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Conclusions

Many Shades of Liberty: Slave Refugees and the Pursuit of Freedom and Equality

Between the American Revolution and the US Civil War, the northern US and British Canada emerged as beacons of liberty for African American freedom seekers. Tens of thousands of self-emancipated refugees - men, women, and children - fled from the US South in search of freedom. However, they encountered different obstacles and opportunities in each space of liberty. *Northward Bound* illustrates that 'freedom' for slave refugees varied significantly throughout eighteenth and nineteenth-century North America. By examining their experiences in the northern US and Canada, it demonstrates that freedom seekers in the North lived in a state of semi-formal freedom, while self-liberated people in Canada could obtain formal liberty. Far from a singular, static concept, freedom for African-descended people exhibited many shades across the continent.

For slave refugees, semi-formal freedom in the northern states was ambiguous. Under federal law, self-emancipators from the South remained subject to recapture and re-enslavement. Yet northern state laws, as well as the activism of African Americans and white abolitionists, defended them against the threat of slave catchers and federal marshals. By contrast, slave refugees in Canada lived in a state of formal liberty. Aside from a few exceptions, the vast majority were secure from extradition and re-enslavement in the United States. Additionally, formal liberty in British North America offered other advantages to freedom seekers. Most notably, land ownership, educational opportunities, the electoral franchise, civil rights, and equal citizenship were more realistic prospects in Canada. Slave refugees in the North were still regarded as 'chattel' property under US federal law. This limited the opportunities available to freedom seekers in the North. Meanwhile, self-emancipators who fled to British lines in wartime, or escaped to British North America over the antebellum period, were recognized as legally free people as soon as they set foot on Canadian soil.

Nevertheless, while tens of thousands of slave refugees migrated to British North America, most opted to remain in the northern US. How can we explain this development? If given the choice between formal freedom in Canada and semi-formal freedom in the North, why would most freedom seekers choose the latter? Why would many self-emancipators remain in the Lower North, or even in places like the Lake Erie border zone or New England, when they could potentially attain greater rights and protections in the Canadian provinces? And vice versa, what were the motivations and concerns for freedom seekers who migrated to Canada? Considering that most remained in the northern US, why did tens of thousands decide

to seek refuge in British North America? Was it solely for land ownership, improved rights and legal protections, or were other factors at play?

For wartime refugees, the choice was largely beyond their control. Freedom seekers that fled to British lines during the American Revolutionary War and War of 1812 had little say in their final destination. Most refugees ended up in the Canadian Maritimes, which the British government hoped to build into a thriving region. A smaller number of freedom seekers were taken to Upper and Lower Canada, as well as other British imperial territories. For these men, women, and children, fleeing to the enemy of their enslavers presented the best hope for claiming their freedom. The distinction between various shades of liberty, whether it be ‘semi-formal’ or ‘formal,’ was either irrelevant or insignificant. Wartime freedom seekers quickly determined that the real choice was largely between liberty and enslavement. As the geopolitical landscape of freedom fluctuated in wartime, self-emancipated refugees took whatever opportunities they could to escape.

Furthermore, *Northward Bound* illustrates that family and kinship networks were key motivations for freedom seekers to escape in the Revolutionary War and War of 1812. Far from solely individual endeavors, self-emancipated men and women employed tactics and strategies designed not only to liberate themselves but also their parents, spouses, children, and other relatives. Cassandra Pybus, Alan Taylor, and others have highlighted the role of kinship networks in patterns of escape during the Revolutionary War and War of 1812.⁸⁴¹ During each conflict, the British realized that enslaved people were reluctant to escape from their US enslavers without their families. The British government thus had to offer asylum to freedom-seeking women, children, and others who did not directly serve in the armed forces.

Meanwhile, the nature of self-emancipation and escape changed over the antebellum period. As the second slavery expanded in the Lower South and Southwest, and the northern states and British Canada abolished black enslavement within their borders, increasing numbers of black freedom seekers escaped to the North and Canada in search of liberty. Most slave refugees that fled northward came from the Upper South. Others traveled greater distances, either overland or via river and coastal passages. The Mason-Dixon, Ohio River, and Mississippi River border regions were the most popular routes taken by freedom seekers. Most sought shelter in free African American communities. White abolitionists, anti-slavery societies, and vigilance committees also played important roles in assisting slave refugees. Geography certainly influenced self-emancipation and escape from the South. Given the regional differences, the nature of escape varied across the ‘free’ states. Whereas freedom seekers primarily escaped via the Metropolitan Corridor in the Mason-Dixon borderland, while those in the Old Northwest relied more heavily on African

⁸⁴¹ Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom*; Taylor, *Internal Enemy*.

