Cities of refuge : slave flight and illegal freedom in the American urban South, 1800-1860

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Chapter Four

From Slavery to Poverty: Integration in the Urban Labor Markets

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." Terrence legally belonged to Mr. Duplantier, a tobacco inspector, who resided on 33 Dauphine street in New Orleans.[531] Although there is no information about the occupations Terrance performed when he was still forcedly employed by Duplantier, the hint that he was working on the levee around New Orleans, points to his integration in the urban labor market as a common laborer.

The previous chapter has outlined where slave refugees lived and socialized in Baltimore, Richmond, Charleston, and New Orleans. The lives of these men and women, however, did not only take place in clandestine social gatherings, segregated churches, and in the evening hours. Spaces of freedom were not fully useful if they could not provide access to work. Integrating into a segment of the population structurally and legally discriminated against, nobody could afford not to contribute to their own survival by finding work. All refugees worked at the places they chose for their lives outside the reach of their owners. To shed light on this aspect of economic integration, this chapter broaches the issue of the prospects for economic integration of urban runaways—whereby the question is not *if* they worked but rather *what* they did—and sets out an array of opportunities and vulnerabilities they encountered in the cities.

Freedom seekers, as we have seen in chapter two, had occupations before leaving slavery and a majority were skilled and highly mobile. The best-case scenario for men and women would have been to be able to capitalize on their skills acquired under slavery. This strategy, and the possibilities for social mobility, will be discussed in the first part. However, in antebellum cities, finding a job which was tied to the specific occupational skills of slave refugees was only in very exceptional cases feasible. Therefore, the consecutive parts will be devoted to the impediments to finding a job that corresponded to their capacities. With racial slavery and whiteness marking not only the social realities of people but also their experiences

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[531] *Daily Picayune*, May 12, 1850; and *Cohen's New Orleans & Lafayette Directory for 1851* (New Orleans, 1851), Louisiana Division, NOPL, URL: http://files.usgwarchives.net/la/orleans/history/directory/1851cdcd.txt, accessed March 8, 2018.

in the labor markets, how did the racial codes of labor determine which jobs were plausible for black people? To what extent did urban regulations impact the economic integration of refugees? How did the developing demography of southern cities affect this process?

While answering these questions, gender differences and the undocumented status of large parts of the urban black workers will be taken into consideration. Was there a possible relation between illegality and their situation over the antebellum period? Being active in the labor markets was both a fundamentally important element to securing one's survival and at the same time an additional risk that increased the visibility, and, hence, the odds of apprehension of runaways. Still, the changes in the urban economy created spaces where slave refugees could find work and secure their survival. Their economic integration was, together with their social integration, the most pivotal element to explaining how they navigated spaces of freedom.

Best-Case Scenario

The freedom seekers profiled in chapter two all had occupations before escaping the control of those holding them in bondage. In fact, it was the human capacities of their bodies and minds that made them valuable to their owners. Many of the professional skills enslaved people possessed were in high demand in the cities and some evidence hints at a possible integration of freedom seekers in sectors with a relatively high income. In Richmond, skills in construction, shoemaking, carpentering, plastering, and barbering were in high demand.[532] A runaway trained in one or more of these trades who could convincingly pass as a free man could find a decent job in this city. Correspondingly, the Richmond police was informed that "Mr Benjamin Wallers man Humphry runaway from Mr Thomas Mayberry of Rockbridge County whom he was hired to this year [1836]." Humphry, besides being a hired slave and a "good coarse Shoe maker" also had ties into freedom: "his wifes father lives in Richmond[,] a free man of colour name[d] Jonathan."[533] Humphry possessed the skills to find employment, the experience of mobility as a hired slave, and personal contacts to seek support.

In many sectors labor was so high in demand that employers did not seem to care where it came from or what the status of their workers was. In ironmaking, a large industrial sector in Richmond, blacksmiths were constantly needed, for example.[534] Enslaved Billy must have had good chances to find employment when he escaped from his owner Jeremiah Hoopers from King William County in 1835. Having "a Scar on the Side of his neck produced by the cut of an ax & [being] a good Blacksmith by trade said man is Suspected to be about Richmond."[535] The fact that subscribers felt the need to include this information in the search notice demonstrates that they reckoned with the possibility that refugees would indeed try to apply their skills. If Billy found employment, he was able to make a decent living as a blacksmith. Other jobs which paid well included the full array of craftsmen and mechanics.

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[532] Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters*, 238.
[533] Daybook of the Richmond Police Guard, August 16, 1836, UVA.
[534] S. Sidney Bradford, "The Negro Ironworker in Ante Bellum Virginia," in *The Making of Black America.* Vol. I: The Origins of Black Americans, ed. August Meier and Elliott Rudwick (New York: Atheneum, 1971), 139, originally published in *Journal of Southern History* 25:2 (1959): 194-206.
[535] Daybook of the Richmond Police Guard, January 28, 1835, UVA.

Urban labor markets were gendered spaces. In southern cities, black women worked as laundresses, cooks, domestic servants, housekeepers, and peddlers.[536] Yet, in Baltimore nearly all black women were listed as washerwomen. In 1831, 500 African American women were registered as head of households. 249 were listed as washers or laundresses; of 219, no information about their occupations was provided; and 15 were registered as hucksters.[537] In Charleston, they were also market women, seamstresses, and to lesser extent bakers, pastry cooks, and midwives.[538] Enslaved women were lower skilled than men but a few possessed skills or found work which could yield an acceptable income.

Despite the limited opportunities for women to make money, at times female runaways were able to work in a "good" sector. In Charleston, for instance, Amelia or Anne, 24 years of age, succeeded at following a promising occupation after she left her owner. Amelia was a mantua maker (a mantua was a fancy overgown worn by women) by trade and her owner knew that she was engaged in that capacity after her escape: "She works for respectable families about the city, and says she is free," the ad informed. "She has been absent about two years, and was seen in King street last week."[539] That she frequented the upper classes of Charleston points to very high skills, and Amelia no doubt attracted attention. Also the escape of Linda, "a tall thin mustee, well looking," was advertised in Charleston in 1859: "When last heard of she was acting as a stewardess on board of a steamer from this place. She has been out about three years, and passes herself for free."[540] Linda's example was very rare for female runaways; most waterworkers were men.

Significantly smaller numbers of female runaway slaves appear in the official jail records of the city, which reflects the overall trend of more men fleeing slavery and fewer women being apprehended. In line with the general demographic trends of the runaway population, women gravitated to the cities in lower numbers and the chances to economic mobility were beforehand heavily curtailed. Besides exceptions like Amelia and Linda, many refugee women tried to find work as domestic servants. It was not a profession tied to specific skills but it did require experience. Domestic slaves mostly worked in private households but also, for example, in boarding houses.[541] Seth Rockman has noted that the nature of domestic work was oppressive, with long hours, but the wages were usually constant and the work did not fluctuate seasonally.[542] Domestic work was almost the only option for women to have a decent income. In Charleston, they earned around $8 per week, yet children were an obstacle

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[536] Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters*, 221; and Myers, *Forging Freedom*, 43

[537] Much smaller numbers included the remaining, among which three were cooks, two were nurses, doctresses, and mantua makers, respectively, and one was each a grocer, an old clothes dealer, a milk seller, a shop keeper, an oyster woman, a barber, a carpet weaver, and a cook shop owner. *Matchett's Baltimore Director, Corrected up to June 1831. Containing (With, or Without) A Plan of the City; With Reference to the Public Buildings* (Baltimore, 1831), MSA.

[538] Myers, *Forging Freedom*, 92; and Rockman, *Scraping By*, 127.

[539] *Charleston Mercury*, February 16, 1860. Until the 1830s, seamstresses led the top of free black female occupations in Charleston. For the second half of the antebellum period, it was then mantua makers who were most often listed in the city directories. In contrast to seamstressing, mantua making required skills. Myers, *Forging Freedom*, 92.

[540] *Charleston Mercury*, April 12, 1859.

[541] For enslaved women hired to boarding houses, see Weis, "Negotiating Freedom," 133.

[542] Rockman, *Scraping By*, 140.

to take on such work.[543] Therefore, mothers engaged in this occupation had to make arrangements like hiring a nanny to be able to keep their jobs.

George, for instance, presumably a child himself, was in 1832 hired out to a "negro woman" who belonged to a slaveholder in King street, Charleston, "to mind a child." This cost the woman $2, an additional expenditure that had to be deducted from her total wage.[544] If she had been a free domestic laborer, she would have had to spend a fourth of her weekly income in order to be able to work. Hiring a caretaker like George for her child allowed the anonymous enslaved woman to continue working. Many black women in the cities could not afford such a help and had to leave the house to earn a living. In Suffolk, Virginia, a free black woman left her three small children in her "small frame tenement" when she went to work, as a newspaper reported. Because she "left the children with a fire in the hearth," the house caught fire and one of her children died.[545]

Domestic servants were more exposed to the risk of being detected due to their physical closeness to their usually white employers. This happened to Milly, who was "Supposed to be in Richmond," according to a newspaper, where she had been hired in the household of one Fleming Griffiths. She fled and was suspected of hiring herself to another employer as a free woman.[546] However, the private sphere they worked in also provided refugees with a certain degree of protection, since their work was performed mostly behind closed doors rather than out in public spaces, and their employers were unlikely to turn them over to the authorities. In 1850, an editor of *The Charleston Courier* lamented the shortage of domestic slaves for families: "Nothing is more difficult than getting any servant, and nothing is more impossible than getting *a good one*."[547] Once a family found a trustworthy servant to work and live in their midst, they would not let her go if she could not prove her freedom. Since many such jobs were moreover mediated through other reliable persons, vouching furnished refugees with additional protection. Besides, employing a runaway slave gave employers more power in an already uneven relation. Complicating the employment of runaways in domestic service was the arrangement in which domestic servants were placed by a slave-hire agent who functioned as a mediator between rural slaveholders and urban employers. This was frequent in Richmond, as research by Tracey Weis has shown.[548]

Due to the architecture of urban slavery, with a great many domestic servants not living in the same houses as their employers or owners but in shacks behind them, it was even possible to shelter runaways. Lucy, "commonly known by the name of *Lucy Bee*," about 40 years old, absconded in Charleston from her mistress who lived in 76 Broad street. The mistress believed her to be "accommodated or secreted by the domestics in some family, or probably may be harbored by free persons of color." Although Lucy was described as looking noticeable ("fat and stout, with broad shoulders, short neck, small hands and feet"), was well known in the city, and "has frequently been seen by her acquaintance," she was already out for seven weeks when

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[543] John E. Murray, "Poor Mothers, Stepmothers, and Foster Mothers in Early Republic and Antebellum Charleston," *Journal of the Early Republic* 32:3 (2012): 483-484.

[544] Ford Family Papers, 1809-1968, Manuscripts P, SCLC.

[545] *Daily Dispatch*, December 6, 1860.

[546] *Charleston Courier*, January 4, 1830.

[547] Idem, September 12, 1850.

[548] Weis, "Negotiating Freedom," 133.

the advertisement was published.[549] People like Humphry, Billy, Amelia, Linda, and Milly, who probably found reasonable employment in southern cities, might have had the aspiration to over time assimilate into the free African American population and eventually live in a way approximating legal freedom.

One of the most promising aspects of legal freedom was the hope for socio-economic mobility. People of African descent with the highest economic standing were to be found in Louisiana. Essentially, New Orleans was the only American soil which provided economic opportunities for people of African descent. Relying on historian Leonard Curry, five percent of men of African descent engaged in professional, managerial, artistic, clerical, or scientific occupations in New Orleans—more than anywhere else in the country. Eight percent worked as entrepreneurs, an occupational group which included peddlers, traders, hucksters, market men, dealers, and oystermen. These were not professions that promised considerable social mobility but New Orleans furthermore counted one-digit and low two-digit numbers of black merchants, brokers, builders, landlords, stable operators, coffee house owners, and grocery and retail store operators. Like in Charleston, roughly two thirds of black men in both cities worked as artisans by mid-century.[550]

In Charleston, additional large numbers of free black men worked as painters, barbers, butchers, bricklayers, shoemakers, and blacksmiths.[551] In South Carolina in general, free black people were very urban with a focus on artisanal occupations.[552] It is unlikely, though, that high-skilled runaway slaves in Charleston attempted to find employment as barbers, blacksmiths, or carpenters. People working in these trades often operated their own workshops and depended on white customers. Charleston's free black community was so small and the number of those in skilled jobs was even smaller so that every newcomer trying to integrate there would have attracted attention—although the grade of the risk depended on the distance from one's master and the reach of the latter's network.

Historians have claimed that in Charleston and New Orleans, where relatively many black men worked in skilled jobs, white slaveholders had monopolized with their human property large parts of the more sophisticated job market. Training their bondspeople during slavery and before the nineteenth century, craftsmen were often men who had been manumitted or were still enslaved. Disproportionately successful, urban free blacks often held special relationships of protection or vouching with whites. Personal or professional ties to employers or former masters could serve as legal security or economic advantage, for instance, when it was about vouching for good behavior or lending money. In New Orleans, where many free blacks with white fathers obtained financial support or an apprenticeship to learn a trade, one third of all free black households were property-holders in 1830. In Richmond and Baltimore, it looked very different. One of the reasons was that in the Upper South manumissions had occurred comparably indiscriminately and people were released from slavery without personal linkages that could ease the transition to an independent life. The masses of slaves hardly possessed skills or followed trades and continued this pattern when released into freedom. In

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[549] Lucy had been purchased some 15 months prior from a black woman living in Amen street. Being "of a complexion approaching rather a yellowish cast" herself, Lucy was also an example of an enslaved woman with a lighter skin than her owner. *Charleston Courier*, January 16, [?].

[550] Curry, *Free Black*, 22, 26, 30.

[551] Johnson and Roark, *Black Masters*, 185.

[552] Olwell, "Becoming Free," 1.

the Lower South, by contrast, personal motives to emancipate bondspeople led slaveholders to support their manumittees, who were in many cases already skilled, in opening a shop or finding work.[553] Another reason that should be added was the distinct cultural environment with less stark color lines, more amalgamation, and a white society accustomed to artisans of African descent.

