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Published online: 09 Aug 2019.

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Early undocumented workers: runaway slaves and African Americans in the Urban South, c. 1830-1860

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ABSTRACT

In the antebellum period (1800–1860), thousands of enslaved people attempted to escape slavery by making their way to the burgeoning cities and towns within the American South and passing as free or as self-hired slaves. The labor market proved to be especially beneficial for a successful integration due to capitalist transformations and rapid urbanization. There, runaway slaves joined free African Americans of whom many were undocumented residents of their states. This 'undocumentedness' placed them in a liminal status between free and unfree. Over the decades, black people were pushed into even more exploitative working conditions and labored at the lowest end of the urban labor markets. These downward developments were linked to their vulnerable political, legal, and social status. At the same time, this increasingly disadvantageous socio-economic position of the free black population created opportunities for runaway slaves to blend in in large numbers, as well as for the undocumented as a whole to make ends meet.

In May 1850, Jackson, William, and Terrence 'were taken into custody' in the city of New Orleans 'for working by the day on the levee without badges.' Whilst Jackson and William were in all likelihood hired-out enslaved men, Terrence was 'supposed to be a runaway' (*Daily Picayune*, 12 May 1850).[1] He was one of tens of thousands of enslaved African Americans throughout the antebellum period (c. 1800–1860) who managed to temporarily or permanently carve out lives beyond the reach of their slaveholders by running away and passing as free persons or hired slaves in the U. S. South. Thereby, they assumed new identities, integrated into new social environments, and – like Terrance – found their place in a dynamic urban labor market. At the places of work, they joined other African Americans who, as a social group, constituted the poorest segment of American society and continue to do so until the present day.[2] Why did free black populations find themselves on the bottom rung of the social-economic ladder? The general answers are diverse but include employers who chose for white employees over blacks; white supremacy which empowered whites to push black competitors out of certain trades; the desire to create a white republic, which enabled impoverished European immigrants (partly considered as non-white formerly) to integrate; and the general fear of a growing free black population which had to be curtailed not only in the labor markets but in the whole country (Cullen, 2003; Foner, 1998; Merritt, 2017; Roediger, 1991).

Approaching the black population in the antebellum South largely as a group to be divided into free and unfree members, these historiographical trends have not yet looked in depth at its legal composition. Behind the background of American slavery, the general understanding is that black people were either enslaved or free – an assumption which will be nuanced here. It

will be shown that unlike other societal groups, who could be very heterogeneous in terms of religion, education, or class, the black population had an additional variety of legal statuses unmatched in the cases of whites, native Americans, or European immigrants. One example are runaway slaves in the urban South. Hitherto largely overlooked by historians, they sought to exit bondage by becoming invisible within existing free black communities. Because they decided to stay within the slaveholding South rather than escape to the North, Canada, or Mexico, (where slavery was gradually abolished), they could never expect to obtain legal freedom. They were freedom seekers against the law, a condition which impeded them from obtaining legal documentation and identification.

By following the traces left by people like Terrance we come across other social groups who were likewise undocumented residents of their state. Exiting slavery in other illegal ways (other than through running away) or behaving contrary to legal requirements after manumission, black people could be of an undocumented status for a variety of reasons. Although they had in common with twentieth-century undocumented immigrants that they were living somewhere without the authority to do so (Bloch & McKay, 2016, p. 5), being 'undocumented' or 'illegal' was not an official status in the antebellum era.[3] The concept will be applied here, however, to explain a liminal status between free and unfree. 'Undocumentedness' emphasizes their vulnerability to discrimination and exploitation, while at the same time exempting them from tax payments, which could work as an advantage.

The diversity of legal statuses demands a closer inspection of the possible relation between the undocumented statuses of large parts of the black populations and their precarious, indeed worsening, situation over the antebellum period. Cities, due to the close interplay between different groups of lower-class laborers, the relative density of court and police records, and the specific nature of the urban labor markets as demanders of highly adaptable, flexible, and possibly anonymous work forces provide promising insights. This article argues that the fugitive slave populations of New Orleans, Charleston, Richmond, and Baltimore were substantial, and that the undocumented populations were even larger (part I). Against this background, the question rises how these people scratched along in the labor market and why this was possible. It will be examined where they worked and how employment patterns changed (part II). It will discussed whether the undocumented status of so many had an impact on the precarious economic position of the black population as a whole (part III).

Runaway slave advertisements, jail and police records, census records, legal ordinances, observations by travelers, legislative petitions, court cases, and newspaper articles demonstrate that undocumented black residents were an integral part of the antebellum urban labor markets. It will be argued that the liminal status of some increased their vulnerability, which facilitated their economic exploitation. These trends contributed to an increasingly disadvantageous socio-economic position of the free black population. At the same time, they created opportunities for runaway slaves to blend in with urban black communities in large numbers, as well as for the undocumented as a whole to make ends meet. The distinctions between cities in the Upper South (Baltimore and Richmond), where the majority of black people performed unskilled labor, and those in the Lower South (Charleston and New Orleans), which offered more variety, were significant. However, this article will focus on overall developments rather than explicit comparisons. It will be argued that the interplay of different actors and institutions increasingly created a social and economic space in southern cities where runaway slaves and other undocumented workers could find their niche. It is an account of power relations as well as of agency and shows that the experiences of black people are a vital part of the urban history of American capitalism.

