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An "underground railway" to Pensacola and the Impending Crisis over Slavery

by Matthew J. Clavin

In June 1850, several months before the United States Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Law, a runaway slave from Pensacola, Florida, became embroiled in the growing sectional conflict. The bondsman's name was Adam, and he was a twenty-one year old blacksmith at the Pensacola Navy Yard who snuck aboard the brig *Mary Farrow* just prior to its departure for New England. When the ship's captain discovered the stowaway in the ship's hold three days after embarking, he ordered a keelhauling, an archaic punishment whereby victims were thrown overboard and dragged by a rope underneath the boat's keel; the crew refused to allow the ritual to take place, however, and Adam remained unharmed until the vessel landed at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, several days later. Having already received a letter from Pensacola warning of Adam's arrival, law enforcement officials waited at the dock where they planned to arrest the bondsman upon his disembarkation.¹

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1 The episode is described in the following: "A Fugitive Slave," *New Hampshire Patriot and State Gazette*, August 8, 1850; "An Arrival from Florida," *New York Evangelist*, August 15, 1850; "The Fugitive Slave in Portsmouth," *Liberator*, August 16, 1850; "Pensacola," *Pensacola Gazette*, August 17, 1850; "Fugitive Slave," *New Hampshire Gazette*, August 20, 1850.

Before the *Mary Farrow* landed, a group of abolitionists intervened. They were led by Benjamin Cheever, a well-to-do merchant and “local manager of the celebrated underground railroad.”² Pulling alongside the brig in a small rowboat, Cheever and his associates convinced Adam to leap into their craft, though he was quickly recaptured by the captain and struck on the head with a vicious blow that nearly left him unconscious.³ Soon, a local officer and abolitionist sympathizer boarded the brig; after serving the captain with a writ charging him with the crime of false imprisonment, the officer released Adam into the abolitionists’ custody. In the coming days, Cheever and the other “friends of liberty” kept Adam hidden from local authorities before sending him to “the free dominions of Queen Victoria in the North.”⁴

Adam’s story is extraordinary. While there are hundreds of documented cases of fugitive slaves escaping to and from antebellum Pensacola because of its precarious position on the southern frontier, it is the only documented case of a bondsperson from Pensacola absconding successfully to the northern United States or Canada with the assistance of the Underground Railroad. Adam’s story is thus an important reminder that despite the preeminence of the Underground Railroad in the historical literature and popular culture of the antebellum United States, bondpeople in Pensacola and other remote locations on the southern frontier who sought assistance from an organized band of anti-slavery radicals almost always waited in vain. Fugitive slaves from Pensacola rode the Underground Railroad only rarely; nevertheless, those who did had a powerful impact on the impending crisis over slavery by providing sensational stories of slave flight that pro-slavery and anti-slavery forces exploited in local and national media.

To demonstrate how fugitive slaves from Pensacola affected the growing sectional conflict, what follows is an examination of

2 Ezra S. Stearns, William F. Whitcher, and Edward E. Parker, *Genealogical and Family History of the State of New Hampshire: A Record of the Achievements of her People in the Making of a Commonwealth and the Founding of a Nation* (New York: Lewis Publishing Company, 1908), 2:523.

3 With no supporting evidence, a Pensacola report rejected this account completely, retorting, “we are under the impression that the ‘quarrel and fight between the abolitionists and the captain’ was all a piece of sham, gotten up to clear the skirts of the latter from his share in the villainy, so that if he should again visit us he might appear innocent.” “Pensacola,” *Pensacola Gazette*, August 17, 1850; “The Fugitive Slave in Portsmouth,” *Liberator*.

4 “A Fugitive Slave,” *New Hampshire Patriot and State Gazette*, August 8, 1850; “An Arrival from Florida,” *New York Evangelist*, August 15, 1850.

two of these high-profile cases. The first involved seven bondsmen from the Pensacola Navy Yard and their friend and former employer Jonathan Walker, a pious and impoverished ship captain from Massachusetts who tried to convey them to the Bahamas and freedom. The second concerned Columbus Jones, an enslaved laborer and serial runaway who was at the center of one the most infamous fugitive slave cases of the late antebellum period. In each of these celebrated cases, fugitive slaves from Pensacola failed to obtain their freedom despite the assistance of agents and conductors of the Underground Railroad; nonetheless, they and their allies had a profound impact on the history of the United States. By illuminating radical and unrelenting cross-sectional and interracial resistance to slavery, they fueled the fire of sectional discord and brought the nation closer to a day of reckoning for having supported and sanctioned the institution.

Once relegated to the realm of legend and folklore, the Underground Railroad is now the subject of serious academic inquiry.⁵ Yet, for all of the scholarship devoted to the subversive network, the focus remains largely on a few well-known incidents of slave flight from the Upper South to the North or Canada. Indeed, with few exceptions, scholars have paid little attention to the efforts of bondspople along the Gulf Coast who tried to escape from bondage despite truly incredible odds.⁶ The regional

5 R. J. M. Blackett, *Making Freedom: The Underground Railroad and the Politics of Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); David G. Smith, *On the Edge of Freedom: The Fugitive Slave Issue in South Central Pennsylvania, 1820-1870* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012); Steven Lubet, *Fugitive Justice: Runaways, Rescuers, and Slavery on Trial* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2010); Fergus M. Bordewich, *Bound for Canaan: The Underground Railroad and the War for the Soul of America* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005); Stanley Harrold, *Subversives: Antislavery Community in Washington, D.C., 1828-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003); Keith P. Griffler, *Front Line of Freedom: African Americans and the Forging of the Underground Railroad in the Ohio Valley* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004); Ann Hegedorn, *Beyond the River: The Untold Story of the Heroes of the Underground Railroad* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004).

6 Recent exceptions are: Sarah E. Cornell, "Citizens of Nowhere: Fugitive Slaves and Free African Americans in Mexico, 1833-1857," *Journal of American History* 100, no. 2 (September 2013): 351-374; and Irvin D. S. Winsboro and Joe Knetsch, "Florida Slaves, the 'Saltwater Railroad' to the Bahamas, and Anglo-American Diplomacy," *Journal of Southern History* 79, no. 1 (February 2013): 51-78. The silencing does not apply to East Florida's colonial period: Jane Landers, *Atlantic Creoles in the Age of Revolutions* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); *Black Society in Spanish Florida* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Kenneth W. Porter, "Negroes on the Southern Frontier, 1670-1763," *Journal of Negro History* 33, no. 1 (January 1948): 53-78.

slight is remarkable given that the number of bondspople in the Lower South eventually dwarfed that of bondspople in the Upper South.⁷ It is also noteworthy given the explosion of interest in the Atlantic world. Historians working within an Atlantic framework have shown how coastal cities and towns that bordered the Atlantic world were places of contestation and negotiation where free and enslaved black men and women, often alongside their poor white contemporaries, exercised economic, social, and cultural authority in the face of the tremendous obstacles placed before them by European and American masters and merchants.⁸ Even in the United States, with slavery embedded in the nation's core, racial distinctions and barriers at times faded away in the coastal communities that joined the early American republic to the Atlantic world.⁹

