Underground Railroad Free Press

News and views on the Underground Railroad. Since 2006 we've brought together people and organizations interested in the historical and the contemporary Underground Railroad. We publish bimonthly.

Something Looks Different Here

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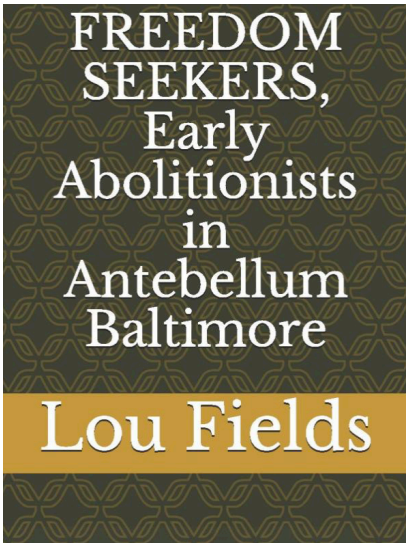
In this issue Maryland launches a grant program to identify more of the state's Underground Railroad sites, Lou Fields has a new book out on Baltimore Underground Railroad figures, and we have the second installment of a comprehensive article on the Underground Railroad escape route out of North Korea.

The Baltimore Underground Railroad Had Its Giants

Historian Louis Fields, often called Mr. Maryland Underground Railroad, had had his book, *Freedom Seekers, Early Abolitionists in Antebellum Baltimore*, published. The book is available at Amazon in paperback and for digital devices.



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Freedom Seekers is a true story of the abolitionists and Freedom Seekers and their work on the Underground Railroad in Baltimore, Maryland. From Tyson to Tubman, *Freedom Seekers* identifies the men and women who risked everything to escape from enslavement in antebellum Baltimore.

In 2015, Fields was awarded the Underground Railroad Free Press Prize for Leadership in the International Underground Railroad community for getting Maryland's annual Harriet Tubman Day observance legislated, founding Baltimore Black Heritage Tours, and leading the state Underground Railroad community for 15 years, now 20.

Maryland Awards Grants to Identify Underground Railroad Sites

Maryland has been awarded federal grant money to discover and tell more stories of Underground Railroad sites in the state.

The $20,000 will be used to fund four research fellows who will work with the Maryland Office of Tourism Development and the Maryland State Archives to document and interpret the additional sites.

The funding was awarded through the 400 Years of African American History Commission, a National Park Service panel established in 2018 to recognize the 400th anniversary of the arrival

of enslaved Africans in the English colonies and highlight the contributions of Africans and African Americans in the centuries since.

"Maryland is the most powerful Underground Railroad storytelling destination in the world and we are grateful for the grant to continue the important research of uncovering the histories of individuals who utilized the Underground Railroad to gain their freedom and others who assisted those fleeing from bondage," Gov. Larry Hogan said in a statement. "It is imperative to bring to light the stories of the many currently unknown individuals whose lives were forever changed by the Underground Railroad and to share their stories of determination for freedom, self-preservation, and self-emancipation."

Each fellow will conduct research and complete applications for the National Park Service's Network to Freedom program, which aims to honor, preserve and promote the history of the resistance to enslavement. At the end of their fellowships, each recipient will present a free public program about his or her findings. Maryland currently has 85 Network to Freedom sites, research facilities and programs.

"The Network to Freedom program helps to tell the stories of all those individuals who fought against oppression and for freedom who are often left out of the national narrative," said Maya Davis, research archivist for the Legacy of Slavery in Maryland program at the Maryland State Archives. "Thank you to the 400 Years of African-American History Commission for awarding this grant to Maryland in order to recognize the brave men, women, and children whose stories inspire us today to learn from the past to ensure all are treated fairly and equally in the present and future.

Active and Very Risky: North Korea's Underground Railroad

By Doug Bock Clark

This article is being serialized over three issues of Free Press, this being the second. Readers will find the first installment of the article in our September, 2020, issue in the Free Press archives. The article first appeared in the March 26, 2019, issue of GQ for which Mr. Clark serves as Correspondent. Serialization of this long-form article will be completed in the next issue of Free Press due out in January, 2021. Reprinted with thanks.

