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Citation

Pargas, D. A. (2018). Seeking freedom in the midst of slavery: fugitive slaves in the antebellum South. In *Fugitive slaves and spaces of freedom in North America* (pp. 116-136). Gainesville: University Press of Florida. Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3464775

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Seeking Freedom in the Midst of Slavery

Fugitive Slaves in the Antebellum South

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Moses Hutcherson, a "likely black fellow about twenty-three years old, five feet four or five inches high, neck somewhat long, and rather a prominent nose for a negro," decided in the spring of 1825 that he would no longer live in slavery. Surveying the possibilities to escape bondage from his farm on the Potomac River in southern Maryland, he concluded that the most logical course of action would be to flee to Pennsylvania, where slavery had been abolished. It was an option fraught with peril, of course. Despite the close proximity of the neighboring free state, flight attempts across the Mason–Dixon line were risky at best—Moses would have to traverse dozens of miles of slaveholding borderland undetected by heavily armed patrols and professional slave catchers. In case he would be stopped by anyone, he procured forged free papers under the false name of John Henry before starting off. Satisfied that his plan would work, he slipped away from his master's residence on April 1 and made for the North, but his hopes of reaching Pennsylvania were dashed when he was caught just north of Baltimore and thrown into jail. His master recovered him and dragged him back to the southern part of the state. Undaunted, Moses escaped again a month later. This time, however, he fled not to the "free" North but to the nearby slaveholding city of Washington, D.C., where he changed his name again and passed himself off as a free black. Indeed, the free black community of Washington helped him to conceal his true identity and assisted him in finding accommodations

and employment. In the months that followed, Moses "served in many of the Taverns and Boarding Houses in [the] District" and remained harbored by "free negroes in [that] place," with whom he had come to have "considerable intercourse."[1]

Unlike thousands of his fellow bondsmen who escaped slavery by crossing state or international borders to parts of the continent where the institution had been abolished, Moses Hutcherson attempted to craft a life of freedom for himself by simply disguising his slave identity, living a clandestine life, and passing himself off as a free black *within* the slaveholding South. His story—and there are innumerable such cases in the history of the antebellum South—complicates our understanding of both the geography of slavery and freedom in North America and the opportunities for enslaved people to permanently escape bondage by fleeing the spaces and places in which they were held captive.

A number of historians have greatly contributed to our understanding of various aspects of slave flight in the antebellum period, with the seminal work by John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (1999), standing out in particular for its broad and comprehensive analysis of the subject. Most scholarship on fugitive slaves has tended to focus on escape to sites of formal and semiformal freedom along the North–South axis, however, especially to the northern United States and Canada, and as such misses a broader understanding of the geography of slavery and freedom within North America. Other destinations for fugitive slaves have remained far less thoroughly explored by historians. Although briefly touched upon by Franklin and Schweninger, among others, the "southern underground railroad" that led fugitive slaves to Texas, Mexico, Spanish Florida, and even the Caribbean has only recently begun to receive more in-depth analysis from scholars. Few scholars have analyzed the experiences of slaves who sought informal forms of freedom by fleeing *within* the slaveholding states of the South. Those who have, moreover—Franklin and Schweninger, and Stephanie Camp, for example—have tended to underscore the temporary nature of such flight, characterizing runaways who remained in the slave territories as "truants" or "absentees" (temporary runaways or *petits marrons*) rather than permanent refugees from slavery (long-term migrants or *grand marrons*). Franklin and Schweninger describe the common act of fleeing to the

forests that bordered southern plantations as "lying out," for example, and they interpret runaways who made for urban areas as "temporary sojourners" who experienced a "brief respite from bondage" or at best a "break . . . of longer duration" before being caught and sent back to their masters.[2]

A smattering of more recent works are beginning to challenge the view that fugitive slaves in the South only sought and experienced temporary interludes from slavery. Sylviane Diouf's revisionist study of antebellum America's "borderland maroons" specifically argues that many of these slaves "went to the Southern woods to *stay*."[3] Alan Taylor's research on runaway slaves in Virginia reveals how fugitives attempted to secure permanent freedom by actively seeking out the assistance of sympathetic British naval officers anchored in the Chesapeake Bay, especially during the War of 1812. And Matthew J. Clavin's work on fugitive slaves in antebellum Pensacola emphasizes the relative ease with which runaways in that seaport town were able to settle and find sustainable employment—although even they often attempted to flee onward to places where slavery had been abolished (especially the British Caribbean). Indeed, many southern cities—St. Louis, Baltimore, New Orleans—ultimately served as "gateways to freedom" for some daring runaways who sought to escape the South altogether, whether because of their proximity to free soil or because of the various transportation possibilities they offered. But runaway slave advertisements and court records consistently indicate that fugitive slaves who concealed themselves in towns and cities across the South often navigated urban areas not merely gateways to freedom in other parts of the hemisphere but as actual sites of freedom in their own right. In other words, they were permanent freedom seekers—at least by intent, and often by outcome—who made illegal yet quite earnest attempts to rebuild their lives in informal freedom rather than bolt for geographic spaces of formal freedom. Understanding why and how they did so is crucial for scholars' reconceptualization of these runaways as freedom seekers rather than mere truants, and for "rerouting" the geography of freedom in America during the age of slavery, as Rachel Adams recently called for.[4]

Taking a broad scope, this study contributes to the reinterpretation of fugitive slaves who remained in the South between 1800 and 1860

as permanent refugees from slavery. It touches upon themes such as the motivations that led slaves to flee within the South and the cooperation between free and enslaved blacks that enabled and facilitated their escape attempts and settlement processes. Most importantly, it highlights the experiences of runaways who, like Moses Hutcherson, escaped slavery by fleeing to sites of informal freedom rather than cross into geographic spaces of formal freedom.

