

A Crafty Escape

A Reading A-Z Level X Leveled Book
Word Count: 1,522

LEVELED BOOK • X

A Crafty Escape

Connections

Writing

Write a speech speaking out against slavery from the point of view of William or Ellen Craft. Deliver the speech to your class.

Social Studies

Research to learn more about the Underground Railroad. Create a poster that explains what it was. Include a map showing some of the main routes.

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**Multi
level
R•U•X**

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Focus Question

Who were the Crafts, and
why are they remembered?

Words to Know

abolitionists	fugitive
bounty hunters	harbor
complexion	invalid
conductor	segregated
disguised	slavery
freedoms	vouched

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Correlation

LEVEL X

Fountas & Pinnell	S
Reading Recovery	40
DRA	40



Ellen Craft



William Craft

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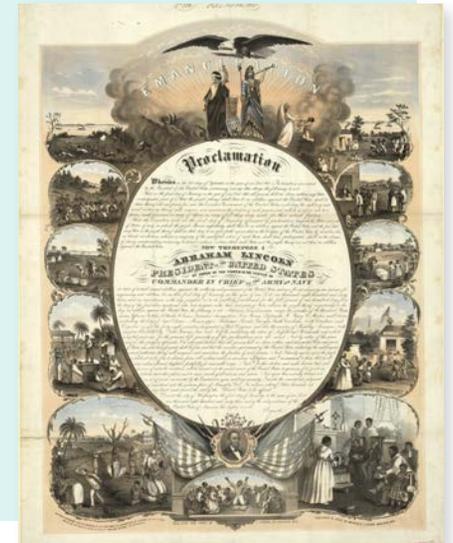
Introduction

Dressing in costume as someone else can be entertaining and fun. Now imagine that your life depends on how well you play that part. In the nineteenth century, William and Ellen Craft did just that. The Crafts were two slaves who **disguised** themselves to escape their lives in the South.

People as Property

The Crafts, like all black slaves in nineteenth-century America, were considered property. They were forced to do whatever work their owners wanted them to do. As property, they had few, if any, of the rights enjoyed by white people. They could not learn to read or write. They could be bought and sold. They also could be starved, beaten, or even killed if they angered their owners.

In January 1863, President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, which granted freedom to many, but not all, slaves. The original proclamation freed all slaves in most slaveholding states. It did not, however, pertain to Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri. Though these states permitted slaveholding, they never officially seceded from the Union. The slaves in those states would have to wait two more years to be free.



Born into Slavery

Like so many black people living in America during the mid-1800s, William and Ellen Craft were born into **slavery**. William, born in 1824, lived in Macon, Georgia. His family was owned by a man who liked to gamble. To settle his debts, the man sold off the members of William's family, one at a time.

William was sold when he was sixteen years old. He had been apprenticing as a carpenter and was quite skilled. William's training and talent would prove to be valuable assets. His new owner, a bank cashier, realized that William could provide him with a good income. He permitted William to work as a cabinetmaker and earn money for him.

Ellen was two years younger than William. Her mother was a slave and her father a white slaveholder. Ellen had a light **complexion**, so much so that people didn't suspect she had a slave mother. At the age of eleven, Ellen was "given" to her newly married half sister to work as her servant. Ellen moved to Macon with her half sister's family. There, she eventually met William.



Ellen Craft



William Craft



A Decision Fueled by Love

William and Ellen fell in love and wanted to be together, but slave marriages were complicated. Slaves were considered property with few of the **freedoms** that white people had. They needed their owners' permission to wed. Even if permission was granted, slave couples could not live together if they had different owners.

In 1846, Ellen and William finally received permission to marry. For two years, they lived apart, seeing each other only occasionally. The separation took its toll on the Crafts. They realized that at any moment, one of them could be sold and sent far away from the other. For this reason, Ellen did not want to have children. She couldn't bear the idea of having their child torn from them and sold.

Eventually, the Crafts realized that the only way they could live as a family was to escape and flee north. Black people could live freely in the Northern states. The big question was how the Crafts could do it without being caught. Fortunately, William had a plan.

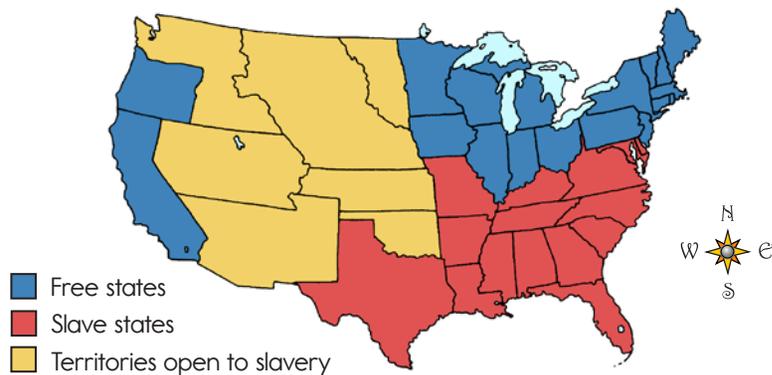
Free or Slave?