The first installment introduced Faith (a pseudonym), her dismal life in North Korea, her bad marriage, and increasing suspicions by local authorities about her loyalty. Weighing her options, Faith resolves to escape North Korea and does, making her way into China where she is subject to deportation back to Korea. Now she needs to identify people she can trust to help her navigate clandestine Underground Railroad routes south through Viet Nam, Laos, Thailand and finally to the South Korean embassy there, the friendly terminus of her long perilous journey.

Second Installment

Faith wanted to flee via the Underground Railroad as soon as possible, but she refused to abandon her children born in China, as she had been forced to do with her kid in North Korea, meaning the escape had to wait until late 2017, when her Chinese husband departed for an extended trip. She left no note before ushering her two children into a pre-arranged car. She didn't want to hurt her husband, but what other choice did she have? The car drove her to a safe house in a major northern Chinese city. There she received a call. "Are you okay?" a soft masculine voice asked. "I've been praying for your safety." The mysterious man explained that he was a leader on the Underground Railroad and that from there on out, all she had to do was follow the directions of his agents, whom he would be carefully managing from afar. The man on the phone was "Stephen Kim." "Kim is one of the key activists who still has the contacts, knowledge, and tenaciousness to get North Korean defectors out," said Phil Robertson, the deputy director for the Asia Division of Human Rights Watch. "Getting people out has become

infinitely harder [recently]— and while others have dropped out, he has doubled down." Soon, under Kim's care, Faith would begin her journey along the Underground Railroad while Kim Jong-un, the dictator of North Korea, continued his campaign to destroy it. And her escape would be made even more difficult by recent changes within the Underground Railroad that were creating conflict between once allied activists.

Though neither Faith nor Kim knew it, they were embarked on a course that would upend both their lives.

3. The Mission

Stephen Kim is a man whose life has been shrouded in legend. For leading the rescue of over 700 North Koreans, he has been called "the Oskar Schindler of North Korea," a

nickname that he shares with several other humanitarians who do similar work. Associates refer to him by the code name Superman, and he has been called "mythical" by human- rights activists, as reported by *The Times* of London. When I first met him, in the fall of 2018, at a private location in Seoul, I was struck by his constant wry smile—the kind that suggests someone who knows something they aren't telling you. After months of unsuccessfully attempting to arrange our interview through an intermediary, Kim had suddenly agreed to meet. "People need to know that the Underground Railroad is under attack by Kim Jong-un and China," he explained. "And they need to do something about this and help the North Koreans."

Over the coming months, Kim would give me an unprecedented look into his life and the Underground Railroad. I wanted to better understand what it takes for a man like Kim to sacrifice himself for others. How had he and other activists created a secretive international humanitarian organization, responsible for saving thousands of lives? And how could it be saved as it faced increasing danger? In searching for these answers, I would learn that things weren't always as they seemed. And I would find, surprisingly, that sometimes threats to the Underground Railroad come from within.

For safety, Kim doesn't want too much known about his past, but there are two facts that he feels are important in order to understand him. First, his father grew up in what became North Korea before he moved to modern-day South Korea to run a wholesale vegetable business. Sometime after that, the Korean Peninsula was split into two nations and the Korean War broke out. Thus, while Kim grew up in the South, he thought of North Koreans as long-lost family. Second, Kim's father was Christian, and though he and his family eventually stopped attending church, Kim never forgot Jesus.

But in the mid-1990s, it was profit and not religion that was on Kim's mind as he sourced cheap textiles from the Chinese provinces lining the North Korean border. Striding the streets, the besuited high roller would pass skeletal North Korean children pleading for food, and if he had time, he would buy them bowls of dog soup, renowned for its dense calories. Listening to their horror stories of the famine just across the river, Kim was deeply moved—but he had an international business to run. That is, until around 1997, when he went bankrupt.