Permanent refugees from slavery often ran away for reasons that were more structural than those that commonly motivated truancy or temporary flight. Impulsive decisions to temporarily flee the plantation and "lie out" were often sparked by significant abuse or the threat of corporal punishment, as stated above, although other factors also played a role. Franklin and Schweninger have even argued that the desire for a change of scenery underlay slave flight to urban environments. Young slaves in their teens and twenties found "the excitement and diversity" of urban environments "especially enticing," and "temporary sojourns" to southern cities were therefore frequent.[5] Slaves seeking to permanently escape within the South, however, were often more serious, less impulsive, and more calculated in their plans. When Mathy, "a griff aged about 38 years," and his wife, Litty, "black, aged about 35 years," ran away from a Louisiana plantation in the summer of 1845, they boarded a flatboat "on their way to South Alabama, where they were lately owned" and where they still had loved ones.[6] For Mathy and Litty, returning to family members from whom they had been forcibly separated was the prime motivation to flee. Indeed, enslaved people's commitment to family is essential to understanding why many bondspeople fled their plantations but remained within the borders of the slave South—fugitives within the South often fled with the intention of staying close or returning to loved ones still held in bondage. The threat or reality of forced separation was one of the most important motivations for permanent slave flight within the South.

In the era of the second slavery, when the Atlantic slave trade had been abolished and the domestic slave trade in the southern states flourished, forced separations increasingly wrought havoc on slave families. Eyewitnesses to the domestic slave trade consistently reported that family separations were common. Ethan Allen Andrews, a university professor charged with investigating the trade in 1835 and 1836,

found that "family ties are often disregarded in this traffic." Visiting Franklin & Armfield's slave pen in Virginia in 1836, he discovered that "in almost every case, family ties have been broken in the purchase of these slaves." Another Alexandria slave trader assured Andrews that "he never separates families" upon sale (a lie intended to legitimize his business to the northerner) but admitted "that in purchasing them he is often compelled to do so, for that 'his business is to purchase, and he must take such as are in the market!'" When Andrews asked whether the traders often bought wives without their husbands, the reply was: "Yes, very often; and frequently, too, they sell me the mother while they keep her children. I have often known them to take away the infant from its mother's breast and keep it, while they sold her."[7] African Americans living in the supply regions of the interstate trade emphatically corroborated such charges, both during and after slavery. In 1854 James Redpath learned from a northern Virginia slave that the separation of slave families through deportation there was as "common as spring water runs."[8] Another bondsman from North Carolina reported after emancipation that in the region where he lived, the "breaking up of families and parting of children from their parents was common . . . and one of the things that caused much bitterness among the slaves."[9]

Historical scholarship has confirmed that charges of forced separation through the interstate slave trade were no exaggeration. Family separation in fact made economic sense in the interregional trade. As Michael Tadman has argued, its very structure was "custom-built to maximize forcible separations."[10] As the antebellum slave trade was highly selective (in age, ability, and sex) according to the demands of specific markets, speculators usually preferred—even openly advised their agents—to purchase desirable slaves individually, tearing husbands from wives as well as children and young adults from their parents and younger siblings. A survey of New Orleans slave ship manifests confirms that most interstate migrants indeed arrived in the Deep South as individuals and not in family units. The brig *Tribune*, for example, a ship chartered by the infamous traders Franklin & Armfield in 1833, carried sixty-eight slaves from Alexandria and Norfolk, Virginia, to New Orleans, most of whom were in their teens and twenties, and only three of whom were in their thirties (the oldest was thirty-eight).

Of the ship's enslaved passengers, six young women were transported with one infant child each. The rest of the slaves in the customs manifest were listed individually, all with different surnames, implying that they were not related. Even when family members were deported together, they were often sold separately in the receiving societies because it was more profitable to do so. Scholars have estimated that forced separations probably destroyed one out of every three first marriages among slaves in the Upper South; at least half of all slave families in the region were ruptured through the deportation of either a spouse or child during the antebellum period. Local sales and the westward migration of slaveholders from the eastern seaboard to the southern interior, moreover, severed cross-plantation marriages as well as extended family bonds in countless slave communities.[11]

Flight became an important vehicle through which victims of forced migration attempted to either prevent separations or reunite bonds torn asunder. Prevention, especially, underlay innumerable escape attempts. Some fugitives who absconded within the South were slaves recently arrived at urban places of market to be disposed of but who fled in order to avoid removal. "Lucy M Downman's man [N]at absconded" upon arrival in Richmond in March 1834, for example, suspected of having disappeared among the city's large free black population. Nat's owner, from a neighboring county, "had Sent him to Richmond for Sale."[12] Likewise, a "Slave Traders man Henry Jackson" absconded in Richmond in 1834 to avoid being shipped south.[13] Other slaves fled when rumors of potential sale loomed. Fifty dollars reward was offered in North Carolina in 1822 for the apprehension of Jack, a "common mulatto, about 40 years of age," who took with him "his Wife and two Children." Fleeing to prevent a possible separation, the family was suspected of "lurking in Fayetteville, Newbern, or Washington, amongst the free negroes."[14] In 1835 a forty-five-year-old slave woman named Mary, from Charleston District in the South Carolina Low Country, disappeared among the free black population of Charleston when she was confronted with the prospect of moving over a hundred miles to the state capital. A runaway slave advertisement in the *Charleston Courier* openly claimed that "the cause of her running away was her dislike to be brought to Columbia."[15] And Joe, a forty-five-year-old Maryland slave from Charles County, "ran off immediately after the

appraisement" of his master's estate, "knowing that he was to be sold in a few weeks." Joe was suspected of "lurking about the neighborhood of Bryan Town" and passing for free.[16]