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- 7 By 1860, five southern states contained an enslaved population approaching half-a-million, and only Virginia, with an enslaved population of 490,865, was outside of the Deep South. Historians have long granted Virginia particular significance given its massive slave population, since on the eve of the Civil War, more enslaved people resided in this than any other state. Yet, the number of slaves had increased only slightly since 1820. The slave population in the Deep South experienced a different trajectory. On the eve of the Civil War, South Carolina, Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia had slave populations exceeding 400,000, and in the four decades prior, their slave populations—unlike Virginia's—multiplied many times over. Between 1820 and 1860, Georgia's slave population increased from 149,656 to 462,198; Alabama's from 41,879 to 435,080; and Mississippi's from 32,814 to 436,631, a multiplication of well more than ten times over. Florida's slave population, though miniscule by comparison, experienced a similar rate of increase. In 1830, United States census takers reported a slave population of 15,501; thirty years later the number had risen to 61,745. United States Bureau of the Census, *Negro Population in the United States 1790-1915* (New York: Arno Press and the *New York Times*, 1968), 57.
- 8 Jorge Cañizares-Esquerro, Matt D. Childs, and James Sidbury, *The Black Urban Atlantic in the Age of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); John Thornton, *Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Ira Berlin, "From Creole to African: Atlantic Creoles and the Origins of African-American Society," *William and Mary Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (April 1996): 251-288.
- 9 Studies of black sailors on the New England shore and David Cecelski's examination of black and white watermen in maritime North Carolina demonstrate this in the North and Upper South through the middle of the nineteenth century. Cecelski, *The Waterman's Song: Slavery and Freedom in Maritime North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Martha S. Putney, *Black Sailors: Afro-American Merchant Seamen and Whalemens Prior to the Civil War* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987). See also, James Barker Farr, *Black Odyssey: The Seafaring Traditions of Afro-Americans* (New York: Peter Lang International Academic Publishers, 1989).

From the first arrival of Spanish conquistadors and colonists in the sixteenth century, Pensacola was a dynamic seaport on the outer edge of the Atlantic world that served frequently as a cockpit of social and political conflict. Following the United States' acquisition of Florida in 1821, however, the city integrated into a regional economy dominated by King Cotton and acquired many of the trappings of a proper Southern city.¹⁰ Among them was a white supremacist culture in which free people of European descent—regardless of class, religion, and ethnicity—considered all people of African descent inferior and all those who were enslaved as chattel. Still, the remote seaport never fully integrated into the economy and culture of the South.

During the antebellum era, Pensacola subsisted on the margins of Southern society where racially divisive institutions and cultural traditions developed more slowly and unevenly than throughout the rest of the South. While neighboring seaports along the Gulf Coast like New Orleans, Louisiana, and Mobile, Alabama, and distant Atlantic ports such as Savannah, Georgia, and Charleston, South Carolina, experienced explosive population growth and rapid economic development, Pensacola remained an inchoate and isolated frontier village. "Renowned, in the palmy days of Spanish rule, for its gardens and grandees, for its fine public edifices and impregnable fortifications, for its showy garrison and wealthy citizens, it has been reduced, many years before the period of which we now write, to a poor straggling town of two hundred small wooden houses, and fifteen hundred inhabitants," is how one writer described the city on the eve of the Civil War. Its residents were "a miscellaneous assemblage of fishermen, West India traders, soldiers, Indians, half-breeds, negroes, and a class of men called in their own language privateersmen, in ours pirates."¹¹

Given Pensacola's reputation as a refuge, it should be expected that the city, like other Florida ports, was a gateway for fugitive

10 Pensacola is known as the City of Five Flags for at different times over the course of five centuries, Spain, France, Great Britain, the Confederate States of America, and the United States of America all laid claim to the city. Spanish occupation took place approximately from 1698-1719, 1722-1763, and 1781-1821. France claimed the city from 1719-1722, while British rule lasted from 1763-1781.

11 James Parton, *Life of Andrew Jackson*, Vol. 1 (New York: Mason Brothers, 1861), 574-575.

slaves throughout the antebellum era.¹² Any attempt to calculate the number of fugitive slaves is futile as those who left a paper trail represent only a fraction of all who made the dangerous attempt at freedom; nevertheless, extant materials prove that at least three hundred bondspople ran to or from Pensacola and the vicinity in the four decades before the Civil War.¹³ Evidence is found in court and military records as well as personal correspondence and reminiscences. It also survives in the runaway slave advertisements that slaveowners, employers, and law enforcement officials posted in local and regional newspapers.

Additional evidence of slave flight comes from widely publicized cases of fugitive slaves who were unsuccessful in their bid for freedom. In July 1856, the English ship *Sarah* departed Pensacola for Barcelona, Spain, but some 200 miles from the Florida shore Captain Alfred Martin “discovered” a black stowaway and ordered the vessel to return to the port.¹⁴ While abolitionists expressed frustration at the actions of “another British shipmaster enforcing the Fugitive Slave Law,” anti-abolitionists were delighted.¹⁵ “This we consider noble and praiseworthy conduct on the part of the Captain,” a Pensacola writer opined before offering a brief

12 For fugitive slaves elsewhere in antebellum Florida, see: Winsboro and Knetsch, “Florida Slaves, the ‘Saltwater Railroad’ to the Bahamas, and Anglo-American Diplomacy”; Larry Eugene Rivers, *Rebels and Runaways: Slave Resistance in Nineteenth-Century Florida* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013); Donorena Harris, “Abolitionist Sentiment in Florida, 1821-1860” (MA thesis, Florida State University, 1989).

13 The number is significant considering that the city’s population peaked at 2,876 in 1860: Joseph C. G. Kennedy, *Population of the United States in 1860* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1864), 54. A review of newspapers published in Pensacola and the Deep South establishes 271 fugitive slaves en route to, originating from, or jailed in Pensacola. Personal correspondence and court and military records confirm another 41 bondspople either ran away or were “stolen” from Pensacola and the vicinity. Vague references to individuals or groups of runaways are not included in this calculation, and bondspople who appear more than once in the records over the course of several years are counted only once. It is worth noting that especially in Pensacola, a remote frontier community characterized by economic scarcity and stagnation, few could afford the cost of advertising for a runaway and even fewer could pay cash rewards for their capture. In the decades before the Civil War, the *Pensacola Gazette* charged \$1.00 for each advertisement per fourteen lines, putting the cost of advertisement out of the reach of most residents. See *Pensacola Gazette*, November 5, 1830, and January 2, 1858.

14 “The Fugitive Slave Law in Florida,” *New York Herald*, August 10, 1856.

15 “Still Another British Shipmaster Enforcing the Fugitive Slave Law,” *Boston Press and Post*, August 7, 1856.

comment that revealed the plight of the city's slaveowners in the face of a defiant population of enslaved people from the region and free people from afar: "We wish we could say as much for some of our Northern Captains who have visited this port."¹⁶

Several months later, a bondsman belonging to Walter Cozzens, a well-known steamboat captain who journeyed frequently between Pensacola and New Orleans, vanished. For weeks, "all attempts to ascertain his whereabouts or the direction of his flight, were unavailing." After more than a month, however, Cozzens received a letter from George Murray of the brig *Amonoosuck* in Central America. The letter informed, "I found a negro stowed away in my brig four days after I left Pensacola, and I believe he belongs to you, or, at all, events, to somebody in Pensacola. But, unfortunately for the negro, I was not imbued with Abolition principles, so that I made his freedom of short duration, and put him aboard of the U.S. sloop-of-war *Cyane*, to be returned to Pensacola." Using the bigoted language common among many nineteenth-century Americans, Murray added, "I have been near being eaten up by the niggers here ever since they found out what I had done, because if your boy had once got his foot on shore it would have been a gone case with him."¹⁷

Public reaction to this failed bid at freedom was similarly antagonistic. The *Anti-Slavery Bugle* called Murray "a heartless, mercenary Yankee, for perpetrating an act of worse than Algerine piracy." Invoking the popular pro-slavery tract by the New England Reverend Nehemiah Adams, the abolitionist editor continued, "Probably the educational and home influence of this fellow, were conducted under the pious auspices of some South Side Dr. Adams or Lord, zealous supporters of Slavery and the Colonization Society." Such nefarious influences were enough "to eradicate all humanity from the human heart when a colored man is concerned."¹⁸ While abolitionists moaned, anti-abolitionists basked in the failure of another bondsman to runaway successfully because of the efforts of an apparently pro-slavery sea captain. A Pensacola editorialist expressed relief that while the captain was "a northern man by birth, education, and home influence," he "acted in a most praiseworthy and enlightened manner." A New Orleans writer concurred, adding sarcastically that the case was proof of

16 "The British Ship Sarah," *Pensacola Gazette*, July 26, 1856.

