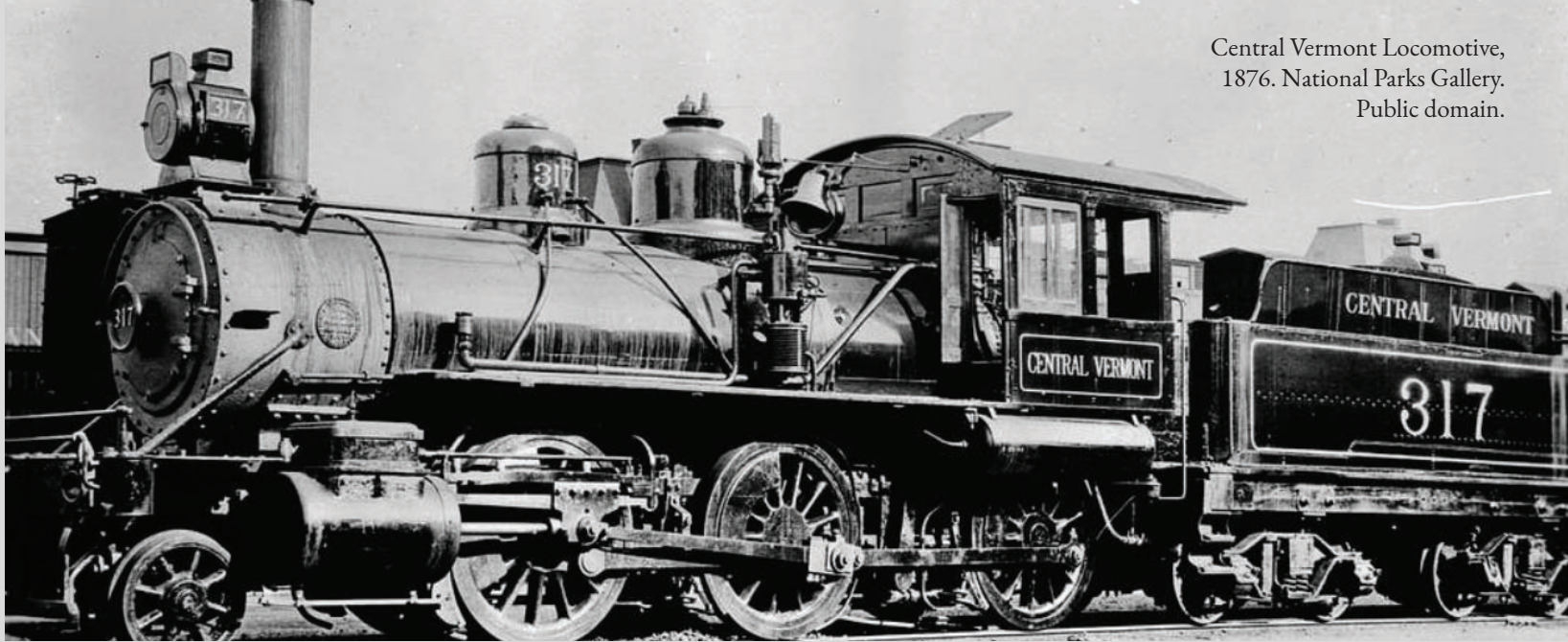




The Art of Passing in Craft’s *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*

Marissa Pate

Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom by William and Ellen Craft tells a tale of bravery, strength, and ingenuity as they travel together to northern states to escape slavery. The northern states were the Crafts’ closest haven from the treachery of slavery in 1848. The story presents the perspective of two Black people, William and Ellen, who devise and execute a daring plan to escape slavery. At that time, the southern states were still heavily supporting slavery and oppression. The northern states had begun advocating for the emancipation of the slaves. Word spread

throughout the nation about the opportunities awaiting those who made the journey to the North. William and Ellen encountered many obstacles, including illiteracy and prejudice, during their escape from slavery and had to craft a careful plan to overcome these obstacles. Using these obstacles to their favor, they were able to manipulate the upper-class White population into allowing them passage to the North.

