

Chapter 4

“The Strong Cords of Affection”: Enslaved African American Families and Escape to the U.S. North and Canada, 1800-1861

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INTRODUCTION

During the antebellum era in the U.S., enslaved African Americans escaped from their Southern White enslavers in search of freedom and security. Self-emancipated men, women, and children sought refuge in urban centers across the South while others fled to Mexico to claim political asylum. Thousands of enslaved African Americans in the Upper South escaped to the Northern “free” states and Upper Canada (roughly present-day southwestern Ontario). Tens of thousands of self-emancipated refugees sought “free soil” spaces, or those states and territories which gradually abolished Black enslavement over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹

While most freedom seekers fled alone, many enslaved African Americans attempted to escape with their parents, spouses, and children. Some fled as a complete family unit while others embraced loose forms of chain migration. To avoid detection, family members fled in stages with the goal of reuniting later. Some refugee families received assistance from African Americans and White abolitionists in the North. Historians often conceptualize self-emancipation as a solitary affair; yet, this was often not the case. Eric Foner argues that more slave refugees passed through New York City “in groups than on their own.” Family bonds often formed the basis of refugee migratory units.²

¹ Rachel Adams, *Continental Divides: Remapping the Cultures of North America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 61-99.

² Eric Foner, *Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015), 205.

However, self-emancipation and escape also came with significant hardships that challenged family bonds. As Sydney Nathans notes, all Black freedom seekers “left family members behind.” For many, the loss of family via flight proved a tremendous source of anguish. While most refugees from slavery resigned themselves to the fact that they would likely never see their families again, others attempted to liberate or rescue enslaved loved ones. In some cases, refugees succeeded in reuniting with their families.³

The relationship between family, self-emancipation, and escape to the North and Canada was a dynamic one. The fear of permanent family separation was one of the primary motivations behind self-emancipation for many enslaved African Americans, and many freedom seekers attempted to escape with their families. For Black freedom seekers following their escape from the South, writes Karolyn Smardz Frost, “the only story usually told of them is that of their flight.” After their escapes from bondage, Black freedom seekers pursued efforts to maintain their kinship networks.⁴

A BRIEF NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

As noted by the National Park Service, terms such as “runaway,” “fugitive,” or “escapee” are “constructs of the Southern slave-holding societal structure... As such, these terms tend to reflect how slave-holding society viewed African American efforts toward freedom.” Instead, terms like “freedom seeker,” “refugee,” “self-emancipator,” and “self-liberator” convey agency rather than Southern laws. Furthermore, “enslaved people” is a better description for people than “slaves” because, as Frost argues, “Slavery is a condition imposed on people; they may be *enslaved*, but no one is ever a slave.” Similarly, the term “enslaver” is preferred over “slaveholder” or “slave owner.” Other descriptors include “Black,” “people of color,” and “people of African descent.” Finally, references to “Upper Canada” and “Canada”

³ Sydney Nathans, *To Free a Family: The Journey of Mary Walker* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 253.

⁴ Karolyn Smardz Frost, *Steal Away Home: One Woman’s Epic Flight to Freedom – And Her Long Road Back to the South* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2017), xviii.

primarily signify present-day southwestern Ontario; between 1793 and 1841, the province was officially called Upper Canada. However, the province was officially known as "Canada West" between 1841 and 1867.⁵

AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILIES IN THE ANTEBELLUM SOUTH

For most of the twentieth century, scholars failed to understand the significance of family and kinship networks to enslaved African Americans. In his book *The Peculiar Institution*, Kenneth Stampp claimed that enslaved families were "highly unstable," and that family structures held less "social significance" among enslaved African Americans than White Americans. Enslaved men and women, it was maintained, adopted a "casual attitude" toward marriage and family life. In the 1970s, a new wave of revisionist historians debunked earlier claims regarding the stability of enslaved families. Revisionists emphasized Black agency and resistance to enslavement and argued that family and community were vital to the lives of enslaved people. John Blassingame described the family as "one of the most important survival mechanisms for the slave," and "an important buffer, a refuge from the rigors of slavery."⁶

Since the 1960s, historians have shed light on the rich diversity of enslaved families throughout the antebellum South. According to Herbert Gutman, whose work greatly influenced most scholarship on Black family life and culture, enslaved African Americans strove to replicate nuclear family structures whenever possible. In recent decades, some scholars have challenged Gutman's emphasis on two-parent, nuclear family households. Brenda Stevenson, for instance, argues that African American families in the Upper South were "essentially were not nuclear and did not derive from long-term monogamous marriages." The prevalence of "abroad

⁵ "Underground Railroad Terminology," *National Park Service*, accessed Apr. 9, 2019. https://www.nps.gov/subjects/ugrr/discover_history/terminology.htm; Frost, *Steal Away Home*, xxi.

