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## **Northward bound: Slave refugees and the pursuit of freedom in the Northern US and Canada, 1775-1861**

Kennedy, O.P.

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***Part I: Escaping Bondage***

*Northward Bound*

## **Chapter One**

### ***Self-Emancipation and the Evolving Landscape of Slavery and Freedom in North America*<sup>58</sup>**

Before the Age of Revolutions, black enslavement was legal across North America. African and African-descended people were enslaved across the United States, Canada, and Mexico. Far from the traditional ‘North-to-South’ paradigm, slave refugees fled in a multitude of routes, including from South to North, between the northern states, from the North to Canada, within the Canadian provinces, and even from Canada to the United States. At a time when formal ‘free soil’ did not exist on the continent, freedom seekers fled in a multitude of directions. Between the American Revolutionary War and the US Civil War, the landscape of slavery and freedom in North America changed dramatically. The Revolutionary Era was a turning point for the continent for several reasons. First, it marked the emergence of informal and formal free-soil spaces in North America. During the Revolutionary War, the British government offered asylum and liberty to enslaved people who escaped from the American Revolutionaries to Loyalist lines. This amnesty was formulated primarily for strategic reasons but, for thousands of enslaved men, women, and children, it offered a glimmer of hope. The British employed the same strategy during the War of 1812.

The geopolitical landscape of North America changed dramatically during this period. First, the northern states and Canadian provinces enacted gradual abolition measures which prohibited the further introduction of enslaved people. Historian Arthur Zilversmit dubbed this movement the ‘first emancipation.’ This development, writes Steven Hahn, “created a free-labor zone that has long been known as “‘the North[.]’” From the outset, self-emancipated refugees from the Upper South and beyond headed north by the thousands with the hope of claiming their freedom. Moreover, some enslaved people from British North America also exploited the post-Revolutionary War legal jurisdictions to claim their liberty by escaping to the United States. But as slavery declined in the North and Canada, the direction of traffic increasingly shifted towards a ‘North-to-South’ migratory pattern.<sup>59</sup>

At the same time, the institution of slavery was revolutionized in the US South. Most obviously, it witnessed the rapid expansion of enslaved-based plantation economies and the ‘cotton boom’ in the Lower South and Southwest. The closure of

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<sup>58</sup> Portions of this chapter were adapted for the article Oran Kennedy, “Slave Refugees, Self-Emancipation, and the Evolving Landscape of Freedom in the United States and Canada,” *Leidschrift* (forthcoming).

<sup>59</sup> Arthur Zilversmit, *The First Emancipation: The Abolition of Slavery in the North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967); Steven Hahn, *The Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 4.

the Atlantic slave trade and the relative decline of slavery in the Chesapeake and Tidewater Virginia created a lucrative interregional trade in enslaved men, women, and children. Dale Tomich refers to the development of new enslaved-based economies in North America and elsewhere as the ‘second slavery.’ As slavery fell into decline across the Upper South (most notably in Virginia and Maryland), enslavers increasingly opted to sell enslaved men and women to the developing Lower South and Southwestern enslaved economies. Enslaved African American families were routinely separated by the interregional trade; husbands were sold away from their wives, and parents from the children. Against this backdrop, freedom seekers in the Upper South increasingly looked to escape northward to the ‘free’ states and Canada.<sup>60</sup>

This chapter traces the evolving landscape of slavery and freedom in North America. It explains how Canada and the northern US emerged as respective spaces of formal and semi-formal free soil. First, it will demonstrate that the Revolutionary War, and later the War of 1812, created temporary spaces of refuge for black freedom seekers in the United States. Moreover, it will discuss how the gradual abolition of slavery in the North and Canada, compounded by the consolidation of black enslavement in the US South, encouraged self-emancipators (particularly in the Upper South) to increasingly flee northward. In short, this chapter examines how black freedom seekers fled from their enslavers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In particular, it analyzes the motivations and strategies of self-emancipators during wartime. Furthermore, this chapter examines how the northern US and Canada emerged as semi-formal and formal spaces of freedom, and why African American refugees increasingly fled from the US South to these regions.

### ***Refugees in Wartime: Self-Emancipators in the Revolutionary War and War of 1812***

The origins of black enslavement in North America can be traced back to the colonial period. Across the continent, British, Dutch, French, Spanish, and other European colonizers forcibly migrated tens of thousands of enslaved African to the territories which would later become Canada, the United States, and Mexico. According to David Brion Davis, some enslaved Africans were documented “as early as the 1560s” in Spanish Florida. Elsewhere, enslaved Africans first arrived in the early seventeenth

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<sup>60</sup> Dale W. Tomich, *Through the Prism of Slavery: Labor, Capital, and World Economy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Little, 2004), 56-71. For more on the “second slavery,” see Anthony Kaye, “The Second Slavery: Modernity in the Nineteenth-Century South and the Atlantic World,” *Journal of Southern History* 75, no. 3 (2009), 627-650; Dale Tomich (ed.), *The Politics of the Second Slavery* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2016).

century. Several systems of black enslavement emerged across the continent, including large-scale agricultural production, small farmsteads, and urban slavery. Additionally, indigenous groups throughout North America were enslaved by European colonizers and white indentured servants emigrated from England, Scotland, France, and elsewhere.<sup>61</sup>

During the colonial period, enslaved Africans and African-descended people escaped from their enslavers in desperate bids for liberty. “No single act of self-assertion,” claims historian Peter H. Wood, “was more significant among slaves or more disconcerting among whites than that of running away.” Self-emancipation, however, proved extremely difficult on a continent in which black enslavement was enshrined in law. In the Mid-Atlantic and New England, freedom seekers attempted to sneak aboard ships and seafaring vessels in port towns and cities. Yet, as noted by Jared Ross Hardesty, self-emancipation “was uncertain and fraught with danger... liberty was always amorphous in an unfree world that steadfastly refused to recognize black freedom.” Escaped slave advertisements for enslaved Africans and African-descended people appeared in colonial New England, Mid-Atlantic, and southern newspapers. Hardesty asserts that forty percent of subjects in Boston newspaper advertisements between 1700 and 1750 “were African slaves.” For most enslaved people, self-emancipation and permanent escape remained a distant dream as long as slavery was legally upheld across the continent.<sup>62</sup>

The Revolutionary War upended the geopolitical landscape of North America and would have dramatic consequences for the institution of black enslavement. The American colonists’ growing desire for independence from Great Britain led to the beginning of the conflict. Enslaved Africans and African-descended people exploited the fluid, shifting geopolitical landscape of the conflict by escaping

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<sup>61</sup> David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 124-140. The historiography of slavery in the colonial United States is too voluminous to list in its entirety. For key overviews of US slavery in the colonial era, see Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, Chapters 1-8; Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 21-96; Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 28-62. Citations refer to the Penguin edition. For an overview of colonial slavery in the Canadian provinces, see Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*, 1-23.

<sup>62</sup> Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), 239; Warren, *New England Bound*, 212-216; Hardesty, *Unfreedom*, 3, 62. Hardesty asserts that “over ninety” freedom seekers were featured in Boston-based newspapers between 1700 and 1750. Examples of escaped slave advertisements from Mid-Atlantic newspapers, including the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, *New York Gazette*, and *New Jersey Gazette*, see Graham Russell Hodges and Alan Edward Brown (eds.), “Pretends to Be Free”: *Runaway Slave Advertisements from Colonial and Revolutionary New York and New Jersey* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994), and Billy G. Smith and Richard Wojtowicz, *Blacks Who Stole Themselves: Advertisements for Runaways in the “Pennsylvania Gazette,” 1728-90* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989). For examples of escaped slave advertisements from the *South Carolina Gazette*, see Wood, *Black Majority*, 239-268. For escaped slave advertisements which focuses solely on female self-emancipators in the Revolutionary Era, see Don N. Hagist (ed.), *Wives, Slaves, and Servant Girls: Advertisements for Female Runaways in American Newspapers, 1770-1783* (Yardley, PA: Westholme Publishing, 2016).

to new spaces of freedom to claim their liberty. During the Revolutionary War, African American freedom seekers escaped from their colonial enslavers to Loyalist-occupied zones with the hope of claiming asylum with the British. Facing a shortage of manpower and forced to contend with the increasing numbers of black refugees, the British government sanctioned the reception of self-emancipators into the British armies in exchange for their formal freedom. On November 7, 1775, the Royal Governor of Virginia Lord Dunmore issued a proclamation which had sweeping implications for enslaved people in North America. It promised formal freedom to all “indentured servants, negroes... willing to serve His Majesty’s forces to end the present rebellion.” Far from an abolitionist decree, Dunmore’s motivations were purely strategic. The British hoped to enlist black labor and inspire unrest among enslaved communities. Dunmore’s proclamation was an unprecedented promise of asylum and liberty to enslaved people of color in the colonies. Crucially, it extended this offer only to those who were enslaved by the Revolutionaries, and not those who remained loyal to the Crown.<sup>63</sup>

Dunmore’s Proclamation had a dramatic effect on the Revolutionary War. Political and military leaders of the Revolution understood the potential ramifications of Dunmore’s offer. The manager of George Washington’s Mount Vernon estate, Lund Washington, acknowledged that, among Washington’s enslaved people, “there is not a man of them but would leave us, if they could make their escape... Liberty is sweet.” With almost immediate effect, Loyalist armies and occupied zones became magnets for black freedom seekers. “Wherever the British army moved,” writes Gary B. Nash, “slaves bolted from their masters and headed toward British lines to claim freedom.”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Lord Dunmore quoted in Graham Russell Hodges, *Root & Branch: African Americans in New York and East Jersey, 1613-1863* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 139-140; For more on the impact of Dunmore’s Proclamation, see Aline Helg and Lara Vergnaud, *Slave No More: Self-Liberation before Abolitionism in the Americas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 118-122; Robin Blackburn, *American Crucible: Slavery, Emancipation, and Human Rights* (London: Verso, 2011), 124; Mason, *Slavery and Politics in the Early American Republic*, 16-17; Nash, *The Unknown Revolution*, 157-166; Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom*, 9-11; Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 63-68; Jasanoff, *Liberty’s Exiles*, 48-49; John Selby, *The Revolution in Virginia, 1775-1783* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1988), 65-66.

<sup>64</sup> Nash, *The Unknown Revolution*, 162 (Lund quote), 231.

