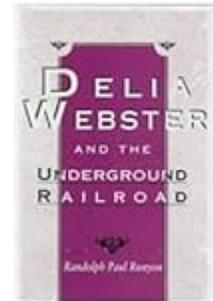


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Randolph Paul Runyon.** *Delia Webster and the Underground Railroad.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996. x + 259 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-1966-3.



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This Victorian melodrama reads like a detective story, and yet it is serious scholarship that makes a significant contribution to the historiography of slavery, abolitionism, the Old South, and nineteenth-century American reform. Many of the aging “new social” historians will wish that they had written a book as appealing as this one. It supports the recent findings of Stanley Harrold on the long-unrecognized activities of abolitionists in the Upper South. And it adds yet another chapter to the legend of the Underground Railroad, though curiously without citing Larry Gara’s classic study. With the assistance of William Albert Davis, a professional genealogist, Randolph Paul Runyon, a professor of French at Miami University of Ohio, has managed to ferret out all of the essential details about his ambivalent and elusive heroine, Delia Ann Webster.

Webster was twenty-six, a Vermont school teacher and art instructor who had studied briefly at Oberlin before leaving under mysterious circumstances. Her moral character was not questioned (meaning, apparently, sexual misconduct), but her honesty was, though whether because of false statements or financial impropriety is unclear.

Set against Delia Webster are an unlikely male trio. She may have had affairs with all three. The Reverend Calvin Fairbank was a twenty-eight-year-old Methodist

abolitionist who had just been graduated from the Oberlin Theological Seminary. Fairbank was experienced at running slaves out of Kentucky across the Ohio River, putting them on the Underground Railroad to Great Lakes cities or Canada. He claimed to have rescued at least forty-four by 1844. The couple’s eventual jailor was Captain Newton Craig, keeper of the Kentucky penitentiary at the state capital in Frankfort. Craig was thirty-seven, the grandson of Baptist dissenters in colonial Virginia who had been persecuted, imprisoned, and driven from the colony. He was a man of strong pro-slavery and evangelical convictions and regularly delivered long sermons to the inmates in his care. The Reverend Norris Day was an abolitionist minister active in New England circles who became Delia Webster’s spokesman and defender after her release from imprisonment, and, the evidence suggests, possibly something more.

A large supporting cast includes William Lloyd Garrison, Levi Coffin, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Lewis Hayden, Henry Clay and his distant cousin Cassius Clay, and many other notables. The setting is northern Kentucky between Lexington and such Ohio River towns as Louisville and Maysville, Kentucky; Madison, Indiana; and Cincinnati, Ohio, though a significant amount of the narrative takes place in New England.

On September 28, 1844, Delia Webster left her Lex-

ington lodgings in a rented hackney coach driven by a slave, Israel, and accompanied by Calvin Fairbank. He had come from Oberlin to rescue the wife and children of Gilson Berry, a fugitive slave who had already escaped to Ohio, but that plan went awry. Webster had come to Kentucky in 1842 with an Oberlin clergyman and his wife. They may have been engaged in rescuing slaves as well. When the couple left town rather abruptly, they put Webster, who had been teaching since she was twelve, in charge of the Lexington Academy for Young Ladies. Born in New York state, Fairbank was raised by evangelical Methodists. Among the slaves he claimed to have rescued were a number of attractive light-skinned women, one of whom, Eliza, was only one-sixty-fourth black. She was being held in Megowan's Hotel, a combination jail and slave pen in Lexington, when she caught Fairbank's eye from an upper window. Fairbank raised \$2,000 back in Cincinnati from Levi Coffin, Salmon P. Chase, and Nicholas Longworth to buy her. At the public auction in Lexington Fairbank outbid a French slave dealer from New Orleans, despite the auctioneer's attempt to stimulate higher bids. He "ripped open her dress and displayed to the throng ... her 'superb neck and breast.'" When that did not suffice, "he lifted the girl's skirts as high as they would go, laying bare 'the beautiful, symmetrical body, from her feet to her waist'" and slapped her "white flesh" (p. 6). Fairbank took his prize back to Cincinnati where she married into upper-class white society, few members of which were aware of her background.