For those who were unable to prevent forced removal, fleeing served as a vehicle to reconnect with loved ones lost through forced migration. A significant number of runaway slaves who stayed in the South were themselves forced migrants who had already been sold away from their home communities and who were fleeing in order to see their families again. Rather than flee to destinations where they could be legally free, they more often ran "home." Slaves who had been sold or removed locally (within the same state or region) were often in the best position to do this. Maria Hamilton, for example, a twenty-four-year-old slave from Alexandria, Virginia, who was sold into the countryside of Fairfax County, was suspected of having run either back to Alexandria, where she had a husband, or to neighboring Washington, where her sister and brother-in-law lived—"she may in all probability have gone there."[17] William Foley, another Virginia slave who ran away from his new master, was suspected of hiding out near "the residence of Mr. Cockerell of Fauquier [County], who owns his mother"[18] and from whom he had been sold away. The runaway Osborn, newly purchased by one William Davison of Winchester, Virginia, had "expressed a desire to visit his relations" across the border and down the Potomac River in his native Nanjemoy, Maryland, and was therefore suspected to be hiding out there.[19]

Remarkably, however, many fugitives who stayed within the South were victims of the interstate trade and traversed vast distances in order to be reunited with families forcibly left behind. As the domestic slave trade scattered black families across the southern states, slave refugees indeed played a prominent role in the "joining of places" (as historian Anthony Kaye dubbed it), creating networks that linked victims of forced migration with their home communities, even across state lines.[20] Southern newspapers from receiving societies are replete with illuminating examples. William, who fled his new plantation near Lexington, South Carolina, in 1830, was presumed to be "mak[ing] his way for North Carolina, as he was purchased . . . and brought from there."[21] A Virginia slave woman named Patsey absconded from her Georgia plantation and was suspected to have "endeavored to get back to Virginia," where she still had relations.[22] Interstate migrant Nicholas

similarly left his South Carolina plantation in an attempt "to make his way to Maryland," where he was originally from.[23] Sally, a slave from the estate of George Mason in northern Virginia and purchased by an Alabama slaveholder, ran away "a few days" after arriving in the Deep South, suspected of making her way back home.[24] "Five Negro Men" from Maryland who had been sold to western Kentucky absconded together, suspected of having "endeavor[ed] to get to Cincinnati" (in a free state!) and "from thence to Baltimore."[25] In some cases slaves even ran to follow a loved one sold out of state. Dick, a thirty-seven-year-old slave from Kentucky, ran all the way to New Orleans and attempted to pass for free there to be with his wife, who was "living in that city" after being sold there.[26]

Whatever the distances they traversed to be near loved ones, fugitive slaves who remained in the South were in constant danger of being discovered and sent back to their masters, unlike their counterparts who successfully reached geographic spaces of formal freedom such as Canada. Effectively going into hiding or at least concealing their identities to outsiders (especially whites) upon arrival, they depended on others to aid and assist them. Slave families and communities in rural districts provided fugitive slaves with the social networks necessary to sustain themselves for long periods of time without being caught. Refugees who remained in the southern countryside were almost always partly or wholly "harbored" by loved ones, sometimes within slave households but also often in the forests that bordered the plantations or farms where they were originally from, effectively becoming "borderland maroons" as Sylviane Diouf has argued. In February 1850, for example, a one-hundred-dollar reward was offered for "the arrest and conviction of the person who has harbored a slave contrary to law named MARGARET," who had been sold from her native Lake Providence to New Orleans and who was "supposed to be at or near Lake Providence," her old community, where she was suspected of hiding out near—and being kept hidden by—loved ones.[27] Southern newspapers are full of similar examples, but slave testimonies also regularly refer to cases of fugitive slaves in the woods being sustained by loved ones. Kitty, Ben, and Isaac, all three former slaves from the same plantation in Alabama, recalled in a 1910 interview that one bondswoman from their neighborhood "hid with her children in the woods" for a length of "two years," which Ben claimed was a "conservative" estimate. Living her life "in

a precarious freedom," the fugitive slave woman reportedly created an underground shelter with a trap door "covered with leaves [so] no one could see it" and depended upon her family and friends, who often left food at the edge of the woods at dusk, to help feed her and her children. Only after the Civil War broke out two years subsequent to her escape were the woman and her family eventually able to procure "a freedom not of the swamp, but of the world."[28] Travelers' accounts and even court documents confirm that such cases were a regular occurrence in the South. Nanny, an "unmanageable" slave from North Carolina, ran away from the employer to which she was hired in 1851, "aided by her . . . husband," who was "well acquainted in much of the great Dismal Swamp." Her husband's assistance afforded Nanny "an easy opportunity" to escape to the wilderness indefinitely and avoid arrest.[29]