Newspaper advertisements indicate that black freedom seekers across the country readily took up Dunmore's offer. In May 1775, the *Pennsylvania Gazette* published an advertisement for Charles Dix from Birdsboro, Pennsylvania (fifty miles northwest of Philadelphia). He was described as "a smart well set fellow, about 5 feet 5 inches high, speaks good English, has a little stoppage in his speech," and was a "Hammerman by trade, [and] always changes his name, and denies his master." Another advertisement appeared for Dix in June 1776, which stated that the self-liberator "has often run away, changed his name, denied that the subscriber was his master, and has been confined in several gaols in the province[.]" Dix's enslaver asserted that he was likely "on his march to join his Lordship's [Dunmore's] own black regiment, but it is hoped he will be prevented by some honest Whig from effecting it." Not long after, John Crozer and John Anderson, two enslavers from Chester County, Pennsylvania, reported the escape of "two Mulattoe [sic] young men" named Caesar and Anthony Welsh, who were both thought to have "gone towards the camp with a design to enlist, but it is hoped they will not meet with a Dunmore there."<sup>65</sup>

Hundreds of slave refugees were organized into the Ethiopian Regiment, a military unit that fought in various engagements during the Revolutionary War. Later, several black soldiers were reorganized into the so-called 'Black Pioneers' the following year. They worked as spies, scouts, guides, and interpreters. Several prominent African American leaders emerged from the Black Loyalist military

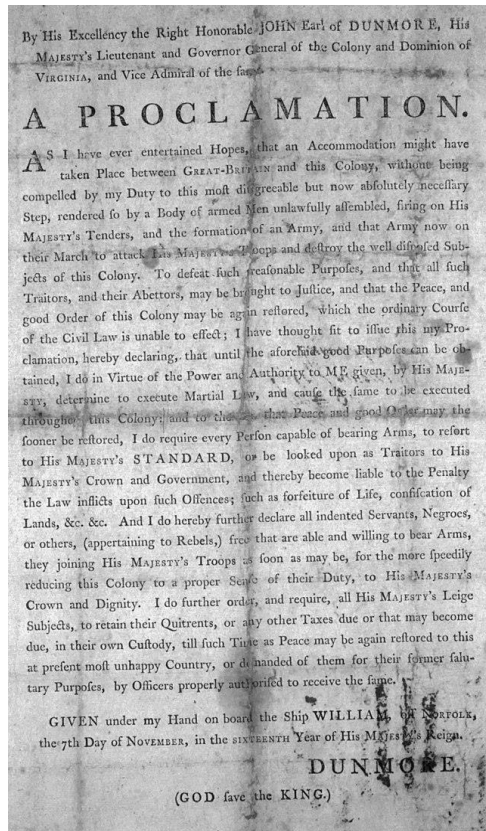


Figure 1: Lord Dunmore's Proclamation

Source: "Dunmore's Proclamation," *Wikiwand.com*, accessed Feb. 1, 2020. [https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Dunmore%27s\\_Proclamation](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Dunmore%27s_Proclamation).

<sup>65</sup> Smith and Wojtowicz, *Blacks Who Stole Themselves*, 123-124, 129-130; Hodges, *Root & Branch*, 147-148.

regiments, including Titus Cornelius (also known as ‘Colonel Tye’), a self-emancipator from New Jersey who led combat units in several battles, and Col. Stephen Blucke. Women and children performed other roles and services. Meanwhile, the Revolutionaries were reluctant to admit African Americans into the Continental Army throughout the war. Graham Russell Hodges notes that they “realized that talk of liberty was dangerous if heard by America’s actual slaves.” Nevertheless, a very small number of black troops were eventually admitted into Continental ranks. Some colonies, notes Hodges, even allowed enslaved people to serve as substitutes in Continental ranks. Nevertheless, enslaved Africans and African Americans greatly favored the Loyalists because they offered a greater promise of liberty.<sup>66</sup>

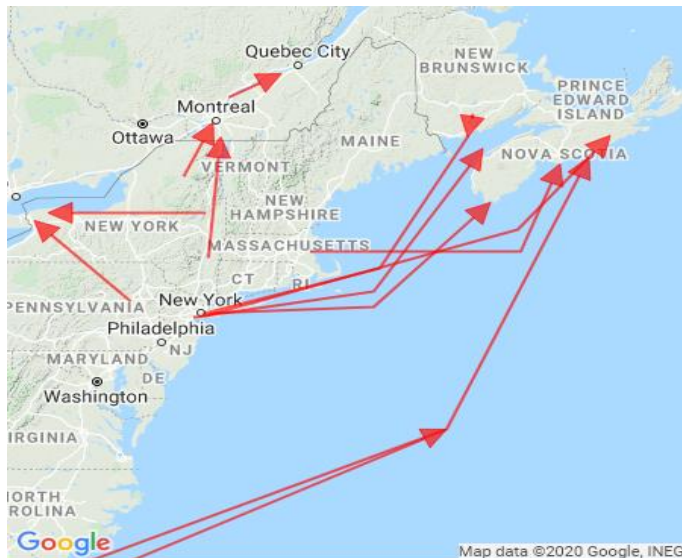
Loyalist-occupied zones became spaces of sanctuary for self-emancipators. New York City received thousands of self-emancipated black refugees. Loyalist incursions into neighboring Connecticut and New Jersey enabled more enslaved Africans and African Americans to escape to New York City. In the Chesapeake, the Carolinas, and Georgia, thousands of black freedom seekers fled to various Loyalist outposts. “Although runaways during the war tended to be young, male, and engaged in a craft,” writes Matthew Spooner, “the single most important factor in determining the likelihood of a slave to abscond was proximity to British forces.” The refugee influx into Loyalist spaces Graham Russell Hodges notes that a census-taker “counted 1,951 blacks living in the city, or about 16 percent of the total population of 12,408.” Similar patterns were documented in other Loyalist occupied cities and spaces. As the war turned against them, the British made one final push to encourage further rebellion among enslaved people. In 1779, General Henry Clinton issued the Phillipsburg Proclamation, which stated, “All Negroes that fly from the enemy’s country are free – No person whatever can claim a right to them – Whoever sells them shall be prosecuted with the utmost severity.” Whereas the Loyalists previously targeted young, fit men beforehand, they became increasingly willing to accept men, women, and children of all ages to cause further chaos in the Revolutionaries’ ranks. While Clinton’s proclamation was in part a strategic decision, it also reflected an inability among the Loyalists to stem the tide of freedom seekers towards their lines.<sup>67</sup>

Seven years after it began, the Revolutionary War was formally concluded by the signing of the Treaty of Paris (1782). The British ceded control of the

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<sup>66</sup> Hodges, *Root & Branch*, 141, 147-148; Nash, *The Unknown Revolution*, 162-166, 223-232.

<sup>67</sup> Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom*, 26-30; Hodges, *Root & Branch*, 150; Hodges, *Slavery, Freedom, & Culture Among Early American Workers* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1998), 65-86; Selby, *The Revolution in Virginia*, 67; Matthew Spooner, “Freedom, Reenslavement, and Movement in the Revolutionary South,” in Whitney Nell Stewart and John Garrison Marks (eds.), *Race and Nation in the Age of Emancipations* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2018) 13-27; Matthew Spooner, “Origins of the Old South: The Reconstitution of Southern Slavery, 1776-1800” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2015), 120-171 (quote on page 130); Clinton quoted in Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom*, 28.



**Figure 2: Approximate routes taken by the Loyalist refugees to British Canada. Made in scribblemaps**

American colonies but, to the Revolutionaries' chagrin, refused to return slave refugees. When charged with property theft, Sir Guy Carleton wrote in a letter to George Washington, "in the case of the Negroes declared free persons previous to my arrival... I had no right to deprive them of that liberty." Beginning in 1783, thousands of black Loyalists were issued official certificates of freedom by the British government and departed from New York City aboard several ships. Roughly 3,000 slave refugees were resettled across the Canadian Maritimes. Nova Scotia received the largest number of freedom seekers, but others were taken to New Brunswick. The details of black Loyalist refugees who departed for Nova Scotia were recorded in the Loyalists' 'Book of Negroes.' Although most entries receive scant attention, the list of people reveals the immense variety of black refugees seeking liberty elsewhere. Many came from New England and the Mid-Atlantic, but the overwhelming majority escaped from slavery in the southern colonies. According to Hodges, about one-quarter of the black refugees that were evacuated from New York City came from New England and the Mid-Atlantic collectively, and "the rest were of unknown origins."<sup>68</sup>

Among the black Loyalist refugees were men, women, and children – many of whom belonged to the same family unit. Sylvia Frey notes that approximately fifty-five percent of black refugees that departed from New York City were women and children (914 women and 740 children). It was not uncommon for parents, typically

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<sup>68</sup> Carleton quoted in Hodges, *Root & Branch*, 156.

mothers, to travel with children in single-parent units. Self-emancipated husbands and wives attempted to escape from slavery and make the journey to the Canadian Maritimes whenever possible. Sam and Betsy Brothers traveled aboard the *Ariel* to St. John, New Brunswick, “with two children aged 12 and 14.” Inevitably, the black Loyalist migration was also marked by profound loss. Exiles were compelled to leave behind spouses, parents, children, and friends in the United States, likely to be never seen again. Moreover, between 1,200 and 2,000 enslaved people were forcibly migrated by their Loyalist enslavers to the Canadian Maritimes, compelled to leave loved ones behind in the United States.<sup>69</sup>

The War of 1812 presented enslaved people with another opportunity to claim their liberty by escaping to the British. During the war, notes Alan Taylor, “Royal Navy warships pushed into Chesapeake Bay and up the Potomac River to punish the United States for declaring war against the British Empire.” From the beginning of the war, British regiments enlisted African American freedom seekers. Secretary of State for War and Colonies Earl Bathurst “broadened the scope of the war,” writes Gene Allen Smith, “suggesting that British forces could liberate American slaves and enlist them in the British black corps in the Caribbean[.]” As the British gained a foothold in the region, black self-emancipators from the Chesapeake and Tidewater Virginia fled to the enemy of their enslavers. Many stole canoes and other vessels to reach British wartime ships. On April 2, 1813, a “canoe of slaves” on the James River near Hampton garnered the attention of an American vessel and its crew, which they believed to be a British ship. According to Smith, the self-emancipators “requested arms” to initiate an uprising and promised the support of approximately 2,000 enslaved people.<sup>70</sup>

Self-emancipation during the war reflected the importance of family and kinship ties among enslaved African Americans. According to Taylor, it was typical for self-emancipators to escape in stages: “in the first, a pioneer runaway made initial contact with the British, and then in the second stage, he returned home to liberate kin and friends.” The case of Presley, a freedom seeker from Kinsale, Westmoreland County, Virginia, illustrates this phenomenon quite clearly. He fled from his enslaver in November 1813 and ran to the British. The following October, Presley (who had renamed himself ‘Washington’) “returned to free his friends and family left behind... [he] guided a British raiding party to Kinsale, liberating the rest of the slaves[.]” The British increasingly understood that enslaved African Americans would not escape from their enslavers unless they promised their family’s freedom. Begrudgingly,

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<sup>69</sup> For Samuel and Betsy Brothers, see “Book of Negroes,” *novascotia.ca*, accessed Jun. 1, 2020. <https://novascotia.ca/archives/africans/BNpages.asp?ID=17>. For more on enslaved people forcibly taken to the Canadian Maritimes, see Whitfield, *North to Bondage*.