For these reasons, Charleston offered more security for black property owners. A South Carolina senate meeting from 1859 voiced the opinion "that the free negro had as much right to have his property protected, as he had to hold property." The House of Representatives agreed that "Although it is an anomalous class, and though it may be that gentlemen will say that we are not to know free negros, we, as legislators, find free negros, and we are bound to protect them."[554] These considerations reflect the status of the intermediate caste of "free people of color" and the interest of slaveholders to keep them as allies against slaves and poor blacks. Despite the fact that free blacks were often accused of enticing slaves to abscond, wealthy whites in the Lower South often recognized their strategic value. Alfred Huger from a slavocratic family in Charleston, stated in 1858 that there was "no better intermediate class in the world than the free colour'd people in this city." Free black people were "our natural allies, tho they can never be our Equals." "They work faithfully and more economically than those [white men] who would supplant them […], are easily managed and controul'd," Huger claimed, and added that they "are disenfranchised forever… yet paying their taxes with punctuality and humility."[555]

The understanding of white southerner like Huger was that free black people who enjoyed an extent of wealth were grateful for their position in a racist society and were less problematic than whites because they did not make political demands. Furthermore, by allying with white slaveholders, they split the black population, which prevented insurrections. However, since they received a minimum of legal rights in return, at times this even resulted in an advantage for those hiding and those who helped them because police could not always enter premises of free African Americans freely. In at least two occasions found by James Campbell, police first had to issue search warrants before the entered the house of a free black women in 1837 and a free black man in 1838, who were under the suspicion of harboring runaways.[556]

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[553] Berlin and Gutman, "Natives and Immigrants," 1192; Goldfield, "Black Life," 124, 133; and Berlin, "Free Negro Caste," 306.

[554] *Charleston Daily Courier*, December 15, 1859. Amrita Chakrabarti Myers has argued that women of color 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. Myers, *Forging Freedom*, 79. This was notably only possible for people with a relatively high social standing whose freedom did not rely on their invisibility before authorities.

[555] Alfred Huger to Henry D. Lesesne, December 8, 1858, Alfred Huger Letterpress Books, 1853-1863, William R. Perkins Library, Special Collections, Duke University, Durham, in Johnson and Roark, *Black Masters*, 192-193.

[556] Mayor's Court Docket Book, March 30, 1837; March 13, 1838, Valentine Museum, Richmond, in Campbell, *Slavery on Trial*, 31. Evidence of earlier search warrants date from Charleston. In 1801, John Francis Delormes claimed that "two of his Negro girls" were "enticed away from him." After offering a reward of $50, he "received information that they were harboured, concealed & locked up in one of the out-houses of George Reid" in Charleston. Delormes "then made application to a Magistrate of the said city who delivered a Search warrant to an Officer to Search the Premises of Said G. Reid in which my property was found locked up in a Room & concealed under a bed." They were harbored "for nearly two months." John Francis Delorme Petition, 1801, Petitions to the General Assembly, S165015, SCDAH.

Free black people furthermore were numerically important slaveholders in New Orleans and Charleston. In 1830, census data listed 262 black slaveowners in Charleston and 141 in Neck. Those in Neck held on average more slaves than their neighbors in the city.[557] New Orleans counted 753 free black slaveowners, of whom 25 owned ten bondspeople or more and 116 owned five to nine. Some of these were family members unable to be legally manumitted. Loren Schweninger has shown that these "elite people of color" in the Lower South remained among themselves, linked their families through intermarriages, and pursued their businesses like white people, including their treatment of slaves.[558] The family networks of the black elite did usually not include slaves. Given that these linkages were the most important connections for freedom seekers to gravitate to a certain place, wealthy free black were hardly connected to runaways.

Many jobs for free black people that promised a decent income or even some wealth provided a valuable service to whites. White Americans needed the services of barbers, butchers, merchants, tailors, carpenters, coopers, builders, masons, cigarmakers, and bootmakers. A mutual benefit, many of these black tradesmen and mechanics knew that their social-economic standing was secured as long as they did not form a threat to the institution of slavery.[559] Perhaps more important than personal connections, free black artisans, especially in a community as small as the one in Charleston, would have resented an intrusion by newcomers who would compete with their vested jobs. This does not mean that free black Charlestonians would not hire slave refugees, thereby profiting from cheap labor. A petition by members of the Agricultural Society of St. Paul's Parish in South Carolina from 1854 gives insight into three cases of rural slaveholders who found their escaped bondspeople in Charleston hired by free people of African descent. One enslaved man who ran away from a plantation was gone for two months. He was then discovered together with a runaway carpenter belonging to a different owner. Both were employed by the same free black man. A woman and her two children, who had escaped three years prior, were captured by two police officers "whilst in the yard + employment of a free Mulatto woman." Next to these incidents, as the petition claimed, runaways were also hired to load vessels at night.[560]

Life was hard in the cities, yet it also offered hope to black people. Through hard work and saving it was possible for some to acquire modest forms of property, which was the foundation for upwards mobility in the nineteenth century. Poverty rendered people vulnerable, while owning land, real estate, commodities, or other human beings partly relieved property holders from the negative effects of racial and gender discrimination. Black southerners attempted to purchase real estate whenever they could, as argued by historian Amrita Chakrabarti Myers. In 1860, 371 free Charlestonians of African descent owned taxable property, of whom 309 owned real estate.[561] (Taxable property included real estate, slaves, and

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[557] Carter W. Woodson (ed.), *Free Negro Owners of Slaves in the United States in 1830. Together with Absentee Ownership of Slaves in the United States in 1830* (Washington, D.C.: Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, 1924), 27-31.

[558] Loren Schweninger, "Prosperous Blacks in the South, 1790-1880," *American Historical Review* 95:1 (1990): 36-38.

[559] Schweninger, "Prosperous Blacks," 40.

[560] To the Honb Senate & Representatives of the State of South Carolina, Colleton Parish/District, South Carolina, Petition by I. Raven Mathews Sr. et al., December 7, 1854, Accession #11385404, Race and Slavery Petitions Project, Series 1, Legislative Petitions.

[561] Myers, *Forging Freedom*, 114, 118-119.

horses.) As research on other places shows, people of African descent in New Orleans bought houses until the 1830s when the dynamics changed beginning with the crisis of 1837. Richmond denoted a reverse trend and the number of black real property holders increased fourfold from 1830 to 1860. By 1860, over 200 free blacks had purchased lots in Richmond. The initial situation of emancipated bondspeople looked much bleaker in the Upper South than in the Lower South and it makes sense to assume that free blacks needed a generation to make up for it. In general, over the course of the antebellum era, the property value of free African Americans decreased, as did the proportion of free black property owners. Baltimore closed the list. In 1850, free black inhabitants who owned property constituted a mere 0.06 percent of the city's inhabitants.[562] Remarkably, this was still too much for some white Marylanders. In 1860, the spokesman of the Baltimore convention asked to legally bar black people from purchasing houses or leasing them for more than a year.[563]

As Loren Schweninger has shown, there were also bondspeople, most of them self-hired, who purchased property and a few who opened their own businesses.[564] Although in the cases he found, things went well and they could keep what they achieved, what they owned was never legally theirs, and their success, wealth, and belongings always depended on the good will of their masters. To determine whether it was possible and feasible for runaways to buy real estate, we have to shift the view to other undocumented residents. Legislative petitions are helpful. Elvira Jones was a self-emancipator in Richmond who obtained her freedom by working hard and saving enough money to purchase herself and her two children from their master Samuel Carlisle. Jones did not only acquire the means to buy three persons out of slavery, her earnings also allowed her to become the owner of a small house in the suburbs of Richmond. Moving up and achieving modest property was possible for emancipated slaves and Jones was furthermore an example of a manumitted woman staying in the state of Virginia illegally since was emancipated after 1806. She had—importantly—a personal relation to a white man called Samuel Harris who managed the receipt of the money for her emancipation and the conveyance of the house she purchased.[565] Another example of a man called Billy Brown likewise points to a link to a white person. He bought his own freedom and purchased some property although he remained in the state of Virginia against the law. When asked to leave with his family, Brown decided to become the nominal slave of a white man.[566] Telling from these cases, it was possible for undocumented residents to acquire taxable property which showed up in official lists. Yet, it was significantly more difficult for men and women without protective relationships with whites.

That they could still succeed is demonstrated by the example of Joseph Elwig from Charleston, discovered by historian Larry Koger. Born the son of Peter Elwig, his father bought him and his two brothers in 1823. Because it was after 1820, his father was not able to manumit

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[562] Schafer, *Becoming Free*, 162; Berlin, "Free Negro Caste," 308; Tommy Bogger, *Free Blacks in Norfolk, Virginia, 1790-1860: The Darker Side of Freedom* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1997), 60; Myers, *Forging Freedom*, 121; and Phillips, *Freedom's Port*, 98-100, 155.

[563] *Planter's Advocate*, February 22, 1860, in Fields, *Middle Ground*, 79.

[564] Schweninger, "Prosperous Blacks."

[565] How exactly Harris was involved in Jones's finances or personal life is unknown. Elvira Jones to the Honorable the Speakers and Members of both Houses of the Legislature of the Commonwealth of Virginia, December 5, 1823, Richmond City, Virginia, Accession #11682304, Legislative Petitions, VSA, Race and Slavery Petitions Project, Series 1, Legislative Petitions, LOC.

[566] Schweninger, "Underside of Slavery."

his sons and so they grew up in illegal freedom. Like his father, Joseph became a carpenter and started operating a shop in the city when he was 26 years old. He paid "free Negro capitation taxes," city taxes, and married a free black woman. Joseph Elwig led the life of a regularly free black man but in times of rupture, his situation ran the risk of turning dire. When his father Peter became ill, he sold Joseph to Joseph's wife Rebecca to protect him from *de facto* enslavement. There were more cases like Elwig's. In 1843, George Lucas, a free black resident of Charleston Neck, purchased his three daughters. Also in Neck, Nelson Richardson bought his wife Ann in 1849. And in 1853, Georgianna Alston from Charleston City purchased her husband Thomas. In the last three examples, the nominally free managed after a couple of years to convince the tax collectors and census takers of their free status. In the case of Nelson and Ann Richardson, this strategy also worked for the children they had in the aftermath.[567] With persistence, patience, and luck it was possible for undocumented people to slowly join the official ranks of the free black population. This bottom-up process of legalization contrasted the top-town illegalization practices. (See chapter one.) Yet, the extent of the former was much smaller.

We can only speculate about how likely this was for refugees and their offspring. It must be assumed that a great many runaways, the majority of whom were in their fertile years, had children at later times. Did, for instance, Cicily Page succeed at passing her children off as free persons? The "first rate seamstress" was advertised to the police by her owners from Williamsburg seven years after she had left them. She had successfully blended in with the free African American community in Richmond and was assumed to have two children.[568] But what about the above mentioned woman and her two children who were discovered in Charleston working for a free black woman? Was her strategy to secure the freedom of her children similar to Page's? Between 1800 and 1820, nearly 600 African Americans applied to the courts in Baltimore for legal certificates of freedom.[569] It can be assumed that a number of them were illegal residents who dared an attempt to legalize the status of themselves and of their children.

In Richmond, many black people claimed to be the offspring of free-born mothers when they asked for registration. In reality, many of them were children of former slaves who were emancipated after 1806 and remained in the state contrary to law.[570] For example, Monroe Jordon, about 17 years old, did not possess a register. The Hustings Court decided that he was the son of a woman who was emancipated after 1806. He was to be hired to pay his jail fees, afterwards registered, and had no right to remain in the Commonwealth. Unlike in the case of Jordan, this was an unproblematic move if undocumented residents had a white person to vouch for them. In 1852, Charlotte Coleman had such a relation with a white woman who testified to her freedom and Coleman was included in the registry as a free person: "It appearing to the Court, by the testimony of Tabitha B. Peterson, that Charlotte Coleman, a woman of colour, was born free in Chesterfield County, it is ordered that she is registered in the office of this court." In a different case, Clement White testified the same for Mary Ann King.[571] If a respectable white person witnessed a black person's freedom, they could succeed.

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[567] Koger, *Black Slaveowners*, 69-71.
[568] Daybook of the Richmond Police Guard, May 22, 1838, UVA.
[569] Rockman, *Scraping By*, 27.
[570] Hustings Court Minutes, September 17, 1852, LVA.
[571] Idem, September 14, 17, 1852, LVA.

For the overwhelming majority of southern urban freedom seekers, however, it was not possible to acquire real property, live openly as free, and include their children into the ranks of those legally free. To take a step back, most did not make enough money to even get to the point to buy real estate. The precarious situation of black people in the urban labor markets prevented this. Runaways were aware of this even before they decided to make a bid for freedom. Thanks to their mobility and their broad social networks, they were informed about the conditions in the cities. Many of those who later fled to Baltimore, Richmond, Charleston, and New Orleans, had already been there or were from the same or a different city. Why could they in most cases not make use of their often high skills and what kind of work could they really hope for?

The Racial Coding of Labor

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 the labor market offered. Since the majority of escapees 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. In a pioneering work, Leonard Curry has scrutinized the sectors enslaved and free blacks worked in. 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.[572] These findings refer to the variety of jobs African Americans could take on with regards to artisan skills and white and immigrant competition.

From place to place, race organized labor differently. Whether an occupation was coded white or black (or enslaved or free) depended on many factors, including demography and customs. In most southern cities, the lives of free black people was interwoven with urban slavery. This overlap occurred on social, economic, and professional levels since black people shared certain jobs and professions that—varying from place to place as well as over time— were regarded as suitable only for them. Commonly labelled "nigger work," many of these jobs were carried out by both free and enslaved African Americans. Most of them comprised menial, servile, dirty, or distasteful occupations and black people on average received less salary than whites; barbering and butchering were examples.[573] Ira Berlin has argued that the stigma of "nigger work" was not a mere disadvantage, it also offered protection, especially in those regions where slavery was strongest because it discouraged white people from competing with black people. And so, the differences between skilled workers of African descent between the Upper South, where slavery was less strong, and the Lower South, where it was stronger, were remarkable. One third of Richmond's free black men were skilled in 1860, compared to almost 80 percent in Charleston, where they comprised a fourth of the city's carpenters, 40 percent of its tailors, and three quarters of millwrights.[574]

Within occupational categories, qualitative differences distinguished the two areas. In Charleston, labor was all about the port. The city funneled the produce of the hinterland

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[572] Curry, *Free Black*, 30.
[573] Goldfield, "Black Life," 134-135.
[574] Berlin, "Free Negro Caste," 311; and J. William Harris, *The Making of the American South: A Short History, 1500-1877* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 104.

plantations—mostly cotton—out of the country and nourished itself with the output of slave agriculture. Looking at black men working in the transportation sector with relation to the wharves, three quarters worked as carters (cartmen), draymen, carmen, hackmen, or carriage drivers in Charleston whereas in Baltimore more than a fourth were porters, following Curry.[575] Given that porters transported goods with their bodies only while the other jobs required investments in carts, carriages, or trolleys reveals the disadvantaged position in which black Baltimoreans started their working lives as well as the bleak prospects for upwards mobility.

