Slave Refugees, Self-Emancipation, and the Evolving Landscape of Freedom in the United States and Canada

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Introduction

Over the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the geopolitical landscape of slavery and freedom in North America underwent dramatic transformations. Prior to this, Africans and African-descended people were enslaved across the United States and Canada. During the American Revolutionary War, the British offered formal liberty to slave refugees[1] that fled from their rebel enslavers to Loyalist lines.[2] After the war, the northern US and Canadian provinces began the slow process of gradual emancipation. By the 1830s, black enslavement was effectively abolished across the northern US and British Canada. Conversely, the institution of slavery expanded rapidly across the South. Various factors, such as the interregional slave trade and forced migrations, contributed to the rapid growth of slavery across the Lower South and Southwest.

This article traces the evolving landscape of slavery and freedom across the United States and Canada between the Revolutionary War and the antebellum period. In doing so, it details the changing nature of self-emancipation across the continent, as well as the legal, political, and social factors that impacted slave refugee migrations in the United States and Canada. Lastly, this article examines the profiles of black freedom seekers, as well as the motivations and strategies behind self-emancipation. It highlights the various tipping points which spurred enslaved people to escape from bondage. This article demonstrates that the threat of sale and forced

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[1] Rather than using the more common terms 'runaways' or 'fugitive slaves', this article employs more progressive language when discussing self-emancipated people. The most commonly used terms in this article are 'slave refugees', 'self-emancipators', or 'freedom seekers'. Variants of these terms include 'self-emancipated people' and 'freedom-seeking people'.

[2] Loyalists were those who supported the British during the American Revolutionary War. Tens of thousands of Loyalist refugees emigrated from the United States after the conflict. For more on the Loyalists, see M. Jasanoff, *Liberty's Exiles: American Loyalists in the Revolutionary War* (New York, NY 2011).

separation, brutal treatment, and a lifelong yearning to be free were the primary motivations behind self-emancipation.

Slave Refugees, Wartime Migrations, and the First Emancipation in the United States and Canada

During the colonial era, black enslavement existed in various forms across North America. European colonisers forcibly migrated enslaved Africans via the transatlantic slave trade to the present-day United States and Canada. Over subsequent decades, through a combination of forced migration and natural reproduction, the enslaved black population of North America grew to the hundreds of thousands, primarily confined to the southern states.[3] Yet contrary to popular imagination, slavery was not confined to the southern colonies. Enslaved Africans and African-descended people were held across New England and the northern Mid-Atlantic (New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania). Statutes and judicial rulings across these regions upheld the legality of black enslavement.[4]

Meanwhile, black enslavement was legal and practiced throughout French and British Canada. Enslaved Africans and African-descended people were held in the Canadian Maritimes, Lower Canada (present-day Quebec), and Upper Canada (present-day southwestern Ontario). In her book *The Hanging of Angélique*, Afua Cooper referred to black enslavement as 'Canada's

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[3] The origins and development of US slavery have been covered by numerous scholarly studies. For sample introductory texts, see P. Kolchin, *American Slavery, 1619-1877* (New York, NY 1993); I. Belin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA 1998); I. Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African American Slaves* (Cambridge, MA 2003); D. Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York, NY 2006), Ch. 6.

[4] For slavery in New England, see W. Warren, *New England Bound: Slavery and Colonization in Early America* (New York, NY 2016); For slavery in the northern Mid-Atlantic, see E. J. McManus, *A History of Negro Slavery in New York* (Syracuse, NY 1966); L. M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863* (Chicago, IL 2003); G. B. Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community* (Cambridge, MA 1988); G. R. G. Hodges, *Root and Branch: African Americans in New York & East Jersey,1613-1863* (Chapel Hill, NC 1999).

best-kept secret'.[5] Overall, black enslavement had a long, complex history in the northern US and Canada.[6]

As slavery was recognised across the continent, there were few places to which self-emancipators could escape with the hope of claiming permanent liberty. However, geopolitical developments led to the emergence of new spaces of freedom on the continent.[7] The American Revolutionary War presented enslaved men, women, and children with new opportunities to permanently escape from bondage. In November 1775, Lord Dunmore, the Royal Governor of Virginia, offered asylum to enslaved people that fled from their Revolutionary enslavers to Loyalist lines. In response, hundreds of slave refugees escaped to Loyalist lines and ships in the Chesapeake Bay within a matter of weeks. Far from a commitment to abolitionism, however, this wartime policy was primarily designed to foster social disorder among the Revolutionaries and gain much-needed manpower.[8]

