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Promised Lands: Seeking Freedom in the Age of American Slavery

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Citation

Pargas, D. A. (2018). *Promised Lands: Seeking Freedom in the Age of American Slavery*. Leiden: Universiteit Leiden. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/62349>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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Oratie
25 mei 2018
16:15-17:00

“Promised Lands: Seeking Freedom in the Age of American Slavery”

Mijnheer de Rector Magnificus, leden van het Faculteitsbestuur, zeer gewaardeerde toehoorders,

Introduction

On the Fourth of July, 1825, most white residents of Washington DC celebrated the anniversary of their liberty and independence from the “tyranny” of British rule with parades, elaborate theater productions and other amusements that included a “GRAND OLIO of Song, Dance, and Recitation” and “a GRAND SCROLL DANCE by the Corps de Ballet.” Spirits clearly ran high that day. Editorials in the local newspaper, the *Daily National Intelligencer*, waxed lyrically about the revolt of “our free and enlightened communities” from “the oppressions enumerated in the Declaration of Independence,” humbly declaring the American Revolution nothing more than “the most important political incident in the history of the world.” “Let us rejoice and be glad,” wrote one resident, “that we have so much to be thankful for in our political condition.”¹

Not everybody in the Washington area was thankful for their political condition, however. Enslaved people were not. The American federal capital may have been the seat of government for a new republic that had brought itself into being in the name of freedom, but it was also a southern slaveholding territory. And at the same time that white Washingtonians were showering themselves with self-congratulation and applauding the Corps de Ballet, dozens of enslaved people from the surrounding farm districts of Maryland and Virginia were celebrating Independence Day by running away—in effect making their own attempts to secure liberty and independence from the tyranny of American slavery. The *Daily National Intelligencer* printed no less than ten runaway slave advertisements on that July 4th—some of them for groups and even entire families—a significant number for any single issue.

Precisely where these slaves were presumed to be running *to* is interesting to note. Where did enslaved people think they might be able to find freedom in 1820s America? If the runaway slave ads of this single issue of the Washington newspaper are anything to go by, the answer to that question is: *anywhere*. Or more accurately: *everywhere*. It seems that enslaved people saw little beacons of freedom in almost every direction—including sometimes right under their noses.

Some of the runaways on that Fourth of July were presumed to be hiding out within the slaveholding city of Washington itself, basically trying to just disguise their visibility as slaves and illegally pass as free blacks. (It appears that, whereas white Americans generally equated freedom with its manifestation as a *political* condition—something encoded in rights and laws and institutions, something to be celebrated on the Fourth of July—enslaved people were often less picky.) Actually, three were even supposedly posing as *whites*. Granderson, a young carpenter who was described as “remarkably white for a slave, and might be readily taken for a white man,” had absconded with the intention “doubtless to pass as a free man.” Even runaways with a dark complexion could hope to disguise their visibility as slaves in a city like Washington, however, which had a sizeable free black population. Free blacks in the nation’s capital indeed outnumbered the slave population by as much as four to one in the antebellum period, so the odds were good that a slave could get lost in the crowd and slip by under the radar. Tom, a local bondsman and a wagoner by profession, was presumed to be passing himself off as a free black in the city, where he would “probably offer his services,” for example. White residents were warned not to illegally employ these runaways and to check their papers first, but that probably had little effect because the runaways on that Fourth of July were described as having changed their names and run off “with forged papers.”²

These were bold attempts to craft lives of illegal freedom within a slaveholding city, but predictably, a handful of freedom seekers had safer territory in mind that day. The northern states had all abolished slavery by the 1820s, and with the Pennsylvania border a mere sixty miles north of Washington as the crow flies, free soil seemed tantalizingly close to bondspeople living in the capital region. Daniel, Moses, and Scipio, all between the ages of twenty-five and thirty, were suspected of having “obtained [forged] passes” (travel documents) to travel “out of the States of Virginia, Maryland, and the District of Columbia” to a northern free state.

To some runaways, however, even the northern states did not seem quite safe enough. Despite the abolition of slavery *at the state level* in the northern US, *federal* laws officially provided southern masters with the right to reclaim their slaves even when they fled to another state, so it was theoretically possible to run to a free state and still get captured and sent back into slavery. The most surefire way to attain lasting freedom was to escape the US altogether. And on that Fourth of July, 1825, one entire family from Stafford County, Virginia, executed a daring attempt to do just that. The group reportedly fled to Washington with forged free papers, having told friends that they intended to board a vessel bound for the Caribbean because they wanted “to go to St. Domingo,” where slavery had not only been abolished but where the Haitian government also promised asylum and citizenship to all runaway slaves who reached its shores. Their secret plans had somehow become known to their master, who was now frantically trying to catch them before they left the country.³