⁶ Kenneth Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), 343-349; John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 78-79; 103.

marriages" (where enslaved parents lived apart on different homesteads), single-parent households, matrifocal families, and extended kinship networks illustrates the sheer diversity of Black family structures in the antebellum South. Furthermore, several scholars have noted that enslaved African Americans embraced "fictive kin," or members that were not related by blood or marriage but were nonetheless embedded within family structures. Friends and loved ones often performed the roles of absent parents, siblings, and other family members.⁷

Families and kinship networks were almost always under threat in the antebellum period as Southern White enslavers regularly disrupted enslaved Black families in several ways. Physical and sexual violence against enslaved people (particularly women) threatened the stability of Black marriages and families throughout the South. Furthermore, White enslavers in the Upper South hired out enslaved men, women, and even children with little regard for family structures. James Pennington, a self-emancipator from Maryland, was hired out to work at age nine as a stone mason for two years. Pennington claimed that enslavers regularly hired out children "not only because they save themselves the expense of taking care of them, but in this way they get among their slaves useful trades."⁸

The forced separation of enslaved families was, in the words of Blassingame, "the most brutal aspect of slavery." The domestic slave trade underwent a huge expansion between the early national period and the U.S. Civil War. "Between 1790 and 1860," writes Steven Deyle, "Americans transported from the Upper South to the Lower South more than 1 million African American slaves, approximately two-thirds of whom arrived there as a result of sale." The growth in interstate trade is mostly

⁷ Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976); Brenda Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 324. For more on fictive kinship, see Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

⁸ Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery, 1619-1877* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1993; reprint, New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 139; Calvin Schermerhorn, *Money over Mastery, Family over Freedom: Slavery in the Antebellum Upper South* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 80; James W. C. Pennington, *The Fugitive Blacksmith; or, Events in the History of James W. C. Pennington, Pastor of a Presbyterian Church, New York, Formerly a Slave in the State of Maryland, United*

attributable to several factors: first, the rapid rise of cotton and sugar economies in the Lower South increased demand for enslaved African Americans. Moreover, the shift to less labor-intensive grain economies in the Upper South reduced the need for enslaved Black labor. Enslavers in Virginia, Maryland, and elsewhere sold “surplus” enslaved people to reduce the costs of maintaining a large enslaved labor force. Finally, the closure of the Atlantic slave trade in 1808 resulted in increased demand for enslaved African Americans.⁹

Symbols of the interregional slave trade were commonplace throughout the South with public auctions and slave pens visible in every major Southern city. Enslaved African Americans were forcibly removed to the Lower South in overland coffles, or by steamboats and ships via the United States’ inland waterways, namely the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, or by Atlantic coastal maritime routes. Formerly enslaved people recounted the horrors of the river trade in their autobiographies and testimonies. Henry Bibb, a self-emancipator from Kentucky, was sold “down South” to New Orleans in 1839 after attempting to liberate his enslaved wife and child. Bibb spent six weeks aboard the steamboat *Water Witch*, which traveled to the Lower South via the Ohio River. Bibb recalled, “It was impossible to sleep, being annoyed by the bustle and crowd of the passengers on board; by the terrible thought that we were destined to be sold in market as sheep or oxen[.]”¹⁰ Southern enslavers rarely prioritized family ties over the potential for profit. Robert Gudmestad claimed that the interstate slave trade “routinely ravaged kinship ties,” and enslavers’ concerns toward African American families “varied immensely and could only operate within the bounds of the South’s credit and economic system.” The threat of permanent separation loomed over every single enslaved family in the Upper South.¹¹

States (London: Charles Gilpin, 1849), accessed via <https://docSouth.unc.edu/neh/penning49/penning49.html>.

⁹ Blassingame, *Slave Community*, 89; Steven Deyle, *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 4-5.

¹⁰ Deyle, *Carry Me Back*, 143-148; Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 81-87; Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (New York: Published by the Author, 1849), 99-100, accessed via <https://docSouth.unc.edu/neh/bibb/bibb.html>.

¹¹ Robert H. Gudmestad, *A Troublesome Commerce: The Transformation of the Interstate Slave Trade* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 71.

Frederick Douglass described the practice of forced separation of enslaved children from their parents as “a marked feature of the cruelty and barbarity of the slave system.” The trauma of being torn from one’s family remained with enslaved men, women, and children for the rest of their lives. Born in Virginia, William Grimes was first sold at age ten and served various enslavers over the course of his enslavement. He wrote, “It grieved me to see my mother's tears at our separation. I was a heart-broken child, although too young to realize the afflictions of a tender mother, who was also a slave, the hopes of freedom for her already lost; but I was compelled to go and leave her.”¹²

James W. C. Pennington remembered seeing “children go from our plantations to join the chained-gang on its way from Washington to Louisiana[.]” Likewise, Thomas Hedgebeth of Chatham, Upper Canada, recalled the permanent separation of an enslaved family at auction in North Carolina after their enslaver’s death: “The father went one way, the mother another, with one child, and the other two children another way.” Such traumatic scenes were commonplace at slave auctions across the South. While some Southern Whites expressed concern about the separation of enslaved families, most were willing to set their anxieties aside if the profit to be made was lucrative enough. Hedgebeth noted, “I never heard a White man at a sale express a wish that a family might be sold together.”¹³

