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

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Summary

Between the American Revolutionary War and US Civil War (roughly 1775-1861), thousands of slave refugees fled from the US South to the northern states and Canada. From the late eighteenth century, these regions gradually abolished slavery within their respective jurisdictions. Meanwhile, black enslavement rapidly expanded across the Lower South and Southwest during the antebellum period. Over time, freedom seekers (particularly in the Upper South) increasingly fled to ‘free soil’ spaces in North America, most notably the northern US and Canada. Most self-emancipators made the journey without external assistance, whereas others were aided by free black communities and white abolitionists across the North (often referred to as the Underground Railroad). After escaping from the South, most refugees remained in the northern states. Yet tens of thousands of freedom seekers opted to emigrate from the United States entirely and seek sanctuary in Canada, primarily in southwestern Ontario and the Maritime provinces.

Northward Bound examines the northward migrations of African American slave refugees to the northern states and Canada. Over five chapters, it analyzes the motivations and methods behind self-emancipation and the various challenges which slave refugees encountered in each region. Part I (“Escaping Bondage”) is comprised of two chapters that focus on the evolving landscape of slavery and freedom in North America, the shifting nature of self-emancipation, and the development of black freedom networks in the northern US and Canada. Chapter One explores self-emancipation and freedom seekers during the Revolutionary War and War of 1812 respectively, the abolition of slavery in the northern states and Canada, and the emergence of the second slavery in the US South. Chapter Two examines slave refugee migration to the northern states and Canada during the antebellum era. It analyzes the routes and strategies employed by freedom seekers across the North, the challenges of escape, and the scope and activism of Underground Railroad networks.

Part II (“Forging Freedom”) shifts focus to the experiences, opportunities, and challenges which self-emancipators encountered in the North and Canada. Chapter Three focuses on slave refugee settlement processes and efforts to obtain lands, labor, and education – all three of which were considered integral to autonomy and elevation. Contrary to their romanticized portrayals as spaces of sanctuary, slave refugees were met with open hostility from white Northerners and Canadians. Meanwhile, Chapter Four focuses on the threats of kidnapping and recapture. Slave refugees in the northern states were subject to re-enslavement under US federal law, most notably the Fugitive Slave Acts of 1793 and 1850. At the same time, black activists, white abolitionists, and northern lawmakers fought against the efforts of southern enslavers and slave catchers to abduct black people with impunity. In Canada, slave refugees generally enjoyed greater protections from re-enslavement.

However, several extradition cases and attempted kidnappings illustrate the threats posed to refugees in British North America. Lastly, Chapter Five examines the political mobilization of slave refugees in the northern US and Canada. In particular, it explores their contributions to the transnational abolitionist movement and their campaigns for equal rights and citizenship. This chapter illustrates that slave refugees were at the heart of political campaigns in the northern states and Canada.

Northward Bound is a comparative, transnational study that offers several important contributions to the historiography of slavery and emancipation in North America. First, it complicates the traditional image of slave refugee migration on the continent, one which emphasizes the northward flight of southern black refugees to the northern states and Canada. This dissertation demonstrates that this pattern of escape was only truly cemented in the early nineteenth century, following the emergence of “free soil” spaces in the North and Canada, as well as the rapid expansion of slavery in the Lower South and Southwest. Before this, freedom seekers ran in various directions across the continent, including within the northern states and even from Canada to the United States. During wartime, self-emancipators also fled to British lines to secure their freedom. By the antebellum era, however, slave refugees increasingly looked toward the northern states and Canada as potential spaces of sanctuary.

Northward Bound also re-examines the primary motivations behind escape from slavery and the various routes which freedom seekers took to the northern states and Canada. This study argues that the threat of sale and forced migration was often the primary reason behind self-emancipation (particularly for enslaved people in the Upper South). It was often the final straw or “tipping point” for enslaved men and women across the region. The rapid expansion of slavery in the Lower South and Southwest contributed to the interregional trade in enslaved people. Upper South enslavers increasingly sold enslaved men and women to these regions in exchange for profit. Threatened with permanent separation from family and loved ones, freedom seekers resolved to escape to the North and Canada. Other factors, such as cruel treatment and a lifelong desire to be free, certainly shaped the decision of many slave refugees. Yet the prospect of imminent sale and permanent separation often represented the most immediate threat to enslaved people and thus served as the primary basis of their decision to escape.

Several factors determined when and how slave refugees escaped, and how they reached the northern states and Canada. Mobility, geography, and social networks were the most significant influences. Young, fit enslaved men were more likely to escape than women, children, and the elderly. With greater knowledge of their surroundings and wider spheres of movement, they often possessed a better understanding of when and how to escape. At the same time, refugee women, children, and others also managed to escape from the South despite their limited

mobility, geographical knowledge, and social networks. Enslaved people from the Upper South comprised the bulk of slave refugees in the northern states and Canada. Others traveled from farther away but the greater distance certainly hampered their ability to reach the northern states and Canada.