Unlike Fairbank, Webster had no early abolitionist convictions. She was born in Vergennes, Vermont, and was a member in good standing of the local Congregational church. Her father, Benajah Webster, seems to have been quite conservative about slavery. Runyon errs in crediting Vermont with "being the first state to prohibit slavery" (p. 7) in 1777, but quotes Frederick Douglass, who found conservative attitudes almost everywhere in Vermont when he spoke there in 1843, except for Ferrisburgh, another Lake Champlain town close to Vergennes. Yet it was Webster who called Fairbank's attention to the plight of the slave who would come to be known as Lewis Hayden and she who may have financed their joint venture. Together they stole Hayden, his wife Harriet, and their young child Jo, who was hidden under the carriage seat, while the adults were disguised by having their faces and hands covered with flour.

The desperate group took the Maysville-Lexington Turnpike, their ultimate goal being an Underground station in Ripley, Ohio, just across the river, and the site of

the house of the Reverend John Rankin, a well-known conductor on the Underground Railroad. Because of a sick horse and a forced stop at a tavern, Webster and Fairbank were seen and recognized by two black men from Lexington. Their reports helped the slaves' owners and a livery stableman to connect the rented hack with the disappearance of their property. The Haydens were left in an Ohio town and made their way to Oberlin, but upon being pursued, fled to Sandusky, and eventually to Canada. Runyon accepts without comment an eloquent letter citing John Locke, supposedly written by Lewis Hayden that same year, in 1844. Yet by Hayden's own admission, intellectually he was an infant, and still only "three years old" (pp. 120-21), the amount of time he had been out of slavery, when he wrote to Wendell Phillips in 1848. He may not have actually written the earlier letter as quoted. Runyon seems unaware of the extensive literature surrounding the controversy over how much of various fugitive slave narratives were written by the former slaves themselves, and how much by sympathetic, and often patronizing, white abolitionists.

Fairbank could have remained in Ohio as well, to plan his next venture, but Webster was determined to return to her school in Lexington. Is it possible that he was distracted by his female accomplice? On the way back, the couple may (or may not) have stayed together overnight in a locked room, though one without a bed, a charge raised at their trials that caused some scandal, and which Webster later denied. They were accosted by the angry slave owners and livery stable operator even before they could reach Lexington and seem to have been careless to the point of incompetence. Fairbank claimed that they had just helped a white couple to elope. When asked their names, Webster told him to keep quiet. They were mobbed in Lexington. Fairbank was dragged off to jail. Webster's landlady had searched her room during her absence and found incriminating written evidence in the form of suggestive letters and other material linking her to abolitionists and the Underground Railroad. Damning evidence was also found on Fairbank.

Webster was arrested and locked up later that night in a private room upstairs at Megowan's Hotel. Fairbank was put into irons. Their driver, the slave Israel, was flogged until he confessed what they had all done. Fairbank was chained to a slave condemned to death for murdering his mistress, Caroline Turner, "a Boston blue-blood" (p. 26) married to a local judge. His attempt to commit her to an asylum failed. She had killed at least six of her husband's slaves, but it was one of her own that strangled her. Fairbank and his black colleagues tried but

failed to escape from the jail and were then put under even tighter security.

The author quotes extensively from a number of letters written by both Webster and Fairbank, some of them under obvious duress. He manages with considerable skill to present plausible explanations for hidden meanings beneath what they seemed to be writing, and points out various coded references that would have meant one thing to the slave owners and prosecution and quite another to friends in the North. Funds were raised in Vermont for Webster's defense, and she was initially praised by some abolitionist editors like Garrison, though others criticized her for defending white Kentuckians and asserting that slaves were treated relatively well in the state. Webster failed to get either Henry or Cassius Clay to defend her but did retain a number of lawyers, including General John M. McCalla, a hero of the War of 1812, a prominent Democrat, and virulent enemy of the Whig Clay.