Due to the different geography of black occupations, economic integration depended on the place. Tailoring, for instance, was a black occupation in Charleston, but not in Richmond.[576] Seamstressing was a job for black women in Charleston but not in Baltimore.[577] With this kind of information, it is possible to understand the racial coding of certain jobs. In the majority of cases, however, the subtleties about *how* to find work are lost because they do not show up in historical records. Seth Rockman, in an attempt to reconstruct hiring processes in Baltimore, has speculated that information was obtained through observation and informal communication. Although many jobs were coded black, due to the large share of white laborers, manual and menial occupations were in reality not limited to people of a specific racial group. In fact, most of these jobs were carried out by whites, simply because they came to be more numerous in many cities.[578] The challenge for refugees was to read the landscape of labor to decode the particular permutations of race and legal status in a given city.

Free black men in Baltimore were the most unskilled. In 1830, they overwhelmingly worked as laborers, drivers of carts, stable hands, and wood sawyers. Fewer were seamen, barbers, waiters, blacksmiths, musicians, shoemakers, and caulkers.[579] Wood cutting also appeared in a number of runaway slave advertisements in which escapees were believed to work in that capacity. As early as 1800, George William who, in his owner's perception, "walks upright, is smooth spoken, but a great liar," escaped in Maryland and "took an axe and wedges with him: I expect he will go to cut wood, and pretend he is free," the slaveholder announced. He believed that he would go to the eastern shore of Maryland or to Baltimore to continue from there to Pennsylvania. Williams fled with another black man whose name was Joshua Joice. He was "a free man, but he confesses to some of my people he was a slave and sold from the eastern shore to Georgia; and ran away from there to this country."[580] Joice was an example of a runaway slave passing for free and working alongside slaves. If he shared his knowledge with his enslaved co-workers about how to escape, get to a city, find work, and possibly forge a pass, they could use this information for their own freedom missions.

Freedom seekers like Joice who worked in sectors in which black people were overrepresented had an easier time fitting in after their escape. Those who used to engage in occupations in which their skin color was exceptional might have been better advised to switch jobs. For instance, if an enslaved tailor from Charleston decided to start a life of illegal freedom in Richmond, he should rather consider to seek employment as a factory worker than engaging

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[575] Curry, *Free Black*, 26. Carmen and porters were also common terms for lower dockworkers; draymen were workers who brought goods to the wharves. Michael D. Thompson, *Working on the Dock of the Bay. Labor and Emancipation in an Antebellum Southern Port* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2015), 30.

[576] Goldfield, "Black Life," 133.

[577] *Matchett's Baltimore Director*, MSA.

[578] Rockman, *Scraping By*, 45-46, 73.

[579] Olson, *Baltimore*, 90.

[580] *Baltimore Gazette*, April 3, 1800.

in his original occupation. Refugees had to strategically reflect upon the liabilities of pursuing a particular job, and tradeoffs affected remuneration, visibility, and mobility. This likewise applied to Seabourn who spoke French and English. His owner H. Stackhouse from Tchoupitoulas street, New Orleans, offered $100 for his arrest in 1848 and announced that "He is supposed to be across the Lake or in the vicinity of Pass Manchac cutting wood." Believing to know the behavior of his slave, Stackhouse informed the readers of the paper that Seabourn "is somewhat of a circus actor, and when a little tired of work will no doubt attempt to pass himself off as a circus performer." Apparently, the slaveholder was wrong and Seabourn resisted the temptation of earning quick money by performing for an audience. Five years later, Seabourn was still advertised for: "He is somewhat of a circus actor," claimed the ad sticking to the same strategy to find him, "by which he may easily be detected as he is always showing his gymnastic qualifications."[581]

It is difficult to get a statistical profile about the exact professions of refugees before their flight; runaway slave ads only offer a small window. Furthermore, as has been argued, the people appearing in these announcements were the least likely to be found. What is obvious is that in the labor markets they joined free black city dwellers. The problem that arises is that statistics on free black occupations are necessarily based on official census records and city directories. For instance, the Baltimore city directory of 1831 listed 417 black male heads of households as laborers.[582] There is reason to believe that these data do not account for large parts of the nominally free African American population. Most of them worked in precarious conditions, were day laborers, washerwomen, providers of menial services, and had to avoid registration to protect their freedom and to avoid tax payments. Moreover, runaway slaves and other undocumented groups depended on certain jobs which did not imply a too close relationship with whites who could question their identity. The informal economy was therefore for most runaways the most obvious choice. This is hardly surprising given that, for instance, almost all black women worked in the informal sector anyways.[583]

The majority of runaway slaves depended on low-profile jobs with a ready payment. A great many were therefore automatically drawn to the informal and casual sectors. The jobs that were open to them, however, did not correspond to the profile of the mobile slave elite. (See chapter two.) Runaway slaves migrating to southern cities were aware of the opportunities the labor market offered and 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.[584] With high urbanization rates and a decline in the relative demand for skilled work, the demand for menial and unskilled labor soared. The new urban residents needed houses to live, clothes to wear, and food to readily consume. Streets had to be cleaned and maintained, dikes repaired, new canals were to be dug, and rail tracks to be placed. Flexible,

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[581] *Daily Advocate*, December 7, 1848; November 3, 1852. Seabourn [Seaborn] has already been mentioned in chapter two.
[582] *Matchett's Baltimore Director*, MSA.
[583] The informal sectors refer to self-employment in contrast to wage work. The informal sector as understood today did not exist under nineteenth-century capitalism. See Alejandro Portes, "The Informal Sector: Definition, Controversy, and Relation to National Development," *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 7:1 (1983): 151-174.
[584] See David M. Gordon, Richard Edwards, and Michael Reich, *Segmented Work, Divided Workers. The Historical Transformation of Labor in the United States* (Cambridge, New York, and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 55-56, originally published 1982.

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.

Figure 19: Dock Work in New Orleans, 1853[585]

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 enough workers to make their businesses run and to pay them as little as possible to gain the highest profits. They 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 might have taken 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.

Outside the cities, the coal pits (from where many slaves absconded) and railroad and canal construction provided an opportunity for runaway slaves and other illegals to find employment by the mid-century. For the construction companies it was more efficient to employ free black and white workers, because in the event of accidental death they did not have to reimburse any owners for loss of property. In Virginia, the press reported about a black man "bearing the classic name of Quintus, to which had been added the appellation Terry […] who has lived here for four years without a register, stated that he was employed by the Central

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[585] Hippolyte Victor Valentin Sebron, "Bateaux A Vapeur Geants," 1853, Tulane University of Louisiana, URL: http://steamboattimes.com/images/artwork/giantsteamboats_hippolytesebron1600x1100.jpg, accessed May 23, 2019.

Railroad Company."[586] Whether Quintus was an illegally in the state residing free black or a runaway is unclear, but his case illustrates that it was perfectly possible for any group of illegals to find work even without showing any sort of register or freedom papers.

At the railroad constructions sites, living and working conditions were disastrous. William Matthews, who was as a slave hired out to the Hamburg and Charleston Rail Road, testified to the brutal work regime: "Every hour in the day we could hear the whip going. They did not use brine there. After we were whipped, we had to go straight back to our work. They did not care whether we got well or not, because we were other people's niggers." A dangerous occupation with a relatively high death toll, numerous slaveholders were discouraged from hiring their slaves out to the railroads, which were desperate for labor. "It was very dangereus business," Matthews went on, "There was hardly a day that some of the slaves did not get crippled or killed. There were more killed there than at any other place I ever worked at. On the State road a great many died, but nothing near so many as there."[587] Work sites that were too dangerous for slaves were an option for runaways.

When looking for work, refugees had to be careful to avoid detection. A convincing story and other people to back it up were fundamental prerequisites. The limited evidence that exists suggests that 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 in 1853, his wife Sallie was brought to Richmond together with their youngest child and stored in the slave pen in order to be sold. Teamoh went to visit them. Since he intended to "remain a few weeks," he had to find a job, which apparently was not a problem: "I sought, and found employment during a few days," Teamoh wrote and added that he started working at a dock yard at the Richmond Basin as a common laborer.[588]

Apart from local variations in different productive and commercial specializations, all four cities denoted growth rates large enough to be in constant need of workers in the construction and transport sectors. When Stepney, "of a smiling countenance," ran away from Columbia, South Carolina, his owner started a runaway slave ad in June 1820 believing he was in Charleston because he had been raised there. Being a bricklayer by trade, Stepney might have found employment in this city and was still not found eight months later.[589] Brick makers were also high in demand in other places. The 1850 census registered 1,400 of them in Baltimore City and County, most of them of African descent. Baltimore, the fastest growing city of this research, had approximately 600 houses built per year in the 1830s; in 1851, 2,000 were built.[590]

Other large infrastructural projects included canals and later railroads, as well as water engineering. In New Orleans, for one, the levee was a construction project that needed maintenance all year long and the demand for laborers never snapped. Enslaved Jim, 28 years

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[586] *Daily Dispatch*, November 28, 1860.

[587] Anonymous [Matthews], *Recollections of Slavery*, October 11, 1838. To Matthews's account, the editor added: "This part of the narrative was corroborated incidentally, in conversation with a gentleman who had travelled extensively in the southern states. He remarked that the place where he had seen slaves treated the worst, was on the Rail Road from Charleston to Hamburg. He saw women nearly naked wheeling loads of dirt up on to the road from pits by the road side, on planks about a foot and a half wide. If they lost their balance, they would fall from ten to twenty feet."

[588] Unfortunately, he did not include information on how he got to Richmond but stated that he wrote his own pass. Teamoh, *God Made Man*, 90-91.

[589] *City Gazette and Commercial Daily Advertiser*, December 15, 1820.

[590] Olson, *Baltimore*, 103.

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," read the advertisement, and that he "has been seen twice on the Levee during the last month."[591] People like Jim, who escaped their owners and stayed in the same city could make use of their existing networks and judge the labor market based on their own first-hand experiences. For those escaping from a rural setting this was more difficult, also because the urban environment added a variety of jobs for black men that were not available in the countryside.

For most people, work was not steady and self-hired slaves, free blacks, and undocumented men and women passing as one or the other had to stay alert and flexible to make ends meet and to adapt their strategies to the changing surroundings. When laboring as a slave in the shipyards of Norfolk as a caulker, there was not always work for George Teamoh and he took on a variety of other jobs aside: "When not in their [the shipyard owners'] service, I was found at the common labor of carrying grain, lading and unlading ships freighting Rail Road iron, and, perhaps there is no species of labor, such as may be reckoned in the catalogue of Norfolk's history but I have been engaged at."[592] Historian Walter Johnson supports the observation that employers made use of flexible workers regardless of their background. He has stated that it was common for captains to send out mates or stewards to fill their crews with men laboring on the New Orleans levee, among them many runaways.[593] Following every opportunity that opened up could mean the difference between being able to pay the rent or not.

Important in this regard was the seasonal job market in the Lower South, with hundreds of white laborers who migrated south for the winter months and left again in spring. This was important knowledge for refugees since, for example, the white exodus during seasons of sickness in New Orleans created spaces for black labor. Also Richmond knew a factory season when Virginia slaveholders hired their bondspeople out to Richmond and other cities to work in the industries in the fall and spring, as stressed by Jeffrey Kerr-Ritchie.[594] Reversely, this also meant that in some months of the year, competition was particularly dire. Economic fluctuations contributed their part. Especially after the crisis of 1857, the migration of unemployed workers from the North to the South soared, according to other historians.[595] This made life harder for the lower classes.

Like their male counterparts, female runaways matched their expectations and strategies to what expected them at their destinations. They knew that most jobs were wageless except domestic and related services like cooking, and that they most likely would stay below subsistence level with what they earned. When a slaveholder expressed his suspicion that a runaway woman was following a particular occupation at the place of her arrival, it was usually one of the jobs which were aplenty to be found in cities. With regards to quantity, much work was open to black women but there was not much choosing because the heavily gendered labor

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[591] *Daily Picayune*, October 25, 1855.
[592] Teamoh, *God Made Man*, 87.
[593] Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*, 143.
[594] Jeffrey R. Kerr-Ritchie, *Freedpeople in the Tobacco South, Virginia 1860-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 18-19.
[595] Johnson and Roark, *Black Masters*, 177, 179; and Rodriguez, "Ripe for Revolt," 44.

markets did not leave much variety.[596] Runaway slave ads conjecturing female escapees to be engaged as washerwomen or seamstresses were a case in point. That explains why seamstresses had a high share amongst runaways hiding in Charleston, as observed by Amani Marshall.[597] The case of Martha is indicative. In 1844, she was 28 years old and was sold from Richmond to Charleston. After working for her new owner for three months, Martha went off. Since she was a washer, ironer, and cook, she was believed to "seek employment in that capacity." Strikingly, it only took the newcomer Martha a couple of months to forge ties to people willing to aid her in her escape and concealment: "She was seen the night after she went away in a house occupied by negroes, on Boyce & Co's wharf," the announcement claimed.[598]
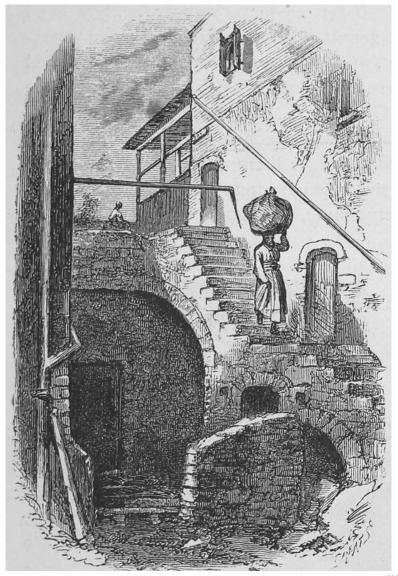
Figure 20: Woman Carrying Bundle—Possibly Laundry—in Back Alley[599]

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[596] Amrita Chakrabarti Myers has likewise come to this conclusion in her study on Charleston. Myers, *Forging Freedom*, 90. Seth Rockman has concluded that having a job did not mean keeping it nor making enough money to survive. Rockman, *Scraping By*, 159.

[597] Marshall, "Endeavor to Pass For Free," 170.

[598] *Charleston Mercury*, February 9, 1844.

