Site of the International Suspension Bridge, 1848, 1855 (replaced by the Whirlpool Rapids Bridge) ¹
Niagara Falls, New York

**Significance:** Built in 1848 as a carriage and footbridge, the Suspension Bridge was rebuilt in two levels to incorporate rail traffic in 1855. This bridge became a magnet for travelers on an Underground Railroad network that reached throughout the northeastern U.S. and Canada, a crossing point that funneled hundreds and perhaps thousands of people from slavery to freedom, including Joe Bailey and others who traveled with Harriet Tubman.

Charles Parsons, "The Rail Road Suspension Bridge: Near Niagara Falls" (New York: Currier & Ives, 1857).
Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, I.D. cph.3b51175.

Falls Of Niagara and the Vicinity (cover) or The Falls of Niagara: Being A Complete Guide... (title page).
purple.niagara.edu/cam/Niagara/

Description: Conceived by William Hamilton Merritt, who built the first Welland Canal, this suspension bridge spanned 800 feet across the Niagara River at its narrowest point, just north of the whirlpool. Built in 1848 by the engineer Charles Ellet, this bridge was owned and operated by two companies, the Niagara Falls Suspension Bridge Company of Canada and the International Bridge Company of New York. Work began when the river was spanned by a kite, flown by a young boy named Homan Walsh. A cable, one inch in diameter, was then sent over the river on the kite string. A basket attached to this cable carried passengers, beginning with Ellet himself, two or three at a time, over the river, at a height of 280 feet. ²


When it was completed on July 26, 1848, the bridge was “a very light and fairy-like affair,” as shown in views by Godfrey Frankenstein and Samuel Geil, both from 1853. This bridge was taken down in 1854 to make room for a new railway suspension bridge, taking advantage of the move toward free trade between Canada and the U.S. in the Reciprocity Treaty of 1854.  

purple.niagara.edu/cam/Niagara/impr1841.html.


Under the direction of engineer John A. Roebling (who later designed the Brooklyn Bridge), a new two-story suspension bridge was built between 1851 and 1855. Both elegant and efficient, it supported railway tracks on top and—twenty-eight feet below that—a roadway for foot and carriage traffic. Four cables (each nine and a half inches in diameter) were attached to sixty-foot high towers.

Marcus Adams, local judge and diarist, recorded progress in his journal:

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June 5, 1854. Bridge floor timbers rapidly going in for carriage bridge.
June 7, 1854. Carriages will pass over the bridge next Monday, if rain does not prevent laying the timbers.
June 8. I went over to Canada today to see the new bridge as far as it was put up, and to see the manner of putting it together. A large number of passengers from the Canada cars came over while I was on it, and I was much amused while there to watch the different individuals, as they passed up a pair of stairs from the old to the new bridge. Some men seemed almost paralyzed with fear. The women were quite as little alarmed as the men.
June 27. It is said that the work of grading for a new depot was actually begun today.
July 14. Bridge cables being made quite fast.
July 21. The bridge tender was at his post in the morning, but at 10 p.m. was dead [of cholera].
August 2. Bridge work resumed. Lost one third of their old hands [to cholera].
August 17. I went to the upper scaffold on the towers.
September 11. Last wire for the cables carried over last Friday night. After long fixing and trying, they got started on Dec. 17 on the Cables, so that they have been about nine months making them and two of them are to be wound yet, which will take until about Oct. 1.
March 8, 1855. Bridge crossed for the first time by a Locomotive. This day will long be remembered by the people of this village. This was not the opening of the bridge but was intended only as an experiment to test some of the parts to fix their adjustment. The Locomotive and tender was called the “London” from the Great Western and crossed from that side—the track from this side not being yet connected. It started at 3 o’clock. The whole engine and tender was covered with men. Mr. Roebling and some of the officers of the Bridge company, Mr. Church, Brooks, and as many more as could hang on. The two national flags fluttered in the breeze side by side, and shouts and cheers were raised by the beholders from both sides. It stopped in the middle, and the depression was accurately taken and was less than one half of an inch; as a man said it was no more than a fly on a clothes’ line. The grand opening will not take place until sometime in May.
March 9. Bridge crossed today by a very heavy locomotive with cars attached filled with people.  
March 18. Sabbath. Awful violation of the Sabbath by long trains of freight cars crossing and recrossing the Bridge. This will not soon be forgotten here by those who reverence this holy day.