During the conflict, self-emancipated black refugees fled to Loyalist lines with the aim of securing formal liberty. As the Loyalists secured New York City, Philadelphia, and other cities, freedom seekers from surrounding areas fled to their lines in greater numbers. Newspaper notices reflected this increasingly popular phenomenon. In June 1779, the *Pennsylvania Gazette* reported that 'a Negroe [sic] man, named Peter, about 24 years of age' had escaped from his enslaver the day before Loyalist armies arrived in Philadelphia. About one month later, the *Gazette* claimed that a woman named Peg from Chester County, Pennsylvania had also escaped to Loyalist

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[5] A. Cooper, *The Hanging of Angélique: The Untold Story of Canadian Slavery and the Burning of Old Montreal* (Toronto, ON 2006), 68. For studies of slavery in Canada, see R. Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: A History* (New Haven, CT 1971); F. Mackey, *Done with Slavery: The Black Fact in Montreal* (Montreal, QC 2010); B. Rushforth, *Bonds of Alliance: Indigenous and Atlantic Slaveries in New France* (Chapel Hill, NC 2012).

[6] For studies that interrogate Canada's reputation as a 'promised land' for African-descended people, see J. H. Silverman, *Unwelcome Guests: Canada West's Response to American Fugitive Slaves, 1800-1865* (Millwood, NY 1985); R. Reese, 'Canada: The Promised Land for U.S. Slaves', *Western Journal of Black Studies* 35.3 (2011) 208-217.

[7] For more on conceptualizing spaces of freedom in North America, see D. A. Pargas, ed., *Fugitive Slaves and Spaces of Freedom in North America* (Gainesville, FL 2019).

[8] Jasanoff, *Liberty's Exiles,* 48-49. Dunmore's proclamation promised liberty to 'all indented Servants, Negroes, or Others (appertaining to Rebels) free, that are able and willing to bear Arms, they joining his Majesty's Troops, as soon as may be.'

forces in the city.[9] After the war, thousands of black refugees travelled with the British to the Canadian provinces (especially Nova Scotia and New Brunswick), the Caribbean and elsewhere.[10] Yet Great Britain's wartime policy did not apply to enslaved people behind their own lines, approximately 1,200 of whom were taken to the Canadian Maritimes after the war.[11]

The American Revolution had wider implications for black enslavement across the continent. Around this time, the northern US and Canadian provinces began the process of gradual emancipation. Yet as Ira Berlin writes, 'the demise of slavery was a slow, tortuous process'.[12] In 1777, Vermont lawmakers ratified a new constitution that outlawed the institution of slavery in the state. Three years later, Pennsylvania's gradual abolition statute declared that enslaved children born after March 1, 1780 would be freed after serving apprenticeships until twenty-eight years of age. Those born before the act's passage would remain enslaved for life. Over the following decade, black enslavement was abolished across New England. The courts became an important site in the nascent freedom movement. In Massachusetts, writes Emily Planck, 'the freedom suit became a vehicle through which slaves delegitimised slavery rather than challenging their own enslavement'. In 1783, the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled that the enslaved Quock Walker, and all other enslaved African Americans in the state, were entitled to their legal freedom. Other states in the region (Connecticut, Rhode Island, and New Hampshire) followed suit and gradually abolished slavery within their borders.[13]

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[9] *Pennsylvania Gazette* notices taken from B. G. Smith, *Blacks Who Stole Themselves: Advertisements for Runaways in the Pennsylvania Gazette, 1728-1790* (Philadelphia, PA 1989) 134 (Peter) 135-136 (Peg).

[10] For more on the black Loyalists, see S. Frey, *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton, NJ 1992); G. B. Nash, *The Unknown American Revolution: The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America* (New York, NY 2005); C. Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom: Runaway Slaves of the American Revolution and Their Global Quest for Liberty* (Boston, MA 2007); S. Schama, *Rough Crossings: The Slaves, the British, and the American Revolution* (New York, NY 2007); Jasanoff, *Liberty's Exiles*.

[11] For more on Loyalist slavery in the Canadian Maritimes, see H. Amani Whitfield, 'Black Loyalists and Black Slaves in Maritime Canada', *History Compass* 5.6 (2007) 1980-1997; H. Amani Whitfield, *North to Bondage: Loyalist Slavery in the Maritimes* (Vancouver, BC 2016).

[12] Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 228.