The sale of parents, spouses, and children spurred many enslaved people to escape from the South. George Ramsey, an enslaved man from Kentucky, determined to escape from slavery after his wife and children were sold to the Arkansas Territory. Ramsey stated, “Canada was not in my head till I lost her completely, and then I thought I would go to Canada.” Meanwhile, Henry Morehead,

¹² Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom. Part I – Life as a Slave. Part II – Life as a Freeman* (NY and Auburn: Miller, Orton & Muilligan, 1855), 37-38, accessed via <https://docSouth.unc.edu/neh/douglass55/douglass55.html>; William Grimes, *Life of William Grimes, the Runaway Slave, Brought Down to the Present Time* (New Haven, CT: Published by the Author, 1855), 8-9, accessed via <https://docSouth.unc.edu/neh/grimes55/grimes55.html>.

¹³ Pennington, *Fugitive Blacksmith*, 9; Benjamin Drew, *A North-Side View of Slavery. The Refugee: or the Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada. Related by Themselves, with an Account of the History and Condition of the Colored Population of Upper Canada* (Boston: John P. Jewett and Company, 1856), 277-278, accessed via <https://docSouth.unc.edu/neh/drew/drew.html>.

who escaped from Kentucky with his family, told Drew, "I left because they were about selling my wife and children. I would rather have followed them to the grave, than to the Ohio River to see them go down. I knew It was death of victory – so I took them and started for Canada."¹⁴

BLACK FAMILIES, SELF-EMANCIPATION, AND ESCAPE TO THE NORTH

During the antebellum period, enslaved African Americans increasingly fled from their enslavers to the Northern states and Canada. Self-emancipation was one of the most powerful acts of resistance against their enslavement. Refusing to submit to their enslaver's authority, Black freedom seekers broke free from the figurative and literal chains of bondage. On the other, permanent escape symbolized a last act of desperation. Escapes from slavery, notes Rebecca Ginsburg, were "largely ad hoc, relying more on luck and opportunity than on prearranged plans, networks of 'conductors,' or secret signs." By and large, African American freedom seekers had to rely on their own wits and knowledge of the local terrain. For enslaved families, the decision to escape was largely unplanned and normally spurred by the fear of forced separation.¹⁵

Family flight was not exclusive to the antebellum era. During the Revolutionary War and War of 1812, for instance, enslaved families exploited the social and political turmoil to escape from their enslavers. In both wars, the British promised liberty and asylum to enslaved African Americans if they escaped from their U.S. enslavers to British lines. Thousands of enslaved men, women, and children fled from their American enslavers to enemy lines. Black freedom seekers were instrumental in transforming British wartime policy. Freedom seekers, writes Alan Taylor, "tended to bolt in two stages: in the first, a pioneer runaway made initial

¹⁴ John Blassingame, ed., *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 440; Drew, *North-Side View of Slavery*, 180-181.

¹⁵ Rebecca Ginsburg, "Escaping through a Black Landscape," in Clifton Ellis and Rebecca Ginsburg, eds., *Cabin, Quarter, Plantation: Architecture and Landscapes of North American Slavery* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), 53;

contact with the British, and then in the second stage, he returned home to liberate kin and friends.” Ultimately, the refusal of enslaved African Americans to escape without their families and loved ones pushed the British toward more expansive asylum policies during both wars.¹⁶

Freedom seekers that fled to the Northern states and Canada came predominantly from Maryland, Virginia, Kentucky, and Missouri. Geographical proximity to the “free” states certainly increased the odds of successful escape. Other factors also created more opportunities for enslaved people in the region to escape Northward. Most notably, the presence of significant free Black populations in the border regions, particularly in Maryland, Delaware, and the District of Columbia, enabled self-emancipators to pass as free people of color. By the mid-nineteenth century, almost half of Maryland’s African American population were legally free. Baltimore and Washington, D.C., boasted some of the largest free Black populations in the Mason-Dixon borderland. Additionally, these centers held extensive maritime and rail links with Northern towns and cities, which facilitated the escape of numerous freedom seekers. Likewise, free Black populations in locales along the Ohio River borderland enhanced opportunities for self-liberators to escape. In some instances, freedom seekers hid themselves aboard steamboats and ships on the Ohio River.¹⁷

In most cases, freedom seekers fled alone or in small groups of no more than a handful to avoid being discovered by the authorities or slave catchers. A small number of African American refugee families also fled to the “free” states and

John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 65-66.

¹⁶ Alan Taylor, *The Internal Enemy: Slavery and War in Virginia, 1772-1832* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013), 4, 246.

¹⁷ For Black population statistics in the Upper South, see Barbara Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland during the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 1-2. For freedom seekers in Baltimore, see Seth Rockman, *Scraping By: Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 35. For freedom seekers in Pennsylvania, see David G. Smith, *On the Edge of Freedom: The Fugitive Slave Issue in South Central Pennsylvania, 1820-1870* (New York: Fordham University, 2013), esp. Ch. 1. For freedom seekers in the Ohio River borderland, see Matthew Salafia, *Slavery’s Borderland: Freedom and Bondage Along the Ohio River* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), esp. Ch. 6.

