

# A Crafty Escape

A Reading A-Z Level R Leveled Book  
Word Count: 1,031

LEVELED BOOK • R

# 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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level  
R•U•X**

# A Crafty Escape



Written by Susan Lennox  
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## Focus Question

Who were the Crafts, and why are they remembered?

## Words to Know

bounty hunters	segregated
disguise	servant
freedom	slavery
gamble	suspect
passenger	

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Level R Leveled Book  
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## Correlation

### LEVEL R

Fountas & Pinnell	N
Reading Recovery	30
DRA	30



Ellen Craft



William Craft

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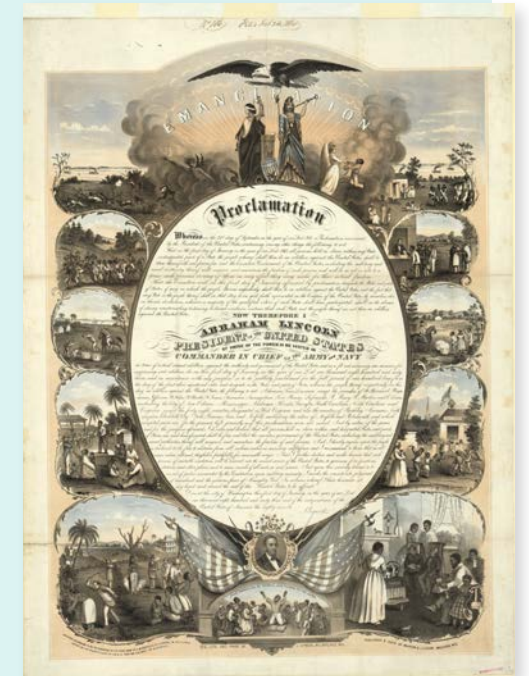
## Introduction

Dressing up as someone else can be fun. Now imagine that your life depends on how well you play that part. Years ago, the Crafts did just that. They pretended to be different people to escape from **slavery** 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 their owners asked. They had few of the rights that white people had. 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 pertain to Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri. The slaves in these states would not be freed for another two years.



## Born into Slavery

William and Ellen Craft were black Americans born into slavery. William was born in 1824 and lived in Macon, Georgia. His family was owned by a man who liked to **gamble**. When the man lost a bet, he got money to pay it by selling his slaves.

William was sold when he was sixteen years old. He was a skilled carpenter. The new owner saw that William did good work. He let William make things to earn money for him.

Ellen was two years younger than William. Her mother was a slave and her father a white slaveholder. Ellen's skin was so light that many people didn't realize she had a slave mother.

When Ellen was eleven, she was "given" to her married half sister to work as a **servant**. When the half sister moved to Macon, Ellen went with them. There she met William.



Ellen Craft



William Craft

## A Decision Fueled by Love

In time, William and Ellen fell in love. They wanted to be together. Getting married, however, was not easy for slaves. They needed their owners' permission to wed. If married slaves had different owners, the couple could not live together.

In 1846, Ellen and William got permission and were married. For two years, the Crafts lived apart. They could see each other only once in a while. They worried that one of them could be sold at any time and sent far away.



The Crafts knew that the only way they could live as a family would be to escape to the North. Black people could live freely in states there. But how could the Crafts leave without being caught? William had a clever plan.

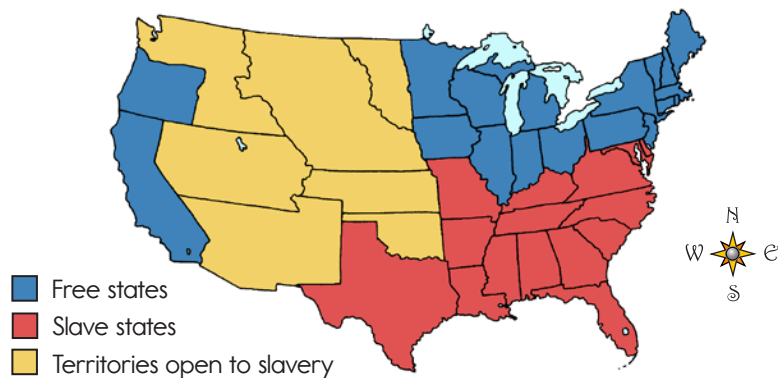
## Free or Slave?

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 freely.

The slave states formed the Confederacy. After the Confederates lost the Civil War, the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution ended slavery in the United States, and all states became free states.

Slavery in States and Territories, 1860



## Preparing and Planning

William's idea was a daring one. They would travel to Pennsylvania, the nearest free state. Since Ellen's skin was so light, she would pretend to be a white person. William could travel with her as her house servant.

There was just one problem—Ellen could not travel as a woman. Women of that time did not travel alone. They certainly didn't travel with a male slave! There was only one way their plan would work. Ellen had to pretend to be a white man.



Ellen was afraid at first. If they got caught, they would be punished. She finally agreed when William explained what they would do. The night of the escape, William would cut Ellen's hair short. She would wear special clothes to hide her figure. She would also wear a bandage around her face and green glasses.