<sup>70</sup> Taylor, *The Internal Enemy*, 1-4; Gene Allen Smith, *The Slave’s Gamble: Choosing Sides in the War of 1812* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) 87-98. For more on self-emancipated refugees in the War of 1812, see Mason, *Slavery and Politics*, 107-108; Whitfield, *Blacks on the Border*.

British troops accepted enslaved women, children, and others into their ranks.<sup>71</sup> In April 1814, the British adopted an official wartime sanctuary policy for African American refugees. Admiral Alexander Cochrane issued the following proclamation to encourage enslaved African Americans to escape from their enslavers to British lines:

That all those who may be disposed to emigrate from the UNITED STATES will, with their Families, be received on board of His Majesty's Ships or Vessels of War, or at the Military Posts that may be established, upon or near the Coast... when they will have their choice of either entering into His Majesty's Sea or Land Forces, or of being sent as FREE Settlers to the British possessions in North America or the West Indies[.]<sup>72</sup>

Throughout the war, thousands of freedom-seeking men, women, and children fled to British lines. In the Chesapeake Bay, Tangier Island became a *de facto* refuge for self-emancipated men, women, and children. While self-emancipated men were enlisted into various regiments, women and children comprised the majority of freedom seekers that fled to the British. Once again, the Americans were reluctant to enlist African Americans. The fear of unrest and rebellion among enslaved people throughout the country weighed heavily on their minds.<sup>73</sup> Following the war, approximately 2,400 black refugees were resettled in the Canadian Maritimes after the war. The journey to the Canadian Maritimes was fraught with danger. On September 3, 1814, the Halifax-based *Acadian Recorder* reported on the arrival of a British ship from the Chesapeake after a ten-day trip. Aboard the ship were “a few hundred Negroes (dead and alive)” Upon arrival, the Black Refugees professed their fidelity to the British Crown. A significant portion of African American refugees traveled to the Canadian Maritimes in family units.<sup>74</sup>

Several refugees wrote to their former enslavers from their new homes and communities in the Canadian Maritimes. Bartlett Shanklyn, a blacksmith who escaped from his former enslaver, Abraham Hooe, wrote to him, “When [I] was with you I worked very hard and you neither g[ave] me money nor any Satisfaction but sin[ce] I have been here I am able to [make] Gold and Silver as well as you.”<sup>75</sup> Others

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<sup>71</sup> Taylor, *The Internal Enemy*, 245-249.

<sup>72</sup> Alexander Cochrane, *Alexander Cochrane, April 2*. April 2, 1814. Manuscript/Mixed Materials. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., accessed Sep. 1, 2019. <https://www.loc.gov/item/maj002793/>.

<sup>73</sup> Smith, *The Slave's Gamble*, 98-114, 129; Alan Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels, & Indian Allies* (Vintage Books: New York, 2010), 327.

<sup>74</sup> Whitfield, *Blacks on the Border*, 34; “SHIP NEWS,” *Acadian Recorder*, Sep. 3, 1814.

<sup>75</sup> Letter from Bartlett Shanklyn to Abraham Hooe, 5/21/1820; Records of Boundary and Claims Commissions and Arbitrations, Record Group 76. [Online Version,

expressed sorrow and anguish at having left family members behind. William Whiddington wrote to his mother:

Thanks be to God, I arriv'd in this place safe – and I have no cause to repent coming away – though I was very sorry to leave you, and all my relations. [B]ut though I may never see any of you again, my dear Mother, yet I shall always think of you and love you. [A]nd I hope, I shall act so honestly and soberly in this World that when I die I may meet all of my Friends in a happy state of Eternity[.]<sup>76</sup>

### ***The First Emancipation and Advent of Free Soil***

The American Revolution accelerated the political abolition of slavery in the northern US and Canada. For the first time, 'free soil' spaces existed on the continent. However, as Ira Berlin writes, "the demise of slavery was a slow, tortuous process." In 1777, Vermont legislators declared that black enslavement disregarded the "natural, inherent, and unalienable rights" of African-descended people. But the anti-slavery clause's language was ambiguous and permitted black enslavement to continue into the early national period. Three years later, Pennsylvania's gradual abolition statute declared that enslaved children born after March 1, 1780, would be legally freed after serving apprenticeships until twenty-eight years of age. Those born before the act's passage would remain enslaved for life. In Massachusetts, writes Emily Planck, "the freedom suit became a vehicle through which slaves delegitimized slavery rather than challenging their own enslavement." In the case of *Commonwealth of Massachusetts v. Jennison* (1783), the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled that the enslaved Quock Walker, and all other enslaved African Americans in the state, were entitled to their legal freedom. "In one stroke," writes Planck, "the court transformed Massachusetts from the first colony to legalize slavery into the first state to deny all of its citizenry the right to hold human property." Soon after, every state in New England enacted gradual abolition measures.<sup>77</sup>

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<https://www.docsteach.org/documents/document/letter-from-bartlett-shanklyn-to-abraham-hooe>, March 16, 2019].

<sup>76</sup> Letter from William Whiddington to Julie Hoxon, 12/9/1820; Records of Boundary and Claims Commissions and Arbitrations, Record Group 76. [Online Version, <https://www.docsteach.org/documents/document/letter-from-william-whiddington-to-julie-hoxon>, March 16, 2019]. For more on Black Refugee letters to former enslavers, "Black Refugee letters shed light on life after slavery," *CBC.ca*, accessed Mar. 16, 2019. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/black-refugee-letters-shed-light-on-life-after-slavery-1.2716951>.

<sup>77</sup> Zilversmit, *The First Emancipation*; Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 228; Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 65-69; Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and Race in New England, 1780-1860* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 64; Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 60-65; Emily

New York and New Jersey took longer to enact gradual abolition. Slavery, notes Manisha Sinha, held “more widespread roots in these states, and neither boasted a history of antislavery like Pennsylvania.” The enslaved population of New York state doubled between 1703 and 1771, representing a significant financial interest. However, the turmoil brought about by the Revolution, the growing resilience of black self-emancipators, free African American and Quaker activism, and the rise of abolitionist organizations like the New York Manumission Society (NYMS) pushed New York and New Jersey down the path of emancipation. In New York, enslaved children born after July 4, 1799, would be entitled to their legal freedom upon turning twenty-eight if male and twenty-five if female. New Jersey’s 1804 statute was similarly restrictive; enslaved men were freed upon turning twenty-five and women twenty-one. In 1817, New York’s state government passed more sweeping emancipatory legal measures. It declared that every enslaved person born before the 1799 law’s enactment would be freed on July 4, 1827. In New Jersey, self-emancipators continued to undermine the system of black enslavement, but the state never passed a similar act to New York. New Jersey enslavers continued to hold

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Plank, *Tyrannicide: Forging an American Law of Slavery in Revolutionary South Carolina and Massachusetts* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2014), 118-127 (quotes 119 and 122). For more on slavery and gradual abolition in Vermont, see Harvey Amani Whitfield, *The Problem of Slavery in Early Vermont, 1777-1810: Essay and Primary Sources* (Barre, VT: Vermont Historical Society, 2014). For more on gradual emancipation in Pennsylvania, see Gary B. Nash and Jean R. Soderlund, *Freedom By Degrees: Emancipation in Pennsylvania and Its Aftermath* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 74-98. For more on the Quock Walker case and gradual emancipation in New England, see Douglas R. Egerton, *Death or Liberty: African Americans and Revolutionary America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 93-121; Margot Minardi, *Making Slavery History: Abolitionism and the Politics of Memory in Massachusetts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 14-18; Robert M. Spector, “The Quock Walker Cases (1781-83) – Slavery, The Abolition, and Negro Citizenship in Early Massachusetts,” *Journal of Negro History* 53, no. 1 (1968), 12-32; Arthur Zilversmit, “Quok Walker, Mumbet, and the Abolition of Slavery in Massachusetts,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (1968), 614-624; Emily Blanck, “Seventeen Eighty-Three: The Turning Point in the Law of Slavery and Freedom in Massachusetts,” *New England Quarterly* 75, no. 1 (2002), 24-51; Chernoh M Sesat, Jr., “The Revolutionary Black Roots of Slavery’s Abolition in Massachusetts,” *New England Quarterly* 87, no. 1 (2014), 99-131; Melish, *Disowning Slavery*; David Menschel, “Abolition Without Deliverance: The Law of Connecticut Slavery 1784-1848,” *Yale Law Journal* 111, no. 1 (2001), 183-222; Christy Clark-Pujara, *Dark Work: The Business of Slavery in Rhode Island* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 61-85. For overviews of the ‘first emancipation,’ see Helg and Vergnaud, *Slave No More*, 130-136; Leon F. Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 3-15; David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 23-39; Melish, *Disowning Slavery*; Ira Berlin, *The Long Emancipation: The Demise of Slavery in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); Patrick Rael, *Eighty-Eight Years: The Long Death of Slavery in the United States, 1777-1865* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2015); Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 228-255; James O. Horton and Lois E. Horton, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 55-76; George W. Van Cleve, *A Slaveholders’ Union: Slavery, Politics, and the Constitution in the Early American Republic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 59-93. For more on the significance of freedom suits, see Edie L. Wong, *Neither Fugitive nor Free: Atlantic Slavery, Freedom Suits, and the Legal Culture of Travel* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

African Americans in forms of bondage and involuntary servitude into the Civil War era.<sup>78</sup>

Meanwhile, the further introduction of enslaved people into the Northwest Territory was prohibited under Article VI of the Northwest Ordinance (1787). Later, the Missouri Compromise (1820) admitted Missouri into the Union as a 'slave' state and outlawed black enslavement north of the 36°30' parallel. Consequently, the Mississippi River became a formal geopolitical border between 'free' Illinois and 'slave' Missouri. In reality, however, enslavers found ways to perpetuate forms of black bondage throughout the nineteenth century. Historians Paul Finkelman, Christopher Phillips, and M. Scott Heerman among others have illustrated how indentured servitude in the 'Old Northwest' effectively held African Americans in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois in indefinite periods of enslavement. Nevertheless, the emergence of 'free soil' in the northern states proved hugely significant.<sup>79</sup>

Similarly, slavery was gradually eroded in the Canadian provinces. In each province, enslaved men and women fled from their enslavers to claim their liberty. In December 1783, the *Nova Scotia Gazette and Weekly Chronicle* informed readers that "a Negro Man named, DICK... about five feet eight Inches high Stout Made," absconded from his Loyalist enslaver, Benjamin Douglass. One-and-a-half years later, the *Gazette* reported on the escape of 25-year-old John Gibson, "alias JOHN BOOCHER," who "had on when he went away a Green Coat and a small round hat" when he ran away. His enslaver warned "all Masters of Vessels and others" that Gibson may try to sneak aboard a ship. Some enslaved women also fled from their enslavers in the Canadian Maritimes. In October 1785, the *Gazette* printed a runaway

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<sup>78</sup> Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 76-85; Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery*, 47-71, 94. For more on gradual emancipation in New York and New Jersey, see Mason, *Slavery and Politics*, 14-15; Shane White, *Somewhat More Independent: The End of Slavery in New York City, 1770-1810* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 24-55; Eric Foner, *Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad* 37-46; David Gellman, *Emancipating New York: The Politics of Slavery and Freedom, 1777-1827* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 153-186; Patrick Rael, "The Long Death of Slavery in New York," in Ira Berlin and Leslie Harris (eds.), *Slavery in New York* (New York: New Press, 2005), 111-146; James J. Gigantino, II, *The Ragged Road to Abolition: Slavery and Freedom in New Jersey, 1775-1865* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); Gigantino, II, "'The Whole North is Not Abolitionized.'"