His family was forced to move into a tiny apartment with a shared bathroom in the Chinese port city of Dalian. He contemplated committing suicide. But then, in what felt like divine inspiration, he remembered that the impoverished North Korean street kids still had the will to live. He swore to re-dedicate his life to them and to Jesus. Using the last of his savings, and eventually money he earned exporting beans and

North Korean antiques, Kim rented several cheap apartments and began inviting dozens of North Korean refugees —"wandering swallows," as the homeless youth were called —to live in them.

Kim remembered that one refugee in his mid-teens, Kang Won-cheol, was so malnourished when Kim met him that his hair had yellowed. Kim's offer could have seemed strange at first, for after a lifetime in a society where citizens are encouraged to inform on one another, many North Koreans are suspicious of unconditional help. But Kim and his wife kept the rice cooker going constantly and spent their days teaching the wandering swallows basic scholastic lessons and the Bible, which Kang distinguished himself in learning. Kang soon realized that Kim's generosity was genuine: "He opened my heart," Kang said, "and changed my life." Soon, Kang became so dear that Kim called him "son."

Kim was not alone in his work. South Korea is the bastion of Christianity in East Asia, and by the late 1990s many South Korean missionaries were sneaking into China to assist North Koreans. Most missionaries, however, had more zeal than discretion—one recalled with horror his colleagues openly discussing their work in hotel lobbies—and soon their work began to attract the attention of the Chinese Communist government, which strictly controls religious expression. Before long, Chinese police were arresting missionaries and parishioners alike. Kim was more cautious than most— ordering that the doors to his safe houses be opened only to a special knock and keeping ropes by the back windows, just in case inhabitants needed to rappel out. After a few years, however, his luck ran out.

4. The Escape

It was late in 2000, and the frigid northern Asian winter was congealing, when another missionary asked Kim to help a family of North Koreans. It was immediately clear when the family arrived at one of Kim's safe houses that they were not like the wandering swallows. The father, mother, son, and two daughters were healthy, wore tailored clothes, and had accents from North Korea's capital, where only elites dwelled. The father confided to Kim that he had been a scientist involved in weapons programs. Could Kim help him escape to South Korea? At least one pastor, Chun Ki-won, and the activist Kim Sang-hun were escorting North Koreans out of China by then. Kim, however, had never helped anyone escape before, and took the time to think over his options.

One day, shortly after plans were set to help the family move, though, Kim found the apartment where they stayed in disarray, with discarded cigarette butts still smoldering on the floor. Neighbors told him that a dozen armed policemen had arrested everyone within, including the family and Kang. Kim

wondered if he should flee, before deciding he couldn't abandon his charges. But when he tried bribing the usually pliable Chinese police, he was told there was no hope in saving the scientist and his wife: They had been beaten so badly their teeth had shattered and they'd soon be returned to North Korea. Eventually, Kim heard, they were executed there by firing squad.

On arriving in his new home, Kang had completed the government's months-long crash course on adjusting to South Korea, studying everything from how to use a subway to what capitalism is.

Meanwhile, Kang and the scientist's three children had been locked in a conference room on the seventh floor of the police headquarters. It was better than an actual jail, but Kang was terrified that he was about to be repatriated to the gulags. Searching for a way to escape, Kang discovered that one of the conference-room windows was unlocked and just within reach was a gutter spout. In the early hours of the morning, Kang grasped hold of the pipe and began shimmying down. His hands slipped. He began to skid—but at the last moment, he clamped back on. When he reached the ground, he says, he felt it was a "miracle," and ran to tell Kim about the children left behind.

