

ELLEN & WILLIAM CRAFT

A Great Escape: 1848, Macon, Georgia

Ellen's Disguise

On December 21, 1848, William Craft cut his wife Ellen's hair at the back of the neck, and then she put on her disguise.

Ellen wore a man's top hat and great coat, and she wore green-tinted glasses to conceal her feminine eyes. A toothache bandage hid the smooth skin of her chin.

Ellen also put her right hand in a sling so she would have an excuse not to sign her name at ports and train stations. She knew that masters were required to sign their name when taking slaves past these points.

A Free Child

The driving force behind the escape of Ellen and William Craft was the desire for children. Ellen refused to have children until they were free.

Ellen knew that any child they had in slavery could be sold away from them at the whim of their master.



Disguised as a White Man

Ellen Craft and Eliza Smith Collins looked somewhat alike because they had the same father—Major James P. Smith. But while Eliza called him “daddy,” Ellen called him “master.” Why the difference? It had to do with their mothers.

Eliza's mother was Mrs. Smith, a white woman, so she was free. Ellen's mother was Maria, a slave of mixed-race descent, so she was a slave.

If you look at pictures of Ellen, you can see that she appeared white. But she decided to take advantage of her light skin tone, and she and her husband William embarked on one of the most unusual escapes in the history of the Underground Railroad. Ellen disguised herself as a white man (see images above), while her husband posed as her slave. Ellen could not pose as a white *woman* because women could not travel with male slaves.

She had to be a man. A white man.



Young Ellen Craft

The Escape

How did they escape? William and Ellen took a train from Macon to Savannah, where they boarded a steamboat to Charleston, South Carolina. From there, they took trains north to Philadelphia, hidden in plain sight.

How did they fund the escape?

William's master hired him out at a woodshop in Macon. In some "hiring out" arrangements, the master allowed his slave to keep a portion of the money, and this was the case with William Craft. William saved money to pay for their escape.

Any close calls? There were many. For instance, Mr. Cray, a man who knew Ellen, sat down next to her on the train. In fact, she had served Mr. Cray at the house that very same week. Terrified, she pretended she was hard of hearing.



Eliza Smith Collins, Ellen's half sister



Ellen & William later in life

Facing Recapture in Boston

After the U.S. passed the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, escaped slaves were put in jeopardy throughout the North. The Fugitive Slave Act made it easier for slave catchers in the South to travel North and recapture them. The Act required Northern authorities to cooperate with the apprehension of escaped slaves.

In 1850, two slave catchers from Macon, Georgia, traveled to Boston with the specific mission of recapturing Ellen and William. They had no idea of the powder keg that awaited them in Boston—literally.



When slave catchers tried to capture William, they found him at the home of Lewis Hayden with a keg of gunpowder. William threatened to ignite the keg, rather than be taken back to slavery.

The Vanishing Woman

The escape of William and Ellen Craft is depicted in Doug Peterson's novel, *The Vanishing Woman*. You can find *The Vanishing Woman* on Amazon and Barnes & Noble.