<sup>79</sup> For more on slavery and freedom in the Old Northwest, see Mason, *Slavery and Politics*, 145-158; Paul Finkelman, "Slavery and the Northwest Ordinance: A Study in Ambiguity," *Journal of the Early Republic* 6, no. 4 (1986); Paul Finkelman, "Evading the Ordinance: The Persistence of Bondage in Indiana and Illinois," *Journal of the Early Republic* 9, no. 1 (1989) 21-51; Thomas Bahde, "'I Would Not Have a White Upon the Premises': The Ohio Valley Salt Industry and Slave Hiring in Illinois, 1780-1825," *Ohio Valley History* 15, no. 2 (2015), 49-69; Christopher Phillips, *The Rivers Ran Backward: The Civil War and the Remaking of the American Middle Border* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 21-43; M. Scott Heerman, "In a State of Slavery: Black Servitude in Illinois, 1800-1830," *Early American Studies* 14, no. 1 (2016), 114-139.

notice for “a black NEGROE WENCH named PHILLIS, aged about 50 Years or upward,” who reportedly had “a Styne on one Eye, and a Wart on her Nose[.]”<sup>80</sup>

The motivations behind self-emancipation in the Canadian Maritimes, notes Whitfield, included brutal physical and psychological punishment, and “possibly forced sexual relations.” Other enslaved men and women absconded from their enslavers in desperate attempts to “keep their families together” or reunite family members that had been forcibly separated. Some newspaper notices reported the escape of small family units within the Maritime provinces. A family of five fled from Caleb Jones, a Maryland Loyalist, in 1786. They likely fled to the free black community in St. John, New Brunswick. Enslaved families, writes Whitfield, escaped “to retain some sense of control over their family lives.”<sup>81</sup>

Similar acts of self-emancipation were reported in Lower Canada. In January 1778, the *Quebec Gazette* published an advertisement for “a Negro Lad named Joe, born in Africa, about twenty years of age” who spoke both English and French “tolerably well.” The following year, the *Gazette* reported the escape of Ishmael, a 35-year-old enslaved man with long, curly black hair. The advertisement claimed that he had “black Eyes, broad shoulders, and the tone of voice peculiar to New-England, where he was born.” Ishmael could read English “tolerably well” and could speak some French. Newspaper notices for enslaved people of African descent continued into the final decade of the eighteenth century. In 1790, the *Herald* informed readers about the escape of Richard, a 27-year-old enslaved man from Montreal. No details are provided apart from his height and choice of clothing.<sup>82</sup>

In Upper Canada, enslaved men, women, and children also escaped from their enslavers in the late eighteenth century. Freedom seekers took advantage of geopolitical tensions and legal ambiguities to secure their permanent liberty by crossing into the United States. Self-emancipators in the Niagara River border zone, for instance, fled to neighboring New York state. In July 1793, Thomas Butler of Niagara posted an advertisement in the *Upper Canada Gazette* for “a NEGRO MAN servant named JOHN,” who likely escaped across the Niagara River to western New York. The following year, Henry Lewis of Niagara-on-the-Lake escaped from Provincial Secretary William Jarvis across the Niagara River to New York. He later relocated to Schenectady, just northwest of the state capital, Albany. Lewis later

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<sup>80</sup> RUN away on the 27<sup>th</sup> Inst...,” *Nova Scotia Gazette and Weekly Chronicle*, Dec. 9, 1783; “RUN AWAY, A NEGRO MAN,” *Nova Scotia Gazette and Weekly Chronicle*, Jul. 19, 1785; “RUN AWAY,” *Nova Scotia Gazette and Weekly Chronicle*, Oct. 4, 1785.

<sup>81</sup> Whitfield, “Slave Life in the Canadian Maritime Colonies,” in Lovejoy and Oliveira (eds.), *Slavery*, 15.

<sup>82</sup> “ADVERTISEMENT,” *Quebec Gazette*, “Jan. 29, 1778; “RUN-AWAY from the Subscriber,” *Quebec Gazette*, Jul. 29, 1779; “RUN AWAY,” *Quebec Herald*, Nov. 4, 1790. For more escaped slave advertisements and documents related to black enslavement in Quebec and Lower Canada, see “Historical Documents,” *QCHistoryXTours.ca*, accessed Jan. 1, 2019. <http://www.qchistoryxtours.ca/historical-documents.html>.

wrote that he chose to escape because he “desired to support myself as [a] free man and enjoy all the benefits which may result from my being free in a country where [sic] a Blackman [sic] is defended by the laws as much as a white man[.]” Enslaved people also escaped from their enslavers to New York via the St. Lawrence River and Lake Ontario. Reverend John Stuart of Kingston, Upper Canada, recorded the escape of “my Negro Boy, without any pretended reason whatever[.]” Stuart believed that the unnamed self-liberator “is gone again to the States. I despair of recovering him.”<sup>83</sup>

Enslaved people in Upper Canada also escaped to the United States via the Detroit River borderland. Loyalist enslavers in Amherstburg, Sandwich, and elsewhere brought enslaved people with them after the Revolutionary War. Some made direct references to slavery in letters, diaries, and other documents. In September 1801, Peter Russell of Sandwich discussed his enslaved woman named Peggy in a letter to Loyalist Matthew Elliott, whom he attempted to sell. Russell hoped to sell Peggy to Elliott given her ‘difficult’ behavior. She regularly ran away for short periods in response to harsh treatment. He claimed that she “is now at large, being not permitted by my Sister to enter this House, and shows a disposition at Times to be very troublesome, which may perhaps compel me to commit her again to Prison.” In January 1806, Peter’s sister Elizabeth wrote a diary entry about Peggy’s son, Jupiter, which noted that he had been released from prison. One month later, Peter placed a newspaper advertisement for both Peggy and Jupiter (Peggy was “a tolerable cook and washerwoman,” while Jupiter was “tall and strong for his age, and has been employed in the country business, but brought up principally as a house servant”).<sup>84</sup>

Similarly, an enslaved woman fled across the river in 1807 and sought refuge in Detroit’s black community. Her enslaver, John Woods of Sandwich, contacted Detroit jurist Solomon Sibley to reclaim the self-emancipated mother and child but was informed that there were no legal means of recovering the mother and child from the Michigan Territory. That same year, Loyalist James May of Sandwich reported the escape of his enslaved man named Nobbins to Detroit. May believed that Nobbins had escaped because he was “apprehensive that I would whip him” if he returned to his enslaver. Before crossing the river, the freedom seeker was reportedly seen near the home of John Askin, a prominent fur trader in the border region. In a

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<sup>83</sup> “FIVE DOLLARS REWARD,” *Upper Canada Gazette*, Jul. 4, 1793; “Henry Lewis Seeking Freedom,” *Archives. gov. on. ca*, accessed Jan. 2, 2019. [http://www.archives.gov.on.ca/en/explore/online/slavery/henry\\_lewis.aspx](http://www.archives.gov.on.ca/en/explore/online/slavery/henry_lewis.aspx). For Henry Lewis’ letter to William Jarvis, see “Letter from Henry Lewis to his master, William Jarvis,” *TPL Virtual Exhibits*, accessed Jun. 2, 2020. <http://omeka.tplcs.ca/virtual-exhibits/items/show/209>.

<sup>84</sup> Peter Russell to Matthew Elliott, Sep. 19, 1801. Peter Russell Fonds, MS 75, Reel 5. AO. Toronto, ON; “Diary Entry by Elizabeth Russell,” *TPL Virtual Exhibits*, accessed Jun. 10, 2020. <http://omeka.tplcs.ca/virtual-exhibits/items/show/207>; Afua Cooper, “The Secret of Slavery in Canada,” in Hobbs, Margaret and Carla Rice (eds.), *Gender and Women’s Studies in Canada: Critical Terrain* (Toronto, ON: Women’s Press, 2013), 262.

letter to Askin, May requested that he “keep a good look out for him and prevent him if possible from crossing over on this side of the River.” About six years after Nobbins’ escape, one of Askins’ enslaved women named Madeline also fled across the Detroit River to Michigan. Following her escape, Madeline found work aboard steamboats in the Great Lakes transnational border zone. Askin claimed in a letter, “My negro wench Madeline absconded two days ago & I am certain that Capt. Bullock has taken her into his service[.]” Likewise, Matthew Elliot at Amherstburg lost eight enslaved people who fled across the Detroit River. The former Loyalist initiated legal proceedings to reclaim the freedom seekers. However, the presiding judge ruled that they were formally free upon setting foot in Michigan.<sup>85</sup>

Beginning at the end of the eighteenth century, the Canadian provinces set about abolishing the institution of slavery. In 1793, Upper Canada became the first to enact a gradual emancipation statute. The provincial government resolved to act in direct response to the sale of Chloe Cooley, an enslaved woman in Queenston. Cooley was forcibly removed across the Niagara River by her Loyalist enslaver, Adam Vrooman, and sold to a New York enslaver. Peter Martin, a free person of color and former member of Butler’s Rangers, informed Lieutenant-Governor John Graves Simcoe of the events which had taken place in the Niagara River borderland. Anti-slavery advocates in the province, including Simcoe, used the Cooley affair to push for an act to gradually abolish black enslavement within the province.<sup>86</sup>

Enslaved African Americans sought liberty in Upper Canada from the late eighteenth century onward. In June 1804, the New York *Western Repository* printed a report from a man named Valentine Brothers who absconded with his legally free wife across the Niagara River. Brothers claimed there existed “a general opinion prevailing among our fellow-citizens, that a slave from the United States, by getting over the line into the province of Upper Canada, becomes a free man[.]” Brothers asserted that his enslaved man escaped “with a free mulattoe [sic] woman, whom he

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<sup>85</sup> Gregory Wigmore, “Before the Railroad: From Slavery to Freedom in the Canadian-American Borderland,” *Journal of American History* 98, no. 2 (2011), 437-454; David M. Katzman, “Black Slavery in Michigan,” *Midcontinent American Studies Journal* 11, no. 2 (1979), 62; James May to John Askin, Aug. 2, 1807, and John Askin to John B. Askin. Oct. 26, 1813, in Milo M. Quaife (ed.), *The John Askin Papers, vol. II: 1796-1820* (Detroit: Detroit Library Commission, 1831), 561-563, 762; BHC, Detroit Public Library. Detroit. For more on the Detroit River border zone’s early history as an ambiguous frontier between slavery and freedom, see Gregory Wigmore, “Gregory Wigmore: The Canadian Slave Trade,” *NationalPost.com*, Oct. 21, 2013. <https://nationalpost.com/opinion/gregory-wigmore-the-canadian-slave-trade>. Accessed Jan. 2, 2019; Miles, *The Dawn of Detroit*; Veta Smith Tucker, “Uncertain Freedom in Frontier Detroit,” in Smardz Frost and Tucker (eds.), *A Fluid Frontier*, 27-42.