I

Throughout the antebellum period, the vast majority of southern newspapers regularly published advertisements in which slaveholders looked out for their escaped human property. A great many

of enslaved men, women, and children were assumed to be at some place outside the slaveholding South but even more were thought to be hiding *within* the South, particularly in cities. Although these runaway slave advertisements demand a careful approach because in their majority they reflect the opinions and guesses of slaveowners rather than the actual trajectories of self-emancipators, a pleasing amount also reveals actual facts, most importantly, when escaped slaves were seen after their flight. This holds true, for example, for Lewis from Chesterfield, Virginia. After he absconded in 1806, his owner thought Lewis would 'attempt passing as a free man, and will attempt to make his escape to Norfolk by water,' yet the owner also informed readers that 'he was seen in Richmond during the Broad Rock Races, dressed in black' and added that 'it is probable that he is still lurking about there' (*Richmond Enquirer*, 1 August 1806). Likewise, Dick, for whom the very high bounty of $200 was set, was assumed to have escaped to Baltimore in 1836 because his mother lived in the city. 'Dick is a brick moulder by trade, and I think it is likely he will try to get employment at some of the Yards' (*Daily National Intelligencer*, October 1836). In Charleston, a slaveholder was on the lookout for Amelia or Anne, twenty-four years of age, who was a mantua (fancy overgown worn by women) maker by trade. 'She works for respectable families about the city, and says she is free. She has been absent about two years, and was seen in King street last week' (*Charleston Mercury*, 16 February 1860).

Apart from runaway slave ads, there were countless advertisements by jails, work houses, and other detention centers for slaves and black people that prove the presence of escaped slaves in the cities. In May 1838, a black man 'calling himself Sam, who has for some time passed in the City, as a free Negro,' was apprehended and 'Lodged in the Work House' in Charleston. The workhouse clerk, who hoped to find Sam's legal owner with the announcement, also 'believes there are several runaways in the same situation in this place' and recommended to 'let the officers look to it!' (*Charleston Mercury*, 11 May 1838). The assessment of the situation by an employee of the work-house shows that the problem of runaway slaves was a perceptible one but it can certainly not tell about the quantitative dimension of the phenomenon. Yet, jail ledgers and police records provide some fragmented ground for estimations.

In 1800, Baltimore had a population of 26,900. By 1860, it grew to be the country's fourth largest city by population with 212,000 inhabitants of whom approximately 28,000 were people of African descent. Of this figure, only 2,200 were still enslaved. Richmond, the tobacco center in Virginia, had 38,000 inhabitants on the eve of the Civil War, including 14,400 African Americans, the vast majority (11,700) enslaved. In most urban centers in the Upper South, the free black population was significantly larger than their enslaved counterparts, with Richmond being the great exception. Further south the picture looked dramatically different. Although Lower South cities were also rapidly growing, the institution of slavery was much more firmly entrenched and manumissions, which around the turn of the century had laid the cornerstone for an autonomously increasing free African American population in the Upper South, occurred much more selectively and sporadically. Consequently, regions further south had relatively small free black populations and more enslaved city dwellers. By 1860, Charleston counted 40,500 inhabitants of whom 17,100 were African Americans, the overwhelming majority of them of lighter skin ('mulattos'). Comparable to Richmond, only 3,200 of them were legally free. Meanwhile, 168,700 people lived in New Orleans of whom 24,300 were of African descent (10,700 free and 13,400 enslaved) (U. S. 7th Census, 1850; U. S. 8th Census, 1860).

During the early 1830s, one black person was jailed in Baltimore every one-and-a-half days on average charged with being a runaway slave (Baltimore City Jail, 1836–1850). It can be assumed that in the first decades of the antebellum period, dozens of runaway slaves gravitated annually to the city. In later decades, due to the rapid growth of the city, the possibilities to find work (see part II), and the extending personal networks of the enslaved, it could have been hundreds. These calculations are supported by the growing number of runaway slave ads in southern newspapers.[4] For New Orleans, with its size and long tradition struggling with marronage and runaway slaves, similar numbers are estimated. Over a fifteen-months period in 1858 and 1859, 913 people were arrested

as runaway slaves in the city (Stith, 1859, in Wade, 1964, p. 219). Louisiana even established a centralized state depot for runaway slaves in 1857 (Annual Report of the State Engineer, 1859, p. 24). In Charleston, black and 'mulatto' residents formed the majority until the 1850s. Yet, it also had the highest proportion of slaves of any American city. In general, large slaveholding decreased in southern cities between 1800 and 1860; Richmond was again exceptional. With its heavy reliance on enslaved workers in tobacco manufacturing and iron production Richmond ranked first in combining slavery and industrialization (Goldin, 1976; Lewis, 1974; Takagi, 2002).

Slightly fewer escaped bondspeople sought refuge in antebellum Charleston and Richmond but their numbers presumably stood in the hundreds towards the mid-nineteenth century nevertheless. For Charleston, imprisonment statistics between December 1858 and October 1860 show that on average fourteen people were jailed as runaway slaves every month (Proceedings of the City Council of Charleston, 1859). By contrast, in 1838 and 1839, only 115 runaway slaves were arrested over the two-year period (Powers, 1982, p. 27). Moreover, due to the strong presence of the institution of slavery, more runaways passed as self-hired slaves instead of free persons, especially in Charleston. During a ten-year period between 1834 and 1844, the Richmond Police was tasked with looking out for 935 runaway slaves who their owners believed to be in the city. Of seventy-four runaways it was reported that they were caught and of fourteen that they returned to their owners 'voluntarily.' However, 847 remained unaccounted for (Daybook of the Richmond Police Guard, 1834-1844). Besides, between 1841 and 1846, the city jailed 215 black people suspected of having escaped from slavery (Richmond, City Sergeant, Section 1, 1841–1846). In the end of the antebellum era, the numbers of runaways in Baltimore, Richmond, Charleston, and New Orleans must have been in the thousands. In the entire urban South, these numbers continuously rose due to the constant influx of newcomers from plantations, other urban areas, or even the same cities. In the cities, these migrants integrated into pre-existing black communities.

The population data mentioned above has provided the combined numbers of the free and enslaved black populations. This is because runaway slaves, depending on the place, time, and context, either tried to pass as free or enslaved. What in the end mattered more than the volume of the free population was the overall volume of the black population, who absorbed the freedom seekers. The official data is likely inaccurate since hundreds of illegal freedom seekers were present in these cities at any given time in the later antebellum era. Furthermore, contrary to the above given census records, the black populations must be sub-divided into more categories than just free and unfree. Persons of African descent who were born free or legally manumitted, who were registered with the authorities as such, and possessed certificates to prove their freedom, will be regarded as *de jure* free. Officially, this should be the group represented in the statistics on the free black populations.