Canada. One of the most well-known examples involved Josiah Henson and his wife and children. Born in Charles County, Maryland, Henson and his wife and children were sent by their enslaver, Isaac Riley, to work for his brother in Kentucky. Henson negotiated an arrangement with Riley to purchase his freedom for \$450. Not long after, Riley reneged on his promise and made plans to sell Henson. Faced with permanent separation, Henson and his family resolved to escape across the Ohio River. The family took refuge in Cincinnati's African American community before heading onward to Canada.¹⁸

In other respects, family and kinship ties complicated the decision to escape. Self-emancipation invariably meant leaving behind some relatives and loved ones. James Pennington described leaving his enslaved family behind as one of the "great difficulties that stood in the way of my flight." Frederick Douglass, the renowned self-emancipator and abolitionist, believed that "thousands would escape from slavery who remain there now, but for the strong cords of affection that bind them to their families, relatives and friends." However, many enslaved people resolved to flee from bondage when threatened with the permanent disruption of families.¹⁹

Newspaper notices also illustrate the varied nature of family flight to the North and Canada. In February 1819, the *Indiana Western Sun & General Advertiser* printed a notice for "two Black Negro Slaves, a man named STAFFORD, and his wife BETTY," who had both absconded from Louisville in August 1818. Some advertisements demonstrate the remarkable heroism of enslaved mothers as they sought to liberate their children. In October 1858, the *Louisville Daily Courier* published an advertisement for a "Negro Woman and Three Children," who escaped from Jefferson County, Kentucky, one of whom was a twenty-six-year-old woman named Betsy, who managed to escape with her three children while "far advanced in

¹⁸ Josiah Henson, *The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave, Now an Inhabitant of Canada, as Narrated by Himself* (Boston: A. D. Phelps, 1849), accessed via <https://docSouth.unc.edu/neh/henson49/henson49.html>.

¹⁹ Pennington, *Fugitive Blacksmith*, 12; Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 333.

pregnancy, probably about eight months." Her enslaver promised three hundred and fifty dollars if "caught and put in jail out of State."²⁰

Escape from the Lower South was much more difficult. The smaller free Black populations and greater geographical distances deterred most from even attempting the journey. Nevertheless, some freedom seekers from the Lower South successfully launched daring escapes to the Northern states and Canada. One of the most remarkable cases of self-emancipation and escape from enslavement involved William and Ellen Craft, an enslaved couple from Georgia. Under the plan, Ellen, a fair-skinned African American woman, would pass as a male enslaver traveling with an enslaved servant. William Craft later recalled, "I cut off my wife's hair square at the back of the head, and got her to dress in the disguise and stand out on the floor. I found that she made a most respectable looking gentleman." Remarkably, the Crafts managed to escape aboard steamboats and trains to Philadelphia without being discovered by the authorities.²¹

Family escapes were typically improvised and highly dangerous for several reasons. First, enslaved people often resolved to escape in response to immediate threats, particularly the threat of sale and permanent separation. This situation offered little time to plan escape strategies and gather provisions. Moreover, enslaved African Americans possessed varying levels of mobility. African American men were generally afforded greater levels of mobility than enslaved women. Enslavers, particularly in the Upper South, regularly hired out enslaved men to work in towns and cities.²²

By contrast, enslaved women were generally required to remain at their enslaver's homestead and assume child-rearing responsibilities, which restricted their spheres of mobility. By all accounts, escaping with children was more difficult than

²⁰ "100 Dollars Reward," *Western Sun & General Advertiser*, Feb. 20, 1819; "\$300 Reward – Negro Woman and Three Children Ranaway," *Louisville Daily Courier*, Oct. 9, 1858.

²¹ William Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; or, The Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* (London: William Tweedie, 1860), 35-36, accessed via: <https://docSouth.unc.edu/neh/craft/craft.html>.

²² For more on enslaved hiring practices in the U.S. South, see Jonathan D. Martin, *Divided Mastery: Slave Hiring in the American South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

escaping alone. But most mothers were reluctant to leave their sons and daughters behind. With limited knowledge of their geographical surroundings, fewer social networks (particularly with free people of color), and the unique challenges of escaping with children, African American women in the South were much less likely to mount permanent escapes to the Northern states and Canada. Nevertheless, enslaved women were not completely immobile or passive victims. Deborah Gray White argues that truancy, or short-term escape to woods, swamps, and urban locales within the South, "became a way of life" for many enslaved women. Furthermore, a small proportion of enslaved women succeeded in absconding to the North and Canada with their husbands and children. Threatened with permanent separation, female self-emancipators threw caution to the wind and made every effort to protect their families.²³

Refugee families that escaped encountered a host of obstacles. According to Rebecca Ginsburg, freedom seekers often became disoriented in their unfamiliar surroundings. Traveling through woods and crossing rivers was difficult for any freedom seeker, let alone with elderly relatives, spouses, or young children. During their escape to Ohio, Henson and his family ran out of food and water. He later remembered, "I had the misery to hear the cry of hunger and exhaustion from those I loved so dearly." Indeed, Henson was compelled to seek food and water from a nearby resident – a risky move which could have led to the family's recapture. The weather and climate also presented significant challenges to refugee families. Escaping with parents, spouses, or children required spreading already thin resources between many people. Henry Morehead stated, "The weather was cold and my feet were frostbitten, as I gave my wife my socks to pull on over her shoes."²⁴