17 "Fugitive Slave Brought To," *The Daily Picayune*, January 30, 1857.

18 "A piratical Yankee Commended," *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, March 7, 1857.

the existence of “an ‘underground railway’ running in the wrong direction—with a conductor of the wrong stripe.”¹⁹

These unsuccessful attempts at freedom are instructive for two reasons. First, they underscore the incredible odds bondspeople faced when trying to escape from slavery. Even on the margins of the antebellum South, where slavery and white supremacy took root variably, the chance of a fugitive slave escaping from bondage permanently was nearly impossible; still, they continued to abscond. Second, while accounts of enslaved residents of Pensacola running away successfully are rare, unsuccessful attempts to escape from slavery were just as capable of producing political discussion and debate. Indeed, as historians are only just beginning to understand, slave resistance could be a political act with far-reaching implications.²⁰

A close examination of the two most prominent cases of fugitive slaves attempting to escape from Pensacola is demonstrative. The first concerned Jonathan Walker, a sailor and shipwright from New Bedford, Massachusetts. Besides serving as the whaling capital of the world for much of the nineteenth century, the port was a well-known asylum for fugitive slaves, Frederick Douglass most notably.²¹ Inhabiting a multiracial maritime community that displayed great hostility toward slavery explains in part why Walker abhorred the institution and fought for its abolition. Toward this end, Walker sailed to Mexico’s Gulf Coast in 1835 to evaluate its potential as a colony for freed slaves.²² After a near deadly encounter with Mexican bandits, Walker and his son headed for the southern coast of the United States, stopping briefly in Pensacola before returning to Massachusetts. Florida’s warm climate and a burst of economic activity undergirded by numerous public works projects along the

19 “Fugitive Slave Brought To,” *The Daily Picayune*, January 30, 1857.

20 For a recent articulation of the idea, see: Winsboro and Knetsch, “Florida Slaves, the ‘Saltwater Railroad’ to the Bahamas, and Anglo-American Diplomacy”; Blackett, *Making Freedom: The Underground Railroad and the Politics of Slavery*. Classic accounts include: Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); James Oakes, “The Political Significance of Slave Resistance,” *History Workshop Journal* 22 (Fall 1986): 89-107.

21 Kathleen Grover, *The Fugitive’s Gibraltar: Escaping Slaves and Abolitionism in New Bedford, Massachusetts* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001).

22 Jonathan Walker, *Trial and Imprisonment of Jonathan Walker, at Pensacola, Florida, for Aiding Slaves to Escape from Bondage with an Appendix Containing a Sketch of His Life* (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845), 108.

Gulf Coast brought Walker, his wife, and their seven children back to the area several years later.

While residing in Pensacola, Walker endeared himself to his neighbors immediately, yet his reputation among many of the city's white residents deteriorated when they learned he "was on good terms with the colored people." Walker rented a room from a free black woman, and while working as a superintendant at the city's railroad depot, employed several bondsmen whom he treated "with great brotherly affection—telling them that they were just as good as he was, and that the difference of colour was a mere shadow, &c." What is more, Walker attended an interracial church and opened his home to black men with whom he associated "on terms of equality and intimacy—seating them by himself, at his table, while his daughters, (half grown girls) waited on the table."²³ Walker later recalled two separate conversations with city officials in which, "it was intimated that there was danger in regard to my peace and safety, for should the people be excited in consequence of my discountenance of some of their rules and customs respecting the association of white with colored men, it would be out of their power to shield me from *violence*."²⁴ Fearful for his family's safety, Walker relocated his wife and children back to Massachusetts, but he remained on the Gulf Coast where he worked as a shipwright and salvager and continued to socialize with African Americans openly.²⁵

Walker also operated clandestinely as a conductor on the Underground Railroad. The abolitionist later admitted that while living in Pensacola, "he had for a long time been of the opinion that he would aid slaves to secure their liberty, if opportunity offered," and on at least one occasion helped two slaves board a vessel and escape from the city.²⁶ Then, in July 1844, several bondsmen approached the friendly seaman and asked if he would help them escape to the North. Like hundreds of other bondsmen, the men lived and worked just south of Pensacola at the Pensacola

23 "Pensacola," *Pensacola Gazette*, June 29, 1844; Walker, *Trial and Imprisonment*, 63; "Waltham Pic-Nic," *Liberator*, August 8, 1845.

24 Walker, *Trial and Imprisonment*, 9.

25 Handbill enclosed with R. C. Caldwell and George Willis to the Secretary of State, July 24, 1844, Miscellaneous Letters of the Department of State, 1789-1906, National Archives and Records Administration.

26 Walker, *Trial and Imprisonment*, 36; "Pensacola," *Pensacola Gazette*, June 29, 1844. When the *Pensacola Gazette* reported Walker's connection with the earlier escape, he offered no denial.

Navy Yard, where as rented laborers they toiled for the federal government on a variety of public works projects. Far removed from the prying eyes of their owners and overseers, Navy Yard employees figure prominently in the numbers of fugitive slaves from Pensacola.²⁷ Walker responded affirmatively to the request to convey these enslaved public employees to freedom, though he insisted the group sail to the Bahamas, a small group of islands off the East Florida coast where the British government had abolished slavery a decade earlier. Besides its proximity to Pensacola, Walker knew the Bahamas offered another significant advantage to fugitive slaves. As historians of the exodus of fugitive slaves from East Florida to the islands point out, "Fleeing from slavery was not a crime under British law, and, therefore, escaped slaves arriving in British territories like Canada and the Bahamas could not be claimed by their masters."²⁸

With all in agreement, Walker prepared his boat, loading it with food, water, as well as powder, shot, and, according to some sources, a double-barrel shotgun.²⁹ Late at night on July 22, the seven bondsmen left their quarters at the Navy Yard and proceeded to Pensacola where they boarded Walker's vessel and drifted into the Gulf of Mexico. Things began well enough as they traveled east along the Florida coast. By the fifth day, however, Walker succumbed to extreme heat exhaustion and fell in and out of consciousness while the runaways suffered increasingly from the

27 For the widespread use of slave labor at the Pensacola Navy Yard, see: Thomas Hulse, "Military Slave Rentals, the Constructions of Army Fortifications, and the Navy Yard in Pensacola, Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 88, no. 4 (Spring 2010): 497-539; Ernest F. Dibble, "Slave Rentals to the Military: Pensacola and the Gulf Coast," *Civil War History* 23, no. 2 (June 1977): 101-113. For slave rentals to the military elsewhere in Florida, see Mark A. Smith, "Engineering Slavery: The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and Slavery at Key West," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 86, no. 4 (Spring 2008): 498-526.

28 Winsboro and Joe Knetsch, "Florida Slaves, the 'Saltwater Railroad' to the Bahamas, and Anglo-American Diplomacy," 54. Walker must have known that just three years earlier in 1841 colonial authorities refused to recognize the rights of American slaveowners in the case of the slave revolt on the brig *Creole*. Walker discusses the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies briefly in *A Picture of Slavery, for Youth*, 21-23; for the Creole case, see Howard Jones, "The Peculiar Institution and National Honor: The Case of the Creole Slave Revolt," *Civil War History* 21, no. 1 (March 1975): 28-40.