Apart from this, many free-born African Americans did not possess free papers for a variety of reasons (for instance, because they could not afford the fee, did not renew them, or had lost them) or were not registered. These people were legally free but had trouble proving their status, particularly if mistaken for runaway slaves. Others were manumitted in conformity with the law but resided in the state illegally. The background of this were laws requiring all manumitted bondspeople to emigrate. To discourage slaveowners from freeing their slaves and to counteract the growing free black population, Virginia was the first state to enact such a legislation in 1806 (General Assembly, 1806).[5] Louisiana and Maryland followed suit in 1830 and 1832, respectively (Landsford, 2007, p. 357; Fileds, 1985, pp. 36–37). After a quarter century of observing how this legislature did *not* work in her neighboring state, Maryland authorities must have been aware that while some freed slaves left the state, the vast majority stayed as illegal residents.

In 1838, citizens of Berkeley County (present-day West Virginia) called attention to the deficiency of the code since sister states had likewise enacted laws to prevent free blacks from immigrating (Petition by Citizens from Berkeley County, 1838). Many southern states banned free African Americans from entering since the early nineteenth century, likewise to placate white Americans. South Carolina introduced this legislation in 1800, Maryland followed in 1808 (Berlin, 1974, p. 92).[6]

Louisiana enacted a similar code in 1807 and another in 1830 requiring the expulsion of 'free negroes of other States from its territory who had entered after 1825.' From 1838 onwards, it was 'modified so as to allow all free blacks in the State' under the precondition that they registered themselves and posted a bond, but this law was also 'rarely enforced,' according to a New Orleans newspaper. And so, free black people grew oblivious about it (*Daily Picayune*, 4 September 1859).

Another group of illegally free black residents was created by complicating or even prohibiting manumissions. In South Carolina, slave emancipation was only allowed by an act of the legislature after 1820 (Walker, 1998, p. 60), which was that high an obstacle that practically no slaveholder complied with it. Instead, they continued to manumit their slaves without legal approbation. The extent of illegal emancipations is made clear by the fact that only two bondspeople were officially manumitted in the entire state of South Carolina in 1850 (Powers, 1982, p. 42). Two years prior, Judge O'Neall wrote that the prohibition on manumission of 1820 had 'caused evasions without numbers' (Ellison Family Papers, 1857), reflecting the ignorance of the state regarding the dimensions of the phenomenon. By the mid-1830s, most southern states demanded that slaveholders get a written permit by the authorities. Two decades later, manumission was generally prohibited in many states.[7] Larry Koger (2014, pp. 77–78) speaks of growing numbers of *de facto* free blacks who seldom possessed freedom papers. Many were seized as runaways or under the suspicion of being runaways.

Escapees from slavery, illegally immigrated blacks, illegally in the state remaining blacks, illegally manumitted slaves, and free born blacks without proper registration all constituted the group of *de facto* undocumented residents in the southern states. For them, this liminal status was preferable to re-enslavement or emigration. Additionally, they had children and created more residents without documentation, which increasingly blurred the lines between the groups. Maria Cole, for one, petitioned in 1850 for being registered as a 'free woman of color' after residing in the city of Richmond for ten years.[8] Counting on the support of five white Richmonders who vouched for her being 'a woman of good character and employment in honest pursuit,' and claimed she was the same person who had a registration in Henrico County dating from 1841, her request was granted. According to the 1841 register, she had been twenty-two years old in 1841, had 'several scars on the back & her neck' and was believed to be free-born (Hustings Court Suit Papers, 1850). It is not evident to which of the here presented categories of undocumented people Cole belonged. Although not a homogeneous group, the undocumented population, due to their evident integration into the legal free black population, was flattened in itself and therefore hardly visible. The number of these illegally free or illegally in the states residing African Americans presumably reached well into the thousands and must have conflicted with the official census data.

II

The volume of the runaway population depended on the relative and absolute size of the free and unfree black population (their receiving societies) and the opportunities offered by the labor market. The last point was the least pivotal one, however, because it seems that poorly paid jobs were almost always to be found, especially in port cities and especially from the 1820s onwards. From that time on, road, canal, house, and ship building as well as dock work grew extensively due to increasing commercial and trading activities (Gordon, Edwards, & Reich, 1986, p. 55). With high urbanization rates and a decline in the relative demand for skilled work, the demand for menial and unskilled labor soared. Since the majority of runaway slaves attempted to pass as free persons in the South, they aimed to find work in those occupational sectors in which free African Americans were represented. Leonard Curry, in his pioneering work *The Free Black in Urban America*, has scrutinized the sectors in which enslaved and free blacks worked. Very generally speaking, employment prospects for free black men were better in the Upper South than in the northern states, and superior in the Lower South to the Upper South.[9] These findings refer to the variety of jobs African Americans could take on with regards to artisan skills and white and immigrant competition (Curry,

1981, p. 30). Ira Berlin has claimed that the monopolies of free blacks were usually service-oriented, required little capital, and often included white customers (Berlin, 1974, p. 236). In Richmond, for example, one third of free black men were skilled workers in 1860. Meanwhile, in Charleston, the share was three quarters (Harris, 2006, p. 104).

These occupational sectors seem at first glance to match the runaway population. Berlin has found that the latter was largely not made up by average field hands. Rather, he labels this demographic group the 'slave elite' and asserts that they were 'more skilled, sophisticated, and aggressive than the mass of slaves' (Berlin, 1974, p. 160). Runaway slave advertisements as well as the very high bounties set on many runaways back up his claim. A professional training, mental capacities, autonomy, and especially mobility turned bondspeople into valuable workers while at the same time increasing their chances of successful escape. English traveler Marianne Finch also opined that 'those whom good treatment has rendered most fit for freedom, are the most desired as slaves' (Finch, 1969, p. 300).

