

Anthony Comegna: [00:12](#) (music)

Not every piece of classical liberal scholarship has to be cram jam full of allusions to Adam Smith or references to Hayek especially in history. History is in a way the most humane of the humane studies. We don't write history because we know the absolute truth of what happened in the past we don't, we can't, we probably never will perhaps it's completely impossible.

We write history first and foremost to practice empathy. It lets us do what little we can to mentally exercise in someone else's head. Plenty of historians lose touch with this fact though and they tell the stories of massive, impersonal, disembodied social forces. But classical liberals write their histories as the stories of individuals and their actions.

Today we have historian Richard Bell who recently spoke at one of our research workshops on his latest book, the gut wrenchingly empathetic, *Stolen: Five Free Boys Kidnapped into Slavery and Their Astonishing Odyssey Home*.

So Professor Bell, your latest book tackles a phenomenon that I think even though many people have heard of, they might not know that it was an actual thing, like a proper phenomenon, the Reverse Underground Railroad. So what can you tell us about that term, what does it refer to exactly?

Richard Bell: [01:48](#)

So the best way into something like this might be through something that I bet many of your listeners are familiar with which is what happened to a man called Solomon Northup. He is the author of a memoir called *Twelve Years a Slave*, and that memoir was made into a Hollywood film in about 2013 and it won the Academy Award for Best Picture.

It's a wonderful piece of cinema and it tells the story of what happened to him as one individual forced passenger on what I call the Reverse Underground Railroad. This is a free black man. He was in his mid thirties. He was a prosperous musician. He lived in upstate New York and one day in 1841 he is lured into Manhattan where he is wined and dined by two well-dressed white confidence men who eventually drug him and are able to kidnap him and sell him to a legal slave trader, passing him off as a slave and so doing and transport him to New Orleans where he is indeed sold as a slave to a sugarcane planter setting up down there in the deep South. And as you know from the title of that memoir, *Twelve Years a Slave*, it took this free black man

12 years to escape that captivity. Remember, he's legally free, he's kidnapped and trafficked into slavery.

The research and my new book *Stolen* is designed to contextualize that case and reveal that in fact what happened to Solomon Northrup happened thousands, and thousands, and thousands of times to free black adults and children most especially living between the American Revolution and the Civil War. So the kidnapping and human trafficking into slavery was a remarkably frequent and pernicious phenomenon and I dub it the Reverse Underground Railroad.

Anthony Comegna: [03:54](#) In your book specifically follows the story of five black children in Philadelphia who are captured and trafficked on this Underground Railroad. Before we talk more about the boys themselves and their situation, I'm wondering what sorts of institutions held this black market together and to what degree was this a very organized phenomenon?

Richard Bell: [04:22](#) So it was protected by the legal culture of the slave South. This kidnapping network exists to exploit what by the early 19th century become major differences in the legal status of slavery in most Northern States and in all the Southern States. It exists in part because of the indifference of many people in positions of political, or legal, or judicial power both in northern free States like Pennsylvania where so many free black adults and children were kidnapped from. Authorities there do precious little typically speaking to intervene or rescue kidnapped free people who disappear from their States. Also of course, by the legal and political culture of the slave South. There are anti-kidnapping laws in all the States, both North and South but for the most part and for most people they go wholly unforced.

Anthony Comegna: [05:33](#) Now to me at least this is not so much a thesis driven book as a story-driven book. It's narrative driven. It's about doing your very best as a historian and as a reader to occupy the lived experience of these kids as they get trafficked on the Underground Railroad and that makes for some really, really compelling descriptions of life in Philadelphia and in New Jersey. I thought that was also very compelling about the kids escaping slavery from New Jersey and ending up in Philadelphia and then almost immediately or relatively quickly being scooped up by this reverse Underground Railroad.

Tell us a bit about the lives of African Americans in Philadelphia and especially how did class and race intersect to sort of continue putting free people in this precarious position?