It is crucial to understand what was at stake for the Crafts. Slaves who were caught fleeing slavery were subjected to harsh punishments and death. At a minimum, the Crafts were sure



to be separated. In *Running*, Craft describes various laws and recounts stories of slaves who attempted to flee. He also describes what awaited them if they were caught fleeing:

We were also perfectly aware of the startling fact, that had we left without this consent the professional slave-hunters would have soon had their ferocious bloodhounds baying on our track, and in a short time we should have been dragged back to slavery, not to fill the more favourable situations which we had just left, but to be separated for life, and put to the very meanest and most laborious drudgery; or else have been tortured to death as examples, in order to strike terror into the hearts of others, and thereby prevent them from even attempting to escape from their cruel taskmasters.¹

Public punishment was a common way for slaveholders and slave hunters to discourage fleeing. The slaves’ fear of punishment held them captive just as much as their slaveholders’ control did. This looming fear presented a dire need to be thoughtful and careful while traveling to the North.



“Whipped Peter,” an escaped enslaved man, displaying scars from repeated whipping, Louisiana, 1863, illustrating the physical punishment used to deter escape. Public domain.

The Crafts were vigilant in their plan for escape. They realized while forming their plan that they had many obstacles to overcome. First, they were two Black slaves who wanted to travel publicly without a White person to escort them. In *Running*, Craft states, Knowing that slaveholders have the privilege of taking their slaves to any part of the country they think proper, it occurred to me that, as my wife was nearly white, I might get her to disguise

herself as an invalid gentleman, and assume to be my master, while I could attend as his slave, and that in this manner we might effect our escape.²

Ellen realized her skin tone was light enough to portray herself as White. Masquerading as a White man while escorting her enslaved husband, William, was a dangerous but ingenious idea. In “A Complication of Complaints’: Untangling Disability, Race, and Gender in William and Ellen Craft’s *Running A Thousand Miles for Freedom*,” Ellen Samuels states, “For she is white, if whiteness is defined purely by the color of her skin and texture of her hair.”³

Despite these features, Ellen was considered Black, due to the “one-drop rule,” which meant no matter how small the amount, if a person had even one drop of African blood in their heritage, they were considered Black.⁴ The condition of slavery was inherited from mothers by their children. So, even though Ellen looked like a White woman, she was still considered a Black slave. The Crafts were able to use this to their advantage during their escape. She disguised herself as a White slaveholder, and William served as her valet, a personal servant who attended to a gentleman. This act was an effective way to appear inconspicuous to the general public during their escape.

REGISTRATION OF BIRTH AND COLOR--VIRGINIA

FULL NAME.....
[GIVEN NAME FIRST. GIVE FULL MAIDEN NAME IF MARRIED WOMAN OR WIDOW.]

PLACE OF BIRTH.....DATE.....SEX.....

NAME OF HUSBAND
[IF MARRIED WOMAN OR WIDOW]

FATHER.....
FULL NAME.....

BIRTH PLACE*COLOR.....

MOTHER.....
FULL MAIDEN NAME.....

BIRTH PLACE.....*COLOR.....

REMARKS:

*A white person is one with no trace whatever of blood of another race, except that one with one-sixteenth of the blood of American Indian, unmixed with other race, may be classed as white. The date of birth may be omitted if desired.

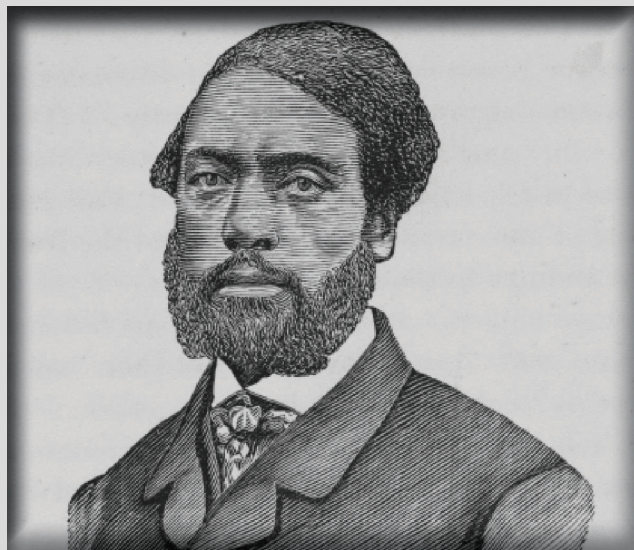
Form 59—3-17-24—65M.

Registration of Birth and Color, 1924, showing the one-drop rule. Courtesy of the Library of Virginia, Local Government Records Collection, 10-0878-001/002.



While the Crafts had the racial obstacle figured out, they still had a hurdle to overcome due to Ellen's gender. During this time, women were predominantly seen in the domestic sphere as homemakers, tending to the housework, cooking meals, and caring for the children of the household. A White woman traveling alone with a male slave would have aroused suspicion from others and immediately resulted in their detainment. To combat this, the Crafts decided to portray Ellen as a man. Because men were seen as the family's providers and protectors, it would have been more common to see a man traveling alone with his slave.