[599] J. Wells Chamney, "Woman Carrying Bundle, Savannah, Georgia, 1873-74," in Edward King, *The Great South* (Hartford: American Pub., 1875), 364, Special Collections, UVA, *Slavery Images: A Visual Record of the African Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Early African Diaspora*,

Washing clothes could be performed at home for piece rates or, increasingly in the late antebellum period, in a laundry for wage payment. Most large institutions like hospitals had their own laundries where they employed women.[600] Being one of the main occupations of black women, it was unobtrusive, which is why it was an acceptable job for runaway slaves. Although physically arduous, it did not require special skills and could be performed by women and girls of all ages. The largest benefit was that they could work in their own homes, thereby being less exposed than market women and peddlers and less dependent than domestic servants who directly worked for their employees. Also when women took to the streets to pick up or deliver clothes and linen, they were much more discreet than, for example, a group of dock or construction workers. (See figure 20.)

Besides domestic service, laundry, and sewing, sex work was a plausible option for many black women, including refugees. In the nineteenth century, sex work was in a grey zone between illegality and tolerance. Historian Patricia Cline Cohen claimed that in New York of the 1830s, prostitutes enjoyed relative protection by the police. From the 1840s on, tolerance by the authorities lessened, which also effected the social standing of women and girls working in that occupation. They forfeited, for instance, their credibility in legal proceedings. By mid-century, the silent condoning of sex services came to an end. Many sex workers were left more vulnerable and sought the liaison with male pimps for protection.[601] James Campbell has dated the suppression in Richmond a little earlier. He claims that restrictions against prostitution began in the 1830s when authorities sought to outsource this practice to less reputable areas of the city.[602]

The bulk of people taken up for prostitution dated, fitting Cohen's timeline, from the 1850s. Newspaper coverage shows that in New Orleans, Catharine Murphy, Bridget Fagan, and Nancy Davis, the latter one being of African descent, were arrested in a brothel in Girod street in 1852 "as lewd and abandoned women and vagrants."[603] Note than women were not actually taken up for *working* as prostitutes but for *being* "loose women," highlighting the aspect of social control.[604] The two white women "were required to furnish vouchers or go to the Work-House. Nancy was sent to the Work-House for six months."[605] New Orleans and Charleston are places for which evidence suggests that mixed-race brothels were common. In 1849, a 13-year-old white girl named Mary Ann Warren was recovered "from a house of ill fame kept by a negro woman on Phillipa street" in New Orleans. In 1850, "Margaret Doherty, *f.w.c.* [free woman of color], and Margaret Gregg were last night locked up in the Second Municipality,

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URL: http://slaveryimages.org/s/slaveryimages/item/2894, accessed November 23, 2019.

[600] It is difficult to find information about wages. In a Philadelphia hospital, laundresses earned $3 per week in 1817, which was reduced to $2 in 1822. United States Department of Labor and Bureau of Labor Statistics, "History of Wages in the United States from Colonial Times to 1928," *Bulletin of the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics* 604 (1934): 135. For an insight into nineteenth-century laundry, see Patricia E. Malcolmson, *English Laundresses: A Social History, 1850-1930* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986).

[601] Until the 1850s, it was a business dominated by women. Cohen, *Murder of Helen Jewett*, 85.

[602] The numbers of white women and men charged with keeping a brothel grew in the 1850s. Campbell, *Slavery on Trial*, 65.

[603] *Daily Picayune*, August 27, 1852.

[604] For a discussion between the alleged character traits and the actual labor of sex workers, see Marion Pluskota, "'We Use Our Bodies to Work Hard, So We Need to Get Legitimate Workers' Rights': Labour Relations in Prostitution, 1600-2010," in *Selling Sex in the City. A Global History of Prostitution, 1600s-2000s*, ed. Magaly Rodríguez García, Lex Heerma van Voss, and Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017), 655-656.

[605] *Daily Picayune*, August 27, 1852.

being charged with keeping a brothel."[606] The last notice did not only reveal that black and white women worked alongside as prostitutes but also that a white woman and a black woman ran a business together.

Historian Seth Rockman has noted that sex work could generate more income in a couple of hours than in several weeks seaming shirts. Many women did not follow this work as a main occupation but rather as an on-and-off by-occupation or to get through a difficult period. Transient men who entered the port cities through the docks provided ample demand.[607] In this light, prostitution was a viable and effective work choice which followed the logics of a free market, as historians of other places have also claimed.[608] Consequently, the prostitution business grew with the cities and the traffic therein. Charleston authorities complained about the volume of this phenomenon in 1820 and acted against the expansion of "public Dancing Room[s]" within the limits of the city.[609]

Next to absorbing refugees, brothels were generally places where illegal activities took place. Newspapers wrote that some sold alcohol without licenses, others were involved in human trafficking.[610] Brothels also served enslaved men. In a New Orleans case involving the white brothel keeper Alice D'Arthenny alias Constance La Farbe, "Recorder Bright found that the charges of keeping a disorderly house or brothel, and of offending against public decency by consorting with the slave Sam, were fully made out."[611] And also in Charleston, involvement of enslaved men in "disorderly houses" were at least so common that in 1821 the City Council ordained that free black persons and slaves were not allowed any longer to act as musicians in "public Dancing Room[s]."[612] Although white society and authorities conceived interracial sexual contact with horrors, the top-down measures to move brothels and prostitution to less well-off parts of the cities worked in the opposite direction. It is hardly imaginable, for example, that the four women who were charged with running "houses of ill fame" in Shockoe Bottom,[613] a dominantly African American neighborhood in Richmond, did not serve black customers when they paid them.

Two cases have been found which point to the occupation of illegal freedom seekers as sex workers. The first involves Eliza Harris. A hearing at the First District Court dealt with a dispute over a different issue than prostitution but in which course Harris, a black woman, was mentioned. A witness testified that Harris "formerly lived in Natchez, and was then reputed to

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[606] Idem, April 9, 1849; August 17, 1850.

[607] Rockman, *Scraping By*, 129.

[608] Pluskota, "'We Use Our Bodies," 653, also referring to Richard Posner, *Sex and Reason* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); and Marjolein van der Veen, "Rethinking Commodification and Prostitution: An Effort at Peacemaking in the Battles over Prostitution," *Rethinking Marxism* 13:2 (2001): 30-51.

[609] Presentment of Grant Jury of Charleston District, October 1820, SCDAH; and Eckhard, *Digest of the Ordinances*, "Disorderly Houses," CCPL. "Public dancing," "disorderly houses," and "loose women" point to the vague legal definition of who qualified as prostitutes. In the nineteenth century, the understanding of prostitution was marked by the interplay of other concepts like class, race, and gender. See Thaddeus Blanchette and Cristiana Schettini, "Sex Work in Rio de Janeiro: Police Management without Regulation," in *Selling Sex in the City. A Global History of Prostitution, 1600s-2000s*, ed. Magaly Rodríguez García, Lex Heerma van Voss, and Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017), 492.

[610] *Daily Picayune*, May 25, 1853; August 4, 1855. In 1854, Emilie Leon, a white girl of 14 years, was, according to a New Orleans newspaper, abducted by Ben T. Haughton "who secreted her in a brothel in Gravier street, kept by a colored woman named Davis." *Daily Picayune*, April 29, 1854.

[611] Idem, August 4, 1855.

[612] Eckhard, *Digest of the Ordinances*, "Disorderly Houses," CCPL.

[613] *Daily Dispatch*, August 27, 1853, in Kimball, *American City*, 48.

be a slave. Her son had been offered to witness for sale. Since that time, she has lived in a brothel in New Orleans."[614] Being mid-century, it was too late for Harris to be manumitted legally. Hence, she was either a slave refugee or an undocumented person. Interesting is that the sale of her son seemed to be connected to her departure from Natchez. The second involves Mary. In 1824, she ran away from Robert Howren in Georgetown, South Carolina. After two months, he advertised for her describing her as of "yellow complexion, large black eyes, an uncommon handsome set of white teeth, lips very red and speaks remarkably drawling—small statue." Howren had purchased Mary some years prior at auction in Charleston, where she apparently went back to because "She has been seen by a black woman in Charleston, within a few weeks. She has changed her name to JANE, and says she lives with a white woman who keeps a house of ill fame." A whole year after Mary's escape, she was still advertised for in the newspaper.[615]

Male and female refugees depended on the distribution of black-coded jobs along the occupational spheres. It was possible for them to find work on the lower levels of the labor market and in informal and disdained sectors.

Regulatory Regimes

It was desirable for runaway slaves to integrate into the *free* black population. Yet race was not the only code that permeated the labor market; local regulations also had to be reckoned with. A great many of these restrictions were not only based on race but also on legal status. Very often, the two were related. Varying from location to location, black people had to apply for special permits to carry out certain works. This has been shown by Barbara Fields. 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.[616] For people with an undocumented status, this was not an option. As chapter one has shown, from the mid-antebellum era onwards, the legislative situation of free African Americans grew tighter. The provisions on prohibitions of assembly and curfews not only affected their social lives but also their jobs. Since black people still had to make money somehow and respond to human needs, they were driven into semi-clandestine or illegal economic and social activities, which means into the underground. They settled at the margins of mainstream economy.

Being at the margins did not mean being independent from the economy, and economic fluctuations always hit these people hard, including the crises of 1837 and 1857. Since black people were reduced to the lowest-paying jobs, black people had to work more to make ends meet. Yet, working longer hours could be risky for black people, for there was a curfew whose violation could end with a night in the workhouse, or a painful fine. These "disciplinary measures" compelled poor laborers to work even harder in order to make up for the lost money or time. Between September 1836 and September 1837, 573 slaves were convicted in

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[614] The case involved the burning of a ship. The captain, Captain Wilson, apparently stayed in a house (presumably a brothel) kept by several people, where also Eliza Harris came into play. A number of witnesses "testified as to the general bad character of Eliza Harris, and would not believe her oath." *Daily Picayune*, March 15, 1850.
[615] *Charleston Courier*, August 30, 1824; May 9, 1825.
[616] Fields, *Middle Ground*, 79.

Charleston for being on the streets after curfew without a pass.[617] When a black person was detected at night and no identification was produced—because the person was a runaway, an illegally free person, or a legally free person without documents—they could be sold into slavery if worst came to worst. In Richmond, Curetta and her daughter Betty were charged with going at large and hiring themselves out. The two women, who belonged to Helen Briggs, lived on their own on 9th street. Working as washerwomen, they would "sometimes be employed in carrying home clothes to or later an hour as 9 at night," the court record reads.[618] In Baltimore, black people petitioned or had white people petition the mayor for passes that allowed them to be on the streets after curfew.[619] Breaking the curfew could pose a problem for black people while at the same time they were forced to seize the working day as soundly as they could.

Due to the overrepresentation of enslaved workers in certain areas, it was better for some runaways to pass as hired slaves. Depending on the context, this could work in the manufactories in Richmond, at the wharves in Charleston, and on the levee in New Orleans. In theory, this was exactly the same situation they had just escaped from, but in practice, the daily lives of self-hired slaves were much more akin to those of free blacks than to those of most slaves. In Baltimore, where urban slavery was never abundant and where it had almost died out by the eve of the Civil War, this option would not have crossed the minds of many. In the other three cities, however, passing as a slave could be a promising strategy. For New Orleans, authorities were aware of this phenomenon from the earliest days of American rule on. The Réglement de Police of 1804 evidenced that there was an interest "to prevent Negroes […] from hiring themselves, when they are runaways."[620] In spite of the different developments of urban slavery in Richmond, Charleston, and New Orleans, by 1860 the number of slaves were comparable. (The size of urban enslaved populations, however, varied greatly; see table 6.)

Table 6: Urban Enslaved Populations, 1800-1860[621]

	1800	1810	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860
Baltimore	2,800	4,700	4,400	4,100	3,200	2,900	2,200
Richmond	2,300	3,100	4,400	6,300	7,500	9,900	**11,700**
Charleston	9,800	11,700	12,700	15,400	14,700	19,500	**13,900**
New Orleans		6,000	7,400	9,400	23,400	17,000	**13,400**

Richmond was an especially remarkable case. In 1860, 40 to 50 percent of urban slaves found themselves in hired labor conditions. This made up 4,700 to 5,900 people.[622] Black Americans held in bondage were an integral part of the city's industry, which was mostly centered around tobacco. Tobacco was a very labor-intense business which relied on a variety of workers with

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[617] Powers, "Black Charleston," 19.
[618] Commonwealth v. Helen A. E. Briggs, July 12, 1862, Suit Papers, Hustings Court Suit Papers, LVA.
[619] For instance, Petition of Jeremiah Willis for a Pass, February 4, 1839; and Petition by A. Williams, To the Honorable S. C. Leakin Mayor, n. d., Mayor's Correspondence, BRG 9-2, BCA.
[620] Minutes of the Conseil do Ville, May 19, 1804, in Jean-Pierre Le Glaunec, "Slave Migrations and Slave Control in Spanish and Early American New Orleans," in *Empires of the Imagination. Transatlantic Histories of the Louisiana Purchase*, ed. Peter J. Kastor and François Weil (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 223.
[621] For sources, see table 3.
[622] Schermerhorn, *Money over Mastery*, 147.

differing skills.[623] In the last two decades of the antebellum period, 80 percent of people working in tobacco were enslaved men.[624] In the 1820s, 15 to 20 tobacco manufacturers employed 370 to 480 enslaved workers. Two decades later, some 600 to 700 slaves worked in 30 factories. The second important raw material for Richmond was wheat, and flour mills sprang up from the ground accordingly. Moreover, the coal mines in Chesterfield, just next to Richmond, made use of 700 to 800 enslaved men in 1835.[625]

Illegals, other than runaways, also passed themselves off as slaves. Free black people entered Louisiana with forged passes describing them as slaves in order to circumvent the contravention laws. These activities were reported by the Attorney General in 1857. Phoebe Black, a free black sex worker, was charged with passing off as a slave a woman named Sarah Lucas who was originally from Louisville, Kentucky. In 1849, Black had, according to Lucas's testimony, lured her into New Orleans with the promise to procure her a job as a chambermaid.[626] Chambermaids or sex workers, women with an illegal status had better chances than men to avoid detection. Men more often worked outside, on the streets, on markets, on harbors, and in groups, which could jeopardize their cover. Runaway ads inform that they were seen in the cities, often on the docks or the levee. "Phil a mulatto man," whose owner was Mrs. Wickhams on James River "has been seen on the Basin [in Richmond] and at the new market in the course of the week." In 1837 in New Orleans, runaway Reason, 18 years old, with "high cheek bones, with very white teeth, long flat feet, and stoops when walking," was seen on the levee and "on board of steam boats." In 1850, "A colored man belonging to Mr. Wurchurt, and calling himself Henry, was arrested on the levee as a runaway and sent to the lock-up."[627] This contributed to explaining the much higher numbers of male runaways in jails.