American farming settlements. Yet white abolitionists and interracial UGRR networks were certainly prevalent (although less developed) in the Old Northwest.

Contrary to earlier studies, *Northward Bound* demonstrates that family and kinship networks were key motivations behind escape to the North and Canada over the antebellum period. This study highlights the role of freedom-seeking women, children, and others in the 'free' states and Canada. Historians like Stephanie Camp, argue that kinship networks often deterred enslaved women from seeking permanent liberty in the North or Canada.⁸⁴² This study also demonstrates that numerous freedom-seeking women fled from the South specifically to protect their families. Far from individual or isolated acts, self-emancipation was often a family endeavor. As the records of William Still, Sydney Howard Gay, and others recognize, various types of freedom-seeking families fled northward to escape from slavery together. While some fled in complete family units, most staggered their escapes in patterns that resembled chain migration. Moreover, other freedom seekers strove to rescue enslaved family members after escaping from the South.

Having escaped from the South, slave refugees had to determine what to do next. Should they remain where they were, head to New England or the Lake Erie border zone, or even emigrate from the United States entirely? Thousands decided to seek refuge in Canada from the moment they escaped. As long as slavery existed in the United States, they believed that black people could not attain true freedom in the North. Most headed to British North America alone or with assistance from abolitionists and UGRR activists. In many cases, family ties the primary factor that inspired self-emancipators to emigrate. Others like Adam Crosswhite and his family, Samuel Ringgold Ward, and Thornton and Lucie Blackburn fled to Canada in response to the threat of re-enslavement. For many freedom seekers, escaping to Canada was an *ad hoc* decision. It was spontaneous, necessary, and came with great emotional anguish (particularly the loss of enslaved family members and loved ones).

Yet most freedom seekers remained in the northern US rather than heading to Canada. Why did most refugees from slavery stay in the North? Many freedom seekers followed family members to various locations in the 'free' states. Others hoped to stay relatively close to enslaved family members in the Upper South with the aim of purchasing their liberty or rescuing them. Additionally, most self-emancipators were simply unable to make the journey to Canada. Without the aid of UGRR networks, freedom seekers typically had to find employment and housing quickly. Furthermore, slave refugees were typically drawn to African American communities in the North, which offered varying degrees of security and protection. Rural black settlements across the North also appealed to self-emancipators for similar reasons. Within the crowd, they could pass as legally free people of color.

⁸⁴² Camp, *Closer to Freedom*.

The northern US offered socio-economic advantages to slave refugees. In particular, urban centers across the North were simply more developed than their Canadian contemporaries. New York City, Philadelphia, Boston, and Cincinnati (and other urban centers) were much more developed than Toronto, Halifax, and other towns and cities in the Canadian provinces. For freedom seekers, one of the primary concerns was making a living to support themselves and their families. With their low-wage jobs and significant free black populations, slave refugees often determined that there were better socio-economic opportunities in the North. At the same time, freedom seekers encountered challenges and obstacles in the 'free' states. Most refugees lived in poverty and faced anti-black hostility and violence from northern whites. Racial prejudice often spilled over into violence against northern black communities. Nonetheless, freedom seekers considered these circumstances preferable to enslavement.

In the Canadian Maritimes and Upper Canada, slave refugees established brand new settlements and integrated into existing towns and cities. Like their US counterparts, they mostly lived in poverty and endured racial discrimination from white Canadians and European newcomers. Officially, slave refugees in Canada possessed better socio-economic rights than their northern counterparts. First, they could purchase lands of their own in British North America. Across each region, self-emancipated newcomers founded rural farming settlements. While most proved short-lived, their brief existence was a testament to the resilience of freedom seekers, as well as the greater rights and opportunities afforded by formal liberty. Furthermore, black refugees in British North America had greater access to schools and colleges, although racial prejudice and poverty prevented many from gaining an education. Black activists and white abolitionist missionaries founded utopian settlements in Upper Canada for the elevation of slave refugees.⁸⁴³

Additionally, slave refugees were mostly concerned about the threat of recapture and re-enslavement. Beyond the jurisdiction of the US federal law (namely the Fugitive Slave Acts), self-emancipators in Canada were almost entirely secure from re-enslavement. By contrast, the northern states remained subject to federal law, which preserved southern enslavers' right of recapture. Bearing this in mind, one might assume that most freedom seekers would head to Canada. Yet this was not strictly the case. Considering the added security afforded by British and Canadian law, why did most refugees decide against migrating to Canada?