The runaway slave ads published in the Fourth of July edition of the *Daily National Intelligencer* offer us a fascinating glimpse into how enslaved people viewed the geography of freedom before the Civil War. What is so striking about these advertisements is that the presumed destinations of the runaway slaves were so diverse. They included places where

slavery had been abolished *and* places where it still existed. From the perspective of enslaved people seeking to flee bondage, in other words, “freedom” in one form or another could be found in a wide variety of geographical, political and social settings. Freedom could be forged in the north, south, east, or west; it could be reached by crossing political borders or by remaining within the borders of the slaveholding territories; it could be attained by disguising one’s true identity or by openly claiming asylum with a friendly government. Different destinations required different strategies of absconding and no place constituted an *ideal* destination for runaway slaves, but however imperfect, North America in the decades preceding the Civil War provided enslaved people with various “free spaces” to which they could flee to try to escape slavery. Hundreds of thousands made the attempt. Collectively, their actions had major repercussions for North American society.

Indeed, the “fugitive slave issue” was *the* refugee crisis of 19th-century North America, and, like other refugee crises in world history, it was an issue that provoked controversy at the local, state, national, and continental levels. No other issue confronted North Americans with a more alarming need to define and defend their position on thorny issues such as freedom, citizenship, free soil, slave soil, asylum, extradition, Christian humanitarianism, and geopolitical expediency. The seemingly simple act of enslaved people disappearing from their masters in the middle of the night opened a Pandora’s box of problems to a continent struggling to define itself in the Age of Revolutions, problems that included diplomatic rows; military skirmishes; calls for tighter border security at the state and international levels; crackdowns on “sanctuary cities”; conflicts with local law enforcement teams that refused to cooperate with federal law enforcement; the ballooning of a black market in false identification documents; and increasing public anxiety due to the inability to visibly distinguish between “illegals” and “legals” in a society based on racial hierarchy.

Why did this refugee crisis come about when it did, and what role did runaway slaves (and the runaway slave issue) play in the development of “free spaces” in North America?

The Shifting Landscape of Slavery and Freedom

The fugitive slave crisis in the decades prior to the American Civil War was a direct result of the changing landscape of slavery and freedom that emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (not just in North America but throughout the Americas). For many African Americans, it was an age of emancipation. Whereas prior to the American Revolution slavery was legally sanctioned and rarely questioned in every part of the hemisphere, the last quarter of the eighteenth century witnessed what Steven Hahn has called a “deepening crisis of slave regimes,” as growing moral doubts about slaveholding among Quakers and Protestant evangelicals dovetailed with economic and intellectual challenges to the institution’s perceived inefficiency, social undesirability, and political unsustainability among prominent thinkers in Europe and America. Transatlantic discourses in the Age of Revolutions had a profound effect upon slavery in the New World, ultimately leading to the legal abolition of

the transatlantic slave trade and of slavery itself in various parts of the Americas. Moreover, this period witnessed a spike in individual manumissions by slaveholders themselves, resulting in the emergence or bolstering of free black communities *within* slaveholding territories (especially in urban areas). In short, significant numbers of black people in the Atlantic world legally exited slavery in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.⁴

Yet for countless other African Americans it was an age of what Dale Tomich has called “the second slavery,” a period of intensification of slavery in regions such as the American South, Brazil, and Cuba. Indeed, the entrenchment of slavery, even as antislavery scored its first victories, constituted one of the great paradoxes of the Atlantic world. While some parts of the Americas saw their free black populations considerably augmented, others devolved into “freedom’s mirror,” as Ada Ferrer recently put it. For those still enslaved, the changing landscape of slavery and freedom provided new opportunities to escape and therefore gave rise to waves of asylum-based migration, as droves of slave refugees crossed into geographic spaces and places that constituted sites of *formal freedom* (where slavery was abolished according to “free soil” principles) or *informal freedom* (regions within slaveholding territories, especially urban areas, where slaves attempted to escape by blending in with newly augmented free black populations).⁵

In North America the story was even more complicated. There, the landscape of slavery and freedom in the decades prior to the Civil War was messy, contested, and constantly changing. But for enslaved people in the US South, the potential for reaching the “promised land” of freedom—whether in the North, within the South, or beyond the borders of the US—looked more promising during this period than ever before.

