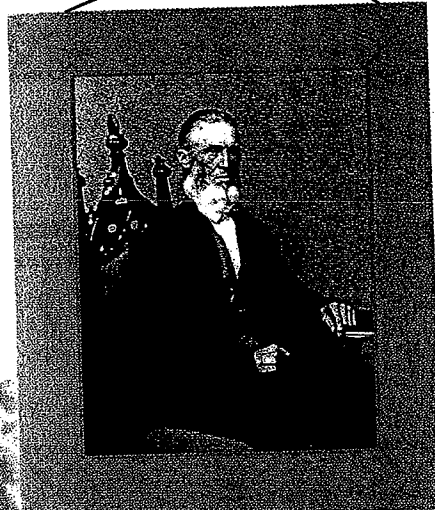


# The Robinsons

by Barbara  
Krasner-Khait



*Rowland Thomas Robinson  
(1796-1879)*



*Rachel Gilpin Robinson  
(1799-1862)*

**Bounty hunters**  
are those who  
pursue fugitives  
for whom rewards  
are offered.

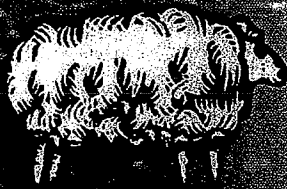
**Emancipation**  
means freedom  
or liberation from  
bondage.

**T**he people of Vermont had a strong tradition of opposition to the institution of slavery. The state outlawed slavery in its 1777 constitution. And Vermont passed personal liberty laws in 1843 that made it difficult, if not impossible, to capture fugitive slaves within its boundaries. Combine that with the state's considerable geographic distance from southern slave owners and **bounty hunters**, and it is easy to see why Vermont was such a safe haven for runaway slaves.

One particular Vermont family stands out in its efforts to aid escaping slaves. The Robinson family operated a sheep farm at

their home, Rokeby, in Ferrisburgh, which is in the west central part of the state. Rowland Thomas Robinson and his wife, Rachel Gilpin, were active abolitionists who believed in the immediate **emancipation** of slaves. They boycotted goods associated with slavery such as tobacco, cotton, and sugar.

The Robinsons also were Quakers. Their religious convictions led them to oppose slavery by any peaceful means. Rowland was active in the Vermont Anti-Slavery Society and served as its executive committee chairman when it was formed in 1834. He also helped found the Ferrisburgh Anti-Slavery Society.



# of Vermont

A relatively small family, the Robinsons needed extra hands to work their prosperous farm in the 1830s and 1840s. This was considered the **golden age** of Vermont sheep farming. Antislavery agents in the Northeast and fellow Quakers knew Rowland could use help and recommended he employ fugitive slaves. New York Quaker Charles Marriott suggested that escaped slave John Williams was "a good chopper and farmer" and his wife, Martha, was "useful...in the house." His friends and colleagues trusted Rowland. Marriott believed, "If [the slaves] could be taken in by thee, we should think them safer."

The Robinsons were different from many other white abolitionists. Their beliefs, location, and local farming economy allowed them to not only protect runaway slaves, but hire them as well. The Robinsons taught the fugitives how to read and write and helped them start new lives as free men and women. Rowland even negotiated with North Carolina slave owner Ephraim Elliot for the freedom of a fugitive named Jesse. The Robinson home became an important stop — and sometimes

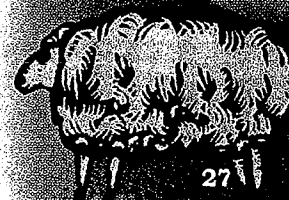
a final destination — along the Underground Railroad.

From Rokeby, fugitives could make their way farther north. They were driven at night to the next station, which could be as close as a mile or as far away as thirty miles or more. Often, the escapees were passed along to Quaker friends, such as Joseph Rogers and Stephen Stevens, and Quaker relatives, such as Nathan Hoag, Robinson's brother-in-law. Sometimes, refugees would work for several months on the Hoag farm in Charlotte, the next town up from Ferrisburgh. The Hoag family also was prominent in the community.

Born in 1833, Rowland E. Robinson was the youngest of the Robinson children. He recalled "seeing four fugitives at a time in my father's house." The family's participation in Underground Railroad activities helped shape young Robinson. As an adult, Rowland wrote several stories about the Underground Railroad in which the Yankees outsmarted the slave catchers.

After 1850, fugitive traffic at Rokeby began to decline. The elder Robinson dealt with financial troubles on the farm as the

Golden age  
is a period  
of great  
prosperity.



A quartermaster is an officer responsible for the food, clothing, and equipment of troops.

price of wool dropped. However, he never stopped working in behalf of the slaves. In fact, after the Civil War ended, he wrote a letter to the **quartermaster** general in Washington, D.C., offering shelter and jobs for "free men of color."

Today, the Robinson farm stands as a testament to its role in the Underground Railroad movement. It is home to the

Rokeby Museum, a National Historic Landmark. The museum maintains a collection of more than ten thousand family letters and hundreds of manuscripts, printed documents, diaries, and account books. For more information, visit the museum's Web site at [www.rokeby.org](http://www.rokeby.org).

Barbara Krasner-Khalt writes frequently about world and family history. She lives with her family in New Jersey.

**LEFT:** A broadside announces an antislavery meeting organized by Robinson. Abolitionist Frederick Douglass was among the featured speakers. **BELOW:** This addition to the Robinson house was built in 1814. Many escaped slaves were welcomed to the home in the 1830s and 1840s.

## GREAT CONVENTION.

THE ANTI-SLAVERY CONVENTION, TO BE HELD AT THE HOUSE OF FREDERICK ROBINSON, ON SATURDAY, THE 10TH OF SEPTEMBER, NEXT, AT 10 O'CLOCK, A.M. THE FOLLOWING SPEAKERS WILL BE PRESENT: FREDERICK DOUGLASS, WILLIAM LLOYD GARRISON, AND OTHERS. ADMISSION FREE. VOLUNTARY CONTRIBUTIONS WILL BE RECEIVED FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE AMERICAN ANTI-SLAVERY SOCIETY.

ROBINSON