The problem that arises is that statistics on free black occupations are necessarily based on official census records and city directories. As shown above, however, there is reason to believe that this data does not account for large parts of the African American population that lived in nominal freedom but had an undocumented status. Moreover, runaway slaves and other undocumented groups depended on certain jobs which did not imply a close relationship with whites who could – and free blacks who would – question their identity. In Charleston, free black men enjoyed a relatively high occupational status. One of the most important skilled jobs was barbering (Berlin, 1974, p. 235) but it is unlikely that runaways passed as barbers since they would have been too exposed. More importantly, free black artisans, especially in small communities like Charleston, would have resented an intrusion by newcomers who could compete with their vested jobs. The same holds true for other occupations like waiting in hotels and shoe making although the grade of the risk depended on the distance from one's owner and the reach of the latter's network. The previously discussed mantua maker surely was an exceptional case since she frequented the higher classes of Charleston with a sensational skill, no doubt attracting attention.

Similar to other illegal migrants who upon arrival become undocumented residents, the majority of runaway slaves depended on low-profile jobs with a ready payment. These low-paying laboring day jobs were plentiful and not difficult to find. That explains, for instance, why seamstresses had a high share amongst runaways hiding in Charleston, as observed by Amani Marshall (2010, p. 170). There is reason to believe that most men attempted to integrate into the local urban labor market as common laborers. Flexible, dilative labor allowed employers to hire and fire workers on short notice, according to their every-day needs. Dock workers and those loading and unloading ships, for instance, could be hired the minute a vessel got into the port. Apart from local variations in different productive and commercial specializations (for instance, iron and tobacco in Richmond, flour and export in Baltimore, rice and cotton in Charleston, and sugar and commerce in New Orleans), all four cities denoted growth rates large enough to be in constant need of workers in the construction and transport sectors, especially on the wharves. When Stepney, 'of a smiling countenance,' ran away from Columbia, his owner placed a runaway slave ad in June 1820 believing he was in Charleston because he had been raised there. A bricklayer by trade, Stepney might have found employment in this city and was still missing eight months later (*City Gazette and Commercial Daily Advertiser*, 15 December 1820). Brick makers were also in high demand in other places. The 1850 census registered 1,400 brick makers in Baltimore City and County, most of whom were people of African descent. Baltimore, the fastest growing city of this research, had approximately six hundred houses built per year in the 1830s; by 1851 the figure stood at two thousand per year (Olsen, 1980, p. 103). The more the economy was booming, the faster the cities were growing.

Other large infrastructural projects included canals and later railroads, as well as water engineering. In New Orleans, the levee (dike) was a construction project that needed constant maintenance all year long and the demand for labor never snapped. Enslaved Jim, twenty-eight years of age,

'stout and muscular, with sullen expression of countenance,' was in October 1855 absent from his owner (which was a firm) in New Orleans for already four months. 'The negro was seen in the lower parts of the city on Saturday and Sunday last, and is no doubt lurking about the city,' announced the advertisement, and that he 'has been seen twice on the Levee during the last month' (*Daily Picayune*, 25 October 1855). The majority of runaway slaves sought employment without attracting attention, and therefore integrated into occupational sectors where (free and enslaved) African Americans were present. This was disproportionately on markets and harbors.

Laundry, seamstressing, day labor, cartering, and factory work – the occupations that most nominally free and enslaved black Americans followed offered no future. Most runaway slaves, although stemming from a privileged segment of the enslaved population, integrated into the urban labor markets below their own professional capacities. There, they joined other undocumented and documented African Americans. In the cities, black men and women were not alone, however, and white society was not limited to the plantocracy, smaller slaveholders, entrepreneurs, and skilled craftsmen. It was also comprised of lower-class and working-class whites. In the early nineteenth century, two contradictory forces were at work that further disadvantaged the economic position of people of African descent. First, as Eric Foner has explained, indentured servitude had, with a few exceptions, vanished from the United States and apprenticeships were sharply declining. These trends pulled white people out of unfree labor relations and underscored the opposition between slavery and freedom (Foner, 1998, p. 19). Second, slavery managed to adapt to modern work relations, industrialization and capitalist labor markets, with an increasing flexibility of enslaved labor to the changing needs of the economy. As Calvin Schermerhorn confirms, free and unfree labor was not easily distinguishable anymore. This situation was aggravated by that in the nineteenth century, hundreds of hired and self-hired slaves were present in southern cities. So, occupations had to become segregated as a whole, as did work places (Schermerhorn, 2011, p. 168; Wade, 1964, p. 30). One of the few ways to demarcate themselves from slavery was for white people to demarcate themselves from blacks.

The phenomenon of sharpening color lines was a result of the racialization of American slavery.[10] It translated into the economic sphere and affected the way in which white Americans saw black labor. Slaves were destined to work for the benefit of white men, and the notion of blacks and whites working together was, for most whites, unthinkable. To reserve the better paying jobs for white Americans, blacks were pushed out of certain skilled and semi-skilled occupations and into more menial sorts of work over the antebellum era. This was a general tendency. As Richard Wade has observed, at mid-century, and particularly over the course of the 1850s, whites managed to drive black laborers out of many jobs (Wade, 1964, p. 30). Labor exclusion of black Americans worked in a variety of ways. White Americans had grown to refuse working with slaves and, in many places, with black people in general. Contemporary observer Frederick Law Olmsted saw in New Orleans that 'employers could get no white men to work with their slaves, except from Irish and Germans' (Olmsted, 1861, p. 231). In New Orleans in the early 1850s, white men comprised the majority of cartmen, hackney-coach men, porters, railroad hands, public waiters, common laborers, and skilled mechanics. The few black men working in these occupations were mostly free. In places where both blacks and whites worked, they often were still segregated according to their tasks. Olmsted noted, for instance, that in his hotel in Richmond, the chamber servants were all black while the dining-room servants were Irish (Olmsted, 1861, pp. 41, 233).