[13] The classic study of the abolition of slavery in the northern US is A. Zilversmit, *The First Emancipation: The Abolition of Slavery in the North* (Chicago, IL 1967). For more

Aside from Pennsylvania, the northern Mid-Atlantic states took much longer to formally abolish the institution of slavery. In New York, enslaved children born after July 4, 1799, would be entitled to their legal freedom upon turning twenty-eight if male and twenty-five if female. Those born before the law's enactment would remain enslaved, however. New Jersey's 1804 statute was similarly restrictive; enslaved men would be freed upon turning twenty-five, while enslaved women would be freed upon turning twenty-one. In 1817, New York formally declared that enslaved people born before the state's earlier gradual abolition law would be freed on July 4, 1827. As James J. Gigantino II has noted, however, New Jersey enslavers continued to hold African Americans in forms of bondage well into the Civil War era. Nonetheless, self-emancipators in the state continuously challenged the institution of slavery by escaping from their enslavers. [14] Elsewhere, the

on the gradual abolition of slavery in the North, see M. Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven, CT 2016) 65-69; J. Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and Race in New England, 1780-1860* (Ithaca, NY 1998) 64; Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 60-65; E. Planck, *Tyrannicide: Forging an American Law of Slavery in Revolutionary South Carolina and Massachusetts* (Athens, GA 2014) 118-127 (quote 119). For more on slavery and gradual abolition in Vermont, see H. A. Whitfield, *The Problem of Slavery in Early Vermont, 1777-1810: Essay and Primary Sources* (Barre, VT 2014). For more on gradual emancipation in Pennsylvania, see G. B. Nash and J. R. Soderlund, *Freedom By Degrees: Emancipation in Pennsylvania and Its Aftermath* (New York, NY 1991) 74-98. For more on the Quock Walker case and gradual emancipation in New England, see D. R. Egerton, *Death or Liberty: African Americans and Revolutionary America* (New York, NY 2009) 93-121; E. Blanck, 'Seventeen Eighty-Three: The Turning Point in the Law of Slavery and Freedom in Massachusetts', *New England Quarterly* 75.1 (2002) 24-51; C. Clark-Pujara, *Dark Work: The Business of Slavery in Rhode Island* (New York, NY 2016) 61-85. For other overviews of the first emancipation, see L. F. Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860* (Chicago, IL 1961) 3-15; D. Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (New York, NY 1999) 23-39; I. Berlin, *The Long Emancipation: The Demise of Slavery in the United States* (Cambridge, MA 2015); P. Rael, *Eighty-Eight Years: The Long Death of Slavery in the United States, 1777-1865* (Athens, GA 2015); Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 228-255; J. O. Horton and L. E. Horton, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860* (New York, NY 1997) 55-76; G. W. Van Cleve, *A Slaveholders' Union: Slavery, Politics, and the Constitution in the Early American Republic* (Chicago, IL 2010) 59-93.

[14] Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 76-85; Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery*, 47-71, 94. For more on gradual emancipation in New York and New Jersey, see S. White, *Somewhat More Independent: The End of Slavery in New York City, 1770-1810* (Athens, GA 1991) 24-55;

further introduction of enslaved people into the Northwest Territory was formally outlawed under Article VI of the Northwest Ordinance (1787). Later, in 1820, the Missouri Compromise outlawed black enslavement north of the 36°30′ parallel. Nevertheless, enslavers found ways to perpetuate forms of black bondage in the Old Northwest, namely through indentured servitude.[15]

Across the Canadian provinces, slavery was gradually abolished in a similar manner. Self-emancipators were the first and primary actors to challenge the institution of slavery in British North America. In December 1783, the *Nova Scotia Gazette and Weekly Chronicle* informed readers that 'a Negro Man named, DICK… about five feet eight Inches high Stout Made', absconded from his Loyalist enslaver, Benjamin Douglass. About one-and-a-half years later, the *Gazette* reported on the escape of 25-year-old John Gibson, 'alias JOHN BOOCHER', who 'had on when he went away a Green Coat and a small round hat' when he ran away. His enslaver warned 'all Masters of Vessels and others' that Gibson may try to sneak aboard a ship to effect his escape from the province'. Enslaved women also fled from their enslavers in the Canadian Maritimes. In October 1785, the *Gazette* printed an advertisement for 'a black NEGROE WENCH named PHILLIS, aged about 50 Years or upward,' who had 'a Stye on one Eye, and a Wart on her Nose'.[16]

Self-emancipators also challenged the institution of slavery in Upper Canada. On numerous occasions, this involved escaping from their Canadian

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E. Foner, *Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad* 37-46; D. Gellman, *Emancipating New York: The Politics of Slavery and Freedom, 1777-1827* (Baton Rouge, LA 2006) 153-186; P. Rael, 'The Long Death of Slavery in New York,' in: I. Berlin and L. Harris, ed., *Slavery in New York* (New York, NY 2005) 111-146; J. J. Gigantino, II, *The Ragged Road to Abolition: Slavery and Freedom in New Jersey, 1775-1865* (Philadelphia, PA 2015); J. J. Gigantino, II, '"The Whole North is Not Abolitionized": Slavery's Slow Death in New Jersey, 1830-1860', *Journal of the Early Republic* 34.3 (2014) 411-437.