29 Walker, *Trial and Imprisonment*, 10-14; Witnesses saw Walker trying to purchase the shotgun in the days before the escape. Handbill enclosed with R. C. Caldwell and George Willis to the Secretary of State, July 24, 1844, Miscellaneous Letters of the Department of State, 1789-1906, National Archives and Records Administration.

lack of adequate supplies. The group persisted, nonetheless, and roughly two weeks into their voyage they approached the southern tip of Florida, bringing them within one day of their destination.³⁰

At the same time, hand-bills appeared in Pensacola offering rewards of up to \$100 for the capture of each of the bondsmen and \$1,000 for their white companion. The billboards provided detailed descriptions of each of the runaways. "Young, strong, healthy, intelligent men," they fit the profile of fugitive slaves found throughout the antebellum South and described by historians John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger.³¹ The brief semi-biographical sketches began with the following: "MOSES JOHNSON is very black, with a full round face and pleasing expression—is stout built and about five feet four inches in height, talks rather rapidly and a little indistinctly—is fond of tobacco and occasionally drinks too much whiskey, is about 35 years of age, is a Blacksmith, basket maker and a great chopper." Charles, Phil, and Len Johnson were "excellent labourers" who resembled their older brother Moses except they were "younger-looking." Silas Scott was a short "very muscular and considerably bow-legged" twenty-five year old who worked as a fisherman and dining room servant, while his younger brother Harry, who was slightly taller and of a darker complexion, worked as a drayman. Anthony Cartlett was a "well-built" thirty-year old mulatto who like the others had a reputation as "an excellent laborourer." Jonathan Walker was "a man of large frame, about 6 feet high, with dark hair and dark complexion, a suspicious countenance, slouchy person, stooping shoulders and a swinging, rolling gait." The placard concluded, "the belief exists that said Jonathan Walker has carried these slaves off in his boat."³²

Local media vilified Walker as a race-traitor. "The most daring and impudent outrage upon the peace and dignity of the Territory is thought to have been perpetrated," the first editorial to address the incident began, "by the abduction of seven negro slaves on the night of Saturday last." Walker was the only suspect, given that Charles Johnson, one of the runaways, "was a ranting, shouting member of the church with him." Moreover, Johnson "was with

30 Walker, *Trial and Imprisonment*, 10-14.

31 John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 233.

32 Handbill enclosed with R. C. Caldwell and George Willis to the Secretary of State, July 24, 1844, Miscellaneous Letters of the Department of State, 1789-1906, National Archives and Records Administration.

men," the article continued. "He took lodgings with a quattron woman and had no white associates during his stay."³³ Elsewhere in the South, anti-abolitionists mocked Walker, referring to him as a "vagabond," a loaded term, which as David Brown has shown, was an opprobrious term applied exclusively to white southerners of the lowest order.³⁴ Other observers undercut Walker's humanitarianism, claiming that he, like other abolitionists, was a slave trader. After providing a fantastic narrative of the escape attempt that included a comment on the happiness expressed by the seven fugitives after having been returned to their owners, a writer in the *Daily Picayune* surmised, "It is evident enough, from all this, that Walker only intended to dispose of the negroes and then run off with the proceeds." The commentator concluded sardonically, "We trust that his punishment will be of a nature that will effectively put a stop to his future operations in this line."³⁵

The three men who claimed ownership of the missing bondsmen—Byrd Willis, George Willis, and Marine Corps Second Lieutenant Robert C. Caldwell—turned to the federal government to recover their valuable property.³⁶ The three men asked the commander of the Navy Yard to help them "rescue their property," going so far as to provide the fuel for any federal vessels deployed on their behalf. But the commander insisted "that he had no authority—that under no circumstances whatsoever could he employ any part of the public force for such a purpose." Outraged, the slaveowners fired off a series of letters to the President of the United States, John Tyler, and the Secretary of State, John C. Calhoun, demanding clarification of the federal government's policy regarding the capture of fugitive slaves. The three men considered their failure to receive "public aid" immediately an issue of great magnitude, as it affected "the interest and safety of the whole South."³⁷

33 "Pensacola," *Pensacola Gazette*, June 29, 1844.

34 "Not Quite Successful," *Daily Picayune*, February 13, 1845; David Brown, "A Vagabond's Tale: Poor, Whites, *Herrenvolk* Democracy, and Value of Whiteness in the Late Antebellum South," *Journal of Southern History* 79, No. 4 (November 2013): 799-840.

35 "The Walker Affair," *Daily Picayune*, July 30, 1844.

36 For the Willis family, see Byrd C. Willis, *A Sketch of the Willis Family: Fredericksburg Branch* (Richmond, VA: Whitte & Shepperson, 1909); Little is known of Caldwell besides his service in the Marine Corps. See "Washington in 1834; Letter of Robert C. Caldwell," *American Historical Review* 27, no. 2 (January 1922): 271.

37 R. C. Caldwell and George Willis to the Secretary of State, July 24, 1844, Miscellaneous Letters of the Department of State, 1789-1906, National Archives and Records Administration.

Unknown at the time, the federal government had already intervened on the slaveowners' behalf. Richard Roberts, a captain aboard the wrecking sloop *Eliza Catherine*, detained Walker and his passengers off the South Florida coast and delivered them to authorities at Key West. Without hesitation, Commander Eben Farrand brought the full resources of the United States Navy to bear on the fugitives, sending Walker and the suspected runaways on separate vessels to Pensacola, where federal marshals assumed custody of each of the prisoners.³⁸ As chattel slaves, the fate of the black captives was predetermined. Authorities returned them to their owners. Caldwell was the first to reclaim his possessions. Waiting for their arrival at the Navy Yard, he took possession of Moses, Silas, and Harry after their disembarkation. Because Byrd and George Willis were away or otherwise indisposed, deputy marshal James Gonzalez locked Anthony Cartlett and the three brothers Charles, Phil, and Leonard, in the city jail. During their incarceration, the city constable subjected each of the prisoners to such a brutal beating that when George Willis arrived finally to take custody of the three men several weeks later, they limped from the building still "being very sore."³⁹

Of the seven captured runaways, only Silas Scott avoided a long life of servitude; however, he paid the ultimate price for his freedom. In September 1844, less than two months after running away with Walker, and despite his reputation as "a trust-worthy, respectful and obedient servant in the Navy Yard," the short and heavily scarred bondsman returned to the city jail after officials arrested him on suspicion of stealing. Unwilling to submit to a jailhouse beating for a second time, Silas took his life in a gruesome fashion. There were no eyewitnesses to the act, but Walker, who sat in an adjacent cell at the time and later caught a glimpse of the gory crime scene, remembered, "On one side of the room, much of the floor was stained with the blood of a slave, who had three days before committed suicide by cutting open his belly and throat with a razor." Walker added, "This was one of the seven slaves whom I had vainly endeavored to save from bondage, and on whose account I was now imprisoned."⁴⁰

38 Walker, *Trial and Imprisonment*, 14-16, 36-37, 57-59.

39 *Ibid.*, 24-25, 53.