<sup>86</sup> Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*, 96-98; Natasha L. Henry, “Chloe Cooley and the Act to Limit Slavery in Upper Canada,” *TheCanadianEncyclopedia.ca*, Oct. 30, 2013. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/chloe-cooley-and-the-act-to-limit-slavery-in-upper-canada>, accessed Jan. 6, 2019. For further discussion on the Chloe Cooley case, as well as how black men and women resisted enslavement in Canada, see Afua Cooper, “Acts of Resistance: Black Men and Women Engage Slavery in Upper Canada, 1793-1803,” *Ontario History* 99, no. 1 (2007), 5-17.

kept as his wife. I, with one of my neighbors, went in pursuit of him, and on arriving at Buffaloe [sic] we learnt [sic] that he crossed the Niagara river on Tuesday afternoon.” The two men crossed the river in pursuit of the self-liberator and his wife but were allegedly “surrounded by eight or nine blacks, armed with clubs and a gun[.]” During this period, formal freedom was not guaranteed to everyone who escaped to Upper Canada. Remarkably, Brothers claimed that he was able to recapture the self-liberator and forcibly return him to the United States. The enslaver claimed that the white Canadian residents in the Niagara borderland “do not countenance runaway negroes. On the contrary they [side] with the owners to take them away[.]” Brothers claimed that there were “about twenty runaway negroes about Fort Erie and Newark.”<sup>87</sup>

Elsewhere, Lower Canada and the Maritime Provinces set about abolishing slavery. In 1798, Chief Justice Joseph Monk in Montreal ordered the release of two self-emancipators named Charlotte and Jude. Under British Canadian law, enslaved people could only be detained in “houses of correction, not common jails.” As none existed, Monk felt compelled to release the two freedom seekers and warned other enslavers that he would rule the same way in future cases.<sup>88</sup> In Nova Scotia, Chief Justices Thomas Strange and Sampson Blowers challenged black enslavement in the province by placing the burden of proof upon white claimants, who often did not possess evidence of legal ownership. Following this, enslaved people across the province felt emboldened to self-emancipate and abscond from their enslavers. In New Brunswick, an enslaved woman named Nancy petitioned for a writ of *habeas corpus* for herself and her son. The court initially sided with her enslaver, Caleb Jones, but issued a writ fourteen years later. During this time, enslavers in the province found it difficult to manage and control enslaved people of color. Like Nova Scotia, the New Brunswick Supreme Court increasingly refused to side with enslavers in self-emancipation cases.<sup>89</sup>

Yet gradual abolition was not met without some resistance. Maritime enslavers sought to exercise and preserve their right to enslave people with little

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<sup>87</sup> “To the Editors of the Repository,” *Western Repository*, Jun. 12, 1804.

<sup>88</sup> Mackey, *Done with Slavery*, 47-49.

<sup>89</sup> Natasha L. Henry, “Black Enslavement in Canada,” *The Canadian Encyclopedia.ca*, Jun. 16, 2016. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/black-enslavement>. Accessed Jan. 6, 2019; For key readings on the gradual abolition of slavery in the Canadian Maritimes, see D. G. Bell, J. Barry Cahill, and Harvey Amani Whitfield, “Slavery and Slave Law in the Maritimes,” in Barrington Walker (ed.), *The African Canadian Legal Odyssey: Historical Essays* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 363-420; Barry Cahill, “Slavery and the Judges of Loyalist Nova Scotia,” *University of New Brunswick Law Journal* 43 (1994), 73-136; Barry Cahill, “Habeas Corpus and Slavery in Nova Scotia: *R. v. Hecht, ex parte Rachel*, 1798,” *University of New Brunswick Law Journal* 44 (1995), 179-209; D. G. Bell, “Slavery and the Judges of Loyalist New Brunswick,” *University of New Brunswick Law Journal* 31 (1982), 9-42; Harvey Amani Whitfield, “The Struggle over Slavery in the Maritime Colonies,” *Acadiensis* 41, no. 2 (2012), 17-44; Ken Donovan, “Slavery and Freedom in Atlantic Canada’s African Diaspora,” *Acadiensis* 43, no. 1 (2014), 109-115; Whitfield, *North to Bondage*, 85-109.

success. In August 1803, Loyalist enslaver James DeLancey of Round Hill, Annapolis County, sued Halifax merchant William Woodin for harboring one of his enslaved people named Jack. In December 1807, twenty-seven enslavers at Annapolis, Nova Scotia, petitioned the provincial legislature to ensure that their right to hold “property in Negroes was maintained, and acknowledged, if not encouraged.” However, the Nova Scotia Assembly rejected a bill that would have defended Loyalist enslavers against the courts. Without the enforcement of positive law or the complicity of enslaved people, slavery in Nova Scotia swiftly fell into decline.<sup>90</sup>

Over the following decades, British Canada solidified its free soil status. In 1819, Upper Canada’s Attorney General John Beverly Robinson declared that black refugees from the United States were “entitled to freedom through residence in [Canada] and any attempt to infringe their right [will] be resisted in the courts.” In 1824, a fifteen-year-old enslaved person named Tom was sold by his enslaver, Eli Keeler of Colborne to William Bell of present-day Belleville. Natasha Henry notes that it was “one of the last recorded sales of a slave in Upper Canada.” In 1833, the British Parliament enacted the Slavery Abolition Act, which formally outlawed the enslavement of African and African-descended people throughout the British Empire as of August 1, 1834.<sup>91</sup> For southern enslavers, the abolition of slavery in the British Empire deeply troubling. Matthew Karp argues that this was more significant “than any other global event between the American Revolution and the Civil War.”<sup>92</sup> Indeed, the advent of formal free soil in Canada, as well as the British West Indies, represented an enormous threat to their interests. Edward Rugemer writes that “British abolition created a geography of freedom” in North America and the Caribbean.<sup>93</sup> The next section will chart the rise of the ‘second slavery’ in the US South.

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<sup>90</sup> “*DeLancey v. Woodin* (plaintiff’s statement of claim against the defendant for harbouring ‘Jack,’ a fugitive slave,” Supreme Court of Nova Scotia – Annapolis County case files, RG 39 C (AP), vol. 1, file 2. NSA, accessed Feb. 1, 2017. <https://novascotia.ca/archives/africanans/archives.asp?ID=63>; “Petition of John Taylor and Others,” Nova Scotia House of Assembly, RG 5, Series A, vol. 14 no. 49 (microfilm no. 15591). NSA, accessed Feb. 1, 2017. <https://novascotia.ca/archives/africanans/archives.asp?ID=64>.

<sup>91</sup> Henry, “Black Enslavement in Canada.”; George Hendrick and Willene Hendrick, *Black Refugees in Canada: Accounts of Escape During the Era of Slavery* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2010), 11; Henry, “Black Enslavement in Canada.”

<sup>92</sup> Matthew Karp, *This Vast Southern Empire: Slaveholders at the Helm of American Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 12.

<sup>93</sup> Edward B. Rugemer, *The Problem of Emancipation: The Caribbean Roots of the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2008), 259. For more on the response of southern enslavers to the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies, see Edward B. Rugemer, “The Southern Response to British Abolitionism: The Maturation of Proslavery Apologetics,” *Journal of Southern History* 70, no. 2 (2004), 221-248.

## ***The Second Slavery and Interregional Slave Trade in the US South***

Beginning in the early 1780s, laws regulating the manumission of enslaved African Americans in the US South were relaxed. This was prompted largely by transformations in the region's agricultural economy. By the end of the eighteenth-century, Upper South planters and farmers began to move away from tobacco to mixed-crop production. Soil erosion precipitated this change. Virginia and Maryland agriculturalists found that their total tobacco yields had fallen dramatically from the colonial period. Over time, hired free black labor proved more cost-effective for Upper South planters and farmers, many of whom became more amenable to manumission reform. In 1782, Virginia's General Assembly enacted "An Act to Authorize the Manumission of Slaves," which permitted enslavers to free enslaved people through their last will and testaments, or other verified documentation. In subsequent years, other southern states approved similar measures. Previously, it was effectively illegal for Virginia enslavers to manumit enslaved Africans and African Americans (it could only be done with the consent of Virginia's General Assembly). Upper South enslavers took advantage of relaxed manumission laws to free 'surplus' enslaved people.<sup>94</sup>

As noted earlier, this brief flirtation with manumission was ultimately short-lived. In the early 1800s, Upper South governments began to tighten manumission laws once again, effectively shutting the door for most enslaved African Americans. The public mood shifted dramatically against manumission reform, in part because of increased fears of revolt. Meanwhile, the Haitian Revolution raised alarm among southern whites, who feared that enslaved African Americans would mount an insurrection. In 1800, their suspicions were seemingly confirmed when Gabriel Prosser led an insurrection in Richmond, Virginia. According to George Van Cleve, Upper South enslavers "firmly believed that the existence of a significant number of free blacks in a slave state increased the possibility of rebellion and other social costs such as crime and flight, and nonslaveowners shared these beliefs[.]" In response, state governments acted quickly to make manumission more difficult and expel free African Americans from their borders. Subsequent laws mandated that free blacks remove themselves from the Upper South following their manumission.<sup>95</sup>

More significantly, black enslavement witnessed an unprecedented resurgence in the US South. Between 1790 and 1810, the enslaved population more than doubled across the region. Several factors account for this dramatic expansion.

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<sup>94</sup> Van Cleve, *A Slaveholder's Union*, 93-97; John P. Kaminski (ed.), *A Necessary Evil? Slavery and the Debate Over the Constitution* (Madison, WI: Madison House, 1995), 15.