In most southern cities, African American women outnumbered men; Richmond was the great exception. Its economic focus on production and manufacturing attracted large numbers of free and enslaved men to the booming city. Half of the black male work force worked in factories such as tobacco manufactories, paper mills, iron works, and flour production on the eve of the Civil War.[628] Although tobacco slaves—since the 1840s mostly men—found themselves under constant surveillance in the factories, they were only regulated by the official slave laws before and after working time.[629] For refugees passing as self-hired

[623] Besides tobacco factories, there were numerous warehouses in which tobacco was lodged before the export. Takagi, *Rearing Wolves,* 3, 10-11, 24.

[624] Takagi, *Rearing Wolves*, 71. Claudia Goldin's calculations revealed that in 1860, 62 percent of enslaved men were hired in Richmond, which corresponded to 71 percent of the actual enslaved labor force. For women, the respective shares were 88 and 46 percent. Goldin, *Urban Slavery*, 36.

[625] The numbers on tobacco workers are from Schermerhorn. Takagi's numbers are higher since he calculated both free and enslaved: In 1820, 760 people worked in 20 tobacco manufactories; in 1850, 1,400 people were employed in 19 factories. In during the 1850s, both the manufactories and the workers rose nearly threefold in numbers. Schermerhorn, *Money over Mastery*, 147, 166; and Takagi, *Rearing Wolves*, 11.

[626] To avoid persecution, Lucas left the state of Louisiana. Schafer, *Becoming Free*, 117-118.

[627] Daybook of the Richmond Police Guard, February 15, 1844, UVA; *Picayune*, July 19, 1837; and *Daily Picayune*, April 5, 1850.

[628] For an account of the experiences of an industrial slave in Richmond, see Charles B. Dew, "Sam Williams, Forgeman: The Life of an Industrial Slave in the Old South," in *Region, Race, and Reconstruction. Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward*, ed. J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press), 199-240.

[629] Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters*, 219; Takagi, *Rearing Wolves*, 11, 26; and Suzanne Gehring Schnittman, "Slavery in Virginia's Urban Tobacco Industry – 1840-1860" (Ph.D. diss., University of Rochester, 1986), v.

slaves, the working conditions might have resembled slavery but after the work was done, they lived *de facto* free in the city.

Urban slavery had many faces. For runaways passing as slaves, it offered many possible scenarios. Bondswomen in cities cooked, cleaned, washed, made and repaired cloths, took care of very young and very old people, and simply did everything their masters and mistresses demanded. Most worked from five o'clock in the morning until curfew hit the city. Men also worked as domestics, for example as valets, gardeners, table servants, or took care of horses, carriages, and ran errands. Even children, usually under the age of ten, were used as household servants, errand boys, and child-minders.[630] The life course of a young runaway could have been linked to someone like Catharine Rieley. A New Orleans paper informed its readership that the white woman, "who lives opposite to the Orleans theatre, was yesterday arrested on charge of harboring a runaway slave boy and claiming him as her property."[631] Passing a refugee off as one's property could both be a method to aid a freedom seeker or a strategy to obtain ownership of a slave by fraud.

When refugees hired themselves out to employers over a longer period of time, they could cross paths with census takers. It appears that some of them were even included in the records. Similar to the listings of the First African Baptist Church in which the status of certain people was left blank or where the space for the owners of enslaved members was filled in with a question mark (which pointed to the integration of runaways and other illegals presented in chapter three), Loren Schweninger has observed that census enumerators could at times not identify the owners of alleged slaves. In the space provided for the name of the slaveholder, census takers then wrote "hired," "owner Unknown," simply "unknown," "Owners names not known," or that the slave belonged to "an estate." Schweninger concluded that the employers of these slaves did not know of whom they were hiring their hirelings.[632] Under the light of this research, however, it is very likely that employers either knew that they had runaways in their employ or that they simply did not look into the background of their employees.

When it was about common laborers, New Orleans and Charleston set clear rules regarding the hiring of unskilled slaves, including places where they could gather to get hired by the day, the daily lengths of the service, and sometimes the wages.[633] In Baltimore and Richmond, by contrast, slave hire was less regulated by city authorities, and rather occurred through private negotiations, also involving brokers.[634] Historian Gregg Kimball has provided context: Early January was usually the time when self-hired bondspeople, men and women, roamed the streets of southern cities looking for contracts for the new year. Around Christmas and well into January, manufacturers closed businesses, and free and enslaved workers were increasingly to be found on the streets, both celebrating their days off and negotiating their

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[630] Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 28-32; and Douglass, *Narrative of the Life*, 38

[631] *Daily Picayune*, November 19, 1855.

[632] Schweninger made these observations for Richmond and a number of other cities in Virginia. United States Manuscript Slave Census, Richmond, 1st Ward, 1860, 1-2, 6; 2nd Ward, 56-57, in Schweninger, "Underside of Slavery."

[633] In Charleston, the "fixed proper stands," where porters were to offer their hired work, were announced in 1803. All of them were located near the waterfront where the wharves were. *Charleston Times*, November 11, 1803, in Thompson, *Working on the Dock*, 44.

[634] Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 41-42.

terms for the following year.[635] This was a welcome opportunity for freedom seekers to blend in with the black community and to establish important business connections. Robert Russell, a British visitor, observed this in the mid-1850s stating that "Richmond was at this time literally swarming with negroes, who were standing in crowds at the corners of the streets in different parts of the town."[636]

SELLING SWEET POTATOES IN CHARLESTON.

Figure 21: Self-hired Bondswomen Selling Sweet Potatoes in Charleston[637]

Because self-hire was prohibited, those who engaged in it were already familiar with an illegal activity before the escape. Passing as self-hired or free was easier for them. It took great boldness, courage, and—in the best case—the experience of having worked as a self-hired slave to successfully pretend to be a self-hired slave. Passing as such was for male runaways a way to engage in the skilled work they had been trained for in slavery. This way, they were able to make more money than they would if working below their skills. At the same time, all hopes of someday joining the free population were up front in tatters. Yet, because it was assumed that self-hired slaves had owners, police were cautious to go too hard on them. (See chapter five.) Even in those places were respective laws were passed, political will to enforce the codes was weak. Robert Lacy, for instance, an enslaved man who was tried in 1839 in Richmond for

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[635] In Richmond, the famous Tredegar Iron Works was not an option in this context because enterpriser Joseph Anderson meticulously monitored his staff. Even in times when he experimented with enslaved employees, Anderson opposed boarding out. Kimball, *American City*, 29-30, 165.

[636] Russell, *North America*, 151.

[637] "Selling Sweet Potatoes, Charleston, South Carolina, 1861," in *Illustrated London News* 38 (1861): 94, *Slavery Images: A Visual Record of the African Slave Trade and Slave Life in Early African Diaspora*, URL: http://slaveryimages.org/s/slaveryimages/item/763, accessed November 23, 2019. The article accompanying the engraving states that the women were slaves who had to hand over a part of their profits to their owners.

"going at large and hiring himself out," was discharged and his case dismissed.[638] A customary hands-off approach created spaces for runaway slaves. They, in turn, proved with their willingness to pass as slaves their awareness of the realities of the urban labor markets in a slaveholding society.

Self-hire constituted as much a springboard to escape slavery (see chapter two) as a strategy to make a living afterwards. The case of Charlotte is striking because the information in a runaway ad about her speaks to both scenarios. She "CAME to Charleston from Beaufort, some time since, by permission of her Mistress." Charlotte never returned to Beaufort "but hired herself out, and taken in washing, ever since, in Charleston." Since she was "from the windward coast of Africa [and] has her country marks on her face," Charlotte would not have stood a good chance passing as a free woman. Yet, the subscriber found it relevant to add that "She has neither badge nor ticket to work out." [639] A similar account is the one of Jim, a tailor by trade. His owner Alexander England knew that "Jim has a ticket to work out, that he got from me, dated in February last" and suspected that "he may show that and hire himself to a Taylor." Jim absconded in June 1821. By June 1822, he was still not found. A couple of years prior, Jim had already passed himself off as a fisherman, revealing the flexibility and adaptability of many freedom seekers.[640]

Tickets were, comparable to slave passes introduced in chapter two, slips of paper written by slaveowners to give permission to their slaves to hire themselves out, and were as easily forged. Mary's owner knew in 1829 that she was passing herself off as a self-hired washerwoman. Calling herself Mary M'Lean, she ran away from 101 East Bay but stayed in Charleston. "She has been repeatedly seen on the Green, washing clothes—and not having a Badge, is supposed to have got some person to write a ticket for her."[641] Everybody who was able to write "a tolerable hand" could furnish slaves who sought to detach themselves from the control of their owners with such papers. These informal licenses were not only a way to control the enslaved population, they also furnished those who used them with a certain protection, both from harassing watchmen and whites who could be spoiling for a fight. Some slaveowners wrote tickets for a specific time range or occupational task, others furnished their bondspeople with vaguely phrased papers. Newspaper notices demonstrate the spaces these tickets opened for hired slaves. Richard, on the one hand, had "a weekly working pass which is expired," to work on the wharves.[642] Dinah, on the other hand, "having a great many free relations," had with her a "nolimited ticket, to look for a master, which she has taken advantage of."[643] Police were aware that tickets could and were easily forged and sometimes apprehended slaves for having "no ticket," a "bad ticket," or a "doubtful ticket."[644] Since these apprehensions also happened late at night, slave tickets cannot be approached as something profoundly different from slave passes, and the boundaries were very blurry.

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[638] Hustings Court Suit Papers, Ended Causes, March – October 1839, Commonwealth v. Robert Lacy, a Slave, September 12, 1839, LVA.
[639] *Charleston Courier*, May 19, 1820.
[640] *City Gazette and Commercial Daily Advertiser*, July 7, 1821; June 1, 1822.
[641] *Charleston Courier*, May 7, 1829.
[642] *City Gazette*, February 19, 1793, in Thomas Brown and Leah Sims, *Fugitive Slave Advertisements in* The City Gazette*, Charleston, South Carolina, 1787-1797* (London: Lexington Books, 2015), xi.
[643] *Charleston Courier*, March 26, 1822.
[644] Records of the Charleston Police Department, Arrest Records and Morning Reports, Lower Ward 1855-1856, January 7, 12; February 25, 1856, CCPL.
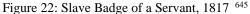
Figure 22: Slave Badge of a Servant, 1817 [645]

Figure 23: Slave Badge of a Mechanic, 1842 [646]

Figure 24: Slave Badge of a Fisher, 1814 [647]

In theory, tickets for hired slaves were not a sufficient identification in Charleston. Municipal ordinances inform that slaveowners were from 1800 onwards required by law to purchase badges given out by the treasurer of the city, who kept a register of all the slaves who obtained badges. Legislation was rather strict stipulating slaves to wear these badges on visible parts of the body and employers had the duty to demand to see them. If an employer was caught hiring a slave who did not possess a badge, he had to pay a $5 fine plus the wages he had agreed upon with the slave's owner.[648] The feasibility of this ordinance was questionable from the very

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[645] Slave Badge, Charleston Museum, URL: https://www.charlestonmuseum.org/research/collection/slave-badge/9FB883C5-944D-4AF2-9FA9-526679644172, accessed March 7, 2019. Servants did not have to wear the badges on their clothes, they just had to carry them with them. Greene, Hutchins, and Hutchins, *Slave Badges*, 7.

[646] Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts, URL: https://mesda.org/item/collections/slave-badge/21118/, accessed March 7, 2019.

[647] RelicRecords, URL: https://relicrecord.com/blog/charleston-slave-badges/, accessed March 7, 2019.

[648] Eckhard, *Digest of the Ordinances*, "Badges," CCPL. If no badge could be produced, the hirer was to carry the slave to the wardens who would commit him or her to the workhouse. Every case was to be heard before the court of wardens where the owner had to appear. The punishment for the slave was whipping. *City Gazette and Commercial Daily Advertiser*, July 21, 1800. Greene, Hutchins, and Hutchins found out that earliest legislation regarding slave badges was passed in the 1780s. The oldest physical slave badge that was found dates from 1800.

beginning. The impracticalities were plenty. To just name one, before the incorporation of Neck, both Charleston City and Neck required separate badges for slaves. As a consequence, hired slaves who crossed Boundary street during their work, had to have two badges. It is hard to imagine that this was controlled. Besides great inconvenience, procuring badges was a costly expenditure next to the taxes on slaves that had to be paid regardless.[649]

Harlan Greene, Harry Hutchins, Jr., and Brian Hutchins have claimed that the badges were numbered consecutively within various categories.[650] (See figures 22-24.) Intended to put a cap on the number of hired slaves as well as to prevent runaways from passing as hired slaves, obtaining a badge could also facilitate the endeavors of freedom seekers in need of employment. In 1812, Pompey absconded. "He is a Painter by trade, and has constantly been employed working out, being furnished with a badge." Pompey could easily find work by showing his badge. The owners of Delia and Clarinda were aware of this. In 1833, an ad informed that Delia, an 18-year-old wet nurse, carried a badge with the number 1234 with her and warned all persons against hiring her. Clarinda, 17 years old, "round face, good set of teeth," was described as "very talkative, and well known in the city." Having "many relatives here," the subscriber J. W. Schmidt assumed that she "resorts certain houses in the city and suburbs." He also added her badge number 176 to the announcement. Most ads, however, stated that runaways did not have badges and presumed that they would try to hire themselves out nevertheless: When March, "well known about the city," was advertised for, the announcement claimed that "he will, no doubt, say he has permission to work out, but has neither ticket nor badge."[651] The production of slave badges gives insight into the numbers of hired slaves in Charleston. As calculated by Harlan Greene, in 1808 and 1809, between 300 and 400 badges were issued contrasting a number of more than 5,000 badges in 1860. This number covered around 25 to 30 percent of Charleston's urban bondspeople.[652] The actual volume of hired slaves was much higher, given that a great many slaveholders disregarded the ordinances, and slaveholders from outside Charleston sent their people into the city. Additionally, the tag counts did not include large numbers of self-hired slaves and nominally free African Americans who mingled with the enslaved hired population.

There are narratives that explicitly deal with the topic of passing as self-hired slaves. After fleeing enslavement, William Matthews went to Charleston. Having worked as a carriage driver before, he "went to the tavern where I used to stop, when I carried eggs and peaches and other things to market." In the following days, Matthews "slept on some hay under a shed in the tavern yard." Being able to read the racial and regulatory landscape of labor in Charleston, he included detailed information on how finding work as an enslaved laborer worked:

Harlan Greene, Harry S. Hutchins, Jr., and Brian E. Hutchins, *Slave Badges and the Slave-Hire System in Charleston, South Carolina, 1783-1865* (Jefferson and London: McFarland, 2008), 15.

