Black men held the preponderance of maritime positions along the Chesapeake Bay and its numerous tributaries that drove the slave trade from the Carolinas to New England. In Hampton Roads, African Americans crowded the ships, sails, and decks as part of the throng of laborers. Visitors to the area would have seen canal boats, scows, flatboats, and sails commanded by all-black crews.

**SECRET, STRATEGY AND CONCEALMENT**

The “agents” and “conductors” on Virginia’s Underground Railroad were the most threatening group to slaveholders. Without their brave and heroic deeds, far fewer slaves would have been able to find freedom, or even see it as an option.

The conductors were often skilled slaves, free blacks or whites. Many of their names will forever remain anonymous because of the success of their enterprise and the safety demanded by the strict secrecy.

Many remain anonymous. But not all.

Henry Leavy was a Norfolk slave who used the pseudonym “Bluebeard” to hide his identity. He escaped 1856 when word circulated that he was a suspected Underground Railroad agent.

William Bagby was a white Virginia Bank bookkeeper who was later credited with assisting in the escapes of numerous slaves and passing correspondence between those who had escaped and enslaved family members still living in Hampton Roads.

Indeed, the duty of an Underground Railroad agent was not limited to connecting slaves seeking freedom with sympathetic ship captains and underground agents in the north.

After the escapes reached the North, the local agent often served as the only connection to loved ones left behind.

**SECRET PASSAGE**

Of the roughly 90 former local slaves interviewed or referenced by William Still in his book, The Underground Railroad, the majority reported escaping by ship from the Norfolk waterfront.

Since the 1830s, in fact, local newspapers had been announcing that the “villains” responsible for carrying fugitives northward were ship captains whose vessels regularly navigated the waterways of Hampton Roads.

To be sure, certain ship captains were known in the underground community to be sympathetic to runaways, or at least willing to do so for a price.

Although some runaway slaves were escorted aboard vessels without the knowledge of captains and crew, others were supervised either from captain or stewards.

Still’s book listed the City of Richmond, the Pennsylvania, and the Augusta steamships, as well as the Kansan schooner, as vessels that plied the local waterways transporting runaways to points north.

Many credited schooner captains William D. Baylies, Alfred Ruthaus, and Henry Lee, along with John Minkins who worked aboard the City of Richmond and the Pennsylvania.

Between 1851 and 1867, there were 40 ships operating in the Norfolk-Portsmouth area.

Perhaps none were more significant than Higgin’s and Wright’s wharves, where The City of Richmond, the Philadelphia, and the Augusta were known to have customarily tied up.

**ISOLATED. REMOTE. PERFECT.**

The City of Richmond with Captain Mitchell and the Pennsylvania with Captain Teal were Union Pacific Steamship Company vessels that left from Higgins’ Wharf every Tuesday and Thursday at noon throughout the 1850s.

The Augusta, captained by William C. Smith, left every Thursday, Tuesday and Saturday at 6:30 a.m. from Wright’s Wharf in Norfolk.

Relatively isolated and located at the far end of Widewater Street near New Castle Street, the two wharves sat near the site of today’s Harbor Park baseball field.

At the time, it was a remote area of Norfolk’s waterfront near a footbridge that led to the black neighborhoods in and around the Town of Berkley. The wharves allowed fugitive slaves some degree of anonymity and protection as they sought passage aboard one of the many schooners and steamships docked in port.

Indeed, opportunities to depart aboard vessels were ample for daring or desperate enslaved African Americans in Hampton Roads, especially before the state-ordered mandatory ship inspections and the municipal paid night watchmen.

Moreover, fugitives may have been assisted in their escape by the Norfolk and Western Railroad whose track ran from Widewater Street past many major wharves along the waterfront in downtown Norfolk, or by the brick black race operating the ferries that span between Norfolk and Portsmouth.

**TRUST, SUSPICION, AND FREEDOM.**

Whites certainly played an invaluable role in the movement. Many white sailors, ship captains, and other travelers provided slaves with opportunities to escape.

However, it was the members of the black community who were most deeply involved. While individual slaves made the courageous decision to escape, he or she usually turned to fellow blacks for aid.

When slaves escaped, their black acquaintances and relatives were immediately suspected of helping, as were white sailors.

The sailors who ran away were young, healthy, and ambitious, and most ranged in age from the late teens to the mid-thirties. About 25 percent were females. It was not unusual for the escapees to be skilled in a trade and represented their masters’ most valuable slave property.

A healthy man in that age range was worth about $1,200 in the late 1850s. He possessed a skill, and male slaves commonly sold for $1,200.