Such arrangements were desperate and often ad hoc by nature, and they were seldom intended to be permanent, even when they lasted years. Although they certainly did not constitute truancy (these fugitives were not intending to ever return to their masters), they often failed to provide sustainable long-lasting solutions to refugees' predicament. Most fugitives who were harbored by loved ones in the countryside can more accurately be perceived as runaways in transit—their final destinations were usually either sites of formal freedom (especially the northern states or Canada) or urban areas in the general vicinity of their home communities.[30]

Urban areas in the South provided slave refugees with spaces where they could realistically attempt to establish a permanent base for themselves in informal freedom—a freedom that did not exist on paper but that allowed them to escape bondage. Towns and cities provided refugees with relative anonymity due to the relatively large presence of free black communities. In public urban spaces runaways hoped to get lost in the crowd and largely conceal their slave status by pretending to be free blacks, often changing their names—one runaway to New Orleans, for example, was "familiar with the names Hildreth, Brown and Walker"—but more importantly changing their appearances.[31] As Amani Marshall has argued, successful procurement of informal freedom in southern cities required runaway slaves to assume "free identities," which they did by engaging in "intricate performances in which they exploited colour, dress, language, and employment skills to transcend lines of race and class."[32] For slave refugees, passing for free meant

looking and acting free. Visibility was everything—erasing all markers of their slave identity was the key to navigating urban spaces undetected. Intriguingly, some light-skinned runaways attempted—sometimes successfully—to pass as white. One carpenter from North Carolina who ran away to Washington, D.C., was described as resembling "a white man . . . His eyes are blue, his hair very straight," saying he had run to the city "to pass as a free man."[33] But for most refugees in southern cities, assuming free identities entailed looking and acting like local free blacks. Indeed, upon arrival in urban areas, runaways' first order of business was often to procure the more fanciful clothing of the free black population to replace the ragged clothes that gave them away as country slaves. Sam, "an artful fellow" from eastern Maryland who had been sold to Kentucky, was presumed to have made his way all the way back to his native town "and will probably exchange his dress" to disguise his slave status.[34] One runaway slave who was suspected of lurking about Livingston, Alabama, was seen wearing "a black cashmere overcoat . . . and a silver huntsman's watch," no garb for a slave.[35]

Free blacks helped cloak the true identities of runaway slaves by harboring them in their homes or arranging for safe hiding places. Sometimes these were free family members. Tarlton, a twenty-four-year-old carpenter from Powhatan County, Virginia, ran away to Richmond in 1834 and was suspected of hiding out at the residence of one Stephen Green, "a free man who lives in Richmond [and] is the Father of Tarlton."[36] Other times the relations between the free black helpers and runaway slaves were less explicit. For example, Julia Johnson, from Staunton, Virginia, likewise ran away to Richmond, the police noting that "Isaac Adams free [was] Susp[ecte]d of decoying hir [sic] off" and arranging for her hiding place in the city.[37] Molly, who disappeared in the city of Alexandria, Virginia, was believed to be "connected with some evil disposed free negroes, and secreted by them."[38] James Lamar, who fled to New Orleans in 1845, was "harbored near the lower vegetable market, by a free black woman" who sold "victuals and coffee in said market."[39] Such was the extent of the assistance provided by free blacks that southern cities and states repeatedly passed legislation that threatened free black populations with heavy penalties for aiding and abetting runaway slaves. As historian William Link has found, Virginia free blacks ran great risks when they harbored runaway slaves. One free black man in Richmond was whipped in 1853 for allowing a

fugitive slave to live in his cellar; a year later another Petersburg resident was brought before the mayor's court for harboring several runaways. In 1856 the General Assembly of Virginia specified that any free person "concerned in the escape of any slave" would receive a prison sentence of five to ten years and a public whipping.[40] The General Assembly of Mississippi passed a similar law in 1839, stating that any free black who helped a slave "to escape from his or her master or owner" would be found guilty of "feloniously stealing [said] slave or slaves."[41]

Southern towns and cities were also attractive destinations for slave refugees, providing them with opportunities to perform various occupations and earn money to sustain themselves indefinitely, to the great consternation of slaveholders throughout the South, who often explicitly warned white urban residents against employing their escaped slaves in the mistaken belief that they were free blacks. Skilled slaves were often in the best position to do so, as their services were in high demand in urban centers and their occupations often associated with economic activities usually performed by free blacks. Historian Larry Rivers recently argued in his study of slave resistance in antebellum Florida that an exceptionally high proportion of runaways in that state were skilled slaves, especially carpenters, blacksmiths, and river pilots. Runaway slave ads from other states confirm that skilled slaves tended to flee to urban areas within the South with remarkable frequency.[42] Examples from the Charleston newspapers are illuminating. In the summer of 1849, for example, a five-hundred-dollar reward was offered for the apprehension of four bondsmen from a plantation in Rowland Springs, Georgia, among them an artisan named Hercules. In the prime of his life—he was thirty years old—Hercules "had the peculiar brogue of low country negroes," having been raised in the South Carolina lowcountry and "bought from Charleston recently." The advertisement that announced his absence implicitly suspected him of having fled to Charleston, where he would have been able to remain in close contact with his home community in the lowcountry. Interestingly, the ad also explicitly specified that Hercules was "a Tinner by trade," presumably because his owner expected him to practice his trade upon arrival in the city.[43] Similarly, Ben Elliott, a twenty-five-year-old runaway originally from Charleston but sold to Augusta in 1833, had been missing for five months before his new master placed an advertisement in the *Charleston Courier* for his recapture. Ben was presumed to be hiding out

with his mother in Charleston, a free woman "named Pheobe Elliott, who sells fruit in the market," and he had already been nearly caught several times passing himself off as a free black and "working about the wharves, and on board vessels, as a Stevedore or an Assistant."[44] Peter Youngblood fled his new Charleston residence for the town of Beaufort, "as he has a wife on Mrs. Hamilton's Plantation, in that neighborhood." An experienced boatman and a fisherman, he was suspected of being "employed in fishing in the neighborhood of that city."[45]