The first railroad, the “London,” crossed the bridge on March 8, 1855. Bridge operators charged a toll: twenty-five cents for foot travelers. Carriages paid fifty cents for each passenger plus fifty cents for the carriage. Three rail lines (the New York Central, Erie, and Great Western from Canada) sent fifty trains a week across this bridge, which became, as one account suggested, “one of the world’s most famous bridges.”  

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4 March 12, March 14, (March 16 “abolition party”)

5 www.niagarafallsinfo.com/history
“Suspension Bridge Over the Niagara River,” *Ballou’s Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion* (Boston: Maturin M. Ballou, June 16, 1855). Drawn by an artist named Barry, just after the bridge was completed.

purple.niagara.edu/cam/Niagara/images/pnia269.jpg

“Suspension Bridge, Niagara on the Line of the Erie Railway,” Stereopticon View, Courtesy Christopher Densmore.
In 1897-98, a new bridge replaced the Roebling suspension bridge, but in 2011, portions of the limestone foundation of what was most likely the 1855 bridge remained, along with anchor bolts for the cables.

Discussion: After its completion in 1848, and particularly after the railroad suspension bridge was finished in 1855, the bridge across the Niagara River at Bellevue became a magnet for freedom seekers, a crossing point that funneled hundreds and perhaps thousands of people from slavery to freedom. After 1855, people took the railroad—principally the New York Central Railroad from New York City, Albany, Syracuse, and Rochester or the Canandaigua Railroad from Elmira—directly across the Suspension Bridge. Before World War I, customs officers were interested in trade goods
subject to tax, not in people who crossed the border, so fugitives crossed freely, with no intervention from state or federal officials.  

Harriet Tubman was the most famous person to travel from slavery to freedom at the Suspension Bridge. Her crossings included one with Joe Bailey, who escaped from slavery with Tubman and three others in November 1856. Tubman told this story to Sarah Bradford in her 1869 autobiography, but details also appear in William Still, The Underground Railroad, the manuscript records of the Philadelphia Vigilance Committees, and notes from the Syracuse Vigilance Committee and the Rochester Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society. Kate Larson, Harriet Tubman: American Hero, put this story together carefully, and this account draws on all these sources.  

In November 1856, Tubman brought twenty-eight-year-old Josiah (Joe) Bailey, his brother William, Peter Pennington, and Eliza Manokey out of Maryland. Bailey—“of chestnut color, bald head, with a remarkable scar on one of his cheeks”—worked as an overseer for William Hughlett, who owned thousands of acres of forests and farms along the Choptank River. Routinely Hughlett flogged his enslaved people, simply to assert his authority. Joe Bailey decided that his first flogging from Hughlett would also be his last, and he took a small boat many miles to visit Ben Ross, Harriet Tubman’s father, who alerted him when Tubman came back to Maryland. When Hughlett discovered that Bailey had disappeared, he offered a $1500 reward for his return, sending advertising posters as far north as New York City. Such a high price brought out determined pursuers. 