Fairbank and Webster were to be tried together. White women were barred from attending because of the scandalous nature of some of the evidence. Webster's attorneys managed to win her a separate trial, a significant victory since the evidence against Fairbank was much stronger, and there was considerable sympathy for the young woman. Webster was tried first, and pled not guilty. She was convicted in December 1844 and sentenced to two years in the state penitentiary. The jury also presented her with a petition signed by all twelve members, and sent to Governor William Owsley, asking a pardon before her sentencing "'on account of her sex'" (p. 53). But Webster declined a pardon, demanding a new trial instead, despite complaining of delicate health that had been damaged during her long confinement, a ploy that she would use at various crises throughout a long and colorful life. One hundred twenty citizens signed another petition to the governor demanding that she not be pardoned. She was then sentenced to two years at hard labor in the state prison at Frankfort, which she entered on January 19, 1845.

Her keeper was Captain Newton Craig. She claimed to fear mistreatment at his hands, since he was closely related to several of her enemies. His wife was a cousin of her first jailer, Megowan; Parker Craig, the livery stable owner from whom Fairbank rented the coach, was his own cousin; and Craig's wife was Parker Craig's sister. Delia Webster was the only female prisoner in the penitentiary. She was housed in a wooden cottage in the center of the prison yard. "The personal approach Delia

Webster consistently adopted" (p. 59) was to play upon the paternal (and other male instincts, one suspects) of those in power over her, whether jailor, judge, jury, or Newton Craig. She became the idol of Frankfort society and was visited by leading ministers and most of the state legislature when it was in session, while James Greenleaf Whittier and others eulogized her in the North.

Calvin Fairbank was tried in 1845. He learned that Governor Owsley intended to pardon Webster only after his trial, and did not want him to call her as a witness because it might inflame public opinion against her, making a pardon even more politically difficult. At his trial in February, Fairbank not only pleaded guilty and threw himself on the mercy of the court, but he also recanted his abolitionist views, virtually embracing the practices of Kentucky slave owners. He was sentenced to fifteen years in the penitentiary, five for each of the three slaves stolen. The judge warned him that the jury could have given him sixty years. Later that month, he arrived at the Frankfort prison in chains and was put to work sawing stone.

Webster was not required to do any work, though she amused herself by sewing shirts part of the time and had access to a fine library as well as special meals prepared for her by Newton Craig's wife, who also frequently escorted her out of the prison and took her into town. Webster's speedy pardon was the result of intense negotiations among herself, her father Benajah Webster, and Governor Owsley. Runyon is not completely successful at pinning down exactly what was agreed to, in part because of Webster's later contradictory and confusing statements, but she was set free on February 24, 1845, having served less than two months of her sentence. She returned to Vermont by way of Ohio River towns and Philadelphia, and after some weeks of argument with her father over what she would write, produced an eighty-four-page booklet, *Kentucky Jurisprudence: A History of the Trial of Miss Delia A. Webster* (1845). She later claimed to have been sick in bed much of the time and so weak that she was unable to resist the pressure of her father to tone down her abolitionist beliefs and admission of her activities.

Her motives in writing the booklet, as Runyon points out, were quite mixed. She wanted to clear her name and absolve herself of any guilt, including sexual misconduct with Fairbank, and lying about her actions. The Reverend John Rankin's son had already called her a liar by denying that she had accompanied any white couple eloping across the Ohio, meaning that the couple were in-

stead fugitive slaves, which Webster to clear herself had to deny. She wanted to speak well of the way Kentucky slaves were treated. And she needed to raise money to pay several thousand dollars in legal expenses. Much of the book consisted of a record of the trial. Purported to be a transcript, it is the most complete account available, but it is impossible to tell how accurate it is, and it is at variance with some other evidence.

For the next few years, Webster was active in Vermont and Boston and throughout New England in abolitionist circles. The Reverend Norris Day became her chief spokesman and public defender. She did not speak in public to “promiscuous audiences” (p. 87; i.e., mixed ones), but sat on the stage while he addressed the crowds who came to see her. Runyon cites various allegations about a scandal regarding Reverend Day, which suggest that he and Webster may have been involved in a relationship. At the same time, Craig was writing letters to Webster, his former prisoner, entreating her return to Kentucky. Though Webster delayed for several years, in 1847-48 her brother-in-law and her own brother both moved to Kentucky.