Female fugitive slaves in southern cities often succeeded in finding domestic employment in white households, their employers assuming that they were free blacks. "Fifty Dollars Reward" was offered "for the apprehension of TENAH, a female servant, who ran away from Barnwell Court House [South Carolina] on the 12th September" in 1830. Like many of her counterparts, Tenah had been separated from her loved ones when she was sold from a plantation near Charleston to Barnwell. The runaway slave ad that announced her flight stated that she was "brought to this city in June last, at a sale of the estate of Vancy's Negroes, and it is believed that she is harbored in Charleston by a free person," her husband being "a free man by the name of William Lewy, who lives in Goose Creek, and has been seen in her company at the person's house in which she is harbored." Tenah was suspected of illegally passing herself as a free black woman in order to gain employment, as her master "understood that she has been (perhaps unknowingly) employed by a white person as a washerwoman." Similarly, a slave woman named Milly was "Supposed to be in Richmond" where she had been hired in the household of one Fleming Griffiths; she fled and was suspected of hiring her services to another employer as a free woman.[46]

A significant portion of the enslaved population in any southern town or city consisted of hirelings, and hired slaves in turn made up a significant number of slave refugees in urban areas. Self-hire arrangements, whereby a slave was sent by his master to the city to hire himself, were common enough that some runaway slaves in the cities even attempted to disguise their identities by passing for hired slaves rather than free blacks. John Lewis, a Kentucky slave, ran away to Lexington with the intention of pretending "he has hired his own time."[47] Most tried to pass themselves off as free, however. Indeed, hired slaves' absence from their masters, their relative lack of supervision and freedom

of movement, and their firsthand experience with urban labor markets placed them in an advantageous position to navigate southern cities disguised as free blacks. They knew the ropes, worked with and rubbed shoulders with free black populations, and were keen to trade in their "quasi-freedom" (as Jonathan Martin dubbed it) for freedom, albeit informal freedom.[48] For these runaways, the determination to live in freedom and the conviction that they deserved the fruits of their own labor were often more important motivations to flee bondage than family reunification. Henry, a refugee in New Orleans who had been "hired in this city as a drayman," absconded and found work for himself "in the shipping and about the levee," keeping his earnings for himself.[49] Urban hirelings also had the networks necessary to pull off a successful escape attempt. William Lee, a "smart, sensible, and very plausible fellow" as well as a "good wagoner" who had been hired in Fauquier Court House, Virginia, absconded and was suspected of hiring himself out around town as a free man. Lee had "extensive acquaintances" in the town in which he absconded, which facilitated his flight.[50] Another Virginia slave who went missing in 1825 "had been hired in Alexandria for some months past," her owner lamenting that "she is well known" there and would no doubt be aided in her flight.[51]

As stated above, the ability of fugitive slaves to abscond to and successfully earn a living in urban areas by passing themselves off as free blacks produced great consternation among slaveholders, who demanded that municipalities tighten police supervision of African Americans' economic activities in public spaces. City councils throughout the South explicitly complied with such demands, at least on paper. The city of Little Rock, Arkansas, for example, passed "an ordinance, concerning Slaves, and free Negroes and Mulattos" in January 1836 that declared, among other things, that "No person shall buy or receive from any slave any commodity whatever in this City, unless the said slave shall produce a written permit from his or her master, mistress or overseer."[52] Since free blacks could reasonably be suspected to be slaves until proven otherwise, this ordinance was implicitly intended to force white customers to ask black sellers for their papers before purchasing any wares from them, presumably in order to uncover fugitive slaves who were living illegally in the city. Similar ordinances were passed throughout the South, but in practice they were often poorly enforced, both by the authorities and by white customers.[53]

Southern municipalities largely failed in their attempts to distinguish between free blacks and runaway slaves in public spaces, despite strict legislation aimed at enhancing the visibility of both, such as requiring slaves to carry passes and free blacks to carry free certificates at all times. Fugitive slaves' precarious existence in the cities was indeed primarily based on the fact that they lacked formal papers to prove that they either had permission to reside in the city or that they were free. As illegals and noncitizens, the very public spaces that often provided them with anonymity could also produce dangerous encounters with whites that might reveal their true identities. Documentation—false documentation—was a great advantage for those who could procure it. Slaves who could read and write were in a position to forge their own passes or free papers, and many did. Frederick, a Georgia slave who was suspected of having run to Augusta in 1825, was presumed to be carrying "a forged pass with him, as he can read and write."[54] Ben, a Virginia slave who ran away with his three daughters to Washington, could "write a pretty good hand, and no doubt has copied the papers of some free man," his master even having "reason to believe he stole the Stafford County seal and attached the impression of it to his papers."[55] Most slaves were illiterate, however, and therefore depended on free blacks to provide them with the false documentation necessary to evade detection. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a black market in forged passes and facsimiles of free papers for runaway slaves—the antebellum equivalent of a fake passport for undocumented immigrants—flourished in urban areas, despite strict legislation against it. In Mississippi the General Assembly explicitly threatened "any free negro or mulatto who shall deliver or transfer to any slave the copy of the register of his or her freedom . . . with the intent to enable such slave to escape from his or her master" with a felony.[56] Every other southern state had similar legislation on the books, and by the eve of the Civil War even the sparsely settled southwestern territory of New Mexico threatened that "any person furnishing slaves free papers is liable to an imprisonment of not less than six months nor more than five years, and a fine of not less than $100 nor more than $1000."[57] Yet runaway slave ads reveal that forged papers were common anyway. Nancy, a "bright mulatto, aged about 25 years" and originally from the Natchez area of Mississippi, absconded from her new master in Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana, but had "lately been heard of in the neighborhood of Natchez