In 1860, there were thirty-three states in the United States. Slavery was legal in the fifteen Southern “slave states” and illegal in the eighteen Northern “free states.”

In the states where slavery was legal, black slaves had none of the rights of their white owners. In free states, black people could live as free citizens.

The slave states seceded from the United States to form the Confederacy. After the South lost the Civil War, the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution abolished slavery in the United States, and all states became free states.

Slavery in States and Territories, 1860



Preparing and Planning

William came up with a daring scheme that involved disguising Ellen. They would escape and travel to Pennsylvania, the nearest free state. Because Ellen’s skin was so light, she could pass as a white person. This would ensure that she would not be questioned while traveling north. William could travel with her as her loyal house servant. They would be hiding in plain sight.

There was just one problem—Ellen could not travel as a woman. Women of that era did not travel alone, and they certainly didn’t travel with a male slave. Doing so would have attracted unwanted attention. The only way the plan would work was if Ellen traveled disguised as a man.



Ellen was reluctant and fearful at first. If they were caught, the penalties would be harsh. They would certainly be beaten and might even be risking their lives. She finally agreed when William explained how her disguise would work. The night of the escape, William would cut Ellen's hair short. She would wear special undergarments to hide her figure. She would also wear a bandage around her face and green spectacles to hide her beardless skin and feminine features.

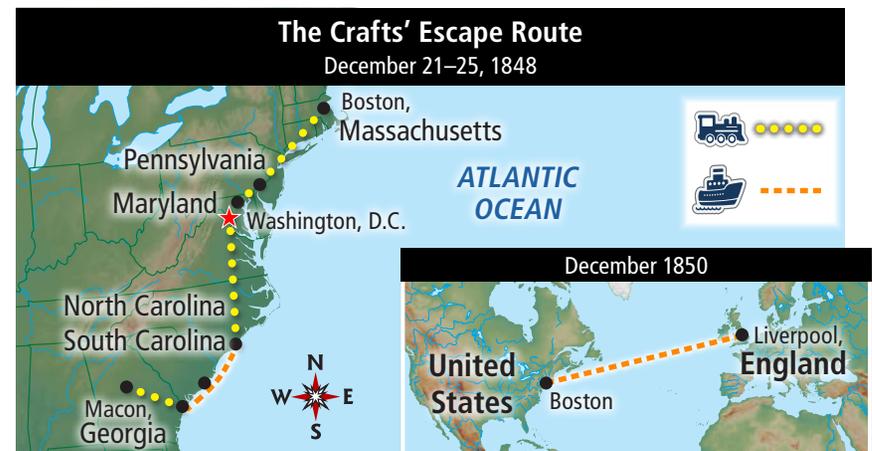
To complete the disguise, Ellen would wear one arm in a sling. Ellen had never learned to read or write. The sling would keep her from having to sign her name on any paperwork needed in those days to travel. The glasses, bandage, and sling would make Ellen appear sickly. Posing as an **invalid** would also explain William's presence as a dutiful servant attending his master. They could then travel without arousing suspicion.



The Great Escape Begins

The Crafts decided to make their escape on December 21, 1848. William had been hiding money from his cabinetmaking to fund their trip. The couple asked their owners for some time off so they could spend Christmas together. It was customary for owners to grant slaves a few days off during the holidays. The Crafts could take advantage of that time to escape and wouldn't be missed until they were long gone.

When the day arrived, William cut Ellen's hair and helped her into her costume. They both said a prayer and went to the Macon train depot to purchase tickets to Savannah, Georgia. They could not even support each other as they journeyed since travel was **segregated**. They boarded separate train cars and waited to begin the first leg of their trip.





Suddenly, William noticed a familiar face on the platform. It was the owner of the cabinetmaking shop where William worked! The man had a suspicion that William might be fleeing with his wife. He began walking through the train, searching for them. William crouched down in his seat, trembling. Just as the man reached William's train car, the departure bell sounded. He left, and William heaved a sigh of relief—he was safe.

Ellen, seated in another train car, had a scare of her own. When her seatmate arrived, he turned out to be her owner's good friend who had known Ellen for years. Ellen sat very still and dared not speak or look up. Fortunately, her disguise was so convincing that the man greeted her without a second glance and took his seat. Ellen pretended to be deaf so she could avoid talking and giving herself away.

Setting Sail for Freedom

The Crafts reached Savannah safely and boarded a steamer ship for Charleston, South Carolina. When the ship landed in Charleston, they tried to buy tickets to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. However, a clerk refused to sign for the couple's tickets despite Ellen's apparent "injury." The boat captain from their first ship happened to pass by and offered to help. He **vouched** for the pair, and soon they were on their way north again.