Asylum in the “Free” States

Consider the northern US, for example. That the North was considered a “Canaan land” to enslaved African Americans is well known. Beginning in 1777 the northern states began to abolish slavery at the state level (most of them gradually, meaning all those born after a certain date would be free). By 1804 slavery was clearly on the road to extinction in all of the northern states—even the federal Northwest Territory had been declared off limits to slavery—and by the 1820s there were only a handful of scattered slaves left. It was therefore logical for southern slaves to equate the North with freedom early on, and to view the North Star as the compass to free soil.⁶

But how “free soil” were the free states? Historians have traditionally viewed antebellum America as a land neatly bifurcated between slave states and free states, a “slave South” and a “free North”—but recent scholarship has attempted to nuance this image and blur the lines between the two regions. Ira Berlin, for one, described antebellum America as essentially a slaveholding republic where one region, the North, was attempting to slowly transition out of slavery—a transition that was still far from complete. Certainly from a federal level, the argument that there was no free soil in antebellum America appears sound. As stated earlier,

overarching federal fugitive slave laws—embedded in the US Constitution and reinforced in the 1793 and 1850 Fugitive Slave Acts—granted slaveholders the right to recover runaway slaves even when they fled to another state, so even if slavery was illegal in the North and virtually absent there by the 1820s, from the perspective of the federal government a runaway slave from the South was still a slave upon arrival in the North, and therefore had no claim to freedom or asylum. At least, that was the presumed intent of the law. This is the basis of scholars' arguments that the North was not really free. But from the perspective of runaway slaves, the ambiguities inherent in northern state abolition decrees and federal fugitive slave laws played more in their favor than is often appreciated. I would argue that it is a bit too simplistic to declare slavery a fully nationalized institution in antebellum America. Fugitive slaves *could* often find asylum in the northern US—but their attempts to claim freedom there were precarious and legally contested. Put simply, crossing into a free state did not make a runaway slave legally free, but it also did not necessarily mean that he/she would be (legally) remitted to slavery. Fugitive slaves in effect entered a realm of legal limbo when they fled north, a legal limbo that brought northern lawmakers and ordinary citizens into direct conflict with the federal government over the meanings of freedom in their states.⁷

The rights of citizens and the matter of extradition caused confusion from the very beginning. Federal fugitive slave laws called the constitutional right to *habeas corpus* into question. “Persons” have a constitutional right to due process of law—“persons” cannot be unlawfully seized and dragged across state borders. Slaves were not considered persons—they were considered property, with no right to due process. But how to tell a slave (with no legal rights) from a free black (with legal rights) in a state where slavery was abolished? At the time the constitution was drafted, slaveholders felt well within their right to simply seize runaways in the North and return them directly to slavery without going through any hearing or judicial process, the way they would a stray horse, since slaves were just property. But as the northern states began to abolish slavery, such practices clearly made northern free blacks vulnerable to potential kidnapping and enslavement without a hearing—and as “persons” they had an indisputable right to judicial process. All of a sudden, slaveholders who came north to claim a black person on the street looked like thugs—was that really their property or were they kidnapping an innocent free black man and selling him into slavery in the South (which happened often enough)? To many northerners, it stood to reason that all black people should be presumed free and accorded the same rights as “persons” until proven to be a runaway slave, and should therefore be remitted back into slavery only after a proper hearing. And that is how they interpreted the fugitive slave clause in the constitution.⁸

Pennsylvania, for example, went to great lengths to enact legal mechanisms designed to prevent the kidnapping of free blacks within its borders. The Pennsylvania legislature passed laws in 1788 and 1790 that threatened fines and punishments for unlawful “man-stealing” and prohibited the removal of African Americans from the state without due process. Other northern states applied similar *habeas corpus* laws in fugitive slave cases. Such protections were of course designed to prevent the free black population of the North from illegal enslavement, but they also provided safety to runaway slaves from the South. For them to be returned to slavery, their master had to not only track them down in another state, but also

prove their identity, prove ownership, and get permission from a northern judge to drag them back to the South. In practice this frustrated most attempts to recover runaway slaves who had fled north, and it infuriated southern slaveholders, who quickly pushed for a harsher federal Fugitive Slave Act in 1793. This act *did* demand a judicial process for rendition but at least allowed slaveholders to “prove” their runaway slave’s identity to a judge by merely providing an affidavit from a white man. In practice this law also proved difficult to enforce, however, and beginning in the 1820s (as most northern states completed their transition to freedom) northern state legislatures passed a flurry of “personal liberty laws” that once again made the recapture of fugitive slaves difficult. Most of these laws prohibited local and state officials from assisting in the capture of runaway slaves, and required jury trials for fugitive slave cases. Civil society now also became mobilized—“vigilance committees” emerged, dedicated to protecting runaway slaves threatened with recapture. Antislavery lawyers challenged the Fugitive Slave Act as unconstitutional. Both black and white abolitionists actively assisted runaways to cross state borders and kept them hidden from authorities through hundreds of networks that would later become known as the Underground Railroad. Even alarm systems were put into place to warn African Americans in certain cities that slave catchers were active.⁹