with a forged pass."[58] Kitty, a Virginia slave suspected of having run to Washington, was advertised as "uncommonly artful, and no doubt will have free papers."[59] Amanda, from Monroe County, Georgia, fled to Augusta with "a pass given her" so that she could "attempt to pass as a free person."[60] David, "by profession a Methodist preacher" from Kentucky who ran to Lexington with his friend Charles, was understood to have "a forged pass."[61] And Will, a Virginia runaway, "probably has a pass or counterfeit papers of freedom."[62]

Such documents became increasingly necessary after the Nat Turner insurrection in 1831, when urban southerners became more vigilant in requiring free blacks to carry papers, and slaves to carry passes or badges, to prove that they resided in the city legally. Because assuming a false identity and a false legal status was so crucial to fugitives' lives in urban areas, those who failed to procure documents ran high risks of recapture. One slave owner from Columbia, South Carolina, advertised for his runaway slave named Mary, who fled back to her native Charleston in 1859, describing her as having "neither ticket nor badge, as required by the City Ordinance."[63] When recapture seemed imminent for those who were discovered without passes or papers, they often fled again, sometimes to geographic spaces where slavery had been abolished, a risky venture that was wrought with hazards. One slave couple named George and Jane, from Henrico County, Virginia, was recaptured in an escape attempt that illustrates the volatile existence of refugees in the cities. Having each fled the employers to which they were respectively hired in 1833, the two fugitives came together and made their way to neighboring Richmond. Upon arrival "George passed himself off as a freeman & hired himself as a cook on bord [sic] the schooner John Bendil," docked in the James River. When the captain of the ship eventually asked for George's free papers before departure, he "found that he was in fact a slave & not a freeman having a right to hire himself." Panicking, George fled, concealing himself on board a schooner bound for New York, where he was later discovered and arrested. Jane was also arrested, "making similar efforts to leave the state" and join her husband in the North.[64] As Matthew Clavin has argued, some southern cities indeed served as "gateways to freedom" for runaways who intended to seek freedom outside of the South from the outset; but many slaves who ultimately passed through such gateways (or attempted to do so) were in fact slaves who had initially attempted

to create lives for themselves in informal freedom in towns and cities across the South but were forced to take flight again when they were detected.[65]

In conclusion, a thorough understanding of the geography of slavery and freedom on the North American continent in the antebellum period must include closer analysis of fugitive slaves who sought freedom by remaining within the slaveholding states. The actions of these runaways went far beyond mere truancy, as is often suggested in the literature. Fugitives to urban areas indeed clearly attempted to live their lives there indefinitely, and even maroons did not intend to return to their masters but were more often "in transit" to other sites of formal or informal freedom. Distinguishing between sites of formal freedom (where slavery had been abolished) and informal freedom (where fugitives attempted to live free illegally) as permanent destinations for runaway slaves is also crucial in understanding how slaves understood freedom (i.e., not always in political terms) and what their prime motivations for fleeing bondage were. Indeed, those who sought informal freedom clearly placed maintaining contact with loved ones still in bondage—even if it meant living illegally within the slave states—above the procurement of political or civil rights to freedom, which supports recent scholarship by historians such as Calvin Schermerhorn, who argued that slaves in the antebellum South almost always preferred "family over freedom"—at least freedom on paper.[66]

NOTES

1. *Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington, DC), July 4, 1825. For more on the Maryland–Pennsylvania borderland as a destination for fugitive slaves, see, for example, Richard S. Newman, "'Lucky to be born in Pennsylvania': Free Soil, Fugitive Slaves and the Making of Pennsylvania's Anti-Slavery Borderland," *Slavery & Abolition* 32, no. 3 (September 2011): 413–30.

2. John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger. *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). See also Paul Finkelman, ed., *Fugitive Slaves* (New York: Garland, 1989); Gordon Barker, *Fugitive Slaves and the Unfinished American Revolution: Eight Cases, 1848–1856* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2013); Jason Silverman, *Unwelcome Guests: Canada West's Response to American Fugitive Slaves, 1800–1865* (Millwood, N.Y.: Associated Faculty Press, 1985); Sydney Nathans, *To Free a Family: The Journey of Mary Walker* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013); Keith Griffer, *Front Line of Freedom: African Americans and the Forging of the Underground Railroad* (Lexington: University