[649] *Charleston Courier*, January 29, 1848. For the legislation and its ongoing exceptions, see Eckhard, *Digest of the Ordinances*, "Negroes," CCPL.

[650] Greene, Hutchins, and Hutchins, *Slave Badges*, depictions between pages 66 and 67.

[651] *City Gazette and Commercial Daily Advertiser*, September 1, 1812; *Charleston Mercury*, July 31, 1833; *Charleston Courier*, April 11, 1822; and *Charleston Mercury*, May 29, 1832.

[652] Harlan Greene, "Slave Badges," in *World of a Slave. Encyclopedia of the Material Life of Slaves in the United States.* Vol. 1: A-I, ed. Martha B. Katz-Hyman and Kym S. Rice (Santa Barbara, Denver, and Oxford: Greenwood, 2010), 437. Comparing Green's numbers with the official census data (table 6), the share of urban slaves with badges would be 36 percent. It is conceivable that also slaves who (officially) resided outside the city limits, worked with badges in Charleston.

> I went down to the stevedore's stand and waited there with the rest of the hands to get work. 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.

Pretending to have a master to whom he answered, Matthews told his co-workers than he had to hand over his entire wages to his owner.[653] Like Matthews, John Andrew Johnson first fled to Charleston before leaving for the North on a vessel. His account on laboring in the city is similar: "I joined a gang of negroes working on the wharfs, and received a dollar-and-a-quarter per day, without arousing any suspicion," Johnson wrote. Yet, he also testified to the slave tags and how this ordinance could keep people from working: "One morning, as I was going to join a gang of negroes working on board a vessel, one of them asked me if I had my badge? […] When I heard that, I was so frightened that I hid myself […]."[654] Johnson's ignoranc regarding the local regulations for self-hired slaves nearly cost him his freedom. Others who were not as lucky as he were arrested and lodged in the workhouse.

Badges for hired-out slaves were also required for New Orleans, as the account of Terrance, Jackson, and William from the opening of this chapter shows. This newspaper article further testifies that controls occurred at least occasionally. The New Orleans ordinances regarding slave badges largely followed those of Charleston. Amendments in the ordinances establishing the fines for people forging these tags furthermore show that this happened to an extent worrisome to the authorities. Free persons "who shall have counterfeited one or more of such badges" were to be fined $50 "with expenses and costs, for every such offense." Slaves were to receive 25 lashes at the police jail, and "every slave wearing a badge not specially obtained for him from the Mayor of this city, shall receive fifteen lashes" unless their master redeemed them by paying $2.[655] In New Orleans, slave badge laws were regularly neglected, and employers did not ask for licenses or identification. In Richmond, no such badges existed and illegally free men and women could pass as self-hired slaves in large numbers. In Baltimore it was not necessary to pass as a slave.

The existence of the slave badge law and the fact that a great many slaveholders obeyed it, reveals a distinct atmosphere in Charleston. It was the only place where these ordinances were executed, which shows the feasibility in the light of political will. Runaways often knew about the regulatory regimes in general although their distinct local implementations and executions were important information that could decide about freedom and slavery.

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[653] Anonymous [Matthews], *Recollections of Slavery*, October 21, 1838.

[654] Johnson, *Experience of a Slave*, 25.

[655] Augustin, *General Digest*, 139, 141. Badges were also forged in Charleston. See, for instance, *Charleston Mercury*, November 8, 1827, in Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 230. Research on badges in places other than Charleston, however, is complicated. Greene, Hutchins, and Hutchins have claimed that Charleston was the only place which seemed to issue tags and not only restricted itself to legislature on paper. Greene, Hutchins, and Hutchins, *Slave Badges*, 6. Vitoria Dawson has argued that Charleston was indeed the "only city known to have implemented a rigid and formal regulatory system." She offered the possible explanation that only in Charleston were badges issued of copper. In the other cities, including New Orleans, Mobile, Savannah, and Norfolk, it is imaginable that tags were of paper or another impermanent material. Victoria Dawson, "Copper Neck Tags Evoke the Experience of American Slaves Hired Out as Part-Time Laborers," *Smithsonian Magazine* (February 2003), URL: https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/copper-neck-tags-evoke-experience-american-slaves-hired-out-part-time-laborers-76039831/, accessed June 27, 2019. Legal ordinances of New Orleans, however, stipulated them to be of brass. D. Augustin, Esq. (ed.), *A General Digest of the Ordinances and Resolutions of the Corporation of New-Orleans* (New Orleans: Jerome Bayon, 1831), 139. Why they did not survive until this day, remains unclear.

A Changing Demography

Over the course of the nineteenth century, the urban marketplace grew to be a central element of the national economic growth. Work became more specialized and reliant on the division of labor, and small shops gave way to factories and heavy machinery.[656] Industrialization and mechanization increasingly reduced skilled to unskilled labor. For most enslaved people this did not necessarily mean that they lost their skills in case they managed to achieve freedom. Rather, the mass of manumitted slaves never possessed skills.[657] This was clearly even more of an issue in the Upper South, where manumissions were less selective and a class of enslaved artisans never existed to an extent comparable with Charleston. Laundry, seamstressing, day labor, cartering, and factory work—the occupations the majority of nominally free and enslaved black Americans followed offered no future.

Both male and female refugees assimilated to black-coded jobs. The coding of labor, however, was not static, and there were lower-class whites who were as desperate to make a living in the cities as black people. With significant effects on the racial landscape, this urban demography has to be taken into consideration when further pursuing the question of where runaways worked in the cities. Two contradictory forces were at work in the antebellum era that had a lasting impact on the economic position of people of African descent. First, according to Eric Foner, 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.[658] Second, following the theory of the second slavery, 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 labor market. Calvin Schermerhorn has emphasized that free and unfree labor was not easily distinguishable anymore with hundreds of self-hired slaves in the cities. Therefore, occupations became segregated as a whole, as did work places.[659]

The strategy of training slaves initially left white people behind and the new republic essentially failed to produce an independent class of white mechanics, as historian David Roediger has argued.[660] This backward position clashed with the promises of capitalism, which claims that in theory every individual free laborer can escape their fate by means of upward mobility. This upward mobility led many whites of the upcoming middle class to become obsessed with material advancement, Michael Schudson has written.[661] Although whites

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[656] Mohl, "Industrial Town and City," 6, 8-9. Not that markets were not the center of economic exchange before, but now, in the words of Zakim and Kornblith, "did these societies with markets become market societies. Michael Zakim and Gary J. Kornblith, "Introduction: An American Revolutionary Tradition," in *Capitalism Takes Command: The Social Transformation of Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Idem (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 4.

[657] This trend wore on after the official abolition of slavery, which likewise produced large numbers of freedpeople without any professional training. Berlin and Gutman, "Natives and Immigrants," 1194.

[658] Foner, *Story of American Freedom*, 19.

[659] Schermerhorn, *Money over Mastery*, 169; and Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 30. See also the legislation to formally equate free black with enslaved people (chapter one).

[660] David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), 67-68. Training one's bondspeople in a craft or trade increased their monetary value, both with regards to hiring rates and sales prices. Rockman, *Scraping By*, 50.

[661] Michael Schudson, *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 134; and Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the World. Essays Toward a Global Labor History* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008), 33. The classifications "working classes" and "working class" came up in the American

always enjoyed a higher social status, on an economic level, white workers competed on a daily basis with enslaved and free black workers for jobs and wages. For them, economic advancement might have seemed as far away as for blacks. From the 1830s on, when cities were becoming whiter, blacks were driven out of some jobs while they were able to hold their niches in others.

The blurring of the free/unfree labor divide fed into capitalism, which was never meant to make an end to unfree labor. Nor was it intended to reach everybody alike. Seth Rockman has neatly summarized that "historians must define capitalism through the power relations that channel the fruits of economic development towards those who coordinate capital to generate additional capital, who own property rather than rent it, and who compel labor rather than perform it." The control of other people's labor power, in other words, was key to social-economic mobility. People performing physical labor, however, had little say in their labor relations.[662] One of the few ways to improve things was for working-class whites consequently to demarcate themselves from those at the very bottom of society.

Although the numbers of African Americans in southern cities grew continuously, the numbers of white residents grew faster. This was foremost related to the influx of Europeans, among which the Irish were the most numerous. Looking at Louisiana, Germans often settled in rural parishes. The bulk of impoverished Irish immigrants, by contrast, who fled from the potato blight, came to live in American cities. Pre-famine migration had existed but it did not even come close to the numbers who arrived in the 1840s and early 1850s. Although most European immigrants did not stay in New Orleans but moved further west, the city constituted the second largest entry port after New York during the middle of the century. Besides New Orleans, 130,000 immigrants arrived in Baltimore between 1820 and 1850, but the city was likewise not the final destination for most. These high numbers should not distract the view from other cities. Also in Richmond, the Irish made up 46 percent of male unskilled laborers in 1860. Free blacks constituted 30 percent, according to the official census.[663]

White laborers visibly changed the faces of southern cities. Northern visitor John DeForest wrote in 1855 surprised to his brother that "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."[664] These poor newcomers integrated into the lowest segments of the labor markets where they encountered unskilled African Americans, among whom many runaway slaves. In particular, Irish newcomers were rivals to them because large numbers of them were unskilled, too, and

North for the first time in the 1820s. Stuart M. Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 242.

[662] Seth Rockman, "Unfree Origins of American Capitalism," in *The Economy of Early America. Historical Perspectives and New Directions*, ed. Cathy Matson (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 345.

[663] Nina Möllers, *Kreolische Identität: Eine Amerikanische 'Rassengeschichte' zwischen Schwarz und Weiß. Die Free People of Color in New Orleans* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2008), 100; Philip Bagenal, *The American Irish and their Influence on Irish Politics* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1882), 12-13; Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 5; Frederick Nau, *The German People of New Orleans, 1850-1900* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1958), 9; Fields, *Middle Ground*, 44; and Carey Latimore IV, "A Step Closer to Slavery? Free African Americans, Industrialization, Social Control and Residency in Richmond City, 1850-1860," *Slavery & Abolition* 33:1 (2011): 123.

[664] John William DeForest to Andrew DeForest, November 9, 1855, John William DeForest Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Room, Yale University, in Johnson and Roark, *Black Masters*, 178.

increasingly so from the mid-antebellum era onwards.[665] Due to the extension of suffrage rights to non-property-holding white men, the opposition of white the working classes to the competition of slaves and free African Americas became more strongly politicized.[666]

This phenomenon of sharpening color lines, which had a strong political and cultural side, 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 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 course of the antebellum era. Leonard Curry has recognized that urban occupations with most promising future prospects were artisan trades and although free black men eagerly aspired to them, these were exactly the ones black Americans were most likely to be barred from.[667] Opportunities for quality work further decayed relative to the respective place and African Americans found themselves in general even more allotted to underclass work.

Labor exclusion of black Americans worked in a variety of ways. Native whites had come 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."[668] 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 whilst the dining-room servants were Irish.[669] In occasions in which a white man accepted work alongside black men, it could happen that other white foreigner turned against him and forced him out.[670] Besides striking, white workers at times formed loose or more organized consolidations to push their competitors out, often using strong rhetoric or physical means to achieve their goals. In the mid-1850s, *The Daily Journal* of Indiana conveniently 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,

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[665] In 1821, 21 percent of Irish immigrants were classified as unskilled laborers; in 1836, it was 60 percent. The famine immigrants after 1845 were the most impoverished, destitute, unskilled group ever to arrive in the United States. 80 to 90 percent of them were unskilled, 90 percent were Catholic, and one third spoke only Gaelic. Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 6-7.

[666] Michael Douglas Naragon, "Ballots, Bullets, and Blood: The Political Transformation of Richmond, Virginia, 1850-1874" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1996), 4.

[667] Curry, *Free Black*, 25.

[668] Olmsted, *Cotton Kingdom*, 231. Keri Leigh Merritt has added that this also had to do with the forced relocation of about one million enslaved people from the Upper to the Lower South, where they posed a competition to lower-class whites. Keri Leigh Merritt, *Masterless Men: Poor Whites and Slavery in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 3.

[669] Olmsted, *Cotton Kingdom*, 41, 233. Hotel work was a good option for runaways in Baltimore. In 1853, when Henry Camp was already off for five months, his owner advertised: "He is an excellent waiter, and is supposed to be at some large Hotel acting in that capacity." *Sun*, November 24, 1853.

[670] Consult the account narrated by Olmsted about an English coalminer who worked with enslaved miners until "*twenty or thirty men called on him, and told him that they would allow him fifteen minutes to get out of sight, and if they ever saw him in those parts again, they would 'give him hell.' They were all armed, and there was nothing for the young fellow to do but to move 'right off.'*" Olmsted, *Seaboard Slave States*, 48.

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 […].[671]

Black people, due to the prohibition of assembly, could not organize themselves in the same manner. The participation of runaways in southern cities in the labor force was very high and an organized labor movement was weakened through the presence of undocumented workers and the general vulnerability of the black population. Instead of complaining or rioting, they presented themselves as law abiding and respectable. Assaults by black workers on white workers were extremely rare and mostly no 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. Working-class whites also used petitions to achieve political goals, yet more so towards the end of the antebellum period. The appeals were often in favor of white trades and skilled occupations. A petition from Virginia in 1831 complained about skilled slaves present in 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 and from the state entirely "to find in the west an asylum where he [they] will be appreciated according to his Honesty, industry and ingenuity."[672]

What these petitioners made sound like a devastating disadvantage for white mechanics was in reality the pointing to an alternative to city life which black people were likewise barred from. The lands in the West, violently taken from native communities by the United States government, were foreseen to be exclusively sold or granted to whites. However, according to Keri Leigh Merritt, by the 1830s, the stolen land became too expensive in the older slave states for poor and lower-middle class whites. So, they were likewise stuck in the competitive urban labor markets.[673] In 1837 in Baltimore, white petitioners asked to expulse them of any artisan trade, and in 1844, they aimed at putting paid to black carpenters and at levying additional taxes on all other black artisans.[674]

Through heavy competition, whites of the lower-middle and working classes 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

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[671] *Daily Journal*, July 20, 1856 [?]. Caulking was an occupation fiercely contested between black and white in the 1850s in Baltimore. On coverage see *Sun*, May 14, 18, 21, 25; June 28, 29; July 8; November 4, 1858; June 3,4, 7, 29, 1859; *Baltimore American*, February 12; July 8; October 11, 1858; and *American and Commercial Daily Advertiser*, July 8, 1858. Note that this was only one part of the story. Native and foreign-born whites did move against black workers but native whites likewise acted against foreigners, for instance, by forming violent gangs. Berlin and Gutman, "Natives and Immigrants," 1197.