Besides striking, white workers at times formed loose or more organized consolidations to push their competitors out, often using strong rhetoric or physical violence to achieve their goals. In the mid-1850s, *The Daily Journal* of Indiana neatly summarized these dynamics for three of the four places under analysis here: In New Orleans,

> rival white labor has driven or frightened black labor, a great measure, from its chief employment as draymen, long shore man and mechanics. [...] In the Carolinas the white mechanics recently formed a combination to drive the slaves from their branches of labor. In Baltimore, last week, the white caulkers formed a combination and resolved that no black man, free or slave should be allowed to work at their business. [...] Consequently

every negro caulker was driven from the ship yard by force. It seems the white association had power to arrest all business […] (*Daily Journal*, 20 July 1856 [?]).

Black people, due to the prohibition of assembly, could not organize themselves in the same manner. An organized labor movement was weakened through the illegals and the general vulnerability of the black population, and instead of complaining or rioting, they presented themselves as law abiding and respectable. The participation of runaways in southern cities in the labor force was very high. Assaults by black workers on white workers were extremely rare and mostly not more than spontaneous acts by individuals.

Another way to achieve exclusion was petitioning. This was the established tool of the lower-middle and upcoming middle classes.[11] The petitions were often in favor of white trades and skilled occupations. To give just one example, a petition from Virginia in 1831 complained about skilled slaves present in certain trades such as blacksmithing, stone masonry, bricklaying, milling, carpentering, coopering, tanning, carrying, shoe and boot making, distilling, 'and in fine handicrafts of all kinds.' Proposing a law to prohibit the apprenticeship of all people of African descent, the petitioners argued that white mechanics were driven out of employment (Culpeper County, VA, Legislative Petitions, 9 December 1831).

Through heavy competition, white southerners aggravated the precarious situation of free blacks. They used legislative petitions, the power of customary law, persuasion, intimidation, and violence to take advantage. The animosities against black workers were not only spontaneous acts by white Americans (and later immigrants) but indeed a well-planned strategy involving formal and informal organizations and associations. At times, these measures were supported by the legislature. In a move that targeted both legally free and undocumented African Americans, Charleston made clear that it was white society's prerogative to make use of black labor as they pleased. In 1848, a law was formulated to target black employers but not whites if they hired slaves without proper identification. These black persons 'may be taken up and committed to the Work House, and there detained until a fine of twenty dollars, and the expenses of the Work House, shall have been fully paid […]' (quoted in Greene, Hutchins, & Hutchins, 2004, pp. 51–52). In the event of non-payment, they would be sentenced to labor in the workhouse.

The dynamics of expulsing black Americans increased through the competition of impoverished European newcomers. Although the number of African Americans in southern cities grew continuously, the number of white residents grew faster and white laborers visibly changed the faces of southern cities. Northern visitor John DeForest wrote to his brother in 1855, 'the crowd of porters & coachmen that met us on the dock [of Charleston] presented not above half a dozen black faces. Instead I saw the familiar Irish & German visages whom I could have met on a dock at Boston or New York' (John William DeForest to Andrew DeForest, 9 November 1855, quoted in Johnson and Roark (1984), p. 178). These immigrants integrated into the lowest segments of the lower labor markets where they encountered unskilled African Americans, many of whom were runaway slaves who suddenly found themselves in direct competition with European whites. In particular, Irish newcomers were rivals because large shares of them were unskilled, too, and increasingly so from the mid-antebellum era onwards (Binder, 1992, pp. 6–7).

In Charleston, growing numbers of native and immigrant whites took over carpentry (Powers, 1982, pp. 53–54). In Baltimore, almost all job ads for domestics referred to black women in the first three decades of the nineteenth century (Cole, 1994, p. 62). Afterwards, white women streamed into this sector (Rockman, 2009, p. 115). Announcements that systematically excluded black women from jobs often looked like this one: 'Wanted immediately,' announced the Baltimore *Sun* in 1853, 'At the Baltimore Laundry, a few more WASHERWOMEN (white). Colored women need not apply – Irish or German preferred' (*Sun*, 18 May 1853). And so, African Americans lost many professions but largely managed to maintain their presence in water-related work, for example as oystermen and seamen, and as hucksters and brickmakers. Furthermore, both men and women still worked service jobs by the mid-century. These included barbers, cooks, waiters, laundresses,

domestic servants, and porters (Olsen, 1980). In general, black people's position on an increasingly competitive labor market became more than tenuous. Yet, there was work, if not work that would feed a family or provide a steady income.

III

Although the situation of black Americans in the urban labor markets was worsening, an ever-increasing number of runaway slaves joined them in the cities. They were aware of the economic shortcomings but preferred a life in poverty over a life in bondage. Most men attempted to integrate into the local urban labor market as common laborers. George Teamoh, an enslaved man from Norfolk, Virginia, wrote in his autobiography that he went to Richmond in 1853 to visit his wife and daughter who were held in the slave pen to be sold. Since he intended to 'remain a few weeks,' he had to seek a job, which apparently was not a problem: 'I sought, and found employment during a few days,' Teamoh wrote, at a dock yard at the Richmond Basin as a common laborer (Teamoh, 1990, pp. 90–91). Another enslaved man, probably by the name of William Matthews, escaped from the railroad in South Carolina and fled to Charleston where he passed himself off as self-hired slave: 'I went down to the stevedore's stand and waited there with the rest of the hands to get work,' Matthews later stated. 'By and by a stevedore came along and asked if I wanted work. I told him yes. He said come along, and I followed him on to the wharf, and worked with a good many others in stowing away cotton in a vessel' (Anonymous, 1838).

Tobacconists in Richmond, railroaders in Baltimore, and other industrialists and employers in Charleston and New Orleans were first and foremost businessmen. Their concern was to gather sufficient workers to make their businesses run and to pay them as little as possible to generate the highest profits. Capitalist labor markets were supportive for runaways to integrate because they did not rely on personal acquaintance but rather on flexibility and adaptability. Employers knowingly employed illegal black residents and they did not pay attention whether some of their employees were actually runaway slaves. It is likely that some took advantage of the vulnerable situation of their illegal employees to exploit them even more. Others simply did not want to know. Turning a blind eye was the most common and helpful support for them.