[15] For more on slavery and freedom in the former Northwest Territory, see P. Finkelman, 'Slavery and the Northwest Ordinance: A Study in Ambiguity', *Journal of the Early Republic* 6.4 (1986); P. Finkelman, 'Evading the Ordinance: The Persistence of Bondage in Indiana and Illinois', *Journal of the Early Republic* 9.1 (1989) 21-51; C. Philips, *The Rivers Ran Backward: The Civil War and the Remaking of the American Middle Border* (New York, NY 2016) 21-43; M. Scott Heerman, 'In a State of Slavery: Black Servitude in Illinois, 1800-1830', *Early American Studies* 14.1 (2016) 114-139.

[16] Run away on the 27th Inst…', *Nova Scotia Gazette and Weekly Chronicle*, Dec. 9, 1783; 'Run away, a negro man', *Nova Scotia Gazette and Weekly Chronicle*, Jul. 19, 1785; 'Run away', *Nova Scotia Gazette and Weekly Chronicle*, Oct. 4, 1785.

enslavers to the United States. Freedom seekers in the Niagara borderland, for instance, fled across the river to Upstate New York. In July 1793, Thomas Butler of Niagara posted a notice in the *Upper Canada Gazette* for 'a NEGRO MAN servant named JOHN', who likely escaped across the Niagara River to western New York. The following year, Henry Lewis of Niagara-on-the-Lake escaped from William Jarvis, the Provincial Secretary of Upper Canada, to Schenectady, New York. In a letter, Lewis explained that he sought to support himself 'as [a] free man and enjoy all the benefits which may result from my being free in a country whear [sic] a Blackman [sic] is defended by the laws as much as a white man'.[17]

Farther west, the Detroit River was another transnational gateway for freedom seekers in Upper Canada. In 1807, a female freedom seeker fled from her enslaver in Sandwich and took refuge in neighbouring Detroit's black community. Her enslaver, John Woods, contacted jurist Solomon Sibley to reclaim the mother and child but was informed that there were no legal means of recovering them from Michigan. That same year, Loyalist James May of Sandwich reported the escape of his enslaved man named Nobbins to Detroit. May believed that Nobbins had escaped because he was 'apprehensive that that I would whip him' if he returned to his enslaver. Before crossing the river, the freedom seeker was reportedly seen near the home of John Askin, a prominent fur trader in the region. May requested that he 'keep a good look out for him and prevent him if possible from crossing over on this side of the River'. About six years after Nobbins' escape, one of Askins' enslaved women named Madeline also fled across the Detroit River to Michigan. Similarly, Matthew Elliot, a Loyalist enslaver at Amherstburg, reported the escape of eight self-emancipators who fled across the river to Michigan.[18]

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[17] 'Five dollars reward', *Upper Canada Gazette*, Jul. 4, 1793; 'Letter from Henry Lewis to his master, William Jarvis', *TPL Virtual Exhibitions*, http://omeka.tplcs.ca/virtual-exhibits/exhibits/show/freedom-city/item/195, accessed Jun. 10, 2020. For more on self-emancipation in Upper Canada, see A. Cooper, 'Acts of Resistance: Black Men and Women Engage Slavery in Upper Canada, 1793-1803', *Ontario History* 99.1 (2007) 5-17.

[18] G. Wigmore, 'Before the Railroad: From Slavery to Freedom in the Canadian-American Borderland', *Journal of American History* 98.2 (2011) 437-454; D. M. Katzman, 'Black Slavery in Michigan', *Midcontinent American Studies Journal* 11.2 (1979) 62; J. May to J. Askin, Aug. 2, 1807, and J. Askin to J. B. Askin. Oct. 26, 1813, in: Milo M. Quaife ed., *The John Askin Papers, vol. II: 1796-1820* (Detroit 1831) 561-563, 762; BHC, Detroit Public Library. Detroit, MI. For more on the Detroit River

Canadian politicians, lawmakers and judges also set about abolishing black enslavement through legislation and court rulings. In 1793, Upper Canada became the first to enact a gradual emancipation statute. The provincial government passed the gradual emancipation statute in direct response to the sale of Chloe Cooley, an enslaved woman in Queenston. Cooley was sold to a New York enslaver and forcibly removed across the Niagara River by her Loyalist enslaver, Adam Vrooman. Peter Martin, a free black man and former member of Butler's Rangers, relayed the news of Cooley's abduction to Lieutenant-Governor John Graves Simcoe. Anti-slavery advocates in the province, including Simcoe, pushed for an act to gradually abolish black enslavement within the province.[19]