Supporters along their route hide the group in a variety of safe places, including potato holes in the field. Even so, it took them two weeks instead of the usual three days to reach Wilmington, Delaware, smuggled over the river by black bricklayers, who hid them in their wagon under a load of bricks. On November 26, they reached William Still’s office in Philadelphia. Still sent them to New York City the next day, where Oliver Johnson sent them on to Albany and then Syracuse. This was only Tubman’s second trip to Syracuse, where Rev. Jermain Loguen kept the main safe house, with the help of a well-organized support network. The Syracuse group normally sent people directly to the Suspension Bridge, but they had run out of money. W.E. Abbott, treasurer of the Syracuse society, sent them instead via various safe houses to Maria G. Porter, treasurer of the Rochester Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society. This group sent them across the Suspension Bridge. When Joe Bailey realized that advertisements for his capture had reached as far as New York City and that they still had over three hundred miles to go before reaching Canada, he grew depressed. “From that time Joe was silent,” said Harriet; “he sang no more, he talked no more; he sat with his head on his hand, and nobody could amuse him or make him take any interest in anything.” Even when they reached the Suspension Bridge, Joe refused to take heart. His fellow travelers brought tears to the eyes of others in the train when they sang a song to the tune of “Oh Susannah,” most likely newly-written by Parson Rezin Williams:

I'm on my way to Canada,  
That cold and dreary land;  
The sad effects of slavery,  
I can't no longer stand.  
I've served my master all my days,  
Widout a dime's reward;  
And now I'm forced to run away,  
To flee the lash abroad.  
Farewell, ole master, don't think hard of me,  
I'll travel on to Canada, where all the slaves are free.  

Their experience of crossing the Suspension Bridge itself is best told in Tubman’s own words:

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7 Sarah Bradford, Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman (Auburn: W.J. Moses, 1869), 27-35; Kate Clifford Larson, 133-36; 159;

8 Stephen Cornelius, Music of the Civil War Era (Greenwood, 2004), 134-35, noted that, in a WPA interview in 1937, Parson Rezin Williams claimed to have written “Aid Me on to Canada” in the late 1850s, which some people sang to the tune of “Oh Susanna.” In 1937, Williams was about 116 years old, the oldest living African American Civil War veteran.
The cars began to cross the bridge. Harriet was very anxious to have her companions see the Falls. William, Peter, and Eliza came eagerly to look at the wonderful sight; but Joe sat still, with his head upon his hand.

"Joe, come look at de Falls! Joe, you fool you, come see de Falls! It's your last chance." But Joe sat still and never raised his head. At length Harriet knew by the rise in the center of the bridge, and the descent on the other side, that they had crossed "the line." She sprang across to Joe's seat, shook him with all her might, and shouted, "Joe, you've shook de lion's paw!" Joe did not know what she meant. "Joe, you're free!" shouted Harriet. Then Joe's head went up, he raised his hands on high, and his face, streaming with tears, to heaven, and broke out in loud and thrilling tones:

"Glory to God and Jesus too,
One more soul is safe!
Oh, go and carry de news,
One more soul got safe."

"Joe, come and look at de Falls!" called Harriet. "Glory to God and Jesus too, One more soul got safe," was all the answer. The cars stopped on the other side. Joe's feet were the first to touch British soil, after those of the conductor. .

"The ladies and gentlemen gathered round him," said Harriet, "till I couldn't see Joe for the crowd, only I heard 'Glory to God and Jesus too!' louder than ever." William went after him, and pulled him, saying, "Joe, stop your noise! you act like a fool! Then Peter ran over, and jerked him mos' off his feet,-"Joe, stop your holliin'! Folks'll think you're crazy!" But Joe gave no heed. The ladies were crying, and the tears like rain ran down Joe's sable cheeks. A lady reached over her fine cambric handkerchief to him. Joe wiped his face, and then he spoke.

"Oh! if I'd felt like dis down South, it wold hab taken nine men to take me; only one more journey for me now, and dat is to Hebben!" "Well, you ole fool you," said Harriet, . . . "you might a' looked at de Falls fust, and den gone to Hebben afterwards." 9

The whole group went to St. Catharine's, where Rev. Hiram Wilson operated a fugitive aid society. Wilson reported that Tubman was "a remarkable colored heroine," "unusually intelligent and fine appearing," and the men she brought were "of fine appearance and noble bearing." 10

Tubman certainly used the Suspension Bridge at Niagara Falls, but so did hundreds and perhaps thousands of others. We do not know—and probably will never know—how many in total escaped through this route, but we do have many references from memoirs and newspapers. Most of these are only brief notes, but some of them give extensive details.