40 Neither Walker nor the *Pensacola Gazette* mentioned Silas by name; however, Navy Yard payroll records and shipping manifests at the National Archives, as well as estate records at the Escambia County Courthouse, confirm that six of the seven bondsmen who escaped with Walker remained enslaved in Pensacola through the 1850s. Only

Not surprisingly, opinions on the motivation for the suicide were divided along sectional lines. A Pensacola writer alleged, "Conjugal infidelity on the part of his [Silas's] wife is said to have caused occasional fits of melancholy and partial insanity for some time past, and it was during one of these paroxysms that he committed the rash deed."⁴¹ Abolitionists who were anxious to learn the fate of the seven bondsmen disputed the claim. Sydney Howard Gay of the American Anti-Slavery Society interpreted Silas' death as the final act of a great American freedom fighter, explaining, "fearing the dreadful punishment with which the vengeance of his master would visit him, and perhaps desperate with lost hope, he nearly severed his head from his body, and cut out his entrails, that he might at least be sure of liberty in death."⁴²

Unlike the runaways who suffered in silence and faded quickly from the limelight, Walker's fate was determined in the public eye, and thus contributed to his becoming the focus of local, national, and international attention. "When the prisoner landed on the wharf the crowd was immense," read one account, and as soon as a deputy took Walker to the local magistrate, a "crowd thronged the streets and side-walks, and the court-room was filled to overflowing with a highly excited mass of people." For the next four months Walker sat chained to the floor of a tiny cell awaiting his trial before the United States District Court. In November a jury took just a few hours to convict him on four counts of stealing "goods and chattels" from their owners. The punishment handed down by the federal court included: paying a \$150 fine and additional court costs; standing in the pillory in front of the courthouse on the corner of the town square for one hour; and having the letters

Silas disappeared from the historical record after 1844, confirming his identity as the suicide victim. Additionally, the *Pensacola Gazette* stated the deceased bondsman belonged to Byrd C. Willis, while other sources indicate that Silas belonged to Caldwell; nevertheless, the contradiction is explained easily. The bondsmen who escaped with Walker worked at different times for Caldwell, Byrd C. Willis, and his son George Willis. In antebellum Pensacola slaveowners at times owned property collectively, and given the widespread practice of slave hiring, the distinction between a bondperson's owner and employer is often indeterminable. "PayRoll of Mechanics, Laborers, etc.," Pensacola Navy Yard, June 1855, Record Group 71, E-32, Box 136, National Archives, Washington, DC; Slave Manifests of Coastwise Vessels Filed at New Orleans, Louisiana, 1807-1860, March 1, 1845, National Archives, Washington, DC, microfilm M1895, reel 10; Last Will and Testament and Appraisalment of the Personal Estate of George Willis, 1862, Escambia County Circuit Court.

41 "Pensacola," *Pensacola Gazette*, September 7, 1844.

42 "Jonathan Walker," *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, July 24, 1845.

"S.S.," which stood for Slave Stealer, branded onto the palm of his right hand.⁴³

The branding of a free white northerner for assisting enslaved black southerners was an extraordinary event, which explains why the one scheduled to take place in Pensacola in November 1845 almost failed to transpire. On the day of the sentence, the local blacksmith selected to manufacture the iron brand declined the request. The artisan then refused to allow anyone else from using his forge to make the device, declaring that he could make brands for livestock "but not for men." Eventually, another blacksmith fabricated an iron in a makeshift furnace constructed in the courthouse by the United States Marshall Ebenezer Dorr, who then escorted Walker from the pillory and into the courthouse "prisoner's box" before securing his right hand to a railing. As the marshal pressed the red-hot brand into Walker's palm, all those within earshot heard "a splattering noise, like a handful of salt in the fire." The branding was over in seconds, but Walker's punishment had only just begun. After Walker returned to his cell, Dorr served three additional writs against the prisoner. Byrd C. Willis, George Willis, and Robert Caldwell now sought damages of more than \$100,000, an astronomical sum meant to keep Walker behind bars for the rest of his life.⁴⁴

Though facing a potential life sentence, Walker remained hopeful as his incarceration had made him a cause célèbre' of the transatlantic abolitionist movement. Major media followed his case closely. Northern newspapers, in particular, told Walker's story in great depth, especially after the details of his branding became public. None of them spilled more ink on his behalf than the *Liberator*. William Lloyd Garrison's radical abolitionist sheet published dozens of articles about Walker before, during, and after his incarceration, and in the process transformed the lowly seaman into a powerful symbol. At first, most of the articles provided readers with biographical information on Walker and his family, and presented a play-by-play of his trial and imprisonment. Walker and a sympathetic Pensacola resident who called himself "EYE WITNESS" were among those who corresponded with the *Liberator* and provided the pertinent details. Increasingly, however,

43 "Pensacola," *Pensacola Gazette*, July 20, 1844; Walker, *Trial and Imprisonment*, 39-40.

44 "Jonathan Walker," *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, July 24, 1845; Walker, *Trial and Imprisonment*, 42-43.

the articles focused on the fundraising rallies abolitionists held throughout the North in support of Walker and other suffering abolitionists, including Charles Torrey, another Massachusetts native who, like Walker, was imprisoned in the South for assisting fugitive slaves.⁴⁵

In one memorable gathering, the renowned abolitionist orator Wendell Phillips addressed a massive crowd at Boston's Hollis Street Church. The lecture began with Phillips urging his audience not to take for granted the liberty they enjoyed, for in the South several of the "sons of New-England" had lost their freedom while spreading "the genius of liberty" throughout the land. He then launched into an assault against both the church and state as neither institution offered a "remedy for slavery." Phillips rebuked the Christian church for tolerating bondage and "thus sanctioning concubinage, trampling on the marriage institution, and striking hands with the oppressors." He vilified American Christians for "the sentiment that was prevalent in the land, that it is better to obey man than God—that legislative enactments are paramount to the Christian precepts, and should be obeyed." Phillips offered Walker as the rare individual who responded to a higher authority. As for the state, Walker's captivity exposed its debasement, because "It was in the hold of a national vessel that he was confined and carried to Pensacola—it was within the walls of a national prison that he was incarcerated—it was a national brand that was on his fetters." Phillips closed by renouncing rhetorically his citizenship in a nation dedicated to the defense of slavery and then roared defiantly, "I hail and am proud to unite with those whose rallying-cry is, 'NO UNION WITH SLAVEHOLDERS!'"⁴⁶

Support for Walker stretched across the Atlantic as some of the world's leading abolitionists rallied to his cause. At a meeting of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society in London, the organization's legendary leader Thomas Clarkson, who spearheaded the decades-long movement to abolish the Atlantic slave trade, led a public rally in support of Walker. The group issued a resolution

45 Arrested in Baltimore, Torrey died from tuberculosis in the Maryland State Penitentiary after almost two years of incarceration. Stanley Harrold, "On the Borders of Slavery and Race: Charles T. Torrey and the Underground Railroad," *Journal of the Early Republic* 20, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 273-292; J. C. Lovejoy, ed., *Memoir of Rev. Charles T. Torrey, Who Died in the Penitentiary of Maryland, Where He Was Confined for Showing Mercy to the Poor* (Boston: Jon P. Jewett & Co., 1847).