<sup>95</sup> Van Cleve, *A Slaveholder's Union*, 97-99. For more on Gabriel Prosser, see Douglas R. Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

First, the invention of the cotton gin in 1794, combined with westward and southwestern migration during the early republic, led to the development of cotton plantations across the Lower South and Southwest. Additionally, the growth of sugar production in Louisiana also contributed to slavery's expansion. Upper South enslavers, as well as poorer whites, migrated to the Lower South and Southwest in search of land and prosperity. This proved a terrible development for enslaved African Americans in the Upper South, who were either involuntarily forced to migrate with their enslavers or be sold to the Lower South and Southwest. Demand for enslaved labor was also driven by the US Congress' ban on the Atlantic slave trade in 1808. Unable to rely on enslaved Africans, Lower South and Southwestern enslavers looked elsewhere for enslaved labor. Upper South enslavers were more than happy to fill the gap in the market. Indeed, the rise of 'King Cotton' and westward expansion provided black enslavement in the United States with a second life.<sup>96</sup>

While they were undoubtedly valuable before, the interregional slave trade (coupled with the closure of the Atlantic market) led to a sharp rise in the selling price of men, women, and children. Fully aware of the growing demand for enslaved labor in the Lower South and Southwest, and eager to offload surplus enslaved people themselves, Upper South set out to command high prices for enslaved people. Slave trading firms, such as Franklin & Armitage in Richmond, made enormous profits from selling enslaved people to the Lower South and Southwest. As Damian Pargas notes, one Natchez resident in 1835 claimed, "Negroes are selling here at \$1000 for women and \$1500 for men!" Given the inherent value of enslaved people, it is clear why Upper South enslavers were livid about the prospect of men, women, and children running away.<sup>97</sup>

The cotton boom revolutionized the global market. As Sven Beckert writes, "Exports to Great Britain increased by a factor of ninety-three between 1791 and 1800, only to multiply another seven times by 1820... by 1857 it would produce as much cotton as China." However, the ramifications of the new interregional slave trade for enslaved people was terrifying. Steven Deyle estimates that over one million

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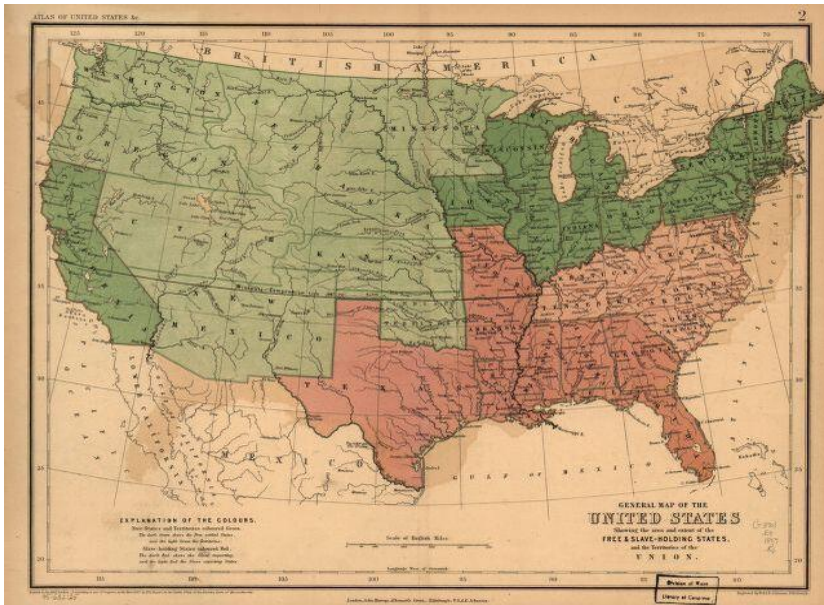
<sup>96</sup> Damian A. Pargas, *Slavery and Forced Migration in the Antebellum South* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 21-22. For more on the rapid expansion of cotton and sugar production in the southern and southwestern US, and black enslavement, in the Lower South, see Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, 175-192; Adam Rothman, *Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); Richard Follet, *The Sugar Masters: Planters and Slaves in Louisiana's Cane World, 1820-1860* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2005); Edward Baptist, *This Half has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014); Andrew J. Torget, *Seeds of Empire: Cotton, Slavery, and the Transformation of the Texas Borderlands, 1800-1850* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman, "Introduction," in Sven Beckert (ed.), *Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 1-27; Calvin Schermerhorn, *Unrequited Toil: a History of United States Slavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 34-46.

<sup>97</sup> Pargas, *Slavery and Forced Migration*, 22 (quote from Natchez resident); 26-27.

enslaved African Americans were forcibly migrated to the Lower South, “approximately two-thirds of whom arrived there as a result of sale.” Men, women, and children were sold indiscriminately at auction, forced to march overland in coffles and chain gangs for weeks (if not longer), transported as ‘cargo’ via carriages and riverboats, or on ships along the Atlantic coast. Various routes and trails developed over the antebellum era. The Ohio and Mississippi Rivers became one of the quickest means of forcibly transporting enslaved people to Natchez and New Orleans (among other places). Various cities on the Eastern Seaboard, such as Baltimore, Richmond, Wilmington, and Charleston, became major hubs for the coastal trade.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015), 104; Steven Deyle, *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 4. The historiography of the interregional slave trade has grown significantly in recent decades. See Alan Kulikoff, “Uprooted Peoples: Black Migrants in the Age of the American Revolution, 1790-1820,” in Ira Berlin and Ronald Hoffman (eds.), *Slavery and Freedom in the Age of the American Revolution* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1983), 143-171; Michael Tadman, *Speculators and Slave Masters: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989); Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Robert H. Gudmestad, *A Troublesome Commerce: The Transformation of the Interstate Slave Trade* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2003); Walter Johnson (ed.), *The Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Trades in the Americas* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004); Ira Berlin, *The Making of African America: The Four Great Migrations* (New York: Penguin Books, 2010), 99-151; David L. Lightner, *Slavery and the Commerce Power: How the Struggle Against the Interstate Slave Trade Led to the Civil War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006); Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2013); Calvin Schermerhorn, *The Business of Slavery and the Rise of American Capitalism, 1815-1860* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015). Some studies do not focus solely on the interregional slave trade but devote extensive time to its impact on enslaved families. See Wilma Dunaway, *The African-American Family in Slavery and Emancipation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 161-244; Jonathan D. Martin, *Divided Mastery: Slave Hiring in the American South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 34-43.



**Figure 3: Map of the United States, c.1857**

**Source:** Henry D. Rogers, *General map of the United States, showing the area and extent of the free & slave-holding states, and the territories of the Union* (London: John Murray; Edinburgh: W. & A.K. Johnston, 1857). Map, accessed Jan. 8, 2020. <https://www.loc.gov/item/95682125/>.

The second slavery had a dramatic impact on the enslaved populations of the Lower South and Southwest. Between 1800 and 1850, the number of enslaved African Americans in Georgia rose from 35,000 to 500,000. Similarly, the enslaved population of Mississippi grew to approximately 400,000 over the same period.<sup>99</sup> Perhaps the most horrifying aspect of the interregional trade in enslaved people was how enslavers and traders rarely paid heed to kinship networks. Countless enslaved families were forcibly separated by sale and forced migration; children were stripped from parents, and husbands from wives. As enslaved families were unrecognized by law, victims of sale had no rights or legal protections. Considered human ‘property,’ they were typically sold to the highest bidders with little concern for kinship ties. Despite slavery’s many horrors, historian Wilma King selected the forced separation of families, either by sale or forced migration, as “the worst of its aspects[.]” In

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<sup>99</sup> Delbanco, *The War Before the War*, 28-30.

essence, nobody was safe; the domestic trade in enslaved people dealt a tremendous blow to enslaved families.<sup>100</sup>

In testimonies and interviews, formerly enslaved people spoke of their traumatic experiences with the slave trade and forced migration. James Adams, a freedom seeker from Virginia, told Drew, “I have seen separations by sales, of husbands from wives, of parents from children – if a man threatens to run away, he is sure to be sold.” Similarly, Leonard Harrod of Windsor, noted, “I was taken from my wife suddenly; she knew no more where I had gone than the hen knows where the hawk carries her chicken. Fifteen hundred miles I wore iron on my wrist, chained in a gang from Georgetown to Port Gibson [Mississippi]. There I was sold and put to receive and pack cotton, etc., for six years. Then I was sold to Nashville [Tennessee], one year; then to New Orleans fifteen years[.]”<sup>101</sup>

Isaac Johnson, a formerly enslaved African American from Kentucky, recounted the horrors of witnessing his family being sold. Johnson provides the following account of the slave auction at which his family was sold: “Then the auctioneer called for Isaac and I was led out, the auctioneer saying, “Time is precious, gentlemen, I must sell them all before night; how much do I hear for this nigger?” ... The next one sold was Ambrose. I could not see him, but I could hear the auctioneer crying for bids and my little four year old [sic] brother was sold for five hundred dollars to William Murphy...in a very short time, our happy family was scattered, without even the privilege of saying ‘Good by’ [sic] to each other, and never again to be seen, at least so far as I was concerned.”<sup>102</sup>

While those who were sold to the Lower South and Southwest faced unspeakable hardships, life in the Upper South was hardly much better for enslaved African Americans. Subject to their enslavers’ total authority, brutal treatment, malnutrition, illness and disease, physical punishment, and sexual assault was commonplace. Without rights or protections, enslaved people could not turn to the authorities or the law. Many self-emancipators discussed their horrible experiences while enslaved. Charles Peyton Lucas, who escaped from Loudoun County, Virginia to Upper Canada, recalled various instances in which he was whipped and beaten by his enslaver. On one occasion, Lucas remembered that his enslaver “tied up” another boy on the labor camp “and laid twenty-five lashes on his bare back with a cowskin[.]” In turn, Lucas’ brother stole one of his enslaver’s horses and escaped to Canada.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011; first edition 1995), 32.

<sup>101</sup> Drew, *North-Side View of Slavery*, 28, 339-340.

<sup>102</sup> Isaac Johnson, *Slavery Days in Old Kentucky. A True Story of a Father Who Sold His Wife and Four Children. By One of His Children* (Ogdensburg, NY: Republican & Journal Print, 1901), 10-11, accessed Sep. 13, 2018. <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/johnson/johnson.html>.

<sup>103</sup> Drew, *North-Side View of Slavery*, 105-107.