Although some families succeeded, many others were caught by bounty hunters or Southern enslavers. In January 1856, Margaret Garner and her family fled

²³ For more on enslaved women, see Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 36-38; Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (NEW YORK: W. W. Norton & Co., 1985), 70-76 (quote on page 75).

from Kentucky to the Cincinnati area. Not long after, Southern enslavers discovered their whereabouts and initiated efforts to re-enslave the family. Rather than witnessing her children forced back into slavery, Margaret Garner killed her youngest daughter with a butcher knife and attempted unsuccessfully to take the lives of her other children.²⁵

To mitigate the prospect of recapture, many enslaved families staggered their escapes to the North. Thomas Johnson, who escaped from Kentucky, told Benjamin Drew that his wife “wished to leave for Canada, with the three youngest children. I gave her money and she got away into Canada safe enough.” After his wife and children escaped, Johnson was detained in jail and questioned about their whereabouts. Johnson’s enslaver, convinced that he would run away eventually to be with his wife and children, resolved to sell him. Before he could be handcuffed and removed from the farm, Johnson escaped from his captors fled to Cincinnati before heading to Canada. He recalled, “I aimed for Toronto, but on my way fell in with a man... who knew where my wife and children lived in Malden. I went there and joined them[.]”²⁶

AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILIES AND THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

From the 1820s onward, African Americans and White abolitionists organized freedom networks to assist refugees to the North and Canada. The Underground Railroad (hereafter “UGRR”) was a series of loosely organized, clandestine escape networks which stretched across the Northern states. The phrase “Underground Railroad” allegedly came from an incident involving Tice Davids, a self-emancipator from Kentucky. In 1831, Davids fled from his enslaver and swam across the Ohio

²⁴ Ginsburg, “Escaping Through a Black Landscape,” 59; Henson, *Life of Josiah Henson*, 51; Drew, *North-Side View of Slavery*, 181.

²⁵ See Nikki M. Taylor, *Driven Toward Madness: The Fugitive Slave Margaret Garner and Tragedy on the Ohio* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2016).

²⁶ Drew, *North-Side View of Slavery*, 379-381.

River. Unable to find the freedom seeker, Davids' enslaver allegedly concluded that the freedom seeker must have escaped on an "underground rail road."²⁷

Fergus Bordewich described the UGRR as the "first great movement of civil disobedience since the American Revolution[.]" Traditional conceptualizations of the UGRR emphasized the role of White abolitionists and Quakers in aiding self-emancipators to the North and Canada. Wilbur H. Siebert's *The Underground Railroad*, which focused on the campaigns and efforts of White Americans, influenced scholars for decades. Beginning in the 1960s, revisionist historians have reconceptualized our understanding of the antebellum Black freedom movement. Most notably, Larry Gara emphasized Black agency over White activism. Today, scholars largely agree that the UGRR, in the words of Keith Griffler, was an "interracial movement... of White activists acting not alone but in concert with African American communities."²⁸

Traditional maps of the UGRR present a series of clearly defined freedom routes (usually depicted as a series of lines and interconnected dots) that were linked by a series of safe houses (or "stations") which were owned by free people of color, White abolitionists or Quakers ("conductors"). Undoubtedly, well-organized networks operated between the Upper South and Canada. In Ripley, Ohio, Rev. John Rankin and African American activist John Parker provided shelter for slave refugees and aided them across the Ohio River. In Philadelphia, New York City, Boston, and other locales along the Eastern seaboard, vigilance committees—abolitionist organizations which free African Americans and self-emancipated freedom seekers—operated in most major Northern cities. Black abolitionists like William Still in

²⁷ Catherine Clinton, *Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom* (NEW YORK: Back Bay Books, 2004), 61.

²⁸ Fergus M. Bordewich, *Bound for Canaan: The Epic Story of the Underground Railroad, America's First Civil Rights Movement* (NEW YORK: Amistad, 2005), 5; Larry Gara, *The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1961); Keith Griffler, *Front Line of Freedom: African Americans and the Forging of the Underground Railroad in the Ohio Valley* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 8.