Slavery was also gradually abolished in the Maritimes and Lower Canada. In 1798, Chief Justice Joseph Monk in Montreal ordered the release of two black self-emancipators named Charlotte and Jude. Under Canadian law, enslaved people could only be detained in 'houses of correction, not common jails'. As none existed, Monk felt compelled to release the two freedom seekers and warned other enslavers that he would rule the same way in future cases. This ruling effectively made it impossible for local enslavers to recapture escaped freedom seekers.[20]

In Nova Scotia, Chief Justices Thomas Strange and Sampson Blowers challenged black enslavement in the province by placing the burden of proof upon white claimants, who often did not possess evidence of legal ownership.

borderland's early history as an ambiguous frontier, see G. Wigmore, 'Gregory Wigmore: The Canadian Slave Trade,' *NationalPost.com*, Oct. 21, 2013. https://nationalpost.com/opinion/gregory-wigmore-the-canadian-slave-trade, accessed Jan. 2, 2019; T. Miles, *The Dawn of Detroit: A Chronicle of Slavery and Freedom in the City of the Straits* (New York, NY 2017); V. S. Tucker, 'Uncertain Freedom in Frontier Detroit' in: K. Smardz Frost and V. S. Tucker ed., *A Fluid Frontier: Slavery, Resistance, and the Underground Railroad in the Detroit River Borderland* (Detroit, MI 2016) 27-42.

[19] Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*, 96-98; Natasha L. Henry, 'Chloe Cooley and the Act to Limit Slavery in Upper Canada', *TheCanadianEncyclopedia.ca*, Oct. 30, 2013. https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/chloe-cooley-and-the-act-to-limit-slavery-in-upper-canada, accessed Jan. 6, 2019. For further discussion on the Chloe Cooley case and the gradual abolition of slavery in Upper Canada, see Cooper, 'Acts of Resistance'; M. Power and N. Butler, *Slavery and Freedom in Niagara* (Niagara-on-the-Lake, ON 1993) 9-36; A. P. Stouffer, *The Light of Nature and the Law of God: Antislavery in Ontario, 1833-1877* (Montreal, QC 1992) 7-18.

[20] Mackey, *Done with Slavery*, 47-49.

Following this, enslaved people across the province felt emboldened to self-emancipate and abscond from their enslavers. In New Brunswick, an enslaved woman named Nancy petitioned for a writ of *habeas corpus* for herself and her son. Although the court initially ruled against her, it eventually issued a writ fourteen years later. During this time, enslavers in the province found it increasingly difficult to manage and control enslaved people.[21]

Canadian anti-slavery politics was met with some forms of resistance, however. Loyalist enslavers in the Maritimes tried unsuccessfully to prevent the gradual abolition of slavery. In August 1803, James DeLancey of Round Hill, Annapolis County, sued Halifax merchant William Woodin for harbouring one of his enslaved people named Jack. Alarmed by this growing trend, Loyalist enslavers sought further protections from the provincial government. In December 1807, twenty-seven enslavers at Annapolis, Nova Scotia, petitioned the legislature to ensure that their right to hold 'property in Negroes was maintained, and acknowledged, if not encouraged'. However, the Nova Scotia Assembly rejected these attempts out of hand.[22]

During the early nineteenth century, Canada's reputation as a beacon of liberty for African-descended people was further enhanced. During the

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[21] N. L. Henry, 'Black Enslavement in Canada', *TheCanadianEncyclopedia.ca*, Jun. 16, 2016. https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/black-enslavement, accessed Jan. 6, 2019; For key readings on the gradual abolition of slavery in the Canadian Maritimes, see D. G. Bell, J. Barry Cahill, and H. Amani Whitfield, 'Slavery and Slave Law in the Maritimes' in: B. Walker ed., *The African Canadian Legal Odyssey: Historical Essays* (Toronto, ON 2012) 363-420; B. Cahill, 'Slavery and the Judges of Loyalist Nova Scotia,' *University of New Brunswick Law Journal* 43 (1994) 73-136; B. Cahill, 'Habeas Corpus and Slavery in Nova Scotia: *R. v. Hecht, ex parte Rachel*, 1798', *University of New Brunswick Law Journal* 44 (1995) 179-209; D. G. Bell, 'Slavery and the Judges of Loyalist New Brunswick', *University of New Brunswick Law Journal* 31 (1982) 9-42; H. Amani Whitfield, 'The Struggle over Slavery in the Maritime Colonies', *Acadiensis* 41.2 (2012) 17-44; K. Donovan, 'Slavery and Freedom in Atlantic Canada's African Diaspora', *Acadiensis* 43.1 (2014) 109-115; Whitfield, *North to Bondage*, 85-109.
[22] '*DeLancey v. Woodin* (plaintiff's statement of claim against the defendant for harbouring 'Jack,' a fugitive slave,' Supreme Court of Nova Scotia – Annapolis County case files, RG 39 C (AP), vol. 1, file 2. NSA, https://novascotia.ca/archives/africanns/archives.asp?ID=63, accessed Apr. 15, 2020; 'Petition of John Taylor and Others,' Nova Scotia House of Assembly, RG 5, Series A, vol. 14 no. 49 (microfilm no. 15591). NSA, https://novascotia.ca/archives/africanns/archives.asp?ID=64, accessed Apr. 15, 2020.