Such conflicts—conflicting visions of freedom and conflicting interpretations of citizens’ rights—became serious contests between the northern states (which were trying to fashion themselves an “asylum of liberty”) and the federal government, and were indeed a major cause for the rift that led to civil war. Northerners were relentless on this issue. Even when the Supreme Court essentially declared northern personal liberty laws unconstitutional in 1842, the northern states responded by passing another flurry of personal liberty laws starting in 1843. The federal government passed a more draconian Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, but the northern states tried to nullify it and then passed even more personal liberty legislation. By the eve of the Civil War, the legal framework of slavery and freedom in the North was confusing at best. Any officer of the law in Vermont, for example, faced federal prosecution if he did not apprehend a runaway slave, but state prosecution if he did. Courthouses where fugitive slaves faced trial were often stormed by antislavery mobs in much publicized “fugitive slave rescues,” the runaway slaves taken and whisked away to safety in Canada or remote farms.

In practice, therefore, the northern US developed into a site of contested freedom, or what I am calling “semi-formal freedom.” Canaan Land may have been part of a slaveholding republic, but conflicting interpretations of federal laws often resulted in de facto asylum for slave refugees from the South.

Free Spaces in the Slave South

The slave refugee crisis erupted in the South as well. Free spaces for runaway slaves also opened up in the South. As the northern states were attempting to “transition out of slavery” in the wake of the American Revolution, the southern states ironically also saw their free black populations augmented in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. While

southerners ultimately chose *not* to abolish slavery, it is significant that abolition was seriously considered in the Upper South. In states like Virginia, Maryland, and Delaware, abolitionist societies were established and abolition bills were introduced in the state legislatures. In Delaware abolition came within a single vote of passing. Even without formal abolition, however, enslaved people exited slavery in record numbers at the turn of the nineteenth century. The era witnessed a brief but significant spike in manumissions and self-purchase arrangements. Manumission laws were relaxed in such a way as to provide slaveholders with the opportunity to free their slaves if they so wished. Many, it appears, so wished.¹⁰

The experience of Virginia, which passed a law that made manumission much easier in 1782, is illustrative. Whereas before 1782 less than one percent of Virginia's African-American population was free, by 1790 free blacks accounted for 4.2 percent of the total and by 1810 they had reached 7.2 percent, surging in absolute numbers from 1,800 to 30,570 in less than thirty years. The number of free blacks living in the port town of Alexandria alone grew from 52 in 1790 to 1,168 in 1820—Richmond, Petersburg, and Norfolk showed proportionally similar trends.¹¹

And Virginia was not alone. Maryland reversed its colonial restrictions on individual manumissions in 1796, and by 1810 almost a quarter of its African-American population was free. In Delaware 78 percent of the black population was free by the end of the first decade of the nineteenth century. One visitor to the region noted as early as 1792 that “the little state of Delaware” appeared to be “followi[ng] the example of Pennsylvania. It is peopled mostly by quakers—instances of giving freedom are therefore numerous.” In the Upper South as a whole more than 10 percent of the African-American population had legally exited slavery by 1810, and by the eve of the Civil War parts of the Upper South had come to virtually resemble free states. Cities such as Baltimore, Washington, and Richmond had free black populations that outnumbered their slave populations, often by substantial margins, as manumitted slaves from rural areas gravitated towards urban centers.¹² Even in South Carolina, the state most furiously committed to slavery, saw its free black population grow from 1.6% in 1790 to 3.9% in 1810.

The trend of freeing slaves died virtually overnight with the cotton boom of the early nineteenth century, however, and by the 1810s most southern states had slammed the door shut to manumission and redoubled their commitment to slavery, expanding it further south and west into the newly acquired territories of the Deep South—the “cotton kingdom.” Jefferson's “empire of liberty” quickly turned into an empire of slavery. A massive domestic slave trade arose—the era of the auction block, the era of the chained coffles to Mississippi cotton plantations, the era of the *second slavery* had begun. But the free black population that was established in the revolutionary era remained, and indeed grew by natural means as the antebellum period wore on. Concentrated in the cities and towns of the South, urban free black communities provided beacons of freedom to the vast majority of southern African Americans who found themselves still trapped in slavery, now with little or no hope of ever being legally freed.

To many slaves, the easiest and most direct way of escaping slavery was to simply run to nearby urban areas and attempt to get lost in the crowd and pass for free blacks. From Baltimore to New Orleans, from St. Louis to Charleston, cities became *the* main destination for runaway slaves, as a perusal of the runaway slave ads in any southern newspaper makes clear. The urban South may not have provided runaway slaves with formal freedom, a right to judicial process, or any right to asylum, but freedom in the shadows was better than no freedom at all. In fact, informal freedom within the slaveholding states even brought certain advantages compared to freedom in the free states, advantages that may not have always seemed obvious to white Americans, but that seemed perfectly logical to enslaved people.