## ***Tipping Points: The Motivations, Profiles, and Strategies of Slave Refugees***

The emergence of ‘free soil’ spaces in the northern US and British Canada, coupled with the rapid expansion of the second slavery and interregional trade in the South, provided enslaved African Americans with a new impetus to escape northward. Escape posed innumerable physical, psychological, and environmental challenges for freedom seekers. Self-emancipators had to abscond with few provisions and little knowledge of the geographical terrain. Furthermore, they had to assume that northern and southern whites were untrustworthy or hostile. The threat of recapture, punishment, and sale constantly hung over the heads of self-emancipators. Self-emancipators struggled with an existential dilemma: escaping from bondage meant leaving loved ones behind, or even condemning them to punishment or sale. Finally, escaping from southern slavery could result in death. Apart from illness and starvation, freedom seekers could drown in rivers, face inhospitable climates, or perish in any other number of ways. The challenges and risks associated with self-emancipation deterred most enslaved people from trying to escape. Yet the fact remains that tens of thousands were willing to put everything on the line to liberate themselves and their families.

Above all, the threat of sale or forced separation compelled enslaved African Americans to escape. David West, a Virginia who fled to Canada, told Benjamin Drew, “My master died, and I heard that I was to be sold, which would separate me from my family, and knowing no law which would defend me, I concluded to come away.” The moment was truly a turning point for West, who stated, “I tried to content myself to remain, and should probably have done so, but for the dread of being sold south.”<sup>104</sup> The threat of forced separation could come about from various developments. As discussed earlier, the local and interregional slave trades posed an enormous threat to enslaved communities in the Upper South. Furthermore, the death of an enslaver motivated many to escape. In this scenario, their estate (including enslaved people) were typically dispersed among relatives and heirs, or sold to another enslaver or trader. Isaac Williams recalled being sold and separated from his family following the death of his enslaver. “When my first master died,” he told Benjamin Drew, “his widow married a man who got into debt and was put into prison. The woman gave up her rights to get him out. Then we were sold. Every man came to be sold for her lifetime – then to revert to the heirs. The heirs bought in all they could – among them my two sisters.” They were subsequently sent to Richmond, and from there to the Lower South. Williams recalled, “we could not help it – they went

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<sup>104</sup> Drew, *North-Side View of Slavery*, 87-88.

off crying.”<sup>105</sup> Franklin and Schweningen note that enslaved African Americans “viewed their master’s passing with great anxiety, and some among them viewed it as a time to attempt an escape.” This pivotal moment in the lives of many enslaved men and women proved the final straw.<sup>106</sup>

Others resolved to escape in response to brutal treatment, physical or psychological punishment, and sexual assault. Franklin and Schweningen write that enslaved people throughout the South “were beaten, chained, incarcerated, ironed, and whipped; and they watched as their wives, husbands, mothers, fathers, and children, and relatives were flogged.”<sup>107</sup> Narratives, memoirs, and testimonies illustrate the impact which maltreatment and punishment had on enslaved people. The sight of other men and women being physically or sexually assaulted encouraged many to escape. James Adams, a self-emancipator from Virginia, told Drew, “At the age of seventeen, I set out to seek freedom in company with Benjamin Harris (who was a cousin of mine) and a woman and four children... I had seen older men treated worse than a horse or a hog ought to be treated; so, seeing what I was coming to, I wished to get away.” Similarly, Dan Josiah Lockhart from Frederick County, Virginia, recalled a horrifying incident involving his new enslaver. He stated, “I lived with my new master three years and two months. Then he whipped my wife and children... I could not stand this abuse of them, and so I made up my mind to leave.” In 1847, Lockhart fled to Pittsburgh and later to Canada. “The hardest thing in slavery is not the work,” he alleged; “it is the abuse of a man, and, in my case, of a man’s wife and children.”<sup>108</sup>

The ‘desire to be free’ was another primary factor behind escape to the North and Canada. James Curry, who escaped from North Carolina, recalled in his memoir, “From my childhood, the desire for freedom reigned predominant in my breast, until I resolved, if I was ever whipped after I became a man, I would no longer be a slave.”<sup>109</sup> Franklin and Schweningen note that ‘habitual runaways’ greatly desired their permanent freedom. They claim that these freedom seekers “ran away not once or twice, but many times, and although often caught and punished, it did not seem to matter how frequent or brutal the punishment or how many threats were made against them and their families.”<sup>110</sup> In most instances, a combination of internal and external factors, both short-term and long-term, motivated men and women to seek permanent liberty.

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<sup>105</sup> Drew, *North-Side View of Slavery*, 54-55.

<sup>106</sup> Franklin and Schweningen, *Runaway Slaves*, 19.

<sup>107</sup> Franklin and Schweningen, *Runaway Slaves*, 42.

<sup>108</sup> Drew, *North-Side View of Slavery*, 19 (Adams quote), 46-50 (Lockhart quotes).

<sup>109</sup> James Curry, *Narrative of James Curry, A Fugitive Slave* (Originally printed in the *Liberator*, Jan. 10, 1840), accessed Sep. 1, 2019. <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/curry/curry.html>.

<sup>110</sup> Franklin and Schweningen, *Runaway Slaves*, 38.

Franklin and Schweninger claim that about eighty percent of freedom seekers across the South were men, most of whom were likely younger than thirty. Most fled alone or, at most, in small groups of no more than a handful. Absconding in larger groups risked alerting enslavers, local whites, and the authorities. By fleeing alone or in small groups of two or three, typically under the cover of night, freedom seekers increased their odds of escape.<sup>111</sup> Male freedom seekers employed various strategies to escape. Most notably, they attempted to pass as free people of color or, in some instances, white men and women. Moses Roper, a self-emancipator from North Carolina, took advantage of his lighter complexion to employ this strategy. As his mother was “half white” and his father was “white,” Roper noted that he was “very white” for an enslaved man. After being sold to a Florida enslaver, Roper secured passage aboard a ship to New York City in 1834.<sup>112</sup>

Newspaper notices also highlight this strategy. In 1801, the *Baltimore American and Daily Advertiser* published a notice for “a negro lad named JIM,” who allegedly “passed for a freeman.” In September, an advertisement for a self-emancipator named Phill claimed, “he is of a light complexion for a negro,” indicating that he potentially sought to pass for a legally free person. Meanwhile, a self-emancipator from Baltimore, Maryland named Nace escaped from his enslaver. According to the advertisement, “his clothes cannot be described, as no doubt he has changed them.” Ten dollars was offered for Nace’s arrest in Baltimore, while fifty was offered if taken out of state. This final sentence leaves open the possibility that Nace would seek to escape to neighboring Pennsylvania or another northern state.<sup>113</sup>

Mobility and movement were also key factors that enabled enslaved men to escape more often than women. Enslaved men were often hired out by their enslavers, which afforded them greater spheres of movement and improved spatial awareness. Some enslavers permitted men to hire out their own time in return for a portion of their profits. Baltimore and Washington, DC boasted sizable hired-out enslaved populations who worked in a range of trades and vocations. Consequently, hired-out enslaved men were able to work alongside enslaved and free African Americans elsewhere, and by extension expand their spatial knowledge and social networks.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 210-212; John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, “The Quest for Freedom: Runaway Slaves and the Plantation South,” in Gabor S. Boritt and Scott Hancock (eds.), *Slavery, Resistance, Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 28.

<sup>112</sup> Moses Roper, *Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper, from American Slavery. With an Appendix, Containing a List of Places Visited by the Author in Great Britain and Ireland and the British Isles, and Other Matter* (Berwick-Upon-Tweed, UK: Published for the author and printed at the Warder Office, 1848), 7 (quote), accessed May 28, 2020. <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/roper/roper.html>.

<sup>113</sup> “Ten Dollars Reward,” (Baltimore) *American and Daily Advertiser*, Jan. 17, 1801; “Fifty Dollars Reward,” *American and Daily Advertiser*, Sep. 23, 1801; “Fifty Dollars Reward,” *American and Daily Advertiser*, Sep. 24, 1801.

<sup>114</sup> For more on enslaved hiring in the antebellum South, see Jonathan D. Martin, *Divided Mastery: Slave Hiring in the American South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); John J. Zarboney,

Some occupations increased enslaved men's mobility more than others. Sailors and boat workers, for example, enjoyed significantly larger spheres of movement. In the Chesapeake and Tidewater Virginia, hired-out enslaved men often worked on ships, schooners, rafts, and other vessels. Farther west, enslaved men worked on steamboats and smaller vessels on the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. Boatmen and river workers on the Mississippi River, notes Thomas C. Buchanan, became "heroic figures in the slave community." Enslaved black men on boats and vessels became essential actors on maritime and coastal UGRR routes. With their experience and knowledge, black sailors and boatmen aided countless freedom seekers.<sup>115</sup>

Meanwhile, enslaved women typically possessed fewer opportunities to escape. This is reflected in the statistics for each southern state. In Virginia, African American women comprised less than one-tenth of self-emancipators between 1838 and 1860. Likewise, in Tennessee, freedom-seeking women accounted for twelve percent of all reported escapes, while in North Carolina they represented only fourteen percent of all cases. In general, these figures symbolize the limited mobility afforded to enslaved women by southern enslavers, as well as the factors which kept them more firmly rooted on farms and plantations. Most importantly, they were expected to remain at home and raise enslaved children. Deborah Gray White writes, "the responsibilities of childbearing and child care seriously circumscribed the female slave's life... women tended to be more concerned with the welfare of children, and this limited their mobility." The practical difficulties of escaping with young children deterred prospective freedom seekers, particularly in the Lower South, from seeking permanent liberty in free-soil spaces. Stephanie Camp argues that enslaved women possessed "a relative lack of knowledge of the geography beyond the plantation."<sup>116</sup>

That being said, the smaller number of female slave refugees should not suggest that enslaved women were inherently more docile than men. When the opportunity arose, many seized the moment to claim their liberty. As with male self-emancipators, women that absconded were usually younger. Furthermore, female freedom seekers often traveled in small groups, with both men and other women. Most groups were comprised of relatives and kin, although others were composed of friends and acquaintances from one or several farmsteads. For freedom-seeking women, traveling with young, physically fit men proved beneficial. Not only did it

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*Slaves for Hire: Renting Enslaved Laborers in Antebellum Virginia* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2012); and

<sup>115</sup> Thomas C. Buchanan, *Black Life on the Mississippi: Slaves, Free Blacks, and the Western Steamboat World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 10. For more on black watermen and sailors, see David S. Cecelski, *The Waterman's Song: Slavery and Freedom in Maritime North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Schermerhorn, *Money over Mastery*, Ch. 2.