Isaac Williamson recorded one of the most detailed descriptions of the use of the Suspension Bridge. He escaped with two others sometime before the bridge acquired its railroad tracks in 1855. Like hundreds of others, Williamson and his friends came through William Still's office in Philadelphia, traveled from there to New York City, and then went to the home of Jermain and Caroline Loguen in Syracuse. The Loguens put them on the train headed for the Suspension Bridge. Williamson heard Loguen personally "tell the conductor to be sure and put us safely on the Canada side." Three men rode the train to look out for danger, and supporters sent telegrams to stations ahead, asking if anyone was on the lookout. When they reached Rochester, the conductor gave them a heads up: "When you hear me cry out 'Suspension Bridge,' you must come right up to me," he said.

We paid due attention and when after a time he thrust his head through the door and shouted out, "Suspension Bridge," clear and distinctly, it fairly electrified us, as we had been growing more and more excited every moment and we knew the final crisis was upon us... On going through a door, we found a buss backed up and ready to receive us. We got in and the conductor said, with a very significant look to the driver, "go quickly" and then the horses sprang forward like lightning, as though they had entered for a race. The buss rumbled and rocked, swaying to and fro and seeming to our excited fancy to be fairly endued with life and sympathy for the three anxious ones it carried. The


10 Larson, 136.
team had to slow up on the bridge and walk. It seemed a very solemn march to us, but at last we were over on the other side of that raging torrent, the majestic Niagara. . . .

The driver now came around and opened the door, saying, "boys, you are safe in Canada." I jumped out, followed by Banks and Nicholas, and we shouted and hallooed just like crazy folks, "We're free; we're free; bless the Lord for it; bless the Lord for it; blessings on his holy name." I then threw up my hat in the air and we all threw our arms around each other and cried for very joy. . . . Oh this grand, glorious liberty. You have only to be a slave once to appreciate freedom.\(^{11}\)

About the same time, "before the bridge was well opened," a young man escaping from slavery rushed on to the bridge only to be dragged back to the U.S. by his pursuers. J.G. Kohl, a European traveler, used this incident to argue that the bridge should have a line of white paint at its center, marking the boundary between the U.S. and Canada. Suggesting to local officials, he received two replies. "We have not yet thought of that," said one. Another argued that the bridge was owned jointly by a Canadian and U.S. companies, and that it "has been built by the common efforts of Americans and Canadians and belongs to both countries in common." Kohl remained firm. "In the name of humanity, such a community ought to be dissolved," he wrote, "and the national limit clearly defined. Two States, of which one recognizes human rights and the other the most detestable wrong, namely, that of slavery, should hold no property in common."\(^{12}\)

From Elmira, John W. Jones sent people on the Canandaigua Railroad directly to the Suspension Bridge at Niagara Falls. In April 1857, the Niagara Falls Gazette quoted the Elmira Advertiser that "the branch of the Underground Railroad running from that place to Niagara Falls, has been doing a pretty fair business this season." John W. Jones had already sent ten people from Elmira to Niagara Falls, including "two young men and one female, all 'freedom shriekers' from North Carolina." John W. Jones provided them with 'tickets over the U.G.R.R. to Niagara Falls."\(^{13}\)

From Albany, freedom seekers traveled directly west on the New York Central Railroad after its formation in 1853. An Underground Railroad supporter from the "abolition hole" of Amsterdam, New York, noted, for example, that many people went from Albany west to the town of Amsterdam. From Amsterdam, many were then sent by train directly to the Suspension Bridge. One young woman, "nearly white, crossed the suspension bridge at Niagara one train ahead of her owner, who followed, swearing vengeance upon all who had aided her."\(^{14}\)