Philadelphia and David Ruggles in New York City became vital actors in the Black freedom movement.²⁹

However, most self-emancipators were not actively assisted by the UGRR. As mentioned earlier, most freedom seekers sought refuge in free Black communities. By the 1830s, Northern cities boasted significant African American populations which provided social camouflage and support networks. Thousands of self-emancipators consequently fled to key urban centers like Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, and elsewhere. In these cities, African Americans organized and maintained the first escape networks to Canada. Furthermore, Cheryl LaRoche argues that rural Black communities “acted as conduits for escape before the Civil War.” Across the Mason-Dixon and Ohio River borderlands, Black settlements, many of which were settled by formerly enslaved African Americans, became beacons of liberty for freedom seekers.³⁰

Refugee families received assistance from African American and White UGRR agents in Northern cities. Men, women, and children arrived at the offices of abolitionists and vigilance committee members seeking food, shelter, and transportation. In Philadelphia, William Still and the Vigilance Committee aided hundreds of slave refugees to Canada. Still’s letters and Philadelphia Vigilance Committee records provide tremendous insight into UGRR operations. According to Julie Roy Jeffrey, William Still depicted freedom seekers as “heroic actors who seized

²⁹ For more on UGRR operations in Ripley, Ohio, see Ann Hagedorn, *Beyond the River: The Untold Story of the Heroes of the Underground Railroad* (NEW YORK: Simon & Schuster, 2004). For Northern vigilance committees, see Graham Russell Hodges, *David Ruggles: A Radical Black Abolitionist and the Underground Railroad in New York City* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Foner, *Gateway to Freedom*; Beverly C. Tomek, “Vigilance Committees,” *Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia*, accessed April 9, 2019.

<https://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/archive/vigilance-committees>.

³⁰ Cheryl LaRoche, *Free Black Communities and the Underground Railroad* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 2. Foner’s *Gateway to Freedom* is the key text for freedom seekers in New York City. For Philadelphia, see Gary B. Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia’s Black Community, 1720-1840* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1998). For Boston, see Stephen Kantrowitz, *More than Freedom: Fighting for Black Citizenship in a White Republic, 1829-1889* (NEW YORK: Penguin Books, 2013). For Cincinnati, see Nikki M. Taylor, *Frontiers of Freedom: Cincinnati’s Black Community, 1802-1868* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005).

freedom for themselves instead of waiting for abolitionists to free them and tell their story.”³¹

Still witnessed the arrival of numerous self-liberated refugee families at his Philadelphia office. In some cases, mothers and fathers arrived at his office with their children. In 1855, David Bennett, his wife Martha, and their two children arrived at Still’s office from Loudon County, Virginia. Around the same time, William Nelson, his wife, Susan, and their son William Thomas also arrived in Philadelphia. According to Still, the family had secretly “availed themselves of the schooner of Captain B. who allowed them to embark at Norfolk, despite the search laws of Virginia.”³²

In New York City, abolitionist Sydney Howard Gay kept very detailed records of the hundreds of refugees that arrived at his office. His “Record of Fugitives,” notes Eric Foner, is “the most detailed account” of UGRR operations in the city. More than two hundred cases are detailed over two books, which provide a rich account of the motivations behind and means of escape, UGRR networks, and the importance of family. The majority escaped from Virginia and Maryland, with others escaping from elsewhere in the South. Some had been forwarded directly from William Still’s office in Philadelphia.³³

Gay documented various types of Black refugee family units at his office over a two-year period. In May 1856, for example, he recorded the arrival of Winny Patsy with her three-and-a-half-year-old daughter. Winny’s husband, Jacob Shooster, had escaped from Norfolk, Virginia, the previous fall to New Bedford, Massachusetts. Gay forwarded the mother and daughter pair to be with him. Similarly, in April 1856, Rebecca Jones escaped from Norfolk with her three children. Her brother, Isaiah Robinson, had arrived one week prior. Following their enslaver’s death, Rebecca

³¹ Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Abolitionists Remember: Antislavery Autobiographies and the Unfinished Work of Emancipation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 65.

³² William Still, *The Underground Railroad: A Selection of Authentic Narratives* (Philadelphia: Porter and Coates, 1872; London: Arcturus Publishing, 2017), 293, 297.

³³ Foner, *Gateway to Freedom*, 194-195.

learned that “two of her brothers, [and] a sister were sold, [and] she had reason to suppose that she [and] her children would follow.”³⁴

In other instances, family members arrived in stages over the course of several days or weeks. On November 10, 1855, Gay recorded the arrival of “Harriet [Shepherd], with her five children,” who had escaped from Maryland with her brothers and two other men by stealing “two carriages [and] a pair of horses to each of their respective masters[.]” A few weeks later, a man named John Bright reached New York City with his wife. Both belonged to the “same party with Harriet... who is his sister.” Two days after Bright’s arrival, two teenagers named Tom Castle and Ezekiel Chambers arrived at Gay’s office. According to the records, Tom was “John Bright’s step-son,” while Ezekiel (listed as “Zeke”) “was raised by Harriet.”³⁵

“INFORMATION WANTED”: AFRICAN AMERICAN REFUGEES AND THE SEARCH FOR FAMILY

Tens of thousands of freedom seekers fled from the United States to Upper Canada during the antebellum period. African American refugees settled in various urban and rural locales throughout the province. Toronto boasted a significant free Black population in the early nineteenth century. In April 1858, the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* claimed that between 1,200 and 1,600 free people of color lived in the city. Farther west, Black newcomers also resettled in London, Hamilton, and other towns in the central counties. Benjamin Drew estimated that 350 free Blacks resided in London at the time of his visit. The following year, the *New York Tribune* reported that “400 to

³⁴ Sydney Howard Gay, “Record of Fugitives. Book 2, page [13-15],” *Columbia University Libraries Online Exhibitions*, accessed March 1, 2018, <https://exhibitions.cul.columbia.edu/exhibits/show/fugitives/item/8911>; Sydney Howard Gay, “Record of Fugitives. Book 2, page [2],” *Columbia University Libraries Online Exhibitions*, accessed March 1, 2018, <https://exhibitions.cul.columbia.edu/exhibits/show/fugitives/item/8900>.