To conceal Ellen's womanly characteristics, significant changes were made to her appearance. In *Running*, Craft recalls,



William Craft. Public domain.



Ellen Craft. Public domain.

"I cut off my wife's hair square at the back of the head, and got her to dress in the disguise and stand out on the floor."⁵ Ellen also wore a poultice (a white cloth) that she wrapped under her chin, draped over her cheeks, and tied over her head to conceal the lack of scruff along her jaw. Along with the poultice were bandages covering her face. This plan also had the added benefit of being a visible disability, which worked to their advantage in more than one way. It aided in the disguising of her feminine features and helped them explain the lack of a deeper vocal tone that would be common for men. In *Running*, Craft states, "My wife's being muffled in the poultices, &c., furnished a plausible excuse for avoiding general conversation, of which most Yankee travellers are passionately fond."⁶

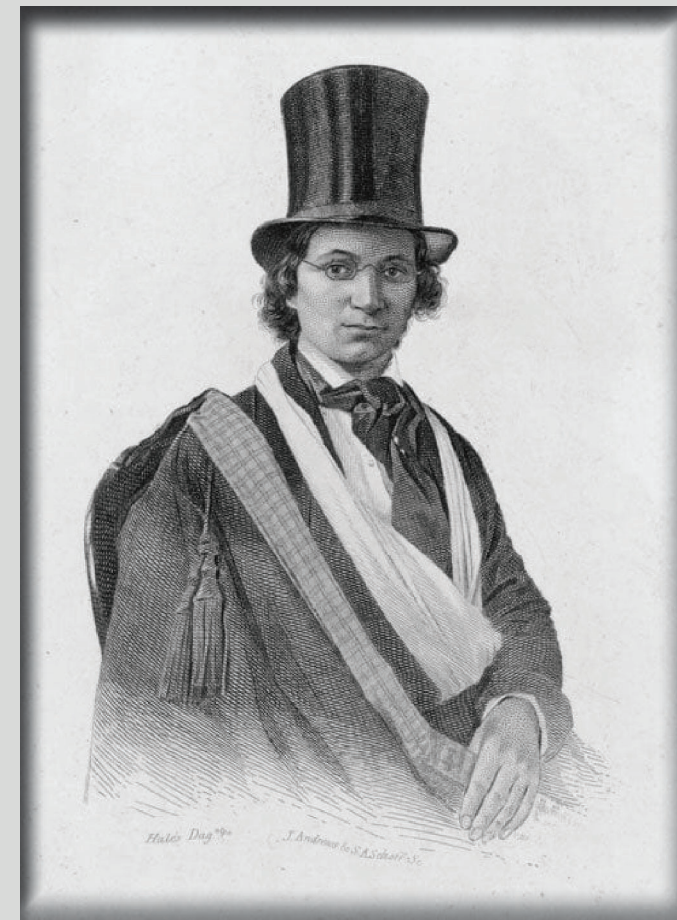
Ellen Craft also sewed a pair of trousers that were hemmed to fit her short stature and wore spectacles to help hide her eyes while conversing with men. The social norms of the time would not accept a single woman traveling with a man, and Ellen feared that if she didn't have something to conceal her eyes, they may reveal her true gender. These steps were effective in portraying Ellen as a man in a time when men were the main participants in the public sphere.

To further hide her identity, Ellen also claimed to have a disability that required bandages wrapped around her hand to help excuse her inability to write and asked for someone else to sign for her when needed. In "A Complication of Complaints," Samuels states, "For Ellen Craft, displacing the disability of illiteracy onto a physical impairment

enables her escape from slavery by allowing her to travel as a White man: it allows her to function as a mobile subject."⁷ Using sympathy she garnered from someone she met during her travels, she was able to get someone to vouch for her and was allowed passage on the train. When people saw her in poor health, they felt compelled either to help her or to avoid close encounters due to an ingrained discomfort with people with disabilities.

In *Running*, Ellen was faced with the challenge of portraying an upper-

class White man. This was a difficult obstacle and took creativity to incorporate indicators of a social class higher than their own. Generally, slaves were kept in horrific housing accommodations, had a certain amount of food their families were given monthly, and



Ellen Craft disguised as a white male traveler during her escape from slavery. Illustration from Wilbur H. Siebert, *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom* (1898). Public domain.



had a yearly allotment for clothing and shoes. If their clothes were ripped or if their shoes were worn to the point of breaking, slaves were not permitted replacements until the next allotment. They were never allowed to experience the luxuries of the upper-class White population. For example, people of higher social status were able to read and write. During these times, it was illegal for a slave to learn to read or write, as this could give them the ability to spread awareness and information amongst themselves. If anyone was caught teaching a slave to do either, they themselves faced harsh punishments.