Some slaves contemplated the view of escaping to freedom for months, or even years before leaving.

Using Virginia’s waterways, they found freedom and a better life.

How many? No one can ever be sure.
RUNAWAY TRAINS

Runaway slaves were believed to have used the Norfolk and Western Railroad in their escapes. Norfolk and Western trains ran down Whaley Street past every major wharf along the waterfront in downtown Norfolk, or were avoided by the all-black crew operating the trains running between Norfolk and Portsmouth.

TESTING THE LAW

Shawshel Minkins, whose 1851 arrest and trial in Boston became the first major test of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, escaped from slavery while working as a house servant at the home of John Deleweit, a prosperous landowner and former Navy man who worked as a seaman at the Gospell Navy Yard. The home was located at 117 E. Main Street in a fashionable district near where the Norfolk-Marriot Hotel stands today. Born around 1841, Minkins was originally owned by Thomas Glenn, a New Kent County native who ran the Eagle Tavern and hotel near the waterfront at the foot of Market Square and Commerce Street. The business was easily accessible to officers stationed at the Gospell Yard. As one of 12 slaves owned by Glenn, Minkins was familiar with whites and blacks from Portsmouth and Norfolk, and was generally cognizant that his situation was tenuous. Visitors to the tavern occasionally heard the shouts and cries of the city's slave auctions. Dealers who bought and sold slaves could easily find Minkins within the slave pen until a sufficient number could be transported to the Lower South where their labor was in demand.

ESCAPING THE "SLAVE PEN"

For 16 years, slave Robert McCoy had been constantly in traveling condition. "It is believed that Minkins escaped three times in the course of the year," Minkins said, "but they were not able to capture me the third time. I was tenuous. Visitors to the tavern occasionally heard the shouts and cries of the city's slave auctions. Dealers who bought and sold slaves could easily find Minkins within the slave pen until a sufficient number could be transported to the Lower South where their labor was in demand. McCoy was held in the slave pen for about three years. This painful state of affairs only caused anxiety among the abolitionists in the Philadelphia area because they thought that he was too intelligent to be a slave. He opened an office in New Bedford, and sought to improve himself in his profession by studying medicine, served in the Massachusetts Regiment during the Civil War. He would later return to Norfolk, set up practice as a dentist, and within four years, was elected to the Norfolk City Council.

AN AXE TO GRIND

In November 1855, Thomas and Frederick Nixon escaped to Philadelphia with 21 fugitive slaves aboard his wheat-packed schooner, the City of Richmond. Just after slaves were collected and confined enslaved African Americans in its clutches of the "Negro-trader" and speculator William Gray. Located at the far end of Widewater Street near New London and Market Street, the Navy Yard's former owner of famous runaway slave Shadrach Minkins. Gray owned the slave pens where many caught fugitives and those awaiting sale were confined. Gray's residence at 117 E. Main Street was on a quarter-mile route across the river. It replaced the North Street Ferry, which still runs today. The home was located at 117 E. Main Street in a fashionable district near where the Norfolk-Marriot Hotel stands today. Born around 1841, Minkins was originally owned by Thomas Glenn, a New Kent County native who ran the Eagle Tavern and hotel near the waterfront at the foot of Market Square and Commerce Street. The business was easily accessible to officers stationed at the Gospell Yard. As one of 12 slaves owned by Glenn, Minkins was familiar with whites and blacks from Portsmouth and Norfolk, and was generally cognizant that his situation was tenuous. Visitors to the tavern occasionally heard the shouts and cries of the city's slave auctions. Dealers who bought and sold slaves could easily find Minkins within the slave pen until a sufficient number could be transported to the Lower South where their labor was in demand.

A SLAVE BECOMES CELEBRITY

Smallest known to have been in the church, a slave, coupled with her family's uncomfortable confinement, prevented her to rest and escape in Philadelphia before being reunited with her husband in Massachusetts. The couple took the names of William and Mary and in 1855, moved to New Bedford, Massachusetts.

FERRIES TO FREEDOM

All black crews operated the ferries that ran across the Elizabeth River between Norfolk and Portsmouth and were known to assist slaves in their escapes. The Norfolk Ferry, which began operation in 1784, was located at Penny Square in downtown Norfolk where fugitives disembarked from Portsmouth to avoid visible or forceful detection of which to escape. The High Street Ferry began operation in 1858 from its location at the Norfolk waterfront and still runs today. It replaced the North Ferry, which had left a series of services of Portsmouth with just a quarryville route across the river.