³⁵ Sydney Howard Gay, “Record of Fugitives. Book 1, page [19],” *Columbia University Libraries Online Exhibitions*, accessed March 1, 2018, <https://exhibitions.cul.columbia.edu/exhibits/show/fugitives/item/8865>; Sydney Howard Gay, “Record of Fugitives. Book 1, page [26],” *Columbia University Libraries Online Exhibitions*, accessed March 1, 2018, <https://exhibitions.cul.columbia.edu/exhibits/show/fugitives/item/8872>.

600 coloured [sic] people, among them Blacksmiths, carpenters, plasterers, and one wheelwright" resided in Hamilton.³⁶

Most incoming refugees settled in towns and cities throughout Detroit and Niagara River borderlands. In Essex and Chatham-Kent, African American newcomers integrated into Black communities in Sandwich, Amherstburg, Colchester, Windsor, Chatham, Buxton, and elsewhere. Indeed, the *New York Tribune* referred to Chatham as "the headquarters of the coloured [sic] people," and claimed that approximately one-third of the town's total residents were people of African descent. Meanwhile, St. Catherines boasted the largest Black population in the Niagara borderland. Beyond towns and cities, Black refugees also settled in an uncleared wilderness region known as the Queen's Bush. These pioneers sought to establish independent farming communities. Several independent Black settlements were established in the Southwestern counties of Upper Canada.³⁷

The experiences of African American refugees in Canada varied greatly. Some became successful entrepreneurs, newspaper editors, politicians, and social activists. Thornton and Lucie Blackburn, for example, formed Toronto's first taxi cab company. Meanwhile, Mary Ann Shadd Cary and Henry Bibb established two of Canada's first Black newspapers, the *Provincial Freeman* and *Voice of the Fugitive*, respectively. Yet most African American refugees endured poverty and racial prejudice. Most lived in segregated locales and suffered varying degrees of discrimination from Canadian

³⁶ *Anti-Slavery Reporter* quoted in Adrienne Shadd, Afua Cooper, and Karolyn Smardz Frost, *The Underground Railroad: Next Stop, Toronto!* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2005), 15; Drew, *North-Side View of Slavery*, 147; "The Negroes of Hamilton and Chatham," *New York Tribune*, reprinted in *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, Oct. 31, 1857. The key texts on Black settlement in Canada are Robin Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971); and Jason Silverman, *Unwelcome Guests: Canada West's Response to American Fugitive Slaves, 1800-1865* (Millwood, NY: Associated Faculty Press, 1986).

³⁷ "The Negroes of Hamilton and Chatham," *New York Tribune*. For the Detroit River borderlands, see Irene Moore Davis, "Canadian Black Settlements in the Detroit River Region," in Karolyn Smardz Frost and Veta S. Tucker, eds., *A Fluid Frontier: Slavery, Resistance, and the Underground Railroad in the Detroit River Borderland* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2016), 83-101. For the Niagara River borderland, see Dann J. Broyld, "'Over the Way': On the Border of Canada before the Civil War," in Paul Lovejoy and Vanessa Oliveira, eds., *Slavery, Memory, Citizenship* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2016). For the Queen's Bush area, see Linda Kubisch-Brown, *The Queen's Bush Settlement: Black Pioneers, 1839-1865* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2004).

Whites. Furthermore, a small number of freedom seekers, such as the Blackburns, Jesse Happy, and Solomon Moseby, were almost extradited back to the United States and re-enslaved. Nevertheless, freedom in Canada was infinitely preferable to enslavement in the South.³⁸

African American refugees in Upper Canada often felt tremendous anguish from having left enslaved loved ones behind. Henry Atkinson, a freedom seeker in St. Catherines, described the sensation of escaping without his wife: "it was like taking my heart's blood: but I could not help it—I expected to be taken away where I should never see her again[.]" Others expressed remorse at losing their spouses and children. David West of St. Catherines recalled, "My family are perpetually on my mind. I should be perfectly happy if I could have my wife and the four children." Likewise, Henry Crowthion, who escaped from Louisville, told Benjamin Drew, "It is hard on me that I am obliged to live away from my family."³⁹

Abolitionists acted as conduits between self-emancipators and their enslaved loved ones. William Still received countless letters from Black refugees who wished to learn more about their loved ones in the United States. John Henry Hill escaped from his enslavers in Richmond, Virginia, on January 1, 1853, after learning that he was to be sold. A carpenter by trade, Hill hid in "a kitchen of a merchant" in the city for nine months before escaping to Philadelphia. With help from the local vigilance committee, he traveled to Albany and Rochester, before crossing the Niagara River at Lewiston, New York. On November 12, 1853, he wrote to Still, "My friend whatever you hear from my wife please write to me. Whenever she come to your city please give instruction how to travel." On December 29, Hill informed Still that his wife had arrived in Canada.⁴⁰