For one thing, fleeing to local cities within the slaveholding South provided refugees from slavery with the only conceivable means of escaping slavery without cutting off all ties to their families and communities. Escaping the slave South was in many ways like escaping from East Berlin—life seemed better on the other side, but if you escaped you could never come back. To many enslaved people, the prospect of permanently severing ties with their communities seemed daunting. Escaping to a nearby town or city and attempting to pass for a free black at least allowed for the possibility of occasional secret visits back home. Indeed, many slaves had relations in the cities. In the South, urban free black communities were not as separated from the slave population as in other parts of the Americas—many slaves who ran away to the cities in fact had free relatives or friends or partners there, people who could help them find accommodation, employment, false papers. People who could ease them into the world of the free black underclass, and who could help them disguise their slave status. This was a crucial lifeline for runaways living in the shadows.

As Amani Marshall has argued, successful attainment of informal freedom in southern cities required runaway slaves to assume “free identities,” which they did by engaging in “intricate performances in which they exploited colour, dress, language, and employment skills to transcend lines of race and class.”¹³ For slave refugees, passing for free meant *looking* and *acting* free. Visibility was everything—erasing all markers of their slave identity was the key to navigating urban spaces undetected. A black market in forged free papers thrived in southern cities, just in case the authorities or employers asked for them. Amanda, from Monroe County, Georgia, fled to Augusta with “a pass given her” so that she could “attempt to pass as a free person.” David, “by profession a Methodist preacher” from Kentucky who ran to Lexington with his friend Charles, was understood to have “a forged pass.” And Will, a Virginia runaway, “probably has a pass or counterfeit papers of freedom.”¹⁴ In such ways were runaways from slavery able to craft lives of informal freedom in urban areas within the slaveholding South.

Freedom Beyond the Borders

The slave refugee crisis also manifested itself beyond the borders of the United States. The revolutionary transformations of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were

Atlantic in scope, and the safest free spaces for slave refugees in the antebellum period emerged not in the United States at all, but rather beyond its borders. The Virginia slave family quoted in the introduction was attempting to get to Haiti, but the most conveniently located foreign free soil could be found in neighboring British Canada and Mexico. By the mid-1830s the United States indeed found itself virtually surrounded by territories that had not only fully abolished bondage but also developed into spaces of uncontested formal freedom for fugitive slaves. Crucially, these regions were not bound by any constitutional compromises with US slaveholders over the extradition of runaways.

The British dominion of Canada—with its relatively small slave population, never numbering more than a couple thousand souls—followed roughly the same trajectory of gradually abolishing slavery and transitioning into free soil as the northern US, beginning in 1793, when the first gradual abolition act was enacted in Upper Canada (present-day Ontario). By the early 1800s the courts in neighboring Lower Canada, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia had put slavery on the road to destruction there as well.¹⁵

The gradual demise of slavery in Canada did not necessarily translate into free soil or formal asylum for runaway slaves from the US, at least not at first. Yet as historian Gordon Barker has argued, colonial authorities in the provinces took particular pains to strengthen Canada's status as a safe haven for enslaved people from south of the border. During the War of 1812, for example, thousands of American slaves fled or were evacuated to Canada by the British navy. Canadian authorities subsequently refused to extradite these refugee slaves after the war was over, despite persistent demands from the American government. A few years later, in 1819, Canadian officials responded to president James Monroe's demand for an extradition treaty by declaring that Canadian soil was free soil, the Canadian Chief Justice John Robinson arguing that the "Law of England," where slavery was prohibited, applied "in all questions relative to property and civil rights, and [personal] freedom" in Canada, adding that "whatever may have been the condition of these Negroes in the Country to which they formerly belonged, here they are free." Later extradition requests were also denied. During one such dispute in 1828, London dispatched a response to Washington that stated that Parliament "gave freedom to every slave who effected his landing upon British ground," including Canada. By the time Great Britain delivered the final death blow to slavery throughout its empire in 1834, Canada had already long been pursuing a policy of granting formal asylum to runaway slaves, even those who were accused of crimes in the US.¹⁶

Tens of thousands of African Americans crossed into the British dominion in the decades preceding the US Civil War. Especially as the political conflict between the North and South over the fugitive slave issue reached fever pitch in the 1850s, Canada seemed like a safer alternative for slave refugees seeking to craft lives of legal freedom. By the eve of the US Civil War entire communities of slave refugees were scattered along the border—especially in the Niagara and Detroit River regions. Safe from recapture and safe from the US constitution, slave refugees (and they were called "refugees") north of the border were *not* safe from racism or discrimination. But neither did they depend on their white neighbors much to define the parameters of freedom for them. They pulled themselves up by their bootstraps; they

lived. They established communities and schools, published newspapers, became active in the abolitionist cause. Referring to their region as a “Refuge for the Oppressed,” they assisted other runaways who trickled across the border in search of freedom from slavery.¹⁷