Freedom seekers from Maryland and Virginia were more likely to escape via the Mason-Dixon borderland, whereas enslaved people in Kentucky and Missouri typically escaped via the Ohio and Mississippi River borderlands. While many fled on foot, others traveled by horseback, steamboat, ship, train, and other modes of transportation. Passing for legally free people of color was the most common strategy for freedom seekers. Across the northern states, slave refugees took shelter among free African American communities. Others were aided by white abolitionists and Quakers, indigenous groups, and biracial vigilance committees, and the Underground Railroad. The most extensive and well-organized escape networks existed in the Mid-Atlantic borderland and New England, but those in the “Old Northwest” also became increasingly developed over time.

One of this dissertation’s most valuable contributions focuses on the relationship between self-emancipation, northward migration, and family. Contrary to most previous historical studies, which typically emphasize individual acts of self-emancipation, *Northward Bound* demonstrates that kinship networks shaped numerous escapes from the South. Refugee families took various shapes and employed various strategies to reach the northern states and Canada. In many instances, families avoided escaping together but instead staggered their escapes. These patterns of escape often resembled chain migration, where freedom seekers followed loved ones to specific destinations. Abolitionist records, such as those from William Still and Sydney Howard Gay, illustrate the centrality of kinship networks to numerous escapes from the South. Consequently, *Northward Bound* reframes historical understandings of self-emancipation and escape to the northern states and Canada.

Furthermore, building upon Damian Pargas’ new typology of freedom, this dissertation contends that slave refugees in the northern states lived in a state of *quasi* or “semi-formal” freedom, whereas their counterparts in Canada were able to attain “formal freedom.” Slave refugees in the northern states were considered fugitives from justice under US federal law. Consequently, most self-emancipated people in the North lived in a fluid, liminal state between slavery and formal freedom. In this sense, refugees throughout the region lived on the margins of free black communities. Slave refugees typically held low-wage jobs, were unable to legally purchase lands or attend schools, were met with racial prejudice and discrimination, were subject to recapture and re-enslavement, and (like free African Americans) were barred from equal citizenship. In this regard, their status is comparable to other marginalized groups in historical and contemporary societies, such as undocumented people. Yet

freedom seekers in the northern states enjoyed some invaluable social and legal protections. In particular, African Americans and white abolitionists, as well as northern lawmakers, resisted the efforts of southern enslavers, slave catchers, and kidnappers to recapture slave refugees in the North. While northern freedom was incomplete, it was infinitely preferable to southern slavery and offered a basis for future advancement.

Slave refugees in Canada encountered similar challenges to their northern counterparts, yet also availed of the greater rights and opportunities which came with formal freedom. Most notably, self-emancipators in Canada were officially able to purchase lands and attend schools. Moreover, having reached British Canadian soil, slave refugees were generally secure from recapture and re-enslavement. Lastly, they were eligible for various civil and political rights which came with British subjecthood, namely the right to vote, sit on juries, and serve in militia companies. However, life in Canada was far from idyllic. Poverty, racial prejudice, and systemic discrimination were facts of life in British North America. Additionally, while most were secure from re-enslavement, various episodes highlight the continuous efforts of southern enslavers and kidnappers to recapture self-emancipated people in the Canadian provinces. Despite its reputation, Canada was hardly a “Canaan land” for black refugees. Yet the rights and privileges which came with formal freedom nonetheless offered formerly enslaved people with the opportunity to build new, better lives for themselves.

Northward Bound challenges several assumptions regarding the experiences of slave refugees in the northern states and Canada. First, it demonstrates that, despite the array of hardships and difficulties, slave refugees were hardworking and industrious. Although many of their settlements were relatively short-lived, they exhibited a real desire to purchase lands, acquire work, gain an education, and generally improve their condition. Far from indolent, most exhibited a spirit of self-reliance. Across the northern states, freedom seekers availed of whatever jobs and opportunities they could find in rural and urban settings. Towns and cities, such as Philadelphia, New York, and Cincinnati, offered the greatest prospects for temporary and short-term wage labor. Most remained on the fringes of northern free black communities, not seeking to bring attention to themselves. While most lived in poverty, some attained varying levels of success. Nevertheless, northern poverty was infinitely preferable to slavery.

In Canada, slave refugees were able to purchase lands, attend schools, and seek employment without the threat of recapture. Like their counterparts in the northern states, most lived in relative poverty and struggled against the backdrop of racial prejudice. Discriminatory policies and a lack of resources prevented many slave refugees from becoming landowners. Many settlements proved short-lived and refugee newcomers regularly found it hard to procure lands in desirable locations or

for affordable prices. Historians have tended to emphasize the failures of many refugee settlements in the Canadian Maritimes and southwestern Ontario. Yet many could be considered at least partially successful considering the circumstances. At the very least, they offered slave refugees their first tastes of land ownership, employment, education, and autonomy.