The large numbers of runaways and undocumented African Americans in southern cities certainly impacted the labor markets. Black Americans who were legally free already experienced dramatic limitations in the execution of their civil and political rights. They faced high obstacles when confronting whites in court and experienced difficulties proving their freedom without the support of whites who would vouch for them. Additionally, they were excluded from suffrage and political representation, and their rights were further curtailed over the decades. Subordinated to the visual code of white supremacy, laws were designed that stressed the similar treatment of slaves and free blacks in punishment, and demarcated whites from blacks, regardless of the latter's legal status. Corporal castigation, for instance, was foreseen for free and enslaved blacks while it was abolished for whites; and in Maryland, free blacks could be sold for crimes after 1858 (Johnson, 2013, p. 141; Berlin, 1974, pp. 60–61; Fields, 1985, p. 79).[12] Slave codes became black codes and black people who had gained their legal freedom were increasingly forced to endure the same treatment white society had formerly reserved for slaves.

Moreover, in cities, when slavery became urbanized in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, individual slaveholders lost direct supervision over their bondspeople. This task was taken over by government actors, which did not care much about distinguishing enslaved people from free people of African descent. This can be linked to larger developments of labor control that were typical of that time. Historians have found that the origin of modern police in the antebellum period was connected to the economic interests of the upcoming commercial elites who saw fighting disorderly conduct as more important than crime. Stressing social control before crime control, the police contributed to ensuring 'a stable and orderly work force [and] a stable and orderly environment for the conduct of business [...]' (Spitzer and Andrew Scull, 1977, pp. 20, 23;

Potter,). Policemen were therefore not foremost instructed to go after crime or criminal behavior but to surveille the underclasses. Nevertheless, police contributed to the tolerance of runaway slaves in southern cities. They generally failed to effectively enforce state laws meant to keep free blacks and slaves separate, and to make slaves more visible to the authorities by enforcing the ordinances that required all black people to carry passes or free papers at all times. This can be explained given the desperate need of the urban economies for labor power.

This need was made visible by the constant complaints by employers about labor shortages, especially in the 1850s. Shortage did not necessarily mean that there were not sufficient workers, as Barbara Fields (1985, p. 67) and Seth Rockman (2009, p. 4) agree, but rather that the wages were still too high, the terms of service too short, or that employers could not afford to hire and fire people at will. In essence, it meant that employees retained limited power to negotiate their working conditions. Likewise, Tom Brass has argued that 'labor shortage' implied that workers held certain leeway to offer and withdraw their labor power. The complaints about them show that workers in the sense of free capitalist markets were not desired at most times. Rather, employers had an intrinsic interest in commanding a work force confined in power and, thus, non-capitalist (Brass, 1997, p. 73).

Varying from location to location, black people had to apply for special permits to carry out certain works. In Baltimore, for one, peddlers were required to acquire licenses, vendors had to get permission to sell certain goods, and boatmen needed to register to operate their businesses on the Chesapeake Bay and the rivers (Fields, 1985, p. 79). Most free African Americans held menial occupations for which they received lower wages than their white counterparts. Since the 1830s, the cities became relatively more populated with whites. To compete, black workers were forced to offer their labor cheaper and hence, kept the overall wages low. Despite the hardship, most people of African descent tried their best to play along. Capitalism claims that in theory every individual free laborer can escape their fate by means of upward mobility (van der Linden, 2008, p. 33). For African Americans, however, the deck was stacked against them. Through legislative arrangements which degraded free black people to the status of slaves, and political projects which excluded them from the idea of nationhood, they were essentially blocked from access to social and economic mobility.[13]

It was difficult to resist. When looking at the effect the institution of slavery had on non-enslaved black Americans, we see that people easily lost their legal status when they exited slavery but did not or could not follow the respective legal requirements (see part I). The legislative frame rendered their status extremely unfavorable, which left them with nearly no rights. In any confrontation with employers, co-workers, competitors, or even free black people who could prove their own freedom, the undocumented got the short end of the stick. It was difficult enough for people who were legally free but counted on white support to challenge the discrimination. Christopher MacPherson was such a case. The bookkeeper from Richmond was born a slave and was granted his liberty and financial support by his master. In 1810, he petitioned for exemption from a newly passed ordinance which drastically curtailed the success of his business. Although supported by many white benefactors, his request was eventually rejected (Petition of Christopher MacPherson, 10 December 1810). Amrita Chakrabarti Myers (2011, p. 79) has likewise found that (relatively) well-off women of African descent in Charleston actively engaged to better their condition. They filed petitions to mitigate the heavy tax burdens, tried to evade licensing, and claim status as *feme sole* to get the upper hand over their means.

People whose freedom relied on their invisibility before authorities could not write petitions. They were generally much more cautious to defend themselves against unfair treatment. Those who dared often regretted it. Autobiographer Lunsford Lane was one of these people trapped in the irony of emancipation. After saving up a considerable amount of money, he was able to purchase his own freedom in 1835. Five years later, while making plans to purchase the freedom of his wife and six children, Lane received notice that following the statutes of North Carolina, he was in the state illegally and had to leave to avoid persecution. With the help of white friends and

employers who vouched for his good character, Lane decided to petition to remain in the state. His wish was not granted and he departed from Raleigh without his family in 1841. Aptly expressed, his autobiography features the sub-title *His Banishment from the Place of His Birth for the Crime of Wearing a Colored Skin* (Lane, 1842, pp. 21, 24–25, 32). In general, men and women who requested permission to stay in their home state comprised only a small fraction of illegal residents; granted petitions were the exception (Legislative Petitions, LVA, 1831).