Far fewer refugees sought freedom by crossing into Mexico (an estimated 5,000 more or less), but to slaves living in the Deep South in the 1830s—especially Texas and Louisiana—the promised land lie due south and not north. Mexico’s development into a space of formal freedom was far too complicated to fully discuss here—with gradual abolition decrees often applying only to specific groups or age cohorts, and local variations throughout the republic, depending on which political factions held power—but by 1829 the Mexican president declared unequivocally that slavery was fully abolished, and that all enslaved people were considered free from that day forward. Indeed, the grievances of slaveholding American settlers in the border state of Texas regarding Mexico’s decision to abolish slavery is what caused Texas to ultimately erupt in revolution and break away in 1835-36.¹⁸

When Texas set up an independent slaveholding republic in 1836, enslaved people there increasingly associated Mexico with freedom, “invest[ing] the border with liberationist significance,” as Sean Kelley has argued. By the time Texas was annexed by the United States in 1845, enslaved people from as far away as Louisiana indeed viewed the Rio Grande as the border between slavery and “Mexican Canaan.” Like the Canadians, the Mexicans refused to sign extradition treaties with the United States, and although the status of slave refugees in Mexico was far from exemplary—Mexicans did not necessarily grant citizenship rights to runaways, for example, nor even formal residency permits—they were at least relatively safe from slavery in a land of formal freedom.¹⁹

Conclusion

The slave refugee crisis of the antebellum period laid bare how the revolutionary strike against slavery in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century affected the lives of enslaved people trapped in the second slavery. Speaking on the floor of the state House of Representatives in 1837, Henry Stanton, a prominent Massachusetts politician, observed that “every free state is now an asylum for runaway slaves, as are the West Indies, Mexico, [and] our Western forests...” Compared to only a half century before, the landscape of slavery and freedom throughout North America (and beyond) had indeed changed radically. By the mid-1830s, enslaved people who found themselves trapped in the second slavery of the American South saw spaces of freedom in every direction: an informal variant within urban areas in the South itself; a contested variant in the northern US; and formal variants beyond the borders of the United States. Through their actions, refugees from slavery helped create and defend the very spaces of freedom to which they fled, and in so doing they struck a blow to slavery where it still existed. The fugitive slave issue—the daring attempts of enslaved people to find freedom in one form or another—mobilized lawmakers, authorities, and ordinary citizens throughout the continent to clarify what freedom meant in their jurisdictions, communities, and households.²⁰

It also mobilized their masters to make desperate attempts to plug the holes in a way of life based on the denial of freedom to an entire swath of the American population. As southern slaveholders found themselves increasingly surrounded by territories committed to ending slavery—and even urban communities within the South committed to hiding runaway slaves—they unleashed their fury in a variety of unproductive ways: diplomatic disputes over extradition treaties; military actions in the Mexican borderlands; threatening the free black population in southern cities with reenslavement; and a constitutional crisis with the northern states that would ultimately erupt in civil war. A strong argument could be made that the slave refugee crisis that gripped the continent in the decades before the US Civil War marked the first break in the dam that would ultimately bring down slavery in the American South altogether—in other words, that would ultimately lead to the transformation of the United States into a land of freedom.

Dankwoord

Ter afsluiting wil ik graag nog mijn dank uitspreken aan allen die aan de totstandkoming van mijn benoeming hebben bijgedragen.

In de eerste plaats dank ik het College van Bestuur voor het besluit mij te benoemen tot deze prachtige leerstoel. In het bijzonder dank ik de Rector Magnificus Carel Stolker, tevens voorzitter van de Sackler Stichting, die deze leerstoel mogelijk heeft gemaakt. Mijn dank gaat ook uit naar het Faculteitsbestuur, naar de huidige decaan Mark Rutgers en naar de oud-decaan Wim van den Doel, voor het in mij gestelde vertrouwen en de ruimte om het vakgebied van de Noord-Amerikaanse Geschiedenis aan deze universiteit verder vorm te geven.

Mijn (oud)collega's aan het Instituut voor Geschiedenis en North American Studies wil ik heel hartelijk bedanken voor de rol die zij vanaf het begin hebben gespeeld (en nog altijd blijven spelen) in mijn wetenschappelijke vorming. Deze universiteit is al bijna twee decennialang mijn thuis geweest, mijn veilige haven. Hier ben ik historicus geworden, hier heb ik de vrijheid gekregen om mijn ideeën uit te werken en projecten op te zetten. Ik ben ontzettend dankbaar voor de steun die ik gaandeweg van docenten, begeleiders, leidinggevend en collega's heb gekregen.