Richard Bell:

[06:34](#)

Yes, thank you. It's a great question and yes, you're right to identify this book as something perhaps unusual. It's certainly very different to my first book, which is a thesis driven, argument driven piece of intellectual and cultural history about a very different topic. This new book is what I call a micro history or an embedded narrative, which means it is narrative driven. It is character driven, its plot driven. There is a beginning, and a middle, and an end, and a story that I hope readers will want to follow and find out what happens to these boys. It's a true story to be clear, but it is a narrative driven attempt to writing history. So that creates various different opportunities and also challenges as a writer and as an academic.

But to answer your question, yes one of the places that I wanted to reconstruct as a world for readers was the world of early 19th century Philadelphia in the 1820s. The case I'm writing about in this book *Stolen*, follows five free black boys who were kidnapped from the streets of Philadelphia in late August 1825.

Philadelphia in that year is home to one of the largest and certainly the most vibrant and dynamic free black communities anywhere in the United States. The census tells us the population of black people in Philadelphia was about 12,000 a very large number by the standards of the day. Philadelphia is in Pennsylvania and Pennsylvania has by 1825 effectively abolished slavery. Philadelphia is considered effectively a free city, a refuge, a place of sanctuary for lawfully free, free black people who want to continue to live their lives and liberty. And of course for runaways from slavery, whether they're running away from slavery in Virginia, or in Maryland, or in Delaware or even in New Jersey, which is next door and where there is still some agricultural slavery in the 1820s.

So Philadelphia has a vibrant, dynamic free black community. It's the center of the free black church movement. For instance, the mother church of... many African American religious life is in Philadelphia, Mother Bethel, Richard Allen, the most famous black preacher of the day is a Philadelphian. There are black mutual aid societies there, black charities, there are black schools. This is a place where free black people believe they can be safest, most prosperous and seize what opportunities they can.

But on the other hand, Philadelphia is at the same time a deeply racially segregated place and a place where racial tensions are

just below the surface, if not out in the open in every interaction. The much larger white population competes with this embattled black population for everything, for jobs, for good housing. Free black people, while they enjoy the legal protections their Liberty supposedly brings them, have to really struggle to find jobs, to find a place to sleep, to find a place for their children to go to school. And anytime the economy begins to contract tensions between the white population and the free black population flare up often into open violence.

So for all its vaunted freedoms and Philadelphia has the reputation of being the city of brotherly love as being a refuge for free black people and for being the hub of America's anti-slavery movement in this period. It is simultaneously one of the most dangerous places in the United States to be free and black when kidnapers cross into Pennsylvania and come into Philadelphia from neighboring slave States hoping to grab some free people and spirit them away. There are precious few white Philadelphians who are willing to lift a finger to stop them. So it's a very dangerous place to be free and black.

Anthony Comegna: [10:44](#)

What kinds of methods though did African Americans and the abolitionist movement and even just in some cases onlookers with a sense of justice who see somebody clearly being kidnapped and they intervene. What kinds of methods did people employ to resist these kidnapping practices?

Richard Bell: [11:06](#)

As your question points out there were of course, energetic, passionate efforts to resist kidnapping from members of the free black community who found themselves being targeted or saw some other member of their community being targeted by kidnapers. It is also true that there were some white bystanders and there were some white anti-slavery activists though the numbers were small who certainly did get off the sidelines when confronted with an abduction in progress.

We know from the surviving sources which get reported in newspapers by the way, they turn up in anti-slavery or organization records by the way. We know that people would bite and kick to avoid... to make kidnapper let them go. We know that people would yell and howl and scream to try to create witnesses and bystanders and to encourage intervention like screaming fire in a theater right, to get people to do something. And we know that sometimes neighbors would rush out and try to separate a kidnapper from his or her victim that they would beat them with brickbats and clubs. They would set upon them if they could.