The payment of capitation taxes, although linked to an official registry, was a common strategy for undocumented people to protect their fragile freedom. Being able to produce tax receipts over a couple of years could serve as a way to legitimize their nominal freedom in case of emergency.[14] Michael Johnson and Roark (1984, p. 44) have insinuated that black people could just make these payments, but in reality it was not that easy. There was a constant danger that, after the death of their legal owner, people who were enslaved according to law could be exposed or they could be seized for possible debts. For most illegals, and especially runaways, it was safer to keep a low profile. Furthermore, the non-payment of taxes, and hence an undocumented status, could be beneficial for a person or a family because they saved money which could be invested in favor of their social upwards mobility – or because they simply could not afford to pay it. This was also why white people did not pay poll taxes when they could not afford it. However, as Keri Leigh Merritt has shown, these requirements were much lower for whites than for blacks, in most states significantly less than $1. When a white person could not meet these expenses, they would be listed as insolvent (Merritt, 2017, p. 169). By contrary, black people could be jailed and non-payment of the jails fees could send them into forced labor or back into slavery.

In Charleston, free black women between eighteen and fifty years of age were required to pay $5 per year. If they were between fourteen and eighteen, the fee was reduced to $3. Meanwhile, men between sixteen and twenty-one years old had to pay $5. Afterwards they were charged $10 until they turned sixty.[15] Immigrants, by contrast, did often not pay taxes, as observed by a free black inhabitant of Charleston. This was why they got rich soon, he claimed (*American Christian Expositor*, 1 November 1832). The head taxes, which were much higher for men than for women, might have been the reason for the dramatic sex imbalance within the urban free black population, and the city tax returns suggest that African American men disappeared from the tax lists once they turned twenty-one.[16] The annual tax of $10 constituted a serious obstacle to making a living and it seems that a great many free black men tried to avoid paying it.

Unequal taxes, discouragement to register, and risks of legal protest were different forms of vulnerability explicitly aimed at people of African descent. People passing themselves off as self-hired slaves had no voice at all. Steinfeld and Engerman (1997, pp. 109–110) have argued that taxation and immigration can serve 'to lower incomes and change the amount and/or nature of work free workers were "willing" to do.' These strategies maneuvered black people into conditions where they were forced to engage in qualitatively lower and quantitatively higher work. Consequently, extreme poverty disproportionately hit black people. In a society that self-identified as a white man's nation, the majority of policy makers, employers, and citizens saw no problem with this state of affair. David Brion Davis's (2006, p. 144) term 'accepted exploitation' encompasses these dynamics well.[17] Those paid by the day had to work harder to prove their worthiness and those being paid by piece, for instance seamstresses, had to work more in order to make up for the pay gap. Yet, working longer hours was risky for black people because there was a curfew which, if violated, could result in discovery (if no identification was produced), a night in the workhouse, or a heavy fine. These 'disciplinary measures' compelled poor laborers to work even harder in order to make up for the lost money or time. Logically, it also affected the others on the lowest levels of the economic system. The high supply on the labor markets, caused by competition of African Americans, low-class American whites, and European immigrants led to an anomaly in the 1850s when economic growth and declining wages for unskilled and semi-skilled workers coincided (Goldfield, 1991, pp. 134–135).

Because runaways were legally property, state and city authorities were careful not to infringe the legal ownership of the slaveholders. At the same time, private entrepreneurs and employers (amongst them a growing middle class) demanded very cheap, very flexible labor. In the ante-bellum southern cities, authorities responded to both claims. They had to recognize the right of slaveholders to their human property, consequently enacting laws to countervail possible loss and damage. In New Orleans, these ordinances date from the earliest days of American rule. The Réglement de Police of 1804 evidences that there was an interest 'to prevent Negroes […] from hiring themselves, when they are runaways' (Minutes of the Conseil do Ville, 1804, quoted in Le Glaunec, 2009, p. 223). But the government also made sure that the economy was filled with a supply of wage workers willing to work for the lowest possible wages. This was achieved by illegalizing large parts of the African American population in the South. Runaways could jump on the bandwagon because the authorities and employers in the cities were often unable to tell them apart from the others.

It is imperative to ask who had an interest in creating an illegal black population and which groups within the black population benefited from it. Illegal and immigrant workers have been exploited more than legal and native workers in the twentieth century, as has been shown extensively.[18] In the nineteenth century, the advantages of an illegal part of the population were likewise obvious to city and state authorities. They executed willingly the menial works in the cities but did not live at common expenses in times of unproductiveness because they had no claim to poor relief. In some places, black men and women were accepted into poor houses but always in much lower numbers than white residents.[19] Mostly, African Americans organized themselves independently to provide for the needy and to guarantee mutual relief (Kimball, 2003, p. 38).[20] The downside for cities was that they did not receive taxes from persons who were not registered.

The benefit of a vulnerable work force for employers was even clearer. Owning enslaved laborers impeded flexible and short-term employment, and bondspeople had to be clothed, fed, housed, and taken care of in old age. The great difference between free and unfree labor was that free laborers could partially bargain the conditions of their employment (although this was even minimally the case within slavery). The less powerful in terms of legal protection workers were, the more they could be restricted in their bargaining power, which left the employers with more space to follow their own economic interests. Employers benefitted from a diverse work force that was partly undocumented and policy makers failed to take preventative measures. They were aware of the implications, and authorities in their functions as representatives of the general public interest took conscious decisions not to intervene. For both groups, people with a liminal status between slavery and freedom were a good solution to avoid the external costs inherent to cheap labor.

For these reasons it was possible that fugitive slaves and other undocumented African Americans in southern cities lived over most of the antebellum period relatively undisturbed, apart from individual discoveries, betrayal, or imprudence. Legal consequence was rare. In Virginia, there were only 124 cases of free African Americans residing illegally in the state between 1830 and 1860 (Campbell, 2007, p. 156). Measures like compelling hired-out slaves to wear badges were not enforced, like in New Orleans, and slave patrols, police guards, and night watches were usually understaffed and underpaid, showing that it was not considered a priority (Le Glaunec, 2009, pp. 223–225). This made runaway slaves and other undocumented African Americans beneficiaries of the illegal market since it secured their employment, and hence survival, and safeguarded their anonymity. There is no evidence that the lives of illegal residents were especially curtailed by executive measures. The anonymity of the growing cities made precise identification of individuals difficult. And so, enforcement of the laws aimed at free blacks only happened in exceptional cases and it was possible for urban slaves and illegal city dwellers to develop an informal life.