46 "Lecture by Wendell Phillips," *Liberator*, November 1 and 8, 1844.

expressing their sympathy with the American abolitionist “for having aided or attempted to aid some of their countrymen in their escape from bondage” and denouncing the pro-slavery laws that sanctioned his imprisonment “as utterly disgraceful to a civilized community, and in the highest degree repugnant to the spirit and precepts of the gospel.” The organization’s secretary, John Scoble, forwarded a copy of the resolution to Walker, informing him that his efforts to “deliver some of your fellow-men from the sufferings and degradation of slavery” were not “unknown to the Abolitionists in Great Britain” who trusted ‘that the efforts which are to be made for your deliverance from the power of evil men and evil laws, will be succeeded by the divine blessings.’ Surprised by the international attention he received, Walker wrote from his cell to the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society to thank its members for their support, though he admitted the impossibility of expressing “the feelings which the reception of the letter and resolution excited.”⁴⁷

Walker’s lionization infuriated slavery’s defenders, who considered it proof of the widening gap between northern extremists and southern moderates. One writer explained, “To deny to the people of the north the right to entertain and to express opinions unfavorable and unfriendly to the institution of the south, would be to be unreasonable and unkind, as they have too unfrequently shown themselves towards us; erroneous opinion should be met with facts and argument, not with angry denunciation.” Anti-abolitionists believed that northern newspapers like the *Liberator* spread falsehoods about Walker’s case, especially regarding his treatment when in custody; in reality, they wrote, the suspect had a trial “as fair and impartial a trial as ever was accorded to a person accused; was found guilty upon the clearest and most satisfactory of evidence, upon four separate indictments, and was sentenced to nearly the lightest punishment which the law would permit.”⁴⁸ Another writer concurred, avowing that Walker should “‘thank his stars’ for having got off so lightly.” The findings of the Pensacola jury were “an instance of mercy and forbearance unparalleled in the history of judicial proceedings,” considering they were reached “in the face of all the vituperation and malignant abuse that has been showered upon the South, in abolition meetings at Boston, and elsewhere at the North.”⁴⁹

47 Walker, *Trial and Imprisonment*, 83-87.

48 “The Boston Liberator,” *Pensacola Gazette*, September 12, 1846.

49 “The Case of Jonathan Walker,” *Daily Picayune*, November 29, 1844.

International support for Walker was particularly troubling for Floridians who remembered Britain's emancipation of hundreds of enslaved Floridians during the War of 1812.⁵⁰ Shortly after learning of Walker's communication with British abolitionists, Florida's Territorial Legislative Council, in a widely circulated protest, decried the intervention of "foreign states" in domestic concerns. The council's members regarded the right of passing laws and punishing the violators of those laws "as amongst the clearest and most valuable rights of a free people, and the interference of foreign states with the exercise of that right, as insulting and unwarrantable and that it should be repelled promptly and indignantly." To many Floridians, Walker's relationship with foreign abolitionists confirmed that conspirators were still plotting the overthrow of slavery in the South. "It can no longer be denied that systematic and powerful influences are at work throughout a large portion of Europe and many parts of our own country," the diatribe continued, "to involve ourselves and the unconscious objects of this false philanthropy in one common ruin." The international reaction to Walker's incarceration was further proof that "a vicious fanaticism, clothed in the garb of religion, is prowling around our borders, and by means of its more reckless and abandoned instruments, invading our in-most sanctuaries, who direct purposes, scarcely concealed, are to deluge our very hearth-stones in blood, and to rear an altar to its false principles upon the ruin of all that is precious to us as freemen and dear to us as men." The only justifiable response was to defend the lives of slaveowners by any means necessary: "Self-protection is the primary law, and we shall stand justified, in the eyes of God and of man, in defending ourselves from unjust aggressions, though the means of safety may bring punishment and suffering where it is not most deserved."⁵¹

Beyond stoking the flames of anti-abolitionism, Walker's greatest contribution to the sectional crisis came after abolitionists secured his release from the Pensacola jail and published several autobiographical accounts of his experiences. The first and most popular was *Trial and Imprisonment of Jonathan Walker, at Pensacola,*

50 Nathaniel Millett, *The Maroons of Prospect Bluff and Their Quest for Freedom in the Atlantic World* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2013); Gene Allen Smith, *The Slaves' Gamble: Choosing Sides in the War of 1812* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013).

51 Walker, *Trial and Imprisonment*, 87-93.

Florida, For Aiding Slaves to Escape From Bondage. Published by the American Anti-Slavery Society in Boston, the 119-page tract went through four editions between 1845 and 1850 and appeared in serial form widely in both the United States and England.⁵² The book shared much in common with the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, which the American Anti-Slavery Society also published for the first time in 1845. But while Frederick Douglass' slave narrative illuminated the horrors of southern slavery from the point of view of an enslaved black southerner, Walker's offered readers the perspective of a free white northerner.⁵³ In the words of Maria Weston Chapman, an executive member of the American Anti-Slavery Society, "The narrative of Frederick Douglass gives a picture of the condition of a slave in the land that their folly and their fear betrayed. That of Jonathan Walker shows the condition of the freeman whose lot is cast in the same land, little more than half a century only after the perpetration of that treason to humanity."⁵⁴

Despite Walker's rare first-hand account of slave life on the Gulf Coast, it was a visual image included on the publication's frontispiece that provided the abolitionist movement with one of its most recognizable icons. In August 1845, just weeks after his release from jail, Walker entered a popular Boston studio where a professional photographer made a daguerreotype of his branded hand that local printers committed immediately to an engraving. It was a simple illustration of the capital letters "S.S." demarcated clearly on Walker's palm, though, in the words of literary scholar Marcus Wood, the hand "literally reached out to a mass audience across the free Northern states."⁵⁵ The image exploded across abolitionist print culture, appearing on the cover of *Trial and Imprisonment* and in a wide variety of publications, including newspapers, broadsides, and even a children's book. The *Liberator* introduced the image with the sort of hyperbole that became

52 The book's success distressed Pensacola's slaveowners who continued to see Walker as a common criminal. While visiting Philadelphia, George Willis "discovered a number of these pamphlets in a book store, purchased the whole collection, tore them up and scattering them upon the floor turned and walked out." Willis, *A Sketch of the Willis Family*, 83.

53 Walker also self-published two editions of *A Brief View of American Chattelized Humanity and A Picture of Slavery, for Youth*; Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of an American Slave* (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845).

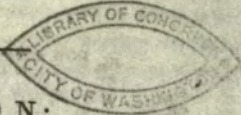
54 Walker, *Trial and Imprisonment*, v.

55 Marcus Wood, *Blind Memory: Visual Representation of Slavery in England and America, 1780-1865* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 249.

TRIAL AND IMPRISONMENT
 OF
JONATHAN WALKER,
 AT PENSACOLA, FLORIDA,
 FOR
 AIDING SLAVES TO ESCAPE FROM BONDAGE.
 WITH AN
 APPENDIX,
 CONTAINING A SKETCH OF HIS LIFE.



"All things whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them. For this is the law and the prophets."



BOSTON:
 PUBLISHED AT THE ANTI-SLAVERY OFFICE,
 25 Cornhill.
 1845.

Frontpiece from *The Trial and Imprisonment of Jonathan Walker*. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress.

typical: "Ponder it, fellow citizens, and as you burn, and blush, and weep, at the disgrace of our country, the indignity done to a worthy neighbor, and the misery of the poor slaves, let the fire burn until your soul is enkindled in the high resolve, that the letters on Jonathan Walker's hand shall be made to read—SALVATION TO THE SLAVE." Below the icon, the *Liberator* published fifty-two lines by the abolitionist poet laureate John Greenleaf Whittier, assuring Walker's ascension into the pantheon of abolitionist martyrs.⁵⁶

Walker's iconic appendage made him a prominent albeit unusual fixture on the abolitionist lecture circuit. While large crowds gathered in public spaces typically to hear the voices of some of the nation's greatest orators speak of the injustice of slavery, those that greeted Walker came to see his hand. Aware of his deficiencies as a public speaker, Walker rarely spoke to audiences for more than a few moments before he descended from the podium and waded through the assembly with his hand outstretched so that attendees could get a closer look at the one-of-a-kind relic.⁵⁷ The effect on the assembly was profound. Frederick Douglass, who counted himself among the affected, recalled nostalgically years later, "I well remember the sensation produced by the exhibition of his branded hand. It was one of the few atrocities of slavery that roused the justice and humanity of the North to a death struggle with slavery."⁵⁸ Fergus Bordewich provides a more objective appraisal, concluding, "Walker's callused seaman's palm became an emblem of the entire abolitionist movement and, perhaps inevitably, of the Underground Railroad, the most riveting symbol both of the sacrifice that was demanded of men who dared to assist fugitive slaves, and of the punishment that awaited them if they were caught."⁵⁹

For his part, Walker rejected his limited role as an historical object and quietly resumed his work on the Underground Railroad shortly after returning to the North. In one instance, he wrote in the *Liberator* of the arrival in Plymouth, Massachusetts, of two bondsmen and their families. After escaping from an undisclosed part of the South, the fugitives had fled across the Mason-Dixon

56 "POETRY," *Liberator*, August 15, 1845.