On February 16, 1855, John P. Van Deusen, who lived in the canal village of Palmyra, east of Rochester, recorded the arrival of a "Negro boy about 16 or 18 years old, a fugitive slave-bringing a line to Mr. Shumway [minister of the Congregational Church] from R.L. Adams, Editor, Wayne County Whig commending him to us for money and to be forwarded via Suspension Bridge to Canada." They collected $4.50 from six different people and then sent him on to Lockport with a written note, telling him to go from there to Mr. Pardee a hardware merchant in Youngstown.\(^{15}\)

Of the hundreds of dramatic escape stories from the Underground Railroad, one of the most famous was that of sixteen-year-old Ann Maria Weems, who came over the Suspension Bridge in November 1855. Ann Maria was "owned" by slave-trader Charles Price and lived in his house in Rockville, Montgomery County, Maryland. Her freeborn father raised enough money to buy her mother and sister out of slavery. Her brothers, however, were all sold South, and Price refused an offer of $700 for Ann Maria. Since Ann Maria slept in the same room with Price and his wife, the situation seemed hopeless. James Bigelow, a lawyer and Underground Railroad agent in Washington, D.C., refused to give up. After three years, he finally managed to bring her to Washington, D.C. Supporters dubbed her "Joe Wright" and dressed her in male attire. A local doctor met her in front of the White House with his carriage. Joe jumped into the

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13 *Niagara Falls Gazette,* April 22, 1857.


15 John P. Van Deusen, Diary, February 16, 1855, transcription in Wayne County Historian's Office, printed in Robert Hoeltzel, *History of Park Presbyterian Church, Newark,* 51. Found by Marjory Perez.
driver’s seat “with the fleetness of a young deer,” while the doctor sat composedly inside, riding though Maryland to William Still’s office in Philadelphia, where she arrived on Thanksgiving Day.  

From Philadelphia, Weems (still in male attire) went to New York City, at the expense of abolitionist merchant Lewis Tappan. She stayed for several days with Rev. A.N. Freeman, African American minister in Brooklyn, and then Freeman accompanied her on the train, headed toward the home of relatives in Buxton, Ontario. By the time they reached Rochester, Freeman was worried, wondering both if the train went across the Suspension Bridge and if slave catchers would descend upon them, eager for the $500 reward. But his fears were groundless. When the reached the Bridge, the conductor told them, “Sit still; this car goes across.” “You may judge of my joy and relief of mind,” wrote Freeman, “when I looked out and was sure that we were over! Thank God, I exclaimed, we are safe in Canada!” Freeman delivered her safely to her uncle Bradley in Buxton.  

James Forman, “twenty-three years of age, dark mulatto, nearly six feet high,” according to William Still, escaped from Norfolk, Virginia. In June 1856, he was working—most likely as a waiter—at the International Hotel. He wrote to William Still, asking him to meet his fiancée, Mariah Moore, who was taking the steamship Virginia from Norfolk to Philadelphia. “You will oblige me very much by seeing her safely on the train of cars that leaves Philadelphia for the Suspension Bridge Niagara Falls,” he wrote. “pleas to tell the Lady to telegraph to me ["direct to the International Hotel"] what time she will leave Philadelphia so i may know what time to meet her at the Suspension Bridge.” He met Mariah Moore at the train on June 30, and they were married “in the English Church in Canada” on July 22.  

Also in 1856, Harriet Eglin and her cousin Charlotte Gildes escaped from Baltimore on the train by wearing large mourning hats and veils to conceal their appearances. They went to the Loguen home in Syracuse, and Loguen found them safe houses near Auburn. Harriet Eglin stayed with Rev. Charles Anderson and Elizabeth Anderson in Sennett, New York, but Charlotte left for Canada after only a week, where she mailed her letters at Suspension Bridge. Slave catchers intercepted one of her letters to Baltimore, in which she told how they had escaped, implicating both the man who helped them board the train and the railroad company itself.  