of Kentucky Press, 2004); and Steven Lubet, *Fugitive Justice: Runaways, Rescuers, and Slavery and Trial* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010). For new studies on fugitive slaves in Mexico, see, for example, S. E. Cornell, "Citizens of Nowhere: Fugitive Slaves and Free African Americans in Mexico, 1833–1857," *Journal of American History* 100, no. 2 (2013): 351–74; Sean Kelley, "Mexico in His Head: Slavery and the Texas-Mexico Border, 1810–1860," *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 3 (2004): 709–23; and James David Nichols, "The Line of Liberty: Runaway Slaves and Fugitive Peons in the Texas–Mexico Borderlands," *Western Historical Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (Winter 2013): 413–33. Matthew Clavin's recent work views Pensacola as a conduit for fugitive slaves fleeing southward into the Caribbean (especially the British Caribbean). Matthew J. Clavin, *Aiming for Pensacola: Fugitive Slaves in the Southern and Atlantic Frontier* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015). For a brief overview of the diplomatic consequences of fugitive slaves in North America (only those who crossed international borders), see Jeffrey Kerr-Ritchie, "Fugitive Slaves across North America," in *Workers across the Americas: The Transnational Turn in Labor History*, ed. Leon Fink (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2011).

3. Sylviane Diouf, *Slavery's Exiles: The Story of the American Maroons* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 1.

4. Rachel Adams calls for a broader understanding of the geography of slavery and freedom in North America. See Rachel Adams, *Continental Divides: Remapping the Cultures of North America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 61–100. For brief treatment of truancy within the South, especially in urban areas, see, for example, Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women & Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 35–59; and Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 97–103, 124–48. Franklin and Schweninger argued that "few absconders [within the South] remained permanently at large." See John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, "The Quest for Freedom: Runaway Slaves and the Plantation South," in *Slavery, Resistance, Freedom*, ed. Ira Berlin, Scott Hancock, and G. S. Boritt, 21–39 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 25. For southern runaways as permanent freedom seekers, see Christopher Phillips, *Freedom's Port: The African American Community of Baltimore, 1790–1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Clavin, *Aiming for Pensacola*; Amani Marshall, "'They Will Endeavor to Pass for Free': Enslaved Runaways' Performances of Freedom in Antebellum South Carolina," *Slavery and Abolition* 31 (May 2010): 161–80; and Alan Taylor, *The Internal Enemy: Slavery and War in Virginia, 1771–1832* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014).

5. Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 126–27.

6. *The Times Picayune*, July 10, 1845.

7. Ethan Allen Andrews, *Slavery and the Domestic Slave Trade, in a Series of Letters Addressed to the Executive Committee of the American Union for the Relief and Improvement of the Colored Race* (1836; Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1971), 49, 137–39.

8. James Redpath, *The Roving Editor: Or, Talks with the Slaves in the Southern States* (1859; New York: Negro Universities Press, 1968), 199.

9. William Henry Singleton, *Recollections of My Slavery Days* (n.p., 1922), 2. There is a rich literature on the domestic slave trade and the extent to which sales, estate divisions, and long-term hiring forcibly separated slave families in the antebellum period. See, for example, Michael Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves: 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, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999); Steven Deyle, *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Robert H. Gudmestad, *A Troublesome Commerce: The Transformation of the Interstate Slave Trade* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003); Damian Alan Pargas, *Slavery and Forced Migration in the Antebellum South* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

10. Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves*, 141.

11. In the 1970s and 1980s the extent of family separations through inter-regional sale was the subject of considerable debate among historians, sparked by controversial conclusions drawn by Fogel and Engerman in *Time on the Cross* (1974), that the domestic slave trade accounted for only 2 percent of dissolved marriages among slaves living in the Upper South. Their calculations, however, have long since been refuted as a gross underestimate by historians such as Herbert Gutman and Michael Tadman, among others. See Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974), 49; Herbert Gutman and Richard Sutch, "The Slave Family: Protected Agent of Capitalist Masters or Victim of the Slave Trade?" in *Reckoning with Slavery: A Critical Study in the Quantitative History of American Negro Slavery*, ed. Paul A. David, Herbert G. Gutman, Richard Sutch, Peter Temin, and Gavin Wright, 94–133 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* (New York: Vintage, 1976), 144–52; Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves*, 133–78; Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 169; Andrews, *Slavery and the Domestic Slave Trade*, 49–50; "Report and Manifest of the Cargo of Slaves on Board the Brig Tribune of New York," January 22, 1833, transcription at http://files.usgwarchives.net/va/shiplists/slavship.txt, consulted March 6, 2012; Gudmestad, *Troublesome Commerce*, 42; and Deyle, *Carry Me Back*, 246–47. Traders Franklin & Armfield, to their credit, began to purchase more slaves in family groups after 1834 in an effort to blunt criticism of the slave trade. Other traders, however, spread "fairy tales," claiming to keep families together when confronted with charges of inhumane practices by outsiders. See Gudmestad, *Troublesome Commerce*, 160–61. Such was the extent of family separation through interstate migration that it even began to affect families' ability to reproduce, especially in the Upper South. In the 1830s, when forced migration reached its peak, the natural growth rate among slaves fell to 24 percent after having risen in the previous decades. See Calvin

Schermerhorn, *Money over Mastery, Family over Freedom: Slavery in the Antebellum Upper South* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 14–15.

12. Daybook of the Richmond, Virginia Police Guard, March 12, 1834, University of Virginia, Alderman Library, Special Collections, Charlottesville, Va. (trans. by Leni Ashmore Sorensen).

13. Daybook of the Richmond, Virginia Police Guard, July 22, 1834.

14. *Raleigh Register and North Carolina Gazette*, April 26, 1822.

15. *Charleston Courier*, September 3, 1835.

16. Daybook of the Richmond, Virginia Police Guard, October 9, 1834.

17. *Alexandria Gazette*, August 7, 1826.