War of 1812, the British once again promised formal freedom and asylum to enslaved people that fled to their lines. As with the black Loyalists, thousands of slave refugees emigrated from the United States to the Canadian Maritimes after the war.[23] In 1819, Upper Canada's Attorney General John Beverly Robinson declared that freedom seekers from the United States were entitled to their formal liberty by virtue of having resided in the province. By this stage, the institution of black enslavement was in serious decline in Canada. In 1824, a fifteen-year-old enslaved man named Tom was sold by his enslaver, Eli Keeler of Colborne to William Bell of present-day Belleville. Nine years later, in 1833, the UK Parliament enacted the Slavery Abolition Act, which formally outlawed the enslavement of African and African-descended people throughout the British Empire as of August 1, 1834.[24]

The Second Slavery and Interregional Slave Trade in the US South

The American Revolution not only impacted slavery in the northern US and Canada; it also had a noticeable effect in the US South. Beginning in the early 1780s, laws regulating the manumission of enslaved African Americans were relaxed. Various factors contributed to this development. Most notably, Upper South planters moved away from tobacco to mixed-crop production. Farmers increasingly found that the quality and quantity of their tobacco yields had declined significantly. As a result, they became less reliant on enslaved labour. Hired free black labour proved significantly more cost-effective for Upper South planters and farmers. In 1782, Virginia's General Assembly enacted 'An Act to Authorise the Manumission of Slaves', which permitted enslavers to free enslaved people through their last will and testaments, or other verified documentation. Other southern states approved similar manumission measures over subsequent years. For a brief moment,

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[23] For more on slave refugees during the War of 1812, see A. Taylor, *The Internal Enemy: Slavery and War in Virginia, 1772-1832* (New York NY 2013); G. Allen Smith, *The Slave's Gamble: Choosing Sides in the War of 1812* (New York, NY 2013).

[24] B. Prince, 'The Illusion of Safety: Attempts to Extradite Fugitive Slaves from Canada' in: Smardz Frost and Tucker ed., *A Fluid Frontier*, 68; Henry, 'Black Enslavement in Canada'; G. Hendrick and W. Hendrick, *Black Refugees in Canada: Accounts of Escape During the Era of Slavery* (Jefferson, NC 2010) 11.

manumission represented a glimmer of hope for enslaved African Americans in the South.[25]

Over the coming decades, however, public opinion had shifted against manumission reform. This was partly due to growing fears of enslaved rebellions among southern whites. The Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) raised concerns about similar uprisings in the South. In 1800, these suspicions were seemingly confirmed when word of a planned revolt in Richmond, Virginia (led by Gabriel Prosser) began to circulate throughout the region. Prosser and others were subsequently captured and hanged, an act which was meant to deter other enslaved people from following their example. Furthermore, legally free African Americans were also increasingly unwelcome in the South. George Van Cleve writes that Upper South enslavers 'firmly believed that the existence of a significant number of free blacks in a slave state increased the possibility of rebellion and other social costs such as crime and flight, and non-slaveowners shared these beliefs'. In response, southern state governments acted quickly to make manumission more difficult and increased measures to expel free African Americans.[26]

More significantly, the institution of slavery expanded rapidly across the US South. The invention of the cotton gin in 1794, combined with westward and southwestern migration, led to the development of cotton plantations across the Lower South and Southwest. Sugar production in Louisiana also contributed to this expansion. Increased demand for enslaved labour also stemmed from the US Congress' ban on the Atlantic slave trade in 1808. Consequently, Lower South and Southwestern enslavers were compelled to purchase enslaved labour elsewhere. With the ban on the Atlantic slave trade, the price of enslaved African Americans rose sharply. Enslavers in the Upper South realised that enslaved people were their most lucrative asset. Dale Tomich dubbed the expansion of slavery to the Lower South and Southwest (as well as elsewhere in the Americas) as the 'second slavery'.[27] The rapid expansion of cotton cultivation in the Lower South and

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[25] Van Cleve, *A Slaveholder's Union*, 93-97; J. P. Kaminski ed., *A Necessary Evil? Slavery and the Debate Over the Constitution* (Madison, WI 1995) 15.

[26] Van Cleve, *A Slaveholder's Union*, 97-99 (quote on pg.97). For more on Gabriel Prosser, see D. R. Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802* (Chapel Hill, NC 1994).