Moreover, this dissertation illustrates how African Americans, white abolitionists, lawmakers, judges, and other figures resisted the attempts of southern enslavers and slave catchers. As mentioned earlier, freedom seekers in the northern states were subject to recapture under US federal law. Indeed, legally free African Americans were also regularly kidnapped across the North and sold into slavery. Black and white activists employed a mixture of legal and extra-legal methods to protect slave refugees from re-enslavement and circumscribe slavery's influence across the region. So-called "Personal liberty laws," freedom suits, and other efforts to enshrine the *Somerset* principle in northern state laws limited southern enslavers' right of recaption. Aside from legal channels, black and white activists throughout the northern states increasingly employed forms of extra-legal (and occasionally violent) resistance to protect slave refugees. Various episodes highlight the challenges which southern enslavers faced when attempting to re-enslave freedom seekers. Overall, while federal law upheld southern enslavers' right of recaption, the active resistance of black and white activists throughout the northern states offered significant forms of protection to slave refugees. The contradictions between state and federal law, as well as the extra-legal challenges of African Americans and white abolitionists, formed the bedrock of semi-formal freedom.

Beyond the jurisdiction of US federal law, slave refugees in Canada enjoyed greater protections from recapture. Indeed, the British and Canadian governments generally refused to sanction the extradition of refugees to the United States. According to British and Canadian law, enslaved people were recognized as legally free people the moment that they set foot on "British" soil. Numerous US efforts to negotiate an extradition agreement over slave refugees with the British government failed. In this regard, Canada was a more secure space of sanctuary for slave refugees. At the same time, several extradition cases from the late 1820s onward highlight the potential threat still posed by southern enslavers. Rather than seek the extradition of slave refugees, they instead embraced a new strategy: petitioning for the return of "criminals" to stand trial in the United States. Charged with other crimes, several refugees were threatened with extradition. One such case even resulted in the re-enslavement of Nelson Hackett, a self-emancipator from Arkansas. Some kidnapping attempts also highlight how the porous US-Canadian borders could be exploited by white Southerners. These efforts were met with staunch resistance from black and white activists. Despite these threats, Canada generally remained a much more secure space of sanctuary for slave refugees.

Finally, *Northward Bound* demonstrates that slave refugees in the northern US and Canada were politically active figures in the transnational abolitionist movement, as well as campaigns for equal citizenship. Building upon the works of Manisha Sinha and other scholars, this dissertation argues that self-emancipators played crucial roles in social and political movements, with the most obvious example being the campaign to abolish slavery in the United States and elsewhere. Through their literary writings and autobiographies, oratory, and other methods, slave refugee activists forged a unique strain of abolitionism – one which drew heavily upon their personal experiences with slavery. Slave refugees like Frederick Douglass, Henry Bibb, Samuel Ringgold Ward, and Harriet Tubman became increasingly recognizable figures within US and Canadian abolitionist circles. Slave refugees were also involved in campaigns for equal rights and citizenship in the northern states and Canada. Segregation, discrimination, and racial prejudice were the primary concerns of black activists. In the northern states, slave refugees campaigned alongside free blacks and white abolitionists to receive equal rights and privileges. Canadian refugees performed similar actions but also utilized their right to vote to promote their interests and remove racist politicians from office. Slave refugees were also at the heart of debates over emigration in the northern states and Canada.

Samenvatting

Tussen de Amerikaanse Onafhankelijkheidsoorlog en de Amerikaanse Burgeroorlog (ca. 1775-1861) vluchtten duizenden mensen uit de slavernij in het zuiden van de Verenigde Staten naar de noordelijke staten en Canada. Vanaf het einde van de achttiende eeuw hadden deze gebieden de slavernij geleidelijk afgeschaft. Ondertussen intensiverde de zwarte slavernij juist in de “Lower South” en “Southwest”. Met name in de “Upper South” vluchtten tot slaaf gemaakten steeds vaker naar “vrije grond” (“free soil”), gebieden in Noord-Amerika, met name de noordelijke staten en Canada waar slavernij niet was toegestaan. Deze zogeheten “zelf-emancipatoren” (“self-emancipators”) maakten de reis zonder hulp van buitenaf. Anderen werden juist geholpen door vrije zwarte gemeenschappen en witte abolitionisten in het Noorden (vaak aangeduid als de Underground Railroad). De meeste vluchtelingen bleven na hun ontsnapping uit het Zuiden in de noordelijke staten van de VS. Tienduizenden vrijheidszoekers (“freedom seekers”) kozen er echter voor om volledig te emigreren en zochten hun toevluchtsoord in Canada, met name in het zuidwesten van Ontario en in de maritieme provincies (Nova Scotia en New Brunswick).

Northward Bound onderzoekt de noordelijke migraties van Afro-Amerikaanse vluchtelingen naar de noordelijke staten en Canada. In vijf