That of course includes the all-star PhD researchers in my “Beacons of Freedom” project, who teach me more than they realize and who never cease to amaze me, not only with their research findings, but also with their enthusiasm for a topic like slavery, which has a tendency to depress people. To you I also extend my thanks.

Vanaf deze plaats dank ik ook mijn nieuwe collega's—mijn nieuwe familie bijna—bij het Roosevelt Institute for American Studies in Middelburg, mijn *home away from home*. Niet alle hoogleraren krijgen de kans om mee te werken aan de ontwikkeling van een

onderzoeksinstituut in hun vakgebied, laat staan met zulke leuke en enthousiaste collega's. Ik prijs mezelf heel gelukkig.

Dank aan mijn familie en vrienden, die mij altijd gesteund hebben en zonder wie ik nergens zou zijn.

Tot slot wil ik Felicia bedanken. Cu tine lumea mea este mai mare și plin de culoare.

Ik heb gezegd.

Endnotes

¹ *Daily National Intelligencer*, 4 July 1825.

² *Daily National Intelligencer*, 4 July 1825; Federal Population Census Schedules for 1820 and 1850, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC (microfilm); Julie Winch, *Between Slavery and Freedom: Free People of Color in America from Settlement to Civil War* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), 85.

³ *Daily National Intelligencer*, 4 July 1825; Ada Ferrer, "Haiti, Free Soil, and Antislavery in the Revolutionary Atlantic," *American Historical Review* 117, no. 1 (Feb. 2012): 40-66.

⁴ Steven Hahn, "Forging Freedom," in Gad Heuman and Trevor Burnard, eds., *The Routledge History of Slavery* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 298-99; Christopher Brown, *Moral Capital: The Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Seymour Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery: British Mobilization in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation* (New York: Knopf, 2014); Robin Blackburn, *The American Crucible: Slavery, Emancipation and Human Rights* (London: Verso, 2011), 162-69; Seymour Drescher, "Civil Society and Paths to Abolition," *Journal of Global Slavery* 1, no. 1 (Apr. 2016): 44-71; Ferrer, "Haiti, Free Soil, and Antislavery in the Revolutionary Atlantic," 40-66; Ada Ferrer, *Freedom's Mirror: Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery, 1619-1877* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2003), 80-85; Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 119-23, 135-50; Rosemary Brana-Shute and Randy J. Sparks, eds., *Paths to Freedom: Manumission in the Atlantic World* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2009).

⁵ Dale W. Tomich, "The 'Second Slavery': Bonded Labor and the Transformations of the Nineteenth-Century World Economy," in Francisco O. Ramírez, ed., *Rethinking the Nineteenth Century: Contradictions and Movement* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 103-17; Dale W. Tomich, *Through the Prism of Slavery: Labor, Capital, and World Economy* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004); Dale W. Tomich and Michael Zeuske, eds., "The Second Slavery: Mass Slavery, World Economy, and Comparative Microhistories, Part I" [special issue], *Review: A Journal of the Fernand Braudel Center* 31, no. 2 (2008); Anthony E. Kaye, "The Second Slavery: Modernity in the Nineteenth-Century South and the Atlantic World," *Journal of Southern History* 75, no. 3 (Aug. 2009): 627-50; Javier Lavina and Michael Zeuske, eds., *The Second Slavery: Mass Slavery and Modernity in the Americas and in the Atlantic Basin* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2014); Ferrer, *Freedom's Mirror*, 10.

⁶ For an overview of abolition in the northern US, see for example Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017); Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, ch. 3.

⁷ Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 233; Eric Foner, *Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2016), 28-62.

⁸ Matthew Pinsker, "After 1850: Reassessing the Impact of the Fugitive Slave Law," in Damian Alan Pargas, ed., *Fugitive Slaves and Spaces of Freedom in North America* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2018), ch. 4; Thomas Morris, *Free Men All: The Personal Liberty Laws of the North, 1780-1861* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974); Foner, *Gateway to Freedom*, ch. 2.

⁹ Pinsker, "After 1850"; Morris, *Free Men All*; Foner, *Gateway to Freedom*, ch. 2.

¹⁰ David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 145; Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 85-96; Kolchin, *American Slavery*, ch. 3.

¹¹ *An Act to Authorize the Manumission of Slaves* (May 1782), in William Waller Hening, ed., *The Statutes at Large; Being a Collection of All the Laws of Virginia from the First Session of Legislature, in the Year 1619* (Richmond, Va: George Cochran, 1823), vol. XI: 39; Kolchin, *American Slavery, 1619-1877*, 81; United States Population Census, 1790 and 1820, NARA; Eva Sheppard Wolf, *Race and Liberty in the New Nation: Emancipation in Virginia from the Revolution to Nat Turner's Rebellion* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 110-111.