[27] D. A. Pargas, *Slavery and Forced Migration in the Antebellum South* (New York, NY 2015) 21-22. For more on the rapid expansion of cotton and sugar production in the southern and southwestern US, and black enslavement, in the Lower South, see A.

Southwest transformed the global market. Sven Beckert notes that 'Exports to Great Britain increased by a factor of ninety-three between 1791 and 1800, only to multiply another seven times by 1820'.[28]

The ramifications of the new interregional trade for enslaved people were truly terrifying, however. Numerous historians have documented the devastating impact of the second slavery on African American families in the South. Steven Deyle estimates that over one million enslaved people were forcibly transported to the Lower South, 'approximately two-thirds of whom arrived there as a result of sale'. Men, women, and children were sold indiscriminately, forced to march overland in coffles and chain gangs for weeks (if not longer), or transported as 'cargo' via carriages and riverboats. A prominent maritime trade in enslaved people emerged along the Atlantic seaboard. Baltimore, Richmond, Wilmington and Charleston became major hubs for the coastal trade. Farther inland, the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers became one of the quickest means of forcibly transporting enslaved people to Natchez, New Orleans and elsewhere.[29] Over the nineteenth century, the

Rothman, *Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South* (Cambridge, MA 2005); R. Follet, *The Sugar Masters: Planters and Slaves in Louisiana's Cane World, 1820-1860* (Baton Rouge, LA 2005); E. Baptist, *This Half has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York, NY 2014); A. J. Torget, *Seeds of Empire: Cotton, Slavery, and the Transformation of the Texas Borderlands, 1800-1850* (Chapel Hill, NC 2015). For more on the second slavery, see D. W. Tomich, *Through the Prism of Slavery: Labor, Capital, and World Economy* (Lanham, MD 2004), Ch. 3; A. E. Kaye, 'The Second Slavery: Modernity in the Nineteenth-Century South and the Atlantic World', *Journal of Southern History* 75.3 (2009) 627-650.

[28] S. Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York, NY 2015) 104.

[29] S. Deyle, *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life* (New York, NY 2005) 4. The historiography of the interregional slave trade has grown significantly in recent decades. See M. Tadman, *Speculators and Slave Masters: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South* (Madison, WI 1989); W. Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA 1999); R. H. Gudmestad, *A Troublesome Commerce: The Transformation of the Interstate Slave Trade* (Baton Rouge, LA 2003); W. Johnson ed., *The Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Trades in the Americas* (New Haven, CT 2004); I. Berlin, *The Making of African America: The Four Great Migrations* (New York, NY 2010) 99-151; D. L. Lightner, *Slavery and the Commerce Power: How the Struggle Against the Interstate Slave Trade Led to the Civil War* (New Haven, CT 2006); W. Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA 2013); C. Schermerhorn, *The Business of Slavery and the Rise of American Capitalism, 1815-1860* (New Haven, CT 2015). Some studies do not focus solely on the interregional slave trade but devote extensive time to its impact on enslaved families. See W. Dunaway, *The African-American Family*

enslaved populations of the Lower South and Southwest grew dramatically. Between 1800 and 1850, for example, the number of enslaved people in Georgia rose from approximately 35,000 to 500,000. Countless families were torn apart by sale and forced migration; children were stripped from parents, and husbands from wives. As enslaved families were unrecognised by law, victims of sale had no rights or legal protections. Wilma King argues that the forced separation of families was the worst aspect of slavery. In essence, nobody was safe.[30]

Slavery was a brutal institution across the South. Its physical, emotional and psychological traumas were intended to dehumanise enslaved people. Orlando Patterson described it as a form of social death.[31] Formerly enslaved men and women recalled their first-hand experiences with slavery's horrors in speeches, memoirs, and other writings. James Adams, a freedom seeker from Virginia, recalled, 'I have seen separations by sales, of husbands from wives, of parents from children – if a man threatens to run away, he is sure to be sold'. Similarly, Leonard Harrod recounted, 'I was taken from my wife suddenly; she knew no more where I had gone than the hen knows where the hawk carries her chicken. Fifteen hundred miles I wore iron on my wrist, chained in a gang from Georgetown to Port Gibson [Mississippi]. There I was sold and put to receive and pack cotton, etc., for six years. Then I was sold to Nashville [Tennessee], one year; then to New Orleans fifteen years'.[32]

Enslaved African Americans resisted their enslavement in numerous ways, but only a minority attempted to permanently escape from bondage. For most, self-emancipation was predicated on a combination of long-term and immediate threats to their security. The motivations behind escape, which I frame as 'tipping points', will be explored in the following section.