57 "Walker Meeting in New Bedford," *Liberator*, August 22, 1845.

58 Frederick Douglass to Photius Fisk, July 15, 1878, in Frank Edward Kittredge, "The Man with the Branded Hand," *New England Magazine* 19, no. 3 (November 1898): 370-371.

59 Bordewich, *Bound for Canaan*, 292.

Line to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, but the constant fear of being kidnapped by slave catchers led them to seek refuge further north in New England. It infuriated Walker that his Massachusetts neighbors offered little assistance to the desperate fugitives who were unable to secure housing in Plymouth "solely because they are guilty of the unpardonable sin of being a fraction darker than most of our neighbors." Walker wondered, "Is there no escape—is there no avoiding—is there to be no end to this dastardly, cruel and infernal prejudice, in the vicinity of the *Puritan Rock*?" The "half-dozen" refugees eventually took up residence in Walker's cabin alongside his wife and small children, but the lack of food and heating made their stay a short one. Despite his best efforts, Walker's impoverishment hindered his abolitionist activities severely. "Others have come here," he lamented, "and gone away for the same reason."⁶⁰

Walker never again set foot in Pensacola; nevertheless, the tracks of the Underground Railroad he helped lay across the city continued to operate. Another famous case occurred on the eve of the Civil War when a daring and defiant bondsman from Pensacola stowed away on a ship headed to Massachusetts. Apprehended and jailed after disembarking at Hyannis Port, he became, like Walker before him, the touchstone of a sensational trial that galvanized public attention and stirred emotions in both sections. "Of the unsuccessful attempts to escape," declared the American Anti-Slavery Society during the first year of the Civil War, "none became more notorious, or excited more attention, by reason of the issues coming to be involved in it, than that of COLUMBUS JONES, who left Pensacola on the 1st of May, 1859, on board a brig bound for Boston."⁶¹

Before fleeing to the North, Columbus Jones was well-known in Pensacola and the vicinity because of his involvement with one of the largest slave stealing syndicates to ever operate along the Gulf Coast.⁶² As is often the case with fugitive slaves on the southern frontier, whether Columbus was a victim of, or

60 "Spiritual Knockings—Again," *Liberator*, June 6, 1851.

61 *The Anti-Slavery History of the John-Brown Year; Being the Twenty-Seventh Annual Report of the American Anti-Slavery Society* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1861), 51-52.

62 Columbus worked for a time at the Pensacola Navy Yard. "Records Relating to Personnel, Pay Rolls, Pensacola, FL, 1847-1861," June 1855, Box 137, National Archives and Records Administration.

accomplice to, his own theft is difficult to determine. The *Pensacola Observer* argued for the latter, announcing in October 1857, "The negro boy Columbus, advertised by Mrs. S. A. Jones, agent for the heirs of Ambrose Jones has, after a long, troublesome and circumlatory process been recovered. This negro, it seems, was stolen while in the employ of Mr. Milner, on the Railroad about the 1st of August last.—Since then it appears he has been touring quite extensively under the protection of the thief, one Leonard Singletary." Available evidence suggested that the "peregrinations" of Jones and Singletary lasted several months and stretched across the Florida border into Alabama and Georgia until "the negro was found in the possession Wm. H. Hendley, near Cambleton, Jackson County Florida, who had purchased him of Judge Yelverton, of Elba, Coffee county, Ala., whose only title was derived from a bill of sale from Singletary—who had sold him for sundries amounting to \$1,000." Singletary had a number of criminal associates who managed to avoid capture, which proved the existence of "a negro stealing organization hereabouts, and owners of such property cannot be too vigilant."⁶³

Undeterred by his capture and re-enslavement, Columbus turned away from the southern interior and instead headed toward the water. Upon arrival at the shore he climbed aboard the *Rolerson*, a swift-moving brig headed for Massachusetts, with a multiracial crew of free and enslaved men and women. Columbus remained hidden for several days in the ship's cargo where sympathetic crew members provided him with food and sustenance. How long they knew about the stowaway or whether they encouraged him to embark with them is unknown. When first mate John Orlando discovered Columbus on board, the bondsman confessed he was a runaway but avowed "he would never go back to slavery alive again." As the vessel continued north, Columbus disappeared below the deck where "he was supplied with food as before by some of the crew." Orlando then ordered the closing of all hatches to cut off communication between Columbus and the crew. The strategy worked. After going without food or water for nearly twenty-four hours, Columbus landed in Orlando's custody for a second time.⁶⁴

63 "Columbus Discovered," *Pensacola Observer* in *Pensacola Gazette*, October 30, 1857; A Pensacola Grand Jury indicted Singletary for stealing Columbus though the outcome of the case is unknown. *State of Florida vs. Leonard Singletary*, File 1857-1753, Escambia County Circuit Court.

64 "The Hyannis Kidnapping Case," *New York Times*, June 1, 1859;

Still, he remained defiant. Throughout the remainder of the journey, Columbus "broke three sets of handcuffs, and was at last again ironed and chained in a caboose." The *Rolerson's* arrival in Hyannis Port provided Columbus with one last opportunity to escape. After Orlando disembarked from the brig to seek the counsel of the vessel's captain, Gorham Crowell, who waited on shore, Columbus jumped overboard and swam to a small skiff piloted by a man who agreed to ferry Columbus ashore for one dollar. The crew watched the daring escape "but pretended not to observe it, as their sympathies were with the runaway." Just before reaching their destination, Columbus and his companion met a boat carrying Crowell and Orlando, who again managed to detain Columbus. Aware that the schooner *Elizabeth B.* was headed South, Crowell and Orlando paid the ship's captain, Edward Bacon, \$500 to return Jones to his owner in Pensacola. Soon the steamer set sail "with the slave chained to the capstan, and got off before the citizens of Hyannis had learned of the affair."⁶⁵

When local abolitionists discovered the dramatic turn of events they sprang into action. Led by Francis W. Bird, a well-known anti-slavery radical, they complained to local authorities who issued warrants for Crowell and Orlando and arrested both. Police also detained the owner of the *Rolerson*, John W. Baker, along with Captain Bacon, when he returned to Boston several weeks later. In September, the Grand Jury of Barnstable County indicted the four men on various counts of kidnapping and conspiracy. During the trial before the Suffolk County Superior Court, which took place over four long days in November 1859, the opposing sides took extraordinary positions regarding states' rights. Massachusetts Prosecutor Baylies Sanford argued that state laws protecting individual liberty trumped federal laws protecting slavery. Jones was a free man, the prosecution insisted; therefore, his abduction and rendition violated the state law passed recently by the commonwealth's legislature that subjected those found guilty of kidnapping to ten years in prison and a \$1,000 fine. The defendants' counsel, Caleb Cushing and H. A. Scudder, countered

65 Ibid.; "The Hyannis Kidnapping Case," *Liberator*, June 24, 1859; Samuel May, *The Fugitive Slave Law and Its Victims* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1861), 118-119. One of Crowell's defenders maintained that the captain tried to protect Jones from the pro-slavery zealots who awaited his arrival at Hyannis Port, but there is no corroborating evidence to support the story. "Rev. Mr. Pope of Hyannis," *Liberator*, September 9, 1859.