But we also know that more often than not, these efforts were too little and too late and vastly more people were spirited away by kidnapers than kidnappings were ever thwarted by various bystanders, onlookers, activists, et cetera. This was a thriving black market business in the early 19th century and my six years of research suggest to me that the number of free black children and adults who are kidnapped from free cities and States in the first 50 or so years of the 19th century probably numbers in the tens of thousands, this was big business.

Anthony Comegna: [13:04](#)

That is a pretty shocking figure. I mean that's many, many boatloads worth of slaves, in a time when of course the importation of slaves from Africa was illegal and vigorously prosecuted across the world.

So one of the interesting pieces of resistance that I found too was the way that the black community just acculturated itself toward looking for the signs of a kidnapper or a kidnapping. The rumor mill or the advice mill of how to spot it in progress, how to avoid it. It really struck me as very similar in this racist culture or the slave culture of the 19th century. It struck me as very similar to what folks in the academic left would refer to as the rape culture today. That women are simply instructed on how to avoid this sort of natural catastrophe. It is going to happen, you have to watch out for it, you have to be on your guard. Yes, you're a victim if this happens to you, but you also have to be responsible for making sure it doesn't happen.

Richard Bell: [14:20](#)

So okay, I'm not going to touch the rape culture part of your question, but I am going to engage with the substance of the history question here, which I think is really important one.

You're right, of course, free black families realize that when it comes to protecting themselves and their loved ones from the threat that kidnapers posed even in free cities like Philadelphia, that they cannot expect much outside help, much governmental intervention. Most constables, most mayors, most magistrates in places like Philadelphia are not committed anti-slavery activists in the 1820s. The free black community is almost on its own. So families themselves form the first line of defense here and we see time and again in surviving records that free black parents are telling each other to carry their freedom papers everywhere to make sure they remain up to date and they're telling their children every night probably at bedtime and again over breakfast the next day. That when you are out and about without us, when you're on your way to

school or on your way to your job, and many children did have jobs in this period that you need to be on the lookout for kidnappers, catchers, people who could grab you. You need to be able to read body language to size up a stranger, to stay out of parts of town, to never go anywhere unaccompanied.

Much of this advice to free black children from their parents is of course directed around the figure of the white kidnapper and a white slave catcher who are most prominent here. But one thing my research turned up was these gangs of white kidnappers would occasionally succeed in hiring black or mixed race operatives to do some of that front end work trying to make an end run around free black parents warnings to their children to be able to look out for suspicious white dudes.

Occasionally these suspicious white dudes would hire black or mixed race individuals, pay them a large amount of money enough to swallow their scruples and silence their conscience. It would be those small numbers of black and mixed race individuals who would actually be the decoys, be the lures, be the bait. They would sidle up to street kids who looked hungry, often kids down by the docks who were clearly looking for odd jobs and they'd say something like, "Hey, I've got some crates of peaches or watermelons down in their ship just round the corner. I really need your help unloading them. You can trust me and the money is good. I'll pay you 25 cents, that's enough for a nice lunch afterwards. The work will take less than an hour once you walk with me this way." Unfortunately, four of the five boys who are at the center of my new book *Stolen* agree to walk with them and that's how they end up on the ship. The fifth resists and a gag is stopped across his mouth and he is dragged to join the others.

Anthony Comegna: [17:22](#)

And then these boys get trafficked by one of these gangs that you just identified. This particular gang seemed to be centered around this just bizarre figure, a woman named Patty Cannon. So tell us about this trafficking operation on the Reverse Underground Railroad and this sort of a matron in charge of it, Patty Cannon.

Richard Bell: [17:44](#)

Yes, extraordinary figure as... a bizarre figure is a good way to put it. Just to answer to your question, come at it from a strange direction, I'll just tell you how I came across this story of these five boys and it was through this woman Patty Cannon.