<sup>116</sup> Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 212-213; White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 70-71; Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 36-38. For more on the gendered dynamics of self-emancipation in the US South, see Michael Johnson, "Runaway Slaves and the Slave Communities in South Carolina, 1799 to 1830," *William and Mary Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (1981), 418-441.

diminish the various physical and environmental hazards, such as traveling long distances or crossing streams and rivers, but it also created new opportunities for supporting themselves. With their added mobility, enslaved men could pose as hired out men or free people of color more easily to obtain resources in towns and cities. Furthermore, female freedom seekers were less likely to arouse suspicion if seen traveling with men.<sup>117</sup>

Despite this, newspaper notices and other historical records demonstrate that some freedom-seeking women escaped northward alone. In 1826, the Virginia-based *Genius of Liberty* printed one notice for a forty-year-old woman named Rachael, who escaped from Loudoun County, Virginia between Christmas Day and New Year's Day. She was reportedly last seen in the village of Waterford, Loudoun County (approximately forty miles northwest of Washington, DC). Amani Marshall notes that freedom-seeking women exploited white conceptualizations of race and ethnicity to pass for free people of color and, on some occasions, free whites. Around the same time as Rachael's escape, an enslaved woman named Sarah from Fairfax County, Virginia was reported missing. The *Genius of Liberty* claimed that she was likely "passing for a free woman, under the assumed character of having been one of the slaves of the late Robert Gunnell, deceased, and freed at his death[.]" Sarah was last seen in Waterford. Other women attempted to escape with children or while pregnant, although this increased the difficulty of escape.<sup>118</sup>

Given the practical challenges of traveling in groups and with women, children, and the elderly and infirm, family escapes proved less common throughout the South. The typical structure of enslaved kinship networks also increased the challenges of escaping in family units. The prevalence of 'abroad marriages' (i.e. husbands and wives dispersed across several farmsteads) increased the logistical challenges of escaping with family. Emily West notes that abroad partnerships comprised approximately one-third of all enslaved unions in South Carolina. Across the Upper South, abroad unions and families were also commonplace. Diane Mutti Burke claims that abroad partnerships "were by far the norm."<sup>119</sup>

Nevertheless, some family units attempted to escape from the South together. In some instances, husbands reunited with wives on neighboring farms before making their escape. Other examples illustrate that freedom-seeking mothers and fathers absconded with children, and even extended families tried to escape

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<sup>117</sup> Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 212-213.

<sup>118</sup> "10 Dolls. Reward," *Genius of Liberty*, Feb. 28, 1826; "20 Dolls. Reward," *Genius of Liberty*, Dec. 8, 1825. Amani Marshall, "'They Will Endeavor to Pass for Free': Enslaved Runaways' Performances of Freedom in Antebellum South Carolina," in *Slavery & Abolition* 31, no. 2 (2010): 161-180; Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 212-213.

<sup>119</sup> Emily West, *Chains of Love: Slave Couples in Antebellum South Carolina* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 44; Diane Mutti Burke, *On Slavery's Border: Missouri's Small Slaveholding Households, 1815-1865*, (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 200.

together. However, as Franklin and Schwenger note, “runaway families included a husband and wife and one or two children.” The fear of sale and permanent separation usually compelled families to escape, but so did cruel punishment and brutal treatment from enslavers. Although the odds were stacked against them, enslaved families did everything in their power to stay together, even if it meant launching desperate bids for freedom.<sup>120</sup>

Geographical proximity to the northern states was a huge advantage for enslaved people in the Upper South. Franklin and Schwenger refer to this as the “accident of location.” Enslaved people in Maryland, Virginia, Kentucky, and Missouri lived close to ‘free’ state borders. While many freedom seekers sought refuge in cities like Baltimore and Richmond, others desired a more complete form of liberty.<sup>121</sup> After resolving to escape, freedom seekers had to determine if they should remain in the South or head towards ‘free’ territories. Although staying in the ‘slave’ states had some advantages, it also came with serious risks. Bounty hunters and slave patrols regularly scoured the southern states for freedom seekers. If found, the consequences could be devastating. In 1843, John Bell of Alexandria, Virginia described a case involving a self-emancipator who escaped from the notorious slave traders, Franklin and Armitage. He wrote that the man “ran away nearly two years ago, and never farther than Prince George’s County [Maryland], and past [sic] off as a freeman[.]” He was soon recaptured, however, and plans were made to return him to the slave traders. Rather than accept this fate, he decided to “plunge himself into the Potomac, in sight of the Capitol & tomb of Washington & drowned.”<sup>122</sup>

For enslaved people in the Upper South, escape to the northern states and Canada undoubtedly presented the best opportunity to attain permanent freedom. African Americans and white abolitionists across the region aided self-emancipated refugees on their escapes. Furthermore, while federal law recognized them as ‘fugitives from justice,’ northern lawmakers and judges restricted slavery’s influence in the North. The legal ambiguity surrounding their status, as well as resistance from northern free black and white abolitionists, reduced the odds of southern enslavers successfully reclaiming freedom seekers. For those who felt that semi-formal freedom in the North was not secure enough, they could cross into Canada and claim permanent or formal liberty. If the threat of recapture seemed imminent, slave refugees in the North could quickly abscond to Canada, beyond the jurisdiction of US

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<sup>120</sup> Franklin and Schwenger, *Runaway Slaves*, 49-70 (quote on pg. 66).

<sup>121</sup> Franklin and Schwenger, *Runaway Slaves*, 25. For more on ‘informal’ freedom in the US South, see Viola Franziska Muller, “Illegal but Tolerated: Slave Refugees in Richmond, Virginia, 1800-1860,” in Pargas (ed.), *Fugitive Slaves*, Ch. 5. Texas, Louisiana, and Florida are exceptional cases given their proximity to Mexico and the Bahamas respectively.

<sup>122</sup> Bell, John, and William Lloyd Garrison. “Letter from John Bell, Alexan[ndria, Virginia], to William Lloyd Garrison, 1834 July 13.” Correspondence. Jul. 13, 1834. *Digital Commonwealth*, accessed Jun. 3, 2020. <https://www.digitalcommonwealth.org/search/commonwealth:2z10zr705>.

federal law. For others, British North America was the ultimate destination from the outset. Unconvinced that the North was secure terrain, these slave refugees believed that they could only attain their permanent freedom by leaving the United States entirely.

In writings and interviews, self-emancipators depicted the North and Canada's reputation as spaces of freedom. As word reached enslaved communities in the Upper South, more and more freedom seekers resolved to reach these free-soil territories. Memoirs and autobiographies reveal the growing awareness among enslaved people that they could escape from slavery by fleeing northward. Jacob Green, who escaped from Kentucky, later recalled, "I heard so much about the free States of the north that I was determined to be free." Many recounted how they endured numerous obstacles and challenges to escape from the South. William Johnson told Benjamin Drew, "My feet were frostbitten on my way North, but I would rather have died than to go back."<sup>123</sup> Self-emancipation was, for many freedom seekers, characterized by a profound sense of loss and anguish. Robert Churchill writes that the decision to escape "was difficult, fraught with risk, and sometimes heart breaking [sic]. In most cases it meant leaving behind family, friends, and the only world that those escaping had ever known."<sup>124</sup> David West told US abolitionist Benjamin Drew, "I am now in Canada and doing well at my trade, and I expect to do better yet. My only trouble is my wife and family. I never should have come away but for being forced away." Similarly, William Brown recalled, "It is three years ago that I left my family, and I do n't [sic] know whether they are dead or alive. I want to hear from them."<sup>125</sup>

Overall, the northern US and Canada offered self-emancipators the best prospect of claiming permanent freedom. Yet as Franklin and Schweninger note, "The dream of freedom in the North or Canada – the so-called Promised Land – went unfulfilled for the vast majority of runaways[.]"<sup>126</sup> Countless obstacles lay between southern black refugees and the free-soil territories. Most notably, slave patrols, slave catchers, and city and state authorities acted quickly to recapture those who absconded from their enslavers. Moreover, southern whites (including those who were not among the enslaver class) were hostile to freedom seekers. Coupled with limited resources and a lack of knowledge of the geographical terrain, it is understandable why most self-emancipators were unable to obtain permanent liberty in the North and Canada. Nonetheless, through cunning, resilience, and sheer

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<sup>123</sup> Jacob D. Green, *Narrative of the Life of J. D. Green, a Runaway Slave, from Kentucky, Containing an Account of His Three Escapes, in 1839, 1846, and 1848* (Huddersfield: Henry Fielding, Pack Horse Yard, 1864), 8, accessed Sep. 1, 2019. <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/greenjd/greenjd.html>; Drew, *North-Side View of Slavery*, 29.

<sup>124</sup> Churchill, *The Underground Railroad and the Geography of Violence in Antebellum America*, 28.

<sup>125</sup> Drew, *North-Side View of Slavery*, 88, 282.

<sup>126</sup> Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 116.

determination, tens of thousands of freedom seekers managed to escape from the South. On foot, by horseback, or aboard steamboats and ships, self-emancipated men, women, and children took various routes and were aided by a range of actors. Above all, free African American communities provided freedom seekers with anonymity and assistance. Furthermore, black and white activists in the Mason-Dixon, Ohio River, and Upper Mississippi River borderlands and beyond maintained extensive UGRR networks which provided countless slave refugees with food, water, shelter, and transportation.

### ***Conclusion***

The Revolutionary Era marked a turning point for the politics of slavery and freedom in North America. Whereas black enslavement was previously legal and practiced throughout the continent, this period witnessed the emergence of informal and formal free-soil spaces in the northern US and Canada. During wartime, thousands of freedom seekers fled to British lines with the hope of obtaining their liberty. Furthermore, the American Revolution accelerated the process of gradual abolition in the North and Canada. Inspired by Enlightenment ideals and economic self-interest (namely, less need for enslaved labor), the northern states and Canadian provinces approved gradual abolition statutes during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Of course, the process of abolition fell short of the expectations of free African Americans and enslaved people in those regions.

Yet the emergence of free soil in the North and Canada presented enslaved African Americans in the South with a newfound sense of hope that they could possibly claim their liberty by heading northward. Yet freedom seekers were not motivated solely by a desire to be free. Rather, they also actively sought to avoid the increasing brutality of the second slavery. In particular, the threat of sale and forced migration remained a pervasive threat for enslaved men, women, and children. As Upper South enslavers sought to sell their 'surplus' human property, African American families were torn apart by the indiscriminate interregional slave trade. In turn, enslaved people resolved to self-emancipate. However, the threat of sale was not the only factor that encouraged freedom seekers to escape from the South. Cruel treatment, for instance, was another commonly listed reason behind self-emancipation. With regard to the profiles of self-emancipators, it is clear that men found it easier to escape from bondage than women given their heightened mobility (particularly in the Upper South). For the most part, freedom seekers hoped to escape alone or in small groups to avoid discovery. Faced with the growing dangers of the second slavery, tens of thousands of enslaved men and women willingly risked their lives to protect themselves and their families and loved ones.

*Northward Bound*



**Figure 4: The Underground Railroad in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

**Source:** Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Jean Blackwell Hutson Research and Reference Division, NYPL. "Underground Railroad 19<sup>th</sup> Century." NYPL Digital Collections, accessed Feb. 29, 2020. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/863f0211-4262-2898-e040-e00a18060f45>.