by asserting the supremacy of the United States Constitution over state laws in cases regarding slaveowners' property. It was, they maintained, the duty of citizens to recognize –slaveowners' power over their bondspople across state lines as the Constitution mandated. The argument confirms David Ericson's finding that when it came to the national debate on slavery, whether northern or southern, abolitionist or anti-abolitionist, most Americans "supported federal action when federal action served their interests and federal inaction when federal inaction served their interests."⁶⁶

Much of the evidentiary portion of the trial that centered on Jones' status as either a free or enslaved person derived from two primary sources. First was courtroom testimony provided by some two dozen witnesses, including Thomas Mitchell, a cook on the *Rolerson* and former bondsman from Pensacola; Eliza Mitchell, Thomas' mother and fellow traveler on the brig from Pensacola to Massachusetts; and Andrew J. Jones, a representative of the Jones family of Pensacola that claimed ownership of Columbus. The second source of testimony was a series of depositions recorded in Florida that arrived in Massachusetts just days before the trial began. Among the deponents were several additional members of Andrew Jones' family, the family's legal representative, as well as one of Columbus' former employers.⁶⁷

Like Walker's *Trial and Imprisonment*, the two publications provided a rare look at slavery and slave resistance on Florida's Gulf Coast. Born in Macon, Georgia, to Caswell and Annie Jones around 1840, Columbus and his mother were brought to Pensacola by their owner, Ambrose Jones, before his death in 1853, at which time his widow, Shada Ann Jones, inherited both Columbus and Annie. Over the course of several years, Shada Ann and her family leased Columbus and his mother to various employers in Pensacola. Eventually, the Jones family agreed upon an arrangement with Columbus and Annie that "when they had time to themselves, they

66 For extensive coverage of the case, see: "The Hyannis Kidnapping Case," *Boston Daily Advertiser*, November 16-21, 1859; see also "The Hyannis Kidnapping Case," *New York Times*; "The Hyannis Kidnapping Case," *Liberator*, June 24, 1859; "The Indictments Against the Massachusetts Kidnappers," *New York Times*, September 14, 1859; "The Hyannis Kidnapping Case," *Boston Daily Advertiser*, November 16, 1859. Claude Moore Fuess, *The Life of Caleb Cushing* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1923), 2:236-237. For the quotation, see David Ericson, *Slavery in the American Republic: Developing the Federal Government, 1791-1861* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2011), 11.

67 "The Hyannis Kidnapping Case," *Boston Daily Advertiser*, November 16-21, 1859.

can work where they please." Annie worked as a "cook, washer, and ironer" in several homes, while Columbus was a jack-of-all-trades. In addition to working on vessels on the Pensacola dock, he toiled as a "common laborer" at the Pensacola Navy Yard and the Pensacola branch of the Alabama and Florida Railroad. According to Andrew Jones, "The wages earned by Columbus were paid to my father while he lived, since his death to my mother or to myself." Forced to forfeit his hard-earned wages, Columbus rebelled. Members of the Jones family often "saw him in the streets of Pensacola doing nothing" and in general considered him "a rather bad character." Several distinguishing scars across Columbus's back confirm his contemptuousness.⁶⁸

The Jones family was fortunate to recover Columbus after he absconded from Pensacola with the area's most notorious gang of slave stealers, and following his second escape attempt they again demonstrated great determination to reclaim their property. Following the Rolerson's departure for Massachusetts and as word spread that Columbus was on board, the family placed numerous advertisements in the local papers and "stuck up hand-bills all around the county." They also contacted legal representatives who dispatched a letter to the United States Marshal in Boston warning of the imminent arrival of the bondsman. The concerted efforts to reclaim the fugitive paid off. In mid-May, roughly one month after Columbus embarked from the Gulf Coast, Andrew Jones traveled to Norfolk where he "found" the runaway and then returned him to Pensacola.⁶⁹ Like most fugitive slaves from Pensacola reclaimed by their owners or employers, the record is silent on Columbus' life following his return to the city. It is likely that he remained enslaved until the abolition of slavery during the Civil War several years later; nevertheless, his impact on the escalating public dialogue on slavery continued. While slavery's defenders reveled in the capture of yet another fugitive slave, abolitionists added Columbus to the pantheon of anti-slavery martyrs when they invoked his name in public addresses they delivered and the tracts and pamphlets they published in the years leading up to the Civil War.⁷⁰

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid.

70 "A Returned Fugitive," *Charleston Mercury*, May 18, 1859; May, *The Fugitive Slave Law and Its Victims*, 118-119; American Anti-Slavery Society, *The Anti-Slavery History of the John-Brown Year* (Boston: Prentiss and Deland, 1861), 51-53.

Back in Boston, Superior Court Chief Justice Charles Allen instructed the jury on the application of the law in respect to the two central issues in the case. The first concerned whether Columbus' rendition occurred within the boundaries of Barnstable County. The second focused on the process in which the defendants returned Columbus to the South. Allen affirmed the constitutional provision that allowed slaveowners to reclaim bondspeople across state lines but noted the state legislature "does not recognize it as a duty of citizens to take back an escaped slave into servitude." Several hours later the jury offered its verdict before a tense courtroom in which "every seat was occupied, and every inch of standing room was taken up." Asserting that the prosecution failed to prove that Columbus's seizure had occurred within county lines, it acquitted the four defendants. A final insult to the fugitive slave from Pensacola and his northern allies came when, according to one courtroom observer, the announcement of the jury "was received with great applause, which the Court promptly checked."⁷¹

The reaction to the verdict underscores the prevalence of pro-slavery sentiment in the North on the eve of the Civil War. Even in Boston—the home of William Lloyd Garrison, the *Liberator*, and the New England Anti-Slavery Society, the precursor of the National Anti-Slavery Society—abolitionists represented only a small fraction of the population. This meant that for bondspeople and their allies the future was bleak. Slavery was a powerful institution protected by the law and supported by the majority of the people. Still, all was not lost, for resistance to slavery was extensive and enduring.

Besides demonstrating Pensacola's connection to the Underground Railroad, the celebrated cases of Jonathan Walker and Columbus Jones revealed the perpetual nature of the war against slavery being waged by bondspeople and their allies in both sections. Against all odds, enslaved residents of Pensacola simply refused to accept their status, while free people at times demonstrated great solidarity with them and their plight. Because of the actions of fugitive slaves and their allies in seaports like Pensacola and countless other small towns and large cities across the United States, by the middle of the nineteenth century war clouds appeared on the nation's horizon. Casting a dark and ominous shadow over the entire republic from the New England

71 "The Hyannis Kidnapping Case," *Boston Daily Advertiser*, November 16-21, 1859.

shore to Florida's Gulf Coast, they portended that the United States would no longer continue half free and half slave.

Given the persistence of fugitive slaves in antebellum Pensacola, it is not surprising that according to *The War of the Rebellion: a Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, the first fugitive slaves to seek refuge behind Union lines at the outbreak of the Civil War fled across Pensacola Bay to the federal-occupied Fort Pickens on Santa Rosa Island in March 1861. They were, however, not the last. Over the next several weeks and months Fort Pickens became a refuge for hundreds of runaways in search of food, shelter, and freedom. When Union forces stationed at the fort regained control over Pensacola in the second year of the war, they adopted the role of Underground Railroad employees by launching a full-scale assault on slavery. For the remainder of the war, Union troops helped bondspople escape from small farms and factories along the coast as well as large plantations throughout western Florida and southern Alabama, hundreds of miles inland. The efforts of fugitive slaves and their northern allies in Pensacola during the Civil War were the culmination of a decades-long effort to subvert slavery throughout the antebellum South, and they contributed significantly to the Civil War's transformation from a limited war to save the union into a total war over freedom and equality.