18. *Phenix Gazette*, September 16, 1826.

19. *Alexandria Advertiser and Commercial Intelligencer*, July 9, 1803.

20. Anthony E. Kaye, *Joining Places: Slave Neighborhoods in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

21. *Charleston Courier*, November 2, 1830.

22. *Charleston Courier*, March 7, 1835.

23. *Charleston Courier*, October 29, 1830.

24. *Huntsville Democrat*, June 16, 1838.

25. *Reporter* (Lexington, Kentucky), December 2, 1809.

26. *Lexington Intelligencer*, July 7, 1838.

27. *Daily Picayune*, February 21, 1850.

28. John Blassingame, *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 537–38.

29. "William Coppersmith and Elisha S. Nash to the Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, Pasquotank County, North Carolina, 1851," in *The Southern Debate over Slavery*, vol. 2: *Petitions to Southern County Courts, 175–1867*, ed. Loren Schweninger, 265–66 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008). See also Kaye, *Joining Places*, 129–35. Frederick Law Olmsted and William Howard Russell made similar observations regarding fugitive slaves in the Great Dismal Swamp during their travels through the South. See Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States: With Remarks on Their Economy* (New York: Dix & Edwards, 1856), 159; and William Howard Russell, *My Diary North and South* (Boston: T. Burnham, 1863), 88–89.

30. For a detailed analysis of long-term or even semipermanent maroon communities in the American South, see Diouf, *Slavery's Exiles*.

31. *Daily Picayune*, March 3, 1850.

32. Marshall, "'They Will Endeavor to Pass for Free,'" 161.

33. *Daily National Intelligencer*, July 4, 1825.

34. *Frankfort Argus*, May 28, 1814.

35. *Mississippi and State Gazette*, September 5, 1851.

36. Daybook of the Richmond, Virginia Police Guard, March 14, 1834.

37. Daybook of the Richmond, Virginia Police Guard, September 28, 1834.

38. *Alexandria Advertiser and Commercial Intelligencer*, December 8, 1803.

39. *Daily Picayune*, November 2, 1845.

40. William A. Link, *Roots of Secession: Slavery and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 104–5.

41. T. J. Fox Alden and J. A. van Hoesen, *Digest of the Laws of Mississippi, Comprising All the Laws of a General Nature, Including the Acts of Session of 1839* (New York: Alexander Gould, 1839), 763. See also Ted Maris-Wolf, *Family Bonds: Free Blacks and Re-enslavement Law in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

42. Larry Eugene Rivers, *Rebels and Runaways: Slave Resistance in 19th-Century Florida* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 66–67. A study of runaway slave profiles in North Carolina comes to the same conclusion, with blacksmiths, carpenters, coopers, and shoemakers heavily overrepresented in runaways from that state. See Freddie L. Parker, "Runaway Slaves in North Carolina, 1775 to 1835" (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1987), 197–99.

43. *Greenville Mountaineer*, August 17, 1849.

44. *Charleston Courier*, March 7, 1835.

45. *Charleston Courier*, September 28, 1830.

46. *Charleston Courier*, January 4, 1830.

47. *The Reporter* (Lexington, Kentucky), April 1, 1812.

48. Jonathan Martin, *Divided Mastery: Slave Hiring in the American South* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 161–87. See also Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 134–45.

49. *Daily Picayune*, February 19, 1850.

50. *Daily National Intelligencer*, January 8, 1820.

51. *Daily National Intelligencer*, July 4, 1825.

52. *Arkansas Gazette*, January 12, 1836.

53. Gregg Kimball, *American City, Southern Place: A Cultural History of Antebellum Richmond* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003), 124–58; Seth Rockman, *Scraping By: Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 52–53; James Campbell, *Slavery on Trial: Race, Class, and Criminal Justice in Antebellum Richmond, Virginia* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida), 146–85; and Thomas C. Buchanan, "Rascals on the Antebellum Mississippi: African American Steamboat Workers and the St. Louis Hanging of 1841," *Journal of Social History* 34 (Summer 2001): 797–817.

54. *Augusta Chronicle*, October 8, 1825.

55. *Daily National Intelligencer*, July 4, 1825.

56. Alden and Hoesen, *Digest of the Laws of Mississippi*, 763.

57. *Bangor (ME) Whig and Courier*, March 17, 1859.

58. *Times Picayune*, July 30, 1845.

59. *Alexandria Gazette*, January 1, 1822.

60. *Augusta Chronicle*, July 13, 1827.

61. *The Reporter* (Lexington, Kentucky), October 18, 1815.

62. *Daily National Intelligencer*, January 8, 1820. For more on cooperation between urban free blacks and slaves within the realm of resistance, see Kimball,

American City, Southern Place, 124–58; Rockman, *Scraping By*, 52–53; Campbell, *Slavery on Trial*, 146–85; and Buchanan, "Rascals on the Antebellum Mississippi," 797–817. William Link has found that the policing of documentation for free blacks and slaves in urban environments in Virginia was at best "sloppily maintained." See Link, *Roots of Secession*, 106.

63. *Charleston Courier*, January 1, 1859.

64. "Thomas Cowles to the County Court, Henrico County, Virginia, 1833," in *The Southern Debate over Slavery*, vol. 2: *Petitions to Southern County Courts, 175–1867*, ed. Loren Schweninger (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 163.

65. Clavin, *Aiming for Pensacola*.

66. Schermerhorn, *Money over Mastery*.