Well, I was writing a book about suicide in American history 10 years ago also. In 2011 as I was finishing that book and putting it

to bed, I came across the alleged suicide of a woman out in rural Delaware in 1829, a woman whose name was Patty Cannon, I'd never heard of her before. The situation surrounding her death was that she had rented out some fields to a tenant farmer and one day the tenant farmer had dug up by accident some human remains on Patty Cannon's property. There was an investigation and the claim was that they were three people who had been murdered and that Patty Cannon, the owner of the property was the alleged murderer. So she was holed up in jail in Georgetown, Delaware, awaiting trial on suspicion of murder. And while she was in jail, she allegedly committed suicide to avoid a trial to escape the hangmen, et cetera.

Parts of that story fell apart upon closer inspection as I dug into it. I also dug into this woman's life and I discovered that prior to 1829 her career had been spent as the co-leader of America's most fearsome gang of kidnappers and child snatchers.

This was a family operation where most of the operatives and the gang, the white operatives at least were either related to each other by blood or by marriage and she worked closely with her own son-in-law whose name was Joseph Johnson and between the two of them over the course of about 10 years throughout the 1820s they orchestrate and authorize a one kidnapping raid on Philadelphia after another, including the kidnapping raid in August 1825 which sees five free black children whose names are Joe, Enos, Sam, Alex and Cornelius lured into the belly of a little ship down by the Navy yard in Philadelphia and that ship will eventually relocate them, the boys to a warehouse and safe house controlled by Patty Cannon in Delaware or near the line in Maryland.

They'll be incarcerated there a week and then they'll get onto another ship, which will cross the Chesapeake Bay and members of the gang, the gang run by Patty Cannon and son-in-law, will then march these five boys and two other... two black women who are also being trafficked across the country, across the continent from Virginia, through Tennessee, through Alabama, through Mississippi, with the intention of trying to pass them off as legally purchased slaves and sell them at a great profits to new planters, setting up on cotton and sugar plantations in the new territories and States rising up along the Gulf coast in the early 19th century.

Anthony Comegna: [20:55](#)

So would people caught up in one of these black market coffles would they be integrated into the white market of the Southern slave trade at some point, or would people purchasing them

have any real way of knowing that these were free people from the North? Was it like an open secret, everybody knew that's basically how this worked once they were there inspecting their purchases or was it something that planters conveniently ignored and just didn't ask the right questions or did they see this as sort of a threat to the legal slavery regime?

Richard Bell:

[21:41](#)

Yeah, such an important question and the answer is both and yes. So let me just unpack that a little bit. You go back to Solomon Northrop's account in *Twelve Years a Slave*. What happens to him after he's kidnapped is he is sold to someone who regards himself as a legal interstate slave trader, but is willing to buy a kidnapped free person for a knockdown price from people who are deeply dodgy, deeply shady. But then his job is to basically launder this kidnapped person so and integrate him into the larger legal supply chain of legally bought slaves. So that by the time Solomon Northup that makes it to a New Orleans slave mart, he has paperwork which says he's legitimately purchased, he has a fake bill of sale. And that while Solomon Northup can protest loudly that he is actually free and from upstate New York, the paperwork says otherwise. So that's one way to sort of launder a kidnapped free person into the legal supply chain, which is what happens to Northup and many other victims of this reverse Underground Railroad.

The other passage is more blatant. The other passage which is what happens to these five boys and in my book is that they are escorted by kidnapers all the way down until they do meet buyers in the American South and the cotton kingdom in the deep South and Mississippi, Alabama. It's very unlikely that kidnapers and the children themselves, I'll start that again... It's very unlikely that the people buying someone from a kidnapper did not know that was happening. The boys in my story certainly raise hell about who they are, how they've been treated, and certainly any forged bills of sale look pretty dodgy. So all of this is to say that most buyers of kidnapped free people probably did know either explicitly or in their heart of hearts that they were buying someone they shouldn't.