Eventually, with donations from various missionaries and NGOs, Kim bribed the police to release the scientist's children. It was clear, however, that the city was no longer safe. So Kim dispatched

the scientist's children to the Mongolian border, under the care of a trusted friend, where they sneaked across and claimed asylum at the South Korean embassy. Then, a few weeks later, Kim and Kang followed, along with two Chinese- Korean guides and four other wandering swallows, divided into two teams. For much of the two-day trip, Kang slept, nestled up against Kim in taxis, trains, and buses. On arrival, the group checked into two different cheap inns, one for the adults and the other for the teenagers. Then, in the last daylight, they scouted the route the children would take across the desolate expanse of the Gobi Desert, divided only by a high metal fence, while winter wind clawed them like the "Devil's hand." The next morning, one of the guides was sent out to check the escape route again, accompanied by a refugee. But before long, the guide telephoned Kim. He and the refugee had been picked up by the Chinese police, and he was calling at the police's orders to tell Kim to surrender himself. Kim frantically telephoned the wandering swallows at their inn, and told them to hide until night and then sneak over the border on their own. The police burst into Kim's room just as he flushed the shreds of the group's maps and documents down the toilet. They handcuffed him. During questioning, the beatings began.

After dark, Kang and the others dug with their hands through the frigid sand under the border fence. It took them six hours, he says. When they finally reached the other side, they hoped that Mongolian soldiers would arrest them—and then eventually turn them over to the South Korean embassy. But they instead found themselves in a wasteland. Kang led the others toward a glow on the horizon until they reached a town. There, Kang says, "I was happy to be caught by the police for once!" After a couple of weeks of processing in the South Korean embassy of Mongolia, he was finally flown to Seoul. Eighteen years later, I met Kang there in a trendy coffee shop. His short stature marked him as a survivor of the North Korean famine, but his stylish streetwear camouflaged him with the South Korean hipsters around us. On arriving in his new home, he had completed the government's months-long crash course on adjusting to South Korea, studying everything from how to use a subway to what capitalism is. Over the years he has worked on a factory line, eventually graduated from university, and most recently had gotten a job at the South Korean agency that resettles North Korean refugees. Several months after his escape, when Kang finally saw Kim, the newly freed man had trouble recognizing his savior because Kim had lost so much weight and had his hair buzzed in prison. Kim's wife, funded by family and a humanitarian NGO, had paid a huge bribe for his freedom. Lingering pain from fistfights with other prisoners and the police beatings stiffened Kim's movements. When Kim explained that he had been tortured in prison, Kang wept.

"Stephen sacrifices a lot for people like me," Kang said. "I will never forget that."

5. Faith Flees

In late 2017, Faith, her children, and five other North Koreans were given stylish clothes so they would not stand out among the better-dressed Chinese, and were matched with Chinese ID cards from a stash used by each group of defectors, a recent necessity for slipping through China's "smart city" surveillance systems. It was then that Faith resumed her journey toward freedom that had been cut short by the treacherous smugglers years before.

For the first week, Faith mostly just saw the insides of sleeper buses, with occasional glimpses of slumbering cities and moonlit countryside. As much as possible, she and the other North Koreans pretended to be asleep, with hoodies pulled over their faces, to avoid talking to ticket conductors or other officials. An agent handled all interactions with authorities. Each morning, when the defectors arrived in a new city, a fresh agent hurried them to a pre-arranged safe house. Then, come evening, they were rushed onward to the next destination.

On long bus rides, Faith struggled to keep her two children, who had to squeeze with her onto a single level of a bunk bed, from tantrums that might expose the whole group. Could she really be so close to freedom only to lose it all? Her single comfort came when Kim called to ask how

she was doing. He explained that he was directing the agents who were leading her. Just talking to him reassured her; the kindness he was displaying would have been unimaginable in North Korea, and she hoped everyone in the South was like this. Faith's journey was out of her control, but she trusted Kim, who had been helping refugees for nearly two decades.

6. The Underground Railroad

After two months in the Chinese jail, "I didn't want to do the work anymore," Kim said. "I was broken." But he felt God intervened. "Until then, I wasn't the kind of Christian who directly experienced many miracles," but afterward he had visions inspiring him to continue the mission. By mid-2002, Kim was again living in northern China, and with funds from the NGO the Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights (NKHR), he was personally guiding a small number of refugees to South Korean embassies in Southeast Asia.