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in Slavery and Emancipation (Cambridge, UK 2003); Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 161-244; J. D. Martin, *Divided Mastery: Slave Hiring in the American South* (Cambridge, MA 2004) 34-43.

[30] A. Delbanco, *The War Before the War: Fugitive Slaves and the Struggle for America's Soul from the Revolution to the Civil War* (New York, NY 2018) 28-30; W. King, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington, IN 2011; first edition 1995) 32.

[31] O. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA 1982).

[32] B. 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, MA 1856) 28 (Adams quote), 339-340 (Harrod quote), https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/drew/drew.html, accessed May 21, 2020.

Most slave refugees remained within the southern states, taking refuge among free black communities in cities like Baltimore, Richmond and Charleston. Others in the Lower South and Southwest sought asylum in Mexico. [33] Meanwhile, tens of thousands (especially from the Upper South) looked northward to the northern states and Canada. For freedom-seeking men and women, these "free soil" territories offered the best hope of permanent liberty. At the same time, this was far easier said than done. As John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger write in their book *Runaway Slaves*, the 'dream of freedom in the North or Canada – the so-called Promised Land – went unfulfilled for the vast majority of runaways'.[34]

Tipping Points: The Motivations, Profiles and Escape Strategies of Slave Refugees

The motivations, profiles and strategies of slave refugees certainly varied over time and space, but it is possible to draw general conclusions from available sources. Immediate concerns normally prompted enslaved African Americans to flee from their enslavers, most notably the death of their enslaver, the threat of sale or forced separation, and the threat of brutal punishment. Self-emancipation was highly dangerous, as the prospect of recapture came with the added threats of beatings, whippings and sale to the Lower South. Nevertheless, thousands of freedom seekers willingly took the risk. Yet slave refugees not only focused on escaping 'to' the North and Canada, but also on escaping 'from' the South. In this regard, several factors compelled enslaved men, women and children to escape.

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[33] For more on slave refugees in the US South, see D. A. Pargas, 'Urban Refugees: Fugitive Slaves and Spaces of Informal Freedom in the American South', 3.7 (2017) 262-284; V. F. Müller, 'Illegal but Tolerated: Slave Refugees in Richmond, Virginia' in: Pargas, *Fugitive Slaves* 137-167. For slave refugees in Mexico, see M. Audain, '"Design His Course to Mexico": The Fugitive Slave Experience in the Texas-Mexico Borderlands, 1850-1853' in: Pargas, *Fugitive Slaves* 232-250.

[34] J. Hope Franklin and L. Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (New York, NY 1999) 116. Escaping to 'free soil' became an increasingly important goal for self-emancipators over the nineteenth century. For more on this concept, see R. S. Newman, '"Lucky to be born in Pennsylvania": Free Soil, Fugitive Slaves and the Making of Pennsylvania's Anti-Slavery Borderland', *Slavery & Abolition* 3.32 (2011) 411-430.

The threat of sale and forced separation from loved ones was among the primary motivations behind self-emancipation. As mentioned previously, the local and interregional slave trades posed an enormous threat to enslaved communities. Additionally, the death of an enslaver was a distressing time for enslaved communities. In this scenario, enslaved people were often distributed among heirs or put up for sale. Isaac Williams, a self-emancipator from Virginia, recalled being sold and separated from his family following the death of his enslaver. 'When my first master died', he wrote, 'his widow married a man who got into debt and was put into prison. The woman gave up her rights to get him out. Then we were sold. Every man came to be sold for her lifetime – then to revert to the heirs. The heirs bought in all they could – among them my two sisters. They were sent straight to a slave-pen in Richmond'. Williams never learned of where his sisters were taken afterwards; he only recalled, 'we could not help it – they went off crying'. Ten years later, Williams escaped to Upper Canada.[35]

Other freedom seekers fled in response to brutal treatment and cruel punishment. Franklin and Schweninger write that enslaved people 'were beaten, chained, incarcerated, ironed, and whipped; and they watched as their wives, husbands, mothers, fathers, and children, and relatives were flogged'.[36] Self-emancipated refugees often recounted the brutal treatment that they suffered at the hands of their enslavers. James Adams, who escaped from Virginia, recalled, 'At the age of seventeen, I set out to seek freedom in company with Benjamin Harris (who was a cousin of mine) and a woman and four children… I had seen older men treated worse than a horse or a hog ought to be treated; so, seeing what I was coming to, I wished to get away'. Dan Josiah Lockhart, who escaped from Frederick County, Virginia, also recalled a horrifying incident involving his enslaver. He claimed, 'I lived with my new master three years and two months. Then he whipped my wife and children… I could not stand this abuse of them, and so I made up my mind to leave'. In 1847, he fled to Pittsburgh in western Pennsylvania and later travelled to Upper Canada. 'The hardest thing