So why did they do that? The simple answer is they got a great deal. If kidnapers know that planters are well aware they're buying trafficked people. They cut the price, they offer a big discount and eventually someone shakes their hand and says, "Yes, I will buy this person." A person whose demographics might suggest that in the regular slave market, they would go for \$500 is being offered to them for \$200 and \$250. For hard-up planters, desperate for more black labor but lacking enough

capital to acquire it through legal means the Reverse Underground Railroad fills a grotesque but important labor need and there are plenty of planters willing to shake that person's hand and make a deal.

Anthony Comegna: [24:29](#)

What happened to the boys, in the end?

Richard Bell: [24:35](#)

There are things I'm not going to tell you because I hope that [inaudible 00:24:39] take a look at the book and the book is brand new it's been out a couple of weeks. So I hope people would take a look. But what I will tell you is the full title of the book gives a few clues and the full title of the book is *Stolen: Five Free Boys Kidnapped into Slavery and Their Astonishing Odyssey Home*. So what I mean by that is that while it was very, very common to be kidnapped into slavery and never to return home, to see your parents, your loved ones again, every now and then something odd happens. Something unexpected happened and the system designed to kidnap you, traffic you, and enslave you didn't work perfectly or the resistance and choices of the people it targeted was sufficient to produce a different outcome.

In my case, some of these five boys are able to make what I call in the subtitle and astonishing odyssey home. Some of these five boys actually return to Philadelphia. I'm not going to say in what circumstances or how or why but what I will tell you is when they get back to Philadelphia, they continue to blow the whistle about what happened to them. They give sworn testimony to the Mayor of Philadelphia about their experience. In this particular case for very particular reasons which are unusual, the Mayor uses that information to see what he can do to try to launch a manhunt for some of these kidnapppers and human traffickers. I think is probably the largest manhunt in American history to that point and it produces some significant results. The boys, those that make it back are able to pick up their lives to some degree where they left off. One of the fun parts of this research was trying to follow these boys into adulthood to see how they did in the rest of their lives.

Anthony Comegna: [26:31](#)

You know, I think this whole story, this whole phenomenon of the Reverse Underground Railroad to me it really speaks to the truth behind many of the militant or radical abolitionists argument that the South was truly imperialistic in its support of slavery. That it would reach into all corners of the country and all parts of the world if it had to, to continue this system up to and including clearly snatching people off the street and importing them into a wholly different society and situation

contrary to all prevailing law in both sections. I mean the imperiousness of the slave system is on full display here in this narrative.

Richard Bell: [27:21](#)

I think that's right. I think that's a smart insight, it's one I tried to lean into in the book as well because I think it's spot on and it's something that people at the time in the North were discovering for themselves. Free black people knew this acutely because their own Liberty was at such acute risk from kidnapers who if they could get across the state line into Delaware or Maryland, regarded themselves as being free and clear after that and the chances of being followed, and prosecuted, and interfered with were relatively small in most cases.

But one of the outcomes of this particular case and these five boys is that it does draw attention to the larger fragility of black freedom in Northern free cities and Northern free States and the great reach of what historians sometimes call the slave power into what we too quickly refer to as the free North. That freedom was wholly vulnerable and anti-slavery activists, one of their prime goals in their various polemical propaganda print campaigns is to get white Northerners to realize just how many tentacles of the Southern slave power do reach across the border of the Mason Dixon Line and do penetrate the North and are ripping at the freedoms of free black people down the street in cities like Philadelphia, in cities like New York, in cities as far north as Boston even.

Anthony Comegna: [28:56](#)

Our absolute greatest thanks to Professor Bell for joining us this week. So far on the show I've made a habit of asking everyone what sort of work we need to do more of. Well, to my mind here it is, *Stolen* is truly a powerful and humanistic book that challenges us to occupy these boys experiences, however imperfect the exercise and feel just how precarious freedom can be when both society and the State array themselves against us. Their struggles help show the way forward for each of us and we want to thank Professor Bell for telling their story.

(music)