To complete her **disguise**, Ellen would wear one arm in a sling. Ellen had never learned to read or write. She could not sign for their travel tickets. A hurt arm would give her the perfect excuse not to sign. Being hurt would also explain why William was traveling with his master. As long as they acted their parts, no one would **suspect** a thing.



## The Great Escape Begins

The Crafts decided to leave on December 21, 1848. William had set aside some money for their trip. The couple asked their owners for time off at Christmas. Owners often gave slaves a few days to celebrate with their families. The Crafts could leave then and not be missed for days.

When the day came, William cut Ellen's hair and helped her into her costume. They said a prayer and went into town to buy train tickets to Georgia. Travel at that time was **segregated**, so they had to sit in separate train cars. There they waited to begin the first part of their trip.





Suddenly, William saw someone he knew on the train platform. It was the owner of the shop where William worked! The man had come looking for the Crafts. William ducked down in his seat, shaking with fear. Just as the man reached William's car, the train's bell clanged. The man left, and William sighed in relief—he was safe.

Ellen had a scare of her own. When another **passenger** sat next to her, Ellen froze. He was a good friend of her owner and had known Ellen for years. Ellen sat very still and did not dare look up. The man, though, did not see her. Ellen pretended to be deaf so she could avoid talking and giving herself away.

## Setting Sail for Freedom

The Crafts reached Savannah, Georgia, safely and took a steamer ship to South Carolina. There, they ran into trouble. The clerk did not want to sign for the couple's tickets. Just then, the boat captain from their first ship passed by. He offered to sign for them.

They met their final test in Maryland. Slave states that shared borders with free states had border patrols. These patrols checked for escaping slaves. The Maryland border patrol stopped the Crafts and would not let them pass.

One officer finally took pity on them. He let the Crafts board. They arrived safely in Pennsylvania on Christmas morning, 1848. There they found friends and shelter.



## Across the Ocean to Safety

For a while, life was good for the Crafts. They learned to read and write. They went to live in Boston, Massachusetts. William and Ellen both found jobs.

Their good life did not last, however. In 1850, a new law was passed. The law made it a crime to protect escaped slaves. Escaped slaves living in free states were suddenly in danger.



## The Underground Railroad

How did the Crafts know where to go once they reached Philadelphia? They used the Underground Railroad.

The Underground Railroad 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.

People who helped slaves escape kept an eye out for black people coming into free states from the South. They would give the newcomers shelter, food, and directions to freedom.

Two **bounty hunters** arrived in Boston, searching for the Crafts. The Crafts hid with friends, but they grew tired of living in fear. In December 1850, they went to England.

## The Bloodhound Law

In 1850, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act. The law stated that a person who helped a runaway slave would be fined \$1,000—a large sum in those days. Anyone who returned a slave to a 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 runaway slaves.

This was the rule of law in both free and slave states. Still, many free states ignored the law and refused to hunt down runaways or the people who helped them.

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

**CAUTION!!**  
**COLORED PEOPLE**  
**OF BOSTON, ONE & ALL,**  
You are hereby respectfully CAUTIONED and advised, to avoid conversing with the  
**Watchmen and Police Officers**  
**of Boston,**  
For since the recent **ORDER OF THE MAYOR & ALDERMEN,** they are empowered to act as  
**KIDNAPPERS**  
**AND**  
**Slave Catchers,**  
And they have already been actually employed in **KIDNAPPING, CATCHING, AND KEEPING SLAVES.** Therefore, if you value your **LIBERTY,** and the *Welfare of the Fugitives* among you, *Shun* them in every possible manner, as so many **HOUNDS** on the track of the most unfortunate of your race.  
**Keep a Sharp Look Out for**  
**KIDNAPPERS, and have**  
**TOP EYE open.**  
**APRIL 24, 1851.**



## The Long Trip Home

The Crafts settled in London and had five children. They traveled around England and spoke against slavery. In 1860, William wrote a book about their escape.

In 1870, William and Ellen returned to America. Slavery was now against the law in the United States. The Crafts settled in Georgia. They started a school to teach and help freed slaves.

Later, the Crafts moved to South Carolina. They spent their last years living together in peace and **freedom**, just as they had always dreamed.



## Glossary

- bounty hunters** (n.) people who track and capture others for a reward (p. 14)
- disguise** (n.) clothes or other things a person wears to keep from being recognized (p. 9)
- freedom** (n.) the state of being free, or having the right and power to act and think as one wishes (p. 15)
- gamble** (v.) to bet money or other valuables on a game or competition; to risk something of value (p. 5)
- passenger** (n.) a person who is traveling in a vehicle, not driving or operating it (p. 11)
- segregated** (adj.) kept apart based on group differences, such as race (p. 10)
- servant** (n.) a person who does household chores or other work for an employer or master (p. 5)
- slavery** (n.) the state or condition of being a slave, or owned by another person (p. 4)
- suspect** (v.) to doubt or distrust; to think someone is guilty without much evidence (p. 9)