ship with all white men, in a traumatic scene of a shark attack. In presenting this experience and example, I shed light onto how exhibition narrative either ignores the representation of Black Americans or is discussed as a key element of an artwork.

Figure 23. *Watson and the Shark,* John Singleton Copley, Museum of Fine Arts Boston, 1778.

[51] Exhibition Panel, "Aesthetics of Freedom" for *Resurrection Story with Patrons* and *Manumission of Dinah Nevil*, in exhibition at Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA. Seen on: March 24, 2023.

Watson and the Shark's description from the Museum of Fine Arts Boston's website reads as follows:

> John Singleton Copley departed from Boston in 1774 and traveled to Europe, where he spent a year studying Renaissance and baroque paintings and classical sculpture. After settling in London in 1775, he continued to paint portraits, but he also attempted more complex compositions. *Watson and the Shark* was the first large-scale history painting he executed. The dramatic composition depicts the attack of a shark on fourteen-year-old cabin boy Brook Watson in the waters of Havana Harbor in 1749. The heroic rescue was ultimately successful, but only after the youth lost the lower part of his right leg; Watson went on to become a prosperous merchant and hold numerous important political posts in London. Copley's choice of subject was innovative, for tradition limited history paintings to themes from the Bible or mythology. Even when artists selected subjects outside the bounds of religious or classical narrative, they typically celebrated events of national rather than personal significance, such as military victories.
>
> Copley's boldness paid off, and *Watson and the Shark* established his reputation in England. His dramatic rendering of the climax of Watson's story—the sailor thrusting a boat hook at the shark lunging with jaws agape at the helpless, terrified boy in the water while other sailors struggle to reach him—appealed to the English public. That Copley drew on old-master paintings by Raphael and Rubens for his composition, echoing their grandeur and themes of salvation, likewise found favor with his contemporaries. He was elected to full membership in the Royal Academy in 1779. His popular painting was made into a print for wider distribution to the public in 1779 and, proud of his accomplishments, Copley painted a second full-scale version of the painting that he kept to display in his studio. That version is the MFA's picture.[52]

The decision to present the description void of the Black man's presence continues to perpetuate the lack of visual representation of Black individuals during the Underground Railroad and beyond. This description positions Copley's accomplishments as an artist front and center, yet remarkably leaves out the uniqueness of including with an equal stylistic elevation a Black man amongst the group of white individuals.

[52] Museum of Fine Arts Boston Collections, adapted from Elliot Bostwick Davis et al., "Watson and the Shark", https://collections.mfa.org/objects/30998/watson-and-the-shark?ctx=e4f21751-9aa3-4eaf-a34d-769982030e13&idx=1 (Accessed April 16, 2023).

Rather, in *Facing History, the Black Image in American Art 1710-1940*, Guy C. McElroy begins his description of John Singleton Copley's *Watson and the Shark*, by stating, "The unidentified black man in Watson and the Shark remains justly celebrated as one of the most eloquent portrayals of an African-American by an American artist."[53] McElroy continues, "After viewing Copley's preparatory drawings for *Watson and the Shark*, which contained a white figure in the position now occupied by the African-American, Watson may have specified that a black figure occupy the central location." McElroy is referring to Brook Watson, a wealthy merchant with strong ties to the transatlantic slave trade, and the painting reenacts a story of Watson's youth – as told in the Museum of Fine Arts Boston's description. McElroy closes with,

> The black figure is, like the other figures in Copley's composition, an overdressed player in an allegorical set piece. More important, however, he is a multi-dimensional individual who shares casual equality with a white man. In a stunning innovation that would not be fully repeated until the paintings of Winslow Homer, Copley's black figure does not exist to provide the set dressing that establishes material wealth or a particularly American setting but acts instead as an integral component of a dialogue that encompasses political intrigue, business practice, and even the psychological identity of individuals within a historical life-and-death context.[54]

By way of these examples from the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, I argue that as museum administrators, curators, and decision makers, we must go further. Expand. Push the limits. The *One More River to Cross* exhibition at the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center begins to create the shift in traditional Underground Railroad visual interpretation, and other institutions are beginning to think along the same lines.

[53] McElroy, Guy C., *Facing History: The Black Image in American Art 1710-1940* (San Francisco: Bedford Arts, Publishers, in association with The Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1990), 6.
[54] McElroy, Guy C., *Facing History: The Black Image in American Art 1710-1940* (San Francisco: Bedford Arts, Publishers, in association with The Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1990), 6.

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