The Crafts had several interesting encounters on their trip. Ellen was scolded by other passengers for thanking her slave. People didn't acknowledge their slaves in that way. One slave trader offered to buy William from Ellen. Others warned Ellen to beware of Northern **abolitionists** who would try to persuade her slave to escape.

Their final hurdle came in Baltimore, Maryland. Slave states that shared borders with free states had border patrols that checked for runaway slaves. The Maryland border patrol demanded proof of slave ownership from the Crafts. William and Ellen feared their quest for freedom was over. One officer took pity on the pair, however. He ordered the **conductor** to let them board. The Crafts arrived safely in Philadelphia on Christmas Day 1848. They found shelter in the home of an abolitionist.

Across the Ocean to Safety

For a while, life was good for the Crafts. They learned to read and write. Three weeks after arriving in Philadelphia, they went on to Boston, Massachusetts. William began working again as a cabinetmaker, and Ellen worked as a seamstress.

Their happiness did not last, however. In 1850, Congress passed the **Fugitive Slave Act**. The act made it a crime to **harbor** runaway slaves, even in free states. Law officers could receive a handsome reward for capturing and returning escaped slaves to their owners.



The Underground Railroad

How did the Crafts know where to go once they reached Philadelphia? A communication and travel network called the Underground Railroad steered them in the right direction.

The Underground Railroad sounds like a subway system, but it had no tracks, nor was it underground! It was a system of escape routes and safe houses run by people who helped runaway slaves get to freedom. The routes ran through free Northern states all the way to Canada.

Abolitionists knew to keep an eye out for black people coming into free states from the South. They would guide these newcomers to safety by providing shelter, food, and directions to freedom.

Two **bounty hunters** from Georgia named Willis Hughes and John Knight arrived in Boston. They were intent on making money by bringing the Crafts back to Georgia. They met with fierce resistance from the people of Boston, who knew of the Crafts' incredible and brave journey. Bostonians warned William and Ellen and harassed the bounty hunters. The terrified Crafts hid with friends while being hunted, but they could not bear to live in fear. In December 1850, they set out on another journey, this time to England.



A poster warns African American people in Boston that they could be seized without a fair trial and enslaved because of the Fugitive Slave Act.

The Bloodhound Law

In 1850, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act. This law stated that a person who aided a runaway slave would be fined \$1,000—a large sum in those days. Anyone who returned a slave to a Southern slave owner would get a reward, or bounty. The law was referred to as the Bloodhound Law because bounty hunters would use bloodhound dogs to track down fleeing runaways.

Because this was a federal law, it impacted free as well as slave states. Still, many antislavery officials in free states defied the law and refused to actively hunt down runaways or people who helped them.

The Long Trip Home

The Crafts settled in West London and had five children. They gave lectures against slavery throughout Great Britain. In 1860, William published a book about their harrowing tale of escape. The Crafts became teachers, ran a boarding house, and engaged in other business ventures to support their family.

In 1870, several years after slavery had been abolished in the United States, the Crafts returned to their homeland. They settled outside Savannah, Georgia. They purchased 1,800 acres (7.3 sq km) of land with money raised from antislavery supporters and friends in the North. They also launched the Woodville Cooperative Farm School in 1873. The school's goal was to educate freed slaves so they could enjoy the same opportunities the Crafts had. Although the school was initially successful, it soon ran into money problems and closed in 1876.

After fleeing many miles over many years, the Crafts moved to Charleston, South Carolina. Charleston had been one of their destinations during their escape. They spent their last years there together in freedom, just as they had always dreamed.

Glossary

abolitionists (<i>n.</i>)	people who fought to make slavery illegal (p. 12)
bounty hunters (<i>n.</i>)	people who track and capture others for a reward (p. 14)
complexion (<i>n.</i>)	the color and appearance of the skin on a person's face (p. 5)
conductor (<i>n.</i>)	one who collects tickets from passengers riding public transportation (p. 12)
disguised (<i>v.</i>)	pretended to be different by changing one's appearance (p. 4)
freedoms (<i>n.</i>)	rights or privileges of being free (p. 6)
fugitive (<i>n.</i>)	a person who is running from something, usually legal authorities (p. 13)
harbor (<i>v.</i>)	to hide or give refuge to a person (p. 13)
invalid (<i>n.</i>)	a person who is sick or injured and in need of care (p. 9)
segregated (<i>adj.</i>)	kept apart based on group differences, such as race (p. 10)
slavery (<i>n.</i>)	the state or condition of being a slave, or owned by another person (p. 5)
vouched (<i>v.</i>)	confirmed that something was true; stated one's belief in another person's good character (p. 12)