First, various regions in the North were relatively secure terrain for freedom seekers. In numerous instances, it was very difficult to recapture slave refugees who

⁸⁴³ As noted earlier, this study contradicts earlier assessments (namely those from Robin Winks and Donald G. Simpson) that independent black settlement schemes, such as Wilberforce and Dawn, were unmitigated disasters. See Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*; Simpson, *Under the North Star*. While there is a tendency to claim that only the Elgin settlement was successful, this dissertation contends that each black settlement proved useful experiments in black land ownership and education.

fled beyond the immediate North-South border zones. For instance, New England, Upstate New York, and Ohio's Western Reserve were each hostile terrain for southern enslavers, slave catchers, and federal marshals. Given their geographical distance and anti-slavery populations, enslavers faced an uphill battle in trying to reclaim self-emancipated men and women. Even in the Lower North, where enslavers enjoyed more success in recapturing self-emancipators, free blacks and white abolitionists often came to their defense. Episodes like the Christiana Resistance highlight the significant challenges which southern whites increasingly faced when trying to recapture slave refugees.

Aside from civil disobedience and physical resistance, freedom seekers understood that northern state laws (namely personal liberty laws and anti-kidnapping statutes), as well as court rulings, provided slave refugees with important rights and protections, such as a right to a jury trial. While the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 provoked an enormous outcry among African Americans and northern whites, it contributed to the recapture of only a very small proportion of slave refugees in the northern US. Although semi-formal liberty in the 'free' states was less secure than formal liberty in Canada, freedom seekers benefited from conflicts and ambiguities between state and federal laws. Ultimately, many parts of the North did not become the 'slave-hunting grounds' that many feared.

Finally, slave refugees in the northern US and Canada were motivated by campaigns for abolitionism, civil rights, and equal citizenship or subjecthood. Once again, British North America was theoretically a more appealing destination for self-emancipators and free people of color. After escaping to Canada, African American newcomers could become naturalized British subjects with (at least officially) most of the same rights and privileges as white Canadians. As the Canadian provinces were officially 'color-blind,' black men could vote, sit on juries, hold some public offices, serve in militia companies, and attend the same public spaces as whites. By contrast, African Americans in the northern US were denied equal rights and were excluded from citizenship. Why would slave refugees remain in the North if they could potentially avail of improved rights and equal subjecthood?

Slave refugees across the northern US were politically active. Self-emancipators like Frederick Douglass, Samuel Ringgold Ward, William Wells Brown, and many others became prominent orators, writers, editors, and political campaigners. Alongside free-born and freed black abolitionists, slave refugees transformed the abolitionist movement into a more progressive, interracial campaign against slavery. Furthermore, slave refugees pushed abolitionists into electoral politics. Through their activism, they helped to legitimize early anti-slavery parties, such as the Liberty Party and the Republican Party. Slave refugee abolitionists were involved in campaigns against segregation, disfranchisement, and racial discrimination in the North.

Slave refugees held important positions in Canadian anti-slavery societies and were instrumental in establishing an independent African Canadian press. The *Voice of the Fugitive* and the *Provincial Freeman* were among the most significant transnational black newspapers in North America. Furthermore, slave refugees across Canada exercised their right to vote to remove racist politicians from office and replace them with more favorable candidates. The cases of Edwin Larwill and Colonel John Prince illustrate the influence of a mobilized black electorate. Over time, Tories and Reformers across British North America increasingly appealed to black refugee voters.

Perceptions of national identity among slave refugees varied between Canada and the northern US. Self-emancipators in Canada embraced British subjecthood, as exhibited by their various acts of loyalty to the Crown. Self-emancipators like Henry Bibb, as well as free-born black activists like Mary Ann Shadd Cary, hoped to inculcate a sense of British identity among African Canadian communities. Meanwhile, freedom seekers in the North conceived of themselves as Americans who were duly entitled to all the liberties and protections afforded by the Constitution. Slave refugees in the North thus conceived their position as a stepping stone toward formal freedom, which could only come about only through the abolition of slavery and African American citizenship.

With its free black communities, UGRR and anti-slavery networks, socio-economic opportunities, and relative security against re-enslavement, many self-emancipators decided to remain in the North. By campaigning for abolitionism and equal citizenship, they sought to push the United States toward formal freedom. Yet for those who sought greater security or civil and political liberties, Canada was not far away. Should they wish, or if necessary, slave refugees could seek formal liberty under the lion's paw. Canada served as a relief valve for many freedom seekers. For others, it was the only destination. As long as slavery existed in the United States, many believed that African Americans could never be truly free.