³⁸ For more on Thornton and Lucie Blackburn, see Karolyn Smardz Frost, *I've Got a Home in Glory Land: A Lost Tale of the Underground Railroad* (NEW YORK: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007). For more on Henry Bibb and his newspaper *Voice of the Fugitive*, see Afua Cooper, "The *Voice of the Fugitive*: A Transnational Abolitionist Organ," in Frost and Tucker, *A Fluid Frontier*, 135-153. For more on Mary Ann Shadd Carey, see Jane Rhodes, *Mary Ann Shadd Carey: The Black Press and Protest in the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998). For Black refugee extradition cases, see Bryan Prince, "The Illusion of Safety: Attempts to Extradite Fugitive Slaves from Canada," in Frost and Tucker, *A Fluid Frontier*, 67-79.

³⁹ Drew, *North-Side View of Slavery*, 81-82, 89, 257.

⁴⁰ Still, *The Underground Railroad*, 207-221.

Some wrote to their former enslavers to request the liberation of their loved ones. Jackson Whitney, another self-emancipator from Kentucky, escaped after learning that his enslaver, William Riley, intended to sell him in Louisville. In a letter dated March 15, 1859, Whitney informed his former enslaver that he had been in the "Fugitive's Home" near Sandwich, Upper Canada, for "several days" and was "in good health." He appealed to Riley to release his wife and children from bondage, writing, "Perhaps, by this time, you have concluded that robbing a woman of her husband and children of their father does not pay, at least in your case[.]"⁴¹

Others searched for loved ones by placing "information wanted" advertisements in newspapers. In December 1855, George T. Smith submitted an ad to the *Provincial Freeman* for his brother, Joseph W. Hines, of Bowling Green. About three months later, John Murry attempted to locate his father, who had escaped from slavery in Maryland years prior. Meanwhile, in May 1856, Rev. H. J. Young of Chatham placed an advertisement on behalf of Jefferson Davis, a slave refugee from Loudon County, Virginia, who had left "in company with his brothers Moses and Lewis... about eleven years ago in search of freedom, but on their way they was [sic] attacked by slave-catchers, at which time a battle ensued, resulting in the capture of Jefferson, while the other two Moses and Lewis effected their escape[.]" After purchasing his own freedom, Davis went to Canada in search of his brothers.⁴²

Some refugees from slavery even organized rescue operations to liberate enslaved family members. Born enslaved in Dorchester County, Maryland, Harriet Tubman (born Araminta "Minty" Ross) escaped in 1849 to St. Catherines, Canada, and became a prominent abolitionist and UGRR activist in the Niagara River borderland. Tubman returned to Maryland's Eastern Shore at least thirteen times and

⁴¹ C. Peter Ripley, ed., *Black Abolitionist Papers: vol. 2: Canada, 1830-1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 406-407.

⁴² "John A. Murry searching for his father," Information Wanted Ads, The Provincial Freeman (Windsor/Toronto/Chatham), March 1, 1856, Last Seen: Finding Family After Slavery, accessed March 7, 2018, <http://informationwanted.org/items/show/1140>; "Rev. H. J. Young searching for Moses and Lewis Davis on behalf of Jefferson Davis," Information Wanted Ads, The Provincial Freeman (Windsor/Toronto/Chatham), May 10, 1856, Last Seen: Finding Family After Slavery, accessed March 7, 2018, <http://informationwanted.org/items/show/1141>.

liberated approximately seventy enslaved people, including her parents, siblings, and other loved ones.⁴³

CONCLUSION

For many freedom seekers, family was central to self-emancipation. The threat of permanent separation spurred many enslaved men and women to escape. While some refugee families fled together, others devised alternative strategies to diminish the heightened risks posed by family flight. While most escaped alone, others were aided by free African Americans and White abolitionists in the Northern states and Upper Canada. Some freedom seekers even put their own safety at risk to liberate their enslaved loved ones. Even after securing their own liberty, African American refugees never forgot the kinship ties which sustained them throughout their lives.

Discussion Questions

1. Why was family important to enslaved African Americans?
2. What were the primary motivations behind self-emancipation?
3. What strategies did enslaved families employ to escape?
4. How did freedom seekers sustain family bonds after escaping from enslavement?

Writing Prompts

Historians face numerous challenges in documenting the lives of enslaved and free African Americans prior to the U.S. Civil War. The relative scarcity of primary sources relating to African Americans challenges scholars to find new ways to document their lives. This chapter employed autobiographies and testimonies, newspapers, and abolitionist records. Write a short essay on the strengths and weaknesses of these

⁴³ Kate Clifford Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman, Portrait of an American Hero* (NEW YORK: Ballantine, 2004), xvii. Also see Clinton, *Harriet Tubman*.

sources. What other materials could shed light on the history of African-descended people before the Civil War?