The upper class was also expected to



Upper-class fashion, 1859. Public domain.

portray themselves in a way that showed decorum, purity, and intelligence to indicate that they were of good breeding. To display their social status, the Crafts used material items they had acquired. William wore a nice secondhand white beaver fur, and Ellen wore a fine cloak. These were both clothing articles that an upper-class person was expected to wear. Ellen also used religion to relate to other people, as religion was an important way to illustrate one's good character during these times.⁸

The upper class also had a very specific view of slaves. In *Running*, Craft states, "The great majority of slaveholders hate this class of persons with a hatred that can only be equalled by the condemned spirits of the infernal regions."⁹ This outlook created a moral dilemma for Ellen when she visited members of the upper class during their escape. Ellen endured constant exposure to conversations in which enslaved people were discussed in dehumanizing, cattle-like terms, which went against her core beliefs. Yet because she was portraying herself as a member of the upper class, she had to appear agreeable so she didn't expose her true identity. Despite the intensity of hatred against her people, she was able to consistently maintain a



Upper-class parlor train car, 1900. Library of Congress. Public domain.

decorum that corresponded with the class that she was impersonating.

Slaveholders during this time were also expected to travel separately from their slaves. During their time on the train, Ellen had to sit with the White upper class while William was forced to ride in a separate car under harsher conditions. The division of the races was to be expected. While separation added to both of their anxieties, they took any opportunity they could to meet and update each other on the status of their escape.

During their time on a train, they were

stopped by an officer who was opposed to allowing slaves passage into the northern states for fear of slaves escaping slavery. Even though William was with his "master," the officer was not easily persuaded into allowing him passage.

After the officer had finished, a few of them said, 'Chit, chit, chit;' not because they thought we were slaves endeavouring to escape, but merely because they thought my master was a slaveholder and invalid gentleman, and therefore it was wrong to detain him.¹⁰

During their escape, Ellen had to



improvise multiple times to avoid being discovered. In *Running*, Craft recalls encounters with others that almost resulted in their discovery. Ellen created new disabilities to maintain her disguise. She feigned deafness to avoid answering people and used a diagnosis of “inflammatory rheumatism” to excuse herself to go to bed when other travelers wanted to stay up.¹¹ Ellen even unintentionally cultivated the romantic interest of two women and

feigned feeling faint to excuse herself from their company.¹² Even though they were faced with many obstacles, the Crafts were able to successfully find passage to the North using a culmination of all these factors and portrayals to manipulate the White upper class. By mastering the art of passing across race, gender, class, and disability, William and Ellen Craft transformed the very structures meant to confine them into tools of liberation.



Ellen and William Crafts’ South Carolina home, 1890. Public domain.

About The Author



Marissa Pate, 27, is an ASL interpreting major from Mena, Arkansas, with a strong passion for advocacy and

communication access. A creative spirit, she enjoys crafting, ceramics, reading, and experimenting with new gluten-free recipes. Marissa shares life with her dog, King, and brings resilience shaped by her experience with Perthes, including a hip replacement at 23. In high school, she was part of a competitive archery team that ranked 13th in the world. Dedicated and compassionate, Marissa strives to make a meaningful impact through language, art, and advocacy.

Endnotes

- 1 Craft and Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles*, Part 1.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Samuels, “A Complication of Complaints,” 23.
- 4 Sharfstein, “Crossing the Color Line,” 593.
- 5 Craft and Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles*, Part 1.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Samuels, “A Complication of Complaints,” 26.
- 8 Craft and Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles*, Part 1.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid.

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William Craft and Ellen Craft. *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*. 1860. Project Gutenberg, 1996. <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/585.w>

Ellen Samuels. “‘A Complication of Complaints’: Untangling Disability, Race, and Gender in William and Ellen Craft’s *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*.” *MELUS* 31, no. 3 (2006): 15–47. <https://jstor.com/stable/30029650>.

Daniel J. Sharfstein. “Crossing the Color Line: Racial Migration and the One-Drop Rule, 1600-1860.” *Minnesota Law Review* 91 (2007): 592–656. <https://scholarship.law.vanderbilt.edu/faculty-publication/386>.