The US Civil War precipitated events that would lead to slavery's ultimate extinction in North America. Throughout the conflict, African American refugees fled *en masse* toward Union lines in daring bids for liberty.⁸⁴⁴ On January 1, 1863, President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation which formally linked the Union cause to the eradication of slavery. After the rebel states were defeated, slavery was formally abolished. Ratified in 1865, the 13th Amendment outlawed black enslavement in the United States. During Reconstruction, formerly enslaved African Americans

⁸⁴⁴ For more on slave refugees during the US Civil War, see Cooper, "'Lord, until I reach my home"; Taylor, *Embattled Freedom*; Manning, *Troubled Refuge*.

gradually made the transition out of human bondage. Yet the postbellum South was hardly a welcoming place for freedpeople.⁸⁴⁵

Over the next few years, African Americans would continue their campaigns for formal freedom, equal citizenship, and racial justice. For many, the most immediate concern was locating lost family members and loved ones. Slave refugees in the North and Canada either returned to the South or sought information on the whereabouts of lost family. They published Information Wanted advertisements in US and Canadian newspapers with the hope of finding their loved ones. In 1866, Lewis Wade placed a notice in the *Christian Recorder* for his wife Lucy and their three children. He supposedly “left them in 1850, they then being in Rockbridge [C]ounty, Virginia. He belonged to Wm. Thompson, while his wife and children belonged to James Watts.” A resident of Chatham, Wade implored anyone who had information regarding his family to contact him.⁸⁴⁶

Three years later, the *Ottumwa Courier* published an advertisement for Harry Bowen, who reportedly “escaped from his master, Jerry Wayland, near St. Francisville, [Missouri], about New Year’s night 1859. It is supposed that he went to Chicago, and from there to Canada, but has not been heard from since his escape, notwithstanding the three hundred dollars in specie offered to the man hunters to capture him.” His brother Charles placed the notice and was “anxious to hear from him[.]” Information wanted advertisements were not strictly a Reconstruction phenomenon. In 1888, the *Christian Recorder* reported that a woman named Dulcina Hall was searching for her father Isaac Tolson who left her “many years ago” and had reportedly escaped to Canada.⁸⁴⁷

Against all odds, some formerly enslaved people managed to find their loved ones. In 1867, the *Highland Weekly News* published a remarkable case of two long lost brothers. It included the following description of their meeting:

[they] met in the streets of Cincinnati, last Sunday, after a separation of sixty years. Their names are Joshua and Solomon

⁸⁴⁵ Bruce Levine, *The Fall of the House of Dixie: The Civil War and the Social Revolution that Transformed the South* (New York: Random House, 2014), 124-125, 287.

⁸⁴⁶ “Lewis Wade searching for family,” Information Wanted Ad, *The Christian Recorder* (Philadelphia, PA), July 14th, 1866, *Last Seen: Finding Family After Slavery*, accessed August 30, 2019, <https://informationwanted.org/items/show/215>.

⁸⁴⁷ “Charles Owens searching for his brother, Harry Bowen,” Information Wanted Ad, *Ottumwa Courier* (Ottumwa, IA), January 14th, 1869, *Last Seen: Finding Family After Slavery*, accessed August 30, 2019, <https://informationwanted.org/items/show/3576>; “Dulcina Hall,” Information Wanted Ads, *The Christian Recorder* (Philadelphia, PA), February 9th, 1888, *Last Seen: Finding Family After Slavery*, accessed August 30, 2019, <https://informationwanted.org/items/show/868>. For an excellent study of family reunification and information wanted ads, see Heather Andrea Williams, *Help Me to Find My People: The African American Search for Family Lost in Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012). For an excellent database of information wanted ads, see Villanova University’s *Last Seen: Finding Family After Slavery*. Obtained via: <https://informationwanted.org/>.

Collins. They were both formerly slaves in Fleming [C]ounty, Virginia. Joshua bought his freedom in 1849, and removed to Cincinnati, where he has since resided. Solomon ran away from his master, then living in Kentucky, in 1837, and made his way safely to Canada. The meeting was purely accidental, and, of course, was enjoyed by the two old men. Joshua is eighty-two years old, and Solomon over sixty.⁸⁴⁸

After the Civil War, many African American refugees returned to the United States.⁸⁴⁹ For some, it was part of their efforts to reunite with lost family members. For others, it was a matter of returning home. Canada was an invaluable space of refuge for freedom seekers, but for some, it was a temporary sanctuary. Yet many remained and formed the bedrock of Canada's black population. Across North America, black men and women sustained their campaigns for liberty and equality.

⁸⁴⁸ "Two brothers, Joshua Collins and Solomon Collins, meet in Cincinnati after decades-long separation," Other (Newspaper Article), *Highland Weekly News* (Hillsboro, OH), October 17th, 1867, *Last Seen: Finding Family After Slavery*, accessed August 30, 2019, <https://informationwanted.org/items/show/3255>.

⁸⁴⁹ For more on this reverse migration, see Adam Arenson, "Experience Rather than Imagination: Researching the Return Migration of African North Americans during the American Civil War and Reconstruction," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 32, no. 2 (2013), 73-77.