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¹³ Amani Marshall, "'They Will Endeavor to Pass for Free': Enslaved Runaways' Performances of Freedom in Antebellum South Carolina," *Slavery & Abolition* 31, no. 2 (2010): 161-80, 161.

¹⁴ *Augusta Chronicle*, 8 Oct. 1825; *The Reporter* (Lexington, Kentucky), 18 Oct. 1815; *Daily National Intelligencer*, 8 Jan. 1820. For more on cooperation between urban free blacks and slaves within the realm of resistance, see: Gregg Kimball, *American City, Southern Place: A Cultural History of Richmond* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003), 124-58; Seth Rockman, *Scraping By: Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 52-53; James M. Campbell, *Slavery on Trial: Race, Class, and Criminal Justice in Antebellum Richmond, Virginia* (Gainesville: University Press of Georgia, 2007), 146-85. William Link has found that the policing of documentation for free blacks and slaves in urban environments in Virginia was at best "sloppily maintained." See William Link, *Roots of Secession: Slavery and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 106.

¹⁵ *An Act to Prevent the further Introduction of Slaves and to limit the Term of Contracts for Servitude within this Province* (9 July 1793), in *A Collection of the Acts Passed in the Parliament of Great Britain, Particularly Applying to the Province of Upper-Canada, and of Such Ordinances of the Late Province of Quebec, as Have Force of Law Therein* (York: R.C. Horne, 1818), 30-32, 30 (quotes); Sigrid Nicole Gallant, "Perspectives on the Motives for the Migration of African Americans to and from Ontario, Canada: From the Abolition of Slavery in Canada to the Abolition of Slavery in the United States," *Journal of Negro History* 86 (Summer 2001): 392-93; Gordon Barker, "Revisiting 'British Principle Talk': Antebellum Black Expectations and Racism in Early Ontario," in Pargas, ed., *Fugitive Slaves and Spaces of Freedom*, ch. 2; Robin Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: A History* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), 97, 102.

¹⁶ *Op. cit.* in Barker, "Revisiting 'British Principle Talk'"; Alan Taylor, *The Internal Enemy: Slavery and War in Virginia, 1772-1832* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2014), ch. 8; Daniel G. Hill, *The Freedom-Seekers: Blacks in Early Canada* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1992), 18-19; Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*, 102.

¹⁷ Barker, "Revisiting 'British Principle Talk'"; Benjamin Drew, *A North-Side View of Slavery: The Refugee; or the Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada* (Boston: J.P. Jewett & Co., 1856), 17.

¹⁸ Sean Kelley, "'Mexico in His Head': Slavery and the Texas-Mexico Border, 1810-1860," *Journal of Social History* 37 (Spring 2004): 711-15; Andrew Jonathan Torget, "Cotton Empire: Slavery and the Texas Borderlands, 1820-1837" (PhD dissertation, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Va., 2009), 210-11; Bram Hoonhout and Thomas Mareite, "Freedom at the Fringes? Slave Flight and Empire-Building in the Early Modern Spanish Borderlands of Essequibo-Venezuela and Louisiana-Texas," *Slavery & Abolition* (2018): 11-18; *Decreto del gobierno—Abolición de la esclavitud* (15 Sept. 1829), in Manuel Dublán et al, *Legislación mexicana; o colección completa de disposiciones legislativas expedidas desde la independencia de la República* (México: Imprenta de Comercio, 1876), vol. 2: 163.

¹⁹ Sean Kelley, "'Mexico in His Head,'" 709 (quote), 713-18; Sarah E. Cornell, "Citizens of Nowhere: Fugitive Slaves and Free African Americans in Mexico, 1833-1857," *Journal of American History* 253 (Sept. 2013): 351-74; Mekala Audain, "'Design His Course to Mexico': The Fugitive Slave Experience in the Texas-Mexico Borderlands, 1850-1853," in Pargas, ed., *Fugitive Slaves and Spaces of Freedom*, ch. 9; James Nichols, "Freedom Interrupted: Runaway Slaves and Insecure Borders in the Mexican Northeast," in Pargas, ed., *Fugitive Slaves and Spaces of Freedom*, ch. 10.

²⁰ Henry B. Stanton, *Remarks of Henry B. Stanton, in the Representatives' Hall, on the 23nd (sic) and 24th of February, Before the Committee of the House of Representatives, of Massachusetts, to Whom was Referred Sundry Memorials on the Subject of Slavery* (Boston: I. Knapp, 1837), 62.