[672] William Walden, John Peyton, Churchill Berry, John R. Tanesly, and Charles E. Dodge to the General Assembly of Virginia, December 9, 1831, Culpeper County, Virginia, Legislative Petitions, VSA, Race and Slavery Petitions Project, Series 1, Legislative Petitions, LOC.

[673] Merritt, *Masterless Men*, 3.

[674] Curry, *Free Black*, 17. Also see multiple petitions in Legislative Petitions, SCDAH; and Race and Slavery Petitions Project, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, URL: https://library.uncg.edu/slavery/petitions/index.aspx?s=1, accessed March 8, 2019.

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 employees 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 […]."[675] In case of non-payment they would be punished to labor in the workhouse.

This was an incentive to reserve black labor for white employers, and African Americans were largely powerless against these assaults. The legislative framework rendered their status extremely unfavorable, which left them with nearly no civil and legal 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. Slavery was a powerful tool to keep free black people in their illegitimate limbo. With large parts of the black population being illegal, and slavery threatening the nominal freedom of its members, African Americans as a group were vulnerable and extremely exploited in the labor market. Despite the hardship, most people of African descent tried their best to play along. For them, the deck was stacked differently than for all other groups who were taken in under the auspices of whiteness. 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.

And in fact, as historian Jim Cullen has argued, the first five decades of the nineteenth century were the best time to be a white man in terms of upward mobility.[676] They refused to work at eye level with black people while black people ferociously tried to fight the idea of being equated with slaves. It was an unequal struggle. And it was not only white Americans who noticed this change. Black laborers felt the pressure every day and black leaders loudly articulated their warnings from the 1830s onwards.[677] Although the precariousness of black Americans in the urban labor markets grew, an ever-increasing number of runaway slaves joined them in the cities. Their absorption was facilitated by the growing segregation of work places.

Black Americans often tried to actively counteract the racial coding and the extent of white competition. This becomes apparent by white petitions written as a reaction to their actions. White mechanics in Charleston complained about the power of enslaved domestic workers to hand jobs to mechanics and craftsmen on behalf of their owners: "many of the most opulent Inhabitants of Charleston, when they have any work to be done, do not send it themselves, but leave it to their Domestics to employ what Workmen they please," the white mechanics claimed. And to point to one of the reasons why it was difficult for them to find enough work, they added that "it universally happens that those Domestics prefer Men of their own Color and condition, and as to a greatness of business thus continually passing through their hands, the Black Mechanics enjoy as complete a monopoly as if it were secured to them

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[675] Quoted in Greene, Hutchins, and Hutchins, *Slave Badges*, 51-52.
[676] Jim Cullen, *American Dream. A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 69.
[677] Jay Rubin, "Black Nativism: The European Immigrant in Negro Thought, 1830-1860," *Phylon* 39:3 (1978): 198-199.

by Law."[678] Far from having a monopoly, the extent to which black people could hand each other work was limited.

The dynamics of expelling black Americans increased through the competition of poor European newcomers, yet it did not affect all places in a similar manner.[679] Newspaper announcements show job openings and reveal racial preferences for certain occupations. In Baltimore, for instance, white washerwomen were preferred over blacks: Wanted immediately "At the Baltimore Laundry, a few more WASHERWOMEN (white). Colored women need not apply—Irish or German preferred."[680] Charleston maintained a variety of jobs with and without preferences of skin color. On a single day in 1859, job ads asked for a black wet nurse; a "YOUNG MULATTO FELLOW, as a Porter in some store;" a "competent WAITING MAN" to be hired "from his owner [ergo, a slave]; a "BOY TO ATTEND THE House and Drive a Rockaway [implicitly black]; four times "A COMPETENT HOUSE SERVANT and one "GOOD HOUSE SERVANT" [no color preference]; a white or black cook for a family; four boot makers [no color preference]; a good cook, washer and ironer [no color preference]; a "NEGRO MAN TO DRIVE a carriage and take care of horses;" and a black boy as a waiter.[681]

In Baltimore, white American women monopolized seamstressing and when Europeans began to join the labor market, they competed with black women in their occupation as laundresses. Striking is the preference of white Americans for either black, white, or European laborers in certain jobs. Because self-identification with people who look different is complicated, as Dirk Hoerder has claimed, it is easier for employers to exploit them. This is why certain ethnic groups can dominate a sector, for instance, domestic service. Moreover, it covers the unequal power relations which would usually be visible within these labor relations.[682] Some sectors, as a consequence, were dominated by particular ethnicities. Their blackness allowed slave refugees and undocumented residents to enter certain segments of the labor market while at the same time ensuring their exploitation in these segments. The employment of free black women as domestic workers was therefore also a continuation of white/black-master/slave relations explicit in slavery.

This occupation brought with it a very personal relationship between the employers and the employees. Many were perhaps reluctant to let Irish women into their homes, who were of a new, suspicious group. Black women, by contrast, had been under the dominance of white people for a long time, a thought that might have been reassuring. Thomas Pinckney, Charleston's former governor, confirmed the reluctance to hire white domestics: "the habits of our inhabitants render them averse to employing such [white] domestics; having seen these offices constantly occupied by slaves, they would, with reluctance, exact similar services from those whom nature, as well as the law, have made their equals."[683] Consistent with this

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[678] To the Honorable the President and Members of the Senate of S. Carolina, Petition of Sundry Mechanics of the City of Charleston, n. d., S165015, Petitions to the General Assembly, SCDAH.

[679] Initially, black Americans had the hope to convince the Irish immigrants to join them in their struggle for equal rights and the abolition of slavery. Frederick Douglass even travelled to Ireland in 1845 and attempted to influence the Irish to speak out against slavery. Alan Rice, "Transatlantic Portrayals of Frederick Douglass and his Liberating Sojourn in Music and Visual Arts 1845-2015," in *Pictures and Power: Imaging and Imagining Frederick Douglass 1818-2018*, ed. Celeste-Marie Bernier and Bill E. Lawson (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017).

[680] *Sun*, May 18, 1853.

[681] *Charleston Daily Courier*, December 15, 1859.

[682] Hoerder, "Gendered Labour Migration," 40.

[683] Thomas Pinckney, *Reflections Occasioned by the Late Disturbances in Charleston. By Achates* (Charleston: A. E. Miller, 1822), 18.

interpretation, by 1860, 4,500 enslaved women labored as domestics in Richmond.[684] The closer to the Civil War, the more accustomed white employers grew to the idea of employing white before black workers.[685] When the wage difference between whites and blacks was narrow, Michael Thompson has claimed for Charleston, they often preferred whites. Corresponding to these trends, growing numbers of native and immigrant whites took over carpentry in Charleston.[686]

The developments were visible. Frederick Olmsted observed in Richmond that immigrants drove black people out of lower-class jobs. In the 1850s, most cartmen, coachmen, porters, railroad workers, waiters, and day laborers but also skilled mechanics were white, according to his observations. Black people working in these jobs were mostly free.[687] This was a significant difference to Charleston and New Orleans. In Baltimore, almost all job ads for domestics referred to black women in the first three decades of the nineteenth century, as found by Stephanie Cole. Afterwards, white women pushed into this sector.[688] 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. Also, both men and women were still present in service jobs by the mid-century. These included barbers, cooks, waiters, laundresses, domestic servants, and porters.[689] 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.

Accepted Exploitation

Runaways gravitating to southern cities were aware of the limited employment opportunities and the economic shortcomings but preferred a life in poverty over a life in bondage. The popularity of cities had an ambiguous side to it given the generally lower life expectancy compared to rural areas. Scholars have stressed that the larger the city was, the higher the mortality risk in nineteenth-century America. Pollution, unpaved streets, garbage, horse droppings, dust and waste from manufactories, and emissions from ever more factories harmed the health of urban residents.[690]

In the proximity of the factories, slave housing ranged from "nearly uninhabitable to tolerable, at best," Midori Takagi has stated.[691] However, free black and white laborers sometimes lived in worse conditions. Slaveholders wanted to make their slaves and society believe that black people were worse off in freedom than in slavery, but reports on the housing situation of free black people were often gloomy indeed. Physician Thomas Buckler reported that in Baltimore, families crowded themselves into insufficient tenements infested with

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[684] Takagi, *Rearing Wolves*, 88.
[685] This is a general tendency and variations in worksite and geography must not be neglected.
[686] Thompson, *Working on the Dock*, 115; and Powers, "Black Charleston," 53-54.
[687] Olmsted, *Cotton Kingdom*, 231, 233.
[688] Stephanie Cole, "Servants and Slaves: Domestic Service in the Border Cities, 1800-1850" (Ph.D. diss., University of Florida, 1994), 62; and Rockman, *Scraping By*, 115.
[689] Olson, *Baltimore*, 120.
[690] Louis Cain and Sok Chul Hong, "Survival in 19th Century Cities: The Larger the City, the Smaller Your Chances," *Explorations in Economic History* 46:4 (2009): 450-463.
[691] Takagi, *Rearing Wolves*, 45, 97.

vermin. Frederick Law Olmsted noted that "very dirty German Jews […] are thickly set in the narrowest, meanest streets, which seem to be otherwise inhabited mainly by negroes" in Richmond.[692] Public boards of health were formed in American cities to control epidemics like cholera, typhoid, and diphtheria. Yellow fever and cholera plagues are reported from all places but New Orleans was struck hardest. It suffered a number of yellow fever epidemics, notably in the 1820s, 1832, 1847, and the most destructive one in 1852 leaving thousands of people dead. Although yellow fever, in contrast to cholera, hit white city dwellers more severely than blacks, the life expectancy of the latter was in general lower. Additionally, the percentage of urban African American children was markedly lower than of their white counterparts.[693]

The dissimilarities in birthrates can be explained by generally lower living standards of black people as well as by the fact that thousands of them did not register themselves or their children. Poor people usually lived close to their working places, in the case of Richmond, for example, in the neighborhoods of industrial production. Olmsted observed during his travels in the South that the city was compactly built between "some considerable hills" and lying amongst "a dull of cloud of bituminous smoke."[694] The higher death rates were equally a consequence of precarious housing and health-threatening work as well as of a numerical discrepancy between deaths, that were registered, and living residents, who often were not.

The large numbers of refugees and undocumented African Americans in southern cities certainly impacted the labor markets. Capitalist labor markets were supportive for runaways to integrate because they did not rely on personal acquaintance but rather on flexibility and adaptability. Because they were even more vulnerable than legally free African Americans, it is likely that their presence in the labor markets partly contributed to the low wage situation. The heavy competition and the disadvantages for people of African descent that resulted from this became a tangible reality every time wages were paid. Seth Rockman has shown that until the 1830s, hired slaves, free African Americans, immigrant and native whites received the same remuneration for the same work in Baltimore.[695] When in 1838, 150 laborers were needed for the Baltimore and Ohio Canal, the subscriber offered $1.25 per day without mentioning a preference for race.[696] Yet, looking at the entire antebellum period and at all southern places, black people received on average less remuneration for their work than whites. Black people, to defend themselves against the dynamics of exclusion, were forced to offer their labor power cheaper and, hence, kept the overall wages low. George Teamoh, for instance, stated that wages for black men at a Norfolk Dry-Dock ranged from $1.50 to $1.62 per day in the 1840s. White workers received $2 or more.[697] Historian Midori Takagi has likewise observed that by 1837, two thirds of canal constructers in Virginia were white. This trend was due to the arrival of Irish and Scottish workers in the late 1830s who infused the urban areas with thousands of unskilled

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[692] Buckler, *Epidemic Cholera*, 5; and Olmsted, *Cotton Kingdom*, 42, 48.
[693] Schultz and McShane, "Engineer the Metropolis," 82; Daphne Spain, "Race Relations and Residential Segregation in New Orleans: Two Centuries of Paradox," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 441 (1979): 87; and Curry, *Free Black*, 11-12. For an account on the relationship of yellow fever with the city of New Orleans, see Urmi Engineer Willoughby, *Yellow Fever, Race, and Ecology in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2017).
[694] Olmsted, *Cotton Kingdom*, 32-33.
[695] Rockman, *Scraping By*, 47.
[696] *Sun*, August 11, 1838. Although white and black men largely executed the same tasks, there were physically kept apart from each other. Schermerhorn, *Money over Mastery*, 168.
[697] Teamoh, *God Made Man*, 82.

laborers. Nevertheless, companies were far from satisfied with the stability of the labor supply.[698]

Especially in the 1850s, the constant complaints by employers about labor shortages made dissatisfaction visible. This did not necessarily mean that there were not sufficient workers, as Barbara Fields and Seth Rockman agree, but rather that the wages were considered to be too high, the term 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 bargain about working conditions.[699] 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. Racism among the lower classes was a welcome tool to keep the competition going and even Irish and German laborers were at times pitted against each other. As a result, for example, wages fell from $1.25 to 87.5 cents a day at the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal in 1839.[700]
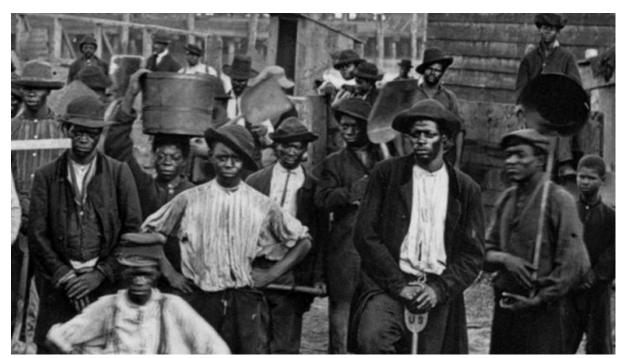

Figure 25: Laborers at a Wharf in Virginia, 1863[701]

It was usually up to the employers to set the wages but at times there were also attempts to formalize exploitation. The City Council of Charleston tried to freeze the daily wages of black day laborers and porters at $1 in 1837: "For a full day's labor, which is to be from sun rise till twilight in the evening, (allowing one hour for breakfast and one hour for dinner) one dollar—

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[698] Takagi, *Rearing Wolves*, 32-33.

[699] Rockman, *Scraping By*, 4; and Fields, *Middle Ground*, 67. Tom Brass has argued that "labor shortage" implied that workers held certain leeway to offer and withdraw their labor power. Tom Brass, "Some Observations on Unfree Labour, Capitalist Restructuring, and Deproletarianization," in *Free and Unfree Labour. The Debate Continues*, ed. Tom Brass and Marcel van der Linden (Berne: Peter Lang, 1997), 73.

[700] Olson, *Baltimore*, 119.