Meanwhile, Craig had taken a personal interest in Calvin Fairbank, even allowing him to preach inside the penitentiary. Fairbank was pardoned in August 1849, having served four and one-half years of his fifteen-year sentence. Unfortunately, his father had come south to try to win his freedom. The aged Chester Fairbank died in the cholera epidemic then raging in central Kentucky shortly before his son’s release. Luckily, what Runyon calls “the only genuine slave insurrection” (p. 123) in Kentucky, which occurred a few weeks earlier, did not prevent his release. Patrick Doyle, a Centre College student from Danville, led a march of about seventy slaves toward the Ohio River and freedom. Their desperate act ended in a small battle with pursuing whites in a hemp field in Bracken County. A number of slaves were spared by the intercession of wealthy owners, but three were hanged, and Doyle died in the penitentiary while serving a twenty-year sentence.

Newton Craig’s marriage of twenty-two years to his first cousin Lucy Craig had by the time of Fairbank’s release produced six children. Runyon thinks that all but Charles, an infant of two, were living with and being taught by Delia Webster at her house in Madison, Indiana. Webster claimed to have spent the three years after her release from prison, 1845-48, teaching school in Vermont and living with her parents in Vergennes. She then moved to New York City for her health, where she also

taught at a school for young women, and visited seaside resorts. Supposedly under a doctor’s orders, she then moved farther south for her health. Her choice of residence was Madison, Indiana, a prosperous and growing Ohio River town halfway between Louisville and Cincinnati and the southern terminus of the state’s first railroad, the Madison and Indianapolis, finished in 1847. It was a gateway for southern products to the rest of the state. Craig probably had commercial ties there for the varied products of his slave and penitentiary laborers from which he had prospered.

Madison was in many ways a southern community, yet it had much Underground Railroad activity. Craig visited Webster on many occasions, both on business and to see his children and possibly to pursue his affair with Delia. She seems to have returned to Frankfort, the scene of her imprisonment, and lived with the Craigs before finally settling in Madison. Craig took her out in his carriage, which caused considerable comment. In his letters to her during her sojourn in and visits back to New England, Craig addressed her as “My dear Dehlia” and called her “my dear child,” while referring to himself as her “true friend” (pp. 134-35). He was ten years her senior. Runyon comments that Lucy Craig was “either remarkably tolerant or remarkably unaware” (p. 138) of what was going on between her husband and the young woman she had befriended in the penitentiary. On another occasion Craig wrote “I LOVE you yes, I LOVE you most dearly...” Runyon concludes that “Craig’s words here appear to test the limits of paternal affection” (p. 139), and he quotes from or reproduces a number of other suggestive and emotionally overwrought letters written by the couple to each other.

While on a speaking tour in New England after his release, Calvin Fairbank met Mandana Tileston in the summer of 1851 in Williamsburg, Massachusetts, a small town in the northwestern part of the Bay State. They were soon engaged to be married. Incredibly, Fairbank returned to Kentucky to resume his slave-stealing activities. He managed to get a slave woman, Tamar, across the river to Jeffersonville, Indiana. There she was put on the Underground Railroad to freedom, but once again Fairbank was caught because of bad luck and his own carelessness. He was linked to the woman’s escape and seized with incriminating evidence on his person and in his lodgings. Tamar belonged to one of Newton Craig’s closest friends, Alfred Lawrence Shotwell, a Louisville merchant. Fairbank later claimed that he was unable to get adequate legal representation and had to settle for an “incompetent” (p. 161) attorney, Lovell Rousseau. A

number of standard Civil War sources call Rousseau one of the leading criminal lawyers in the region. He was a Mexican War hero, served in both the Indiana and Kentucky legislatures, and as a Union general was credited with saving Kentucky for the Union. But Fairbank felt he was completely “inadequate” and that his case was “lost by default” (p. 162). Yet he again retained Rousseau in 1859 in an attempt to win a pardon. Given his earlier conviction and the strong evidence connecting him to Tamar’s escape, Fairbank was perhaps unrealistic about his chances. After a fruitless attempt to conceal his identity, he was quickly tried, found guilty, and sentenced to fifteen years in the penitentiary. Craig was furious at his old prisoner and sent him to the hackling house where hemp was processed, intending to kill him through overwork.