In 1857, William J. Watkins, agent for the Rochester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society, noted that from December 15, 1856, to August 9, 1857, he had spent $90.00 to send fifty-nine fugitives to Canada. He sent six to Toronto (most

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17 Still, 686.


19 William Still, The Underground Railroad (1872), 221-23.
likely via steamboat from Rochester) and fifty-three to “the Suspension Bridge, St. Catharines, Hamilton, etc.” For the whole year of 1857, he expended $140.00\textsuperscript{20}

In 1858, the Niagara Falls Gazette reported, “four highly colored chattels were put aboard the mail train at Rochester on Thursday by Fred Douglas and reached the Canadian side of the Suspension Bridge in safety. They were very suspicious of certain railroad officials who eyed them closely.” \textsuperscript{21}

These eleven well-documented cases suggest that, especially after completion of the railroad tracks, the Suspension Bridge in Niagara Falls was a major destination for people escaping from slavery, well known at least as far south as Philadelphia and regularly used. People who escaped through New York State continued to use steamboats leaving from Oswego, Pulneyville, Charlotte (the port at Rochester), Lewiston, Black Rock, and Ogdensburg. They also crossed on the bridge at Lewiston, the ferry at Youngstown, and other points along the shores of Lake Erie and Lake Ontario. But, after 1855, the Suspension Bridge became a major point of departure.

**Niagara Falls: Suspension Bridge**

**Documented Fugitive Slave Cases**

**General:**

From Amsterdam, New York, people were often sent by rail directly to Canada. One young woman, “nearly white, crossed the suspension bridge at Niagara one train ahead of her owner, who followed, swearing vengeance upon all who had aided her.” E.B.M., “Underground Railroad Again: Its Operations as Seen at Amsterdam, New York,” *Springfield Republican*, April 9, 1900.

**Before 1855**

Isaac Williamson took train to Suspension bridge and then crosses to Ontario on the road. Isaac D. Williams, *Sunshine and Shadow of Slave Life*. (East Saginaw, Mich. Evening News Printing and Binding House, 1885), 47-49.

**February 1855**

Congregationalists in Palmyra sent James, a young African American man to Niagara County. Directed to send him to Suspension Bridge but instead sent him to Lockport and then to Youngstown. John P. Van Deusen, Diary, February 16, 1855, transcription in Wayne County Historian’s Office, printed in Robert Hoeltzel, *History of Park Presbyterian Church, Newark*, 51. Found by Marjory Perez.

**November 1855**


**June 1856**

James Forman wrote to his fiancé, Mariah Moore, asking her to meet him at the Suspension Bridge and to reply to him at the International Hotel. William Still, *The Underground Railroad* (1872), 269-70.

**June 1856**


**November 1856**


**August 1857**


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\textsuperscript{20} William J. Watkins to Mrs. Armstrong, August 1856, Rochester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society, Clements Library, University of Michigan. Thanks to Kate Clifford Larson for finding this. Kate Clifford Larson, email to Kevin Cottrell and Judith Wellman, November 8, 2009.

\textsuperscript{21} *Courier*, Sept. 22, 1858. Niagara County Historian’s Office
"Mrs. Armstrong, I find upon examination, that from Dec. 15th to Aug. 9th, '57, I passed 59 fugitives to Canada, as follows. 6 To Toronto, and 53 to Suspension Bridge, St. Catharines, Hamilton, etc.
   Respectfully,
   Wm. J. Watkins
   P.S. Expended on behalf of the Society, $90.00.  W.J. W."

1858 Jacob Blockson, George Alligood, Jim Alligood, and George Lewis all escaped from Sussex County, Delaware. Went through William Still’s office in Philadelphia to St. Catharine’s. Still recorded details about them. Blockson wrote back to his wife in Delaware, asking her to meet him at Suspension Bridge. William Still, *The Underground Railroad* (1872), 488-91.

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