[701] Andrew Joseph Russell, "Laborers at Quartermaster's Wharf, Alexandria, Virginia, 1863," Metropolitan Museum of Arts, Wikimedia Commons, URL:
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Laborers_at_Quartermaster%27s_Wharf,_Alexandria,_Virginia_MET
_DP274790.jpg, accessed July 20, 2019.

and for less than a day's labor, at the rate of twelve and a half cents for an hour."[702] In New Orleans, enslaved day laborers were equally not permitted to earn more than $1 a day.[703] When wages or transport rates were fixed by municipal governments, black people had to go under these rates.[704] Those paid by the day had to work harder to prove their worthiness and those being paid by piece, for instance seamstresses, had to produce more in order to make up for the pay gap.

On average, day laborers earned $1 per day in the first decades of the antebellum era and $1.25 to $1.50 towards the Civil War. Frederick Douglass earned $1.50 in 1838 when he "was able to command the highest wages given to the most experienced calkers." [705] Remuneration for free and enslaved black people did not really differ. Wages for who were seen as "free" workers probably even derived from the hiring prices of slaves, as claimed by Eulália Lobo and Eduardo Stotz.[706] Other historians have claimed that the high supply on the labor markets, caused by the competition of African Americans, low-class white Americans, and European immigrants led to an anomaly in the 1850s when economic growth and declining wages for unskilled and semi-skilled workers coincided.[707] For instance, when George Teamoh started working at a dock yard at the Richmond Basin in 1853, he earned $1.25 per day as a common laborer.[708] This was less than he had made as a hired slave a couple of years ago and the same salary unskilled construction workers had received 15 years prior.

The average yearly price to hire an enslaved woman in Richmond was $34 during the first four decades of the nineteenth century; for men it was $70.[709] Private bookkeeping shows that a slaveholder named Ford, who made a business out of training and hiring out his bondspeople in Charleston, received in the 1820s a monthly pay of between $2.50 and $3.50. In his diary we see that Ford regularly raised the hire of his slaves receiving between $5 and $7 by the late 1820s and 1830s. Individual slaves with special skills brought more money. Ned, for example, was hired as a sawyer in 1817 and made $10 per month for Ford; the same amount was paid for Samuel in 1840.[710] Immigrant and native whites, although in some segments of the labor market glued to the same or similar wages as black people, had—in theory—a greater variety of occupations to choose from. To name just one example, Philip Whitlock was a Polish-Jewish immigrant in Butchertown, Richmond. Although he started off with a very low income

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[702] Eckhard, *Digest of the Ordinances*, "Negroes," CCPL. This was actually a raise from 81 cents set in 1817.

[703] Augustin, *General Digest*, 141. People, in order to survive with an infrequent income of maximum $1 per day, depended on their inclusion in households. This has comprehensively been laid out by Seth Rockman. Rockman, *Scraping By*, 160-173.

[704] White draymen petitioned the City Council of Charleston in 1854 to ask for an increase in rates that had been established by law in 1837. Their petition was rejected. Thompson, *Working on the Dock*, 115.

[705] Douglass, *Narrative of the Life*, 98.

[706] Eulália L. Lobo and Eduardo N. Stotz, "Formação do operariado e movimento operário no Rio de Janeiro, 1870-1894," *Estudos Econômicos* 15 (1985): 57, in Marcelo Badaró Mattos, *Laborers and Enslaved Workers. Experiences in Common in the Making of Rio de Janeiro's Working Class, 1850-1920* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2017), 22.

[707] Goldfield, "Black Life," 134-135.

[708] Teamoh, *God Made Man*, 90-91.

[709] Takagi, *Rearing Wolves*, 23.

[710] Ford strategically placed young slaves to learn how to cook, wash, and sew, and to get apprenticed in the trades of carpenter, tailor and pastry cook. Ford Family Papers, 1809-1968, Manuscripts P, SCLC.

of $2.50 per week for his first job, he quickly rose up making $6 to $7 as a tailor. This was a job coded white and Whitlock was taken in by his own ethnic network.[711]

Besides the actual lower wages black people often received, white men benefitted from what W. E. B. Du Bois has called "psychological wage" and David Roediger "wages of whiteness." These concepts refer to a compensation of low wages by the social and political privileges white men possessed.[712] Societal rules, for instance, a fair relation between the work done and the wages received, eventually were not evenly applied to all players of the game. Racism, white supremacy, nativism, and sexism saw to it that numerous social groups remained outside the spectrum of opportunities while the window simultaneously opened to include a few others. Women, foreigners, and all men by the standards of the time considered non-white faced structural and ad-hoc discrimination.

If times were hard for black men, there were even harder for black women, especially when they were single. Being in a relationship with a man did not mean for American women to live a life of ease but being single almost always included drudgery and poverty. This is recognizable on basis of the wages; Amrita Chakrabarti Myers has claimed the same with the help of property ownership. In Charleston, where the share of black women was higher than that of black men, men nevertheless owned more taxable property than women.[713] In all cities, black women were confronted with major hardships just to make ends meet. The racial division of the labor market was for them further aggravated by gender hierarchies that placed them in a doubly disadvantaged situation. This was a time when white Richmonders and Baltimoreans expressed grave concerns about the working and living conditions of poor *white* women, many of whom could barely make a living as seamstresses or laundresses, as confirmed by Seth Rockman and Michael Douglas Naragon.[714] If white women had such a difficult time then one can only imagine the struggles that African American women—especially those who lived in the city illegally—faced. It was an arduous life. A mother without the financial support of a husband had to literally work round the clock to make ends meet for her family, and overwork took its toll on many women.

This weighs even heavier when considering that they strongly outnumbered men in the South and even more so in the cities.[715] Since the income of a black men sufficed to feed a family in much less cases than that of a white man, black women who stayed at home were

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[711] Whitlock spent between $3 and $3.50 on board and rent and was, hence, able to save money and start his own business. Philip Whitlock Memoirs, Mss 5: IW5905: I, 67, 71, 74-75, VHS.

[712] Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*. Roediger built upon W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*. Introduction by David Levering Lewis (New York, London, Toronto, and Sydney: Free Press, 1992), 700-701, originally published 1935. A related approach has been made by Cedric Robinson who argued that the issue of race had long been yoked to commodity labor. "Racial capitalism" helps understand how whiteness functions to discipline people into split labor markets. Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism. The Making of the Black Radical Tradition.* Foreword by Robin D. G. Kelley. With a New Preface by the Author (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 2, originally published London: Zed Press, 1983; and Keelyn Bradley, "Working-Class Politics and the Carceral State," *Black Perspectives* (February 6, 2019), URL: https://www.aaihs.org/working-class-politics-and-the-carceral-state/, accessed March 15, 2019.

[713] Myers, *Forging Freedom*, 115, 119.

[714] Rockman, *Scraping By*, 140; and Naragon, "Ballots, Bullets, and Blood," 48.

[715] The background was women's overrepresentation as urban slaves, the discriminatory manumission patterns, and the higher mobility of men which allowed many of them to migrate to the North. (In the northern border states, black men outnumbered women.) Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters*, 177.

rare.[716] Competition by immigrant women was, by the later antebellum decade, furthermore not the only challenge black female workers had to face. In some cases, competition did not come from other demographic groups but through technological advancement. The commercialization of laundry in Baltimore, for example, aggravated the situation of black washerwomen. Instead of washing on their own account at home, they increasingly worked in large-scale laundries.[717]

Those who followed more stable occupations also faced disadvantages. Scholars have argued that service professions and jobs that required customers were more lucrative if the clientele had means to spend. Even those occupations which looked good on paper usually did not pave the way for economic advancement. White customers, due to their higher purchasing power, were important to black service providers but often the latter were stuck with a clientele belonging to the lowest classes themselves. Black people with a very dark skin had additional disadvantages since whites preferred to do business with mulattos. Things looked bleak. In 1860, 94 percent of free blacks in South Carolina lived in extreme poverty. At the most, they had some clothes, a number of things used in the household, maybe some tools, and even less often a mule or cow. Some had little amount of money but they desperately depended on wages.[718]

This initial situation did not differ much from the few things Irish immigrants and slave refugees brought with them. Germans, by contrast, often came with tools because they were farmers and were planning to seek a future in this occupation.[719] There were indeed a great many things, real and imagined, material and ideological, that connected the lower classes of all races, nativities, and sexes, yet no group was in such a long-lasting precarious situation as people of African descent. Widespread discussions about the rapid integration of Irish Catholic immigrants in the nineteenth century and the relative success story of their moving up and acquiring "whiteness" often focus on the racist climate in society. Less often they account for the actual and very real, legal barriers that kept African Americans from advancing. For example, tax payments for black people were higher than for whites.

For runaway slaves and other undocumented residents, 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. Johnson and Roark have insinuated that black people could just make these payments, but in reality it was not that easy.[720] There was a constant danger that, after the death of their legal owner, they could be exposed or they could be seized for possible debts. For most illegals, and especially refugees, it was safer to keep a low profile. It seems that the venture always depended on the context. On the one hand, if people did not have white benefactors to vouch for them, many probably would not have dared to expose themselves by registering

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[716] Black women and men furthermore had to work in order to avoid to be arrested under the local vagrancy laws. Myers, *Forging Freedom*, 78.

[717] Newspaper articles testifying to the precarious situation of free black city dwellers are numerous. Susan Bradford, for instance, "residing in the rear Half-moon alley" in Baltimore attempted suicide in 1838 "because she had not sufficient shelter from the cold." *Sun*, February 22, 1838.

[718] Curry, *Free Black*, 23; Berlin, "Free Negro Caste," 308; and Johnson and Roark, *Black Masters*, 60-61.

[719] Ernst Brauns, *Ideen über die Auswanderung nach Amerika; nebst Beiträgen zur genaueren Kenntnis seiner Bewohner und seines gegenwärtigen Zustandes. Nach eignen Ansichten und den neuesten Quellen und Hülfsmitteln* (Göttingen: Bandenhoed and Ruprecht: 1827), 564, JFK. Travel reports were sold in Germany which featured sections with recommendations on certain occupations and assessments of the competition with free black Americans. Bromme, *Reisen durch die Vereinigten Staaten*, 148-152, 155-156, JFK.

[720] Johnson and Roark, *Black Masters*, 44.

property. On the other hands, southern states enacted capitation taxes that were severe. 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, these requirements were much lower for white than for black people, in most states significantly less than $1 per year. When a white person could not meet these expenses, they would be listed as insolvent.[721] By contrary, black people could be jailed and non-payment of the jail fees could send them back to forced labor or slavery.

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. Leonard Curry has offered as an explanation the higher death rates of free African American men,[722] yet the city tax returns of Charleston suggest that African American men disappeared from the tax lists once they turned 21. In Charleston, free women of African descent between 18 and 50 were required to pay $5 per year. If they were between 14 and 18, the fee was reduced to $3. Meanwhile, men between 16 and 21 years of age had to pay $5. Afterwards they were charged $10 until they turned 60.[723] 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.[724] 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 of Charleston counted 68 women between 14 and 18 and an equal number of men between 16 and 21 in 1858. In the same year, 341 women above 18 paid head taxes in comparison to only 181 men older than 21. In the upper wards and in the following year, the numbers were similar.[725] The suggestion is close that 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. Not paying taxes could maneuver legally free people into a situation in which freedom became threatened. This brought them closer to the undocumented population.

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. Robert Steinfeld and Stanley Engerman 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."[726] These strategies maneuvered black people into

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[721] Merritt, *Masterless Men*, 169.

[722] As Leonard Curry has noted, the prioritization of female slaves for manumission does not suffice to explain the differentials. Additionally, the national free black population was likewise predominately female. Yet, he also allows for the possibility that "census enumerators may also have failed to report significant numbers of free black male urban residents" who were absent from the city due to seasonal jobs in the summer when censuses were taken. Curry, *Free Black*, 9-10, FN 16.

[723] The city of Charleston earned around $10,000 with this legislation in 1859. Statement of the Finances of Charleston for Fiscal Year Ending August 31, 1859, in *Charleston Courier*, October 4, 1859. This was actually an additional burden for black people because the state of South Carolina also required them to pay an annual capitation tax of $2. Myers, *Forging Freedom*, 80.

[724] *American Christian Expositor*, November 1, 1832. Maryland did introduce a head tax of $1.50 for immigrants in 1831. *Niles' Register*, April 23, 1831, in Olson, *Baltimore*, 91.

[725] "City Tax Returns," in *Charleston Courier*, October 4, 1859.

[726] Robert J. Steinfeld and Stanley L. Engerman, "Labor—Free and Coerced? A Historical Reassessment of Differences and Similarities," in *Free and Unfree Labour. The Debate Continues*, ed. Tom Brass and Marcel van der Linden (Berne: Peter Lang, 1997), 109-110.

conditions where they were forced to engage in qualitatively lower and quantitatively higher work. This outcome connects the observation already made. Consequently, extreme precariousness 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 term "accepted exploitation" encompasses these dynamics well.[727]

Conclusion

Antebellum urban labor markets were coded along race and legal status. This had consequences for slave refugees, who—being black and undocumented—felt the effects of both codes. These codes were dynamic and developed over time, generally to the disadvantage of people of African descent. The refugees' presence in the labor markets, although facilitated by the solidarity of and possibility to camouflage among them, worked to the disadvantage of free black people. This was not as clearly visible as, for instance, the legal restrictions that were precipitated by their actively harboring refugees. But free African Americans forfeited even more of their already severely restricted leeway by counting among their group large parts of illegal and, hence, powerless workers. Through a combination of economic and extra-economic forces (formal and customary law), black people were driven to the bottom of the economic system.[728]

Slave refugees, in order to navigate the spaces that the labor markets offered, had to be able to decipher the coded working areas and worksite. Especially male runaways who, according to their profile, were often trained in skilled and semi-skilled occupations, integrated into the economy below their capacities. Those who were familiar with the place or had networks which fed them with the corresponding information, usually succeeded at finding work. Slave refugees integrated into the labor markets of southern cities by passing as free black people or self-hired slaves. Due to the restrictions, black workers had to work harder and, in competition with lower-class whites and European immigrants, accept lower remuneration. This kept the overall wages low and provided capitalist employers with the cheap work force they wanted.

Strikingly, capitalist development, which relied on flexibility and low labor costs, created conditions that were beneficial for the undocumented. Because undocumented black Americans were willing to offer very cheap 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 spaces for more refugees and other undocumented people, and the number of illegal freedom seekers in southern cities grew correspondingly. The following chapter, lastly, will discuss how these processes were in the interests of those who presided over the local economy.

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[727] David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 144. 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.
[728] For economic v. extra-economic factors, see Brass, "Some Observations," 59.