Conclusion

The number of runaway slaves who lived and worked illegally in southern cities was significant, as was the number of other undocumented African Americans. Over the antebellum era, black residents were pushed into even more precarious working conditions and labored on the lowest end of the urban labor markets. These downward developments were linked to their vulnerable political, legal, and social status. This situation was aggravated by the fact that large parts of the black population were undocumented, which rendered them even more vulnerable. People who exited slavery illegally or stayed in the state contrary to law saw no way to improve their working conditions. They could not petition against discrimination, were vulnerable before the police, and often could not make use of their professional skills. Especially runaways who, according to their profile, often were trained in skilled and semi-skilled occupations, integrated into the economy below their capacities.

Those who avoided paying taxes had an economic advantage, yet they could not count on ever proving their freedom. Due to the restrictions, black workers had to labor harder and, in competition with poor whites and European immigrants, accept lower incomes. This kept overall wages low and provided capitalist employers with the cheap work force they demanded. Due to the legal and social developments that led white society to increasingly treat black people as one group destined to execute the most menial and backbreaking jobs, their economic situation worsened. This cast a cloud over the entire black population which became increasingly powerless and vulnerable. Slavery played a significant part by creating the preconditions for this liminal status of 'undocumentedness.' People who, according to white society, ought to be enslaved or expelled, had no way to prove the opposite.

Strikingly, capitalist restructuring of the labor markets, which relied on flexibility and low labor costs, created conditions that were beneficial for the undocumented. In migration history, cities are known to be 'staging grounds' for the integration of unskilled newcomer groups. The restructuring of the economy in the nineteenth century created jobs for low-skilled workers and increased demand for low-wage workers (Waldinger, 1989, pp. 217, 221). Because undocumented black Americans were willing to offer this labor, they contributed to the economic success of their cities. In turn, growing industries and all sectors that grew with them, demanded more labor, which was again met by the pliant group of powerless workers. Finally, the absorptive labor markets created space for more runaway slaves and other undocumented people, and the number of illegal freedom seekers in southern cities grew correspondingly. By showing this, this paper has added a hitherto neglected perspective on the southern African American population in the decades before the abolition of slavery, which helps understand their extreme vulnerability and precarious economic situation.

Notes

1. The familiarity with which the newspaper article mentioned Terrence's owner Mr. Duplantier and the other two men's owners Mr. Powers and Mr. Wiltz suggests the assumption that they were known in the city. In 1851, there was only one Mr. Duplantier listed as living in New Orleans, a tobacco inspector on 33 Dauphine street (*Cohen's New Orleans & Lafayette Directory*). Terrance, escaping from the person who held him captive but staying in the same city surely was not part of the common action pattern of bondspeople who fled American slavery, yet he was also far from being an exception.
2. In 2017, black families earned a little less than fifty percent of the income of white families; their median wealth was slightly above five percent of that of white families (*New York Times*, 18 September 2017).
3. It also had very different consequences. For one, being undocumented in the antebellum era did not bar people from access to citizenship or public education since black people were not included anyways.
4. These are very rough estimations postulating that more people must have been successful than unsuccessful, otherwise much less people would have tried.
5. Note that the manumission rates were relatively very high from after the American Revolution to around 1810. Then, the opening of vast lands for cotton and sugar made slavery a lucrative business again. Besides, the free black population had grown extensively, which most white Americans resented.

6. Laws that were created to prevent free blacks from entering the state, largely failed. For Maryland, see Wright (1921, p. 114).
7. Only Delaware, Missouri, and Arkansas allowed slaveholders to manumit their slaves and allowed the latter to stay in the state (Berlin, 1974, p. 138).
8. 'Free person of color' and 'free negro' were legal terms for people of African descent with a free status.
9. In the Upper South, manumissions had occurred comparably indiscriminately and people were released from slavery to stand right on their own feet. The masses of slaves hardly possessed skills or followed trades and continued this pattern when released into freedom. In the Lower South, by contrast, personal motivations to emancipate bondspeople led slaveholders to support their manumittees, who were in many cases already skilled, in opening a shop or finding work (Berlin, 1976, p. 306). Another reason was the distinct cultural environment with less stark color lines, more amalgamation, and a white society accustomed to artisans of color.
10. For an excellent account of the racialization of American slavery, see Berlin (1998), 'Prologue: Making Slavery, Making Race.'
11. Also working-class whites used petitions to achieve political goals, yet more so towards the end of the antebellum period.
12. In Virginia, the division between white and black punishment was particularly strong; Virginia's black code of 1859 was the most comprehensive and systematic attempt to regulate the conduct of black people (Campbell, 2007, p. 19).
13. On the inclusion of only whites into the project of the nation, see Cullen (2003).
14. This is comparable to undocumented migrants in the present-day United States who pay taxes to build a record of existence, to help their case if detected, and to show that they deserve naturalization (Blanco, 2017).
15. The city of Charleston earned around $10,000 with this legislation in 1859 (Statement of the Finances of Charleston for Fiscal Year Ending 31 August 1859, in *Charleston Courier*, 4 October 1859).
16. Whereas the ratio male-female was nearly even when they were young, the relation shifted to almost two to one when full capitation taxes were due: The lower wards counted sixty-eight women between fourteen and eighteen and an equal number of men between sixteen and twenty-one in 1858. In the same year, 341 women above eighteen paid head taxes in comparison to only 181 men older than twenty-one. In the upper wards and in the following year, the numbers were similar (City Tax Returns, in *Charleston Courier*, 4 October 1859).
17. Davis used this formulation to point out that after the American Revolution, slavery came to be a form of exploitation which was not accepted by many Americans anymore.
18. See the countless scientific, political, and journalistic accounts, e.g. Bauder (2006); Gleeson (2012); and Lewin (2017).
19. See e.g. *Ordinances of the City of Charleston* (1854).
20. See particularly the organization of churches for black poor relief (Green, 2003; Raboteau, 2004).

Acknowledgments

Disclosure statement

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