"No one has a perfect bird's-eye view of the history of the Underground Railroad," said Tim Peters, the founder and director of Helping Hands Korea, a prominent rescue NGO that has saved more than 1,000 people, "as all rescue organizations silo their information," given the sensitive nature of the work. That said, after talking to 13 people involved in the Underground Railroad, I think that the following seems clear: The individual efforts of several dozen South Korean, American, Japanese, and Chinese activists in the late 1990s coalesced into several formal organizations by the early 2000s. Some sneaked refugees into South Korean and other sympathetic embassies in China until security became too tight. Others favored the Mongolian route, before China sealed it in the mid-2000s. This meant the primary way out was to cross all of China and then much of Southeast Asia. Although North and South Korea are divided only by the impenetrably fortified 2.5-mile-wide demilitarized zone, the journey between the nations had become one of about 6,000 miles.

One of Kim Jong-un's first orders was for guards to shoot anyone caught defecting over the border. Then he boosted the number of border guards and installed tens of thousands of surveillance cameras.

As the Underground Railroad expanded, the number of North Koreans arriving in Seoul skyrocketed. In 2001, Kang was one of just more than 1,000 arrivals. By 2007, that number rose to over 2,500. So much success, however, prompted China to crack down. The missionaries had little experience running clandestine networks, and many began to be jailed or disappeared. Kim kept his cover as a businessman but increasingly found himself harassed by Chinese police. By 2005, for fear of attracting attention to his family, he was staying away from their apartment for months at a time. Kim's two sons were still in elementary school, so he could only explain his absences by telling them he was doing a "good thing for God."

"It was hard having a father who could never stay with us more than a week or two," said Kim's son David, "and struggling financially.... Now, though, I understand that my father is just wonderful." At the end of each too-short visit, Kim remembered, "my children would always say: 'Don't leave us!' " But, Kim explained, "I chose to help the North Koreans because my family could at least survive without the help. I feel like I've given my lovely family too much suffering."

Eventually, in 2006, Kim was told by contacts within the Chinese police to get out of the country. By then he also feared a North Korean assassination attempt. So he arranged for his family to move to the United States. Kim had hoped to accompany them "because I just wanted to hide for a few years and live with them." But immigration issues likely related to his arrests prevented him from entering the U.S. Kim hadn't explained the length of the impending separation, but at the airport, even though "he was saying 'Have fun over there' and throwing around jokes," David remembered, "I could tell my dad was sad." David started crying. Kim lifted David off the ground in a hug and told him, "I love you." That was goodbye. A decade later, they still had not seen each other in person again.

At about that time, around 2008, life for activists like Kim became much harder. China tightened security ahead of the Beijing Olympics, and Pyongyang pressured governments in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos to increase their arrests of refugees, whom they would repatriate. "It still really hurts," Kim said. "Many of my friends were lost." An American diplomatic cable exposed by WikiLeaks shows that activists were not expected to last more than a year in northern China. In place of charitable workers, brokers came to dominate the Underground Railroad. Brokers had been assisting refugees from the beginning. North Koreans freed by activists used their new South Korean passports to guide other escapees along Underground Railroad routes they had already traveled. But the number of brokers exploded as North Koreans already in the South proved willing to pay thousands of dollars to be reunited with family left behind, and North Koreans in China who were without funding signed IOUs promising to pay back the brokers in Seoul, often using the significant resettlement stipends the South Korean government gave them. The brokers had more prospective clients than they could lead out personally, and so they cultivated Korean-Chinese living in China who could work for them. Before long, the brokers had forged networks that surpassed those of the charitable organizations, and activists began hiring these brokers as their own networks increasingly failed. A representative from an NGO that has rescued hundreds of defectors estimated that charitable rescues have accounted for about 30 percent of the approximately 32,000 North Koreans who have arrived in the South, with the rest coming via brokers.