About the same time Webster returned to Kentucky. She had her eye on property directly across the Ohio from Madison. With a group of partners and investors she formed the Webster Kentucky Farm Association and bought a six-hundred-acre farm in November 1852 for \$9,000. Where did Webster get her share of the purchase funds? From Newton Craig, who loaned her at least \$1,100 of what she needed. The plan was to establish a school and experiment with free labor, supposedly more efficient than slave labor. The real purpose seems to have been to plant a beachhead for the Underground Railroad in slave territory. Hostile neighbors reported strangers at the farm and boats that were seen stopping, and before long many slaves in the area were missing. Most of her associates and laborers were soon driven off. Webster stood her ground, but her property was repeatedly invaded, crops torn up, trees cut down, buildings burned, and furnishings looted or destroyed. Craig was up for reelection as keeper of the penitentiary. Webster, probably because of a dispute about repayment of her loan, but also because of their tangled love affair, gave Craig’s letters to her to his political enemies, and when they appeared in hostile newspapers, they contributed significantly to his losing the lucrative post. Craig denied any sexual relationship with his former prisoner but was defeated in 1854. He still had one year left on his term of office but was overextended financially, and his creditors and securities were nervous.

Craig took his revenge on Webster and her farm. The ferocity of the struggle between the two seems less ideological than personal: one or both believed that they had been spurned and betrayed by the other. Webster was tried in Indiana for stealing a slave years earlier, but acquitted. In Indiana for her trial, Craig was shot by a man

whose female relative he had mistreated on Webster’s Kentucky farm. Webster then tried to visit his sickroom but was kept away by Mrs. Craig. Craig sued Webster, and the legal difficulties between the two continued for years. Runyon states that “Webster’s reputation as a seductress, whether justified or not, was well known” (p. 200) and affected even her negotiations with prospective lawyers, who were nervous at being alone in a room with her.

Working with a difficult and complex body of evidence, Runyon has produced a fascinating and poignant story without being seduced by it. Only occasionally does he let his narrative go, however plausibly, beyond where his evidence stops, as in his conclusions that Delia Webster and the Haydens were “surely” (p. 118) reunited at Vergennes in July 1847; and that it is a “near certainty” (p. 124) that Fairbank saw her in Madison after his release from prison.

Their subsequent lives were uneventful. Calvin Fairbank did hard time in the penitentiary after his second incarceration, though some of the keepers following Craig were more lenient toward him. In 1864 he was pardoned by Lieutenant Governor Richard T. Jacob, a Republican and a brother-in-law of John C. Fremont, while the more conservative governor was out of the state. He had served twelve years of his sentence. Fairbank spent the rest of his life in poverty and obscurity. His efforts on behalf of the slaves were little remembered during Reconstruction and the conservative reaction that followed. His wife died in 1876. He was never able to hold a job for long or find one that could support his family, and his son was raised by relatives. His autobiography appeared in 1890, but went unsold, even in the black community. He died in 1898 virtually forgotten.

Unlike Fairbank, Newton Craig recovered from his involvement with Webster. In imitation of his abolitionist foes, he sent one of his sons to Canada during the Civil War to avoid Confederate military service and imprisonment by Union forces. He was elected to the Kentucky legislature in 1873, having accumulated a large library and an elegant estate. He had made himself a man of culture. Craig died at the age of eighty-three in 1890.

Delia Webster never married. Among the numerous, well-chosen illustrations in this book, Runyon reproduces the only known photograph of Webster, with her sisters, but it was taken in later life. We have no likeness of her as a young woman, so her appearance at the time of her Kentucky adventures must be left to the reader’s imagination. Her old age was one of genteel poverty and

some bitterness at the lack of recognition for her antebellum exploits. She died in Des Moines in 1904 at eighty-six, at the home of a niece, Dr. Alice A. Goodrich, the first female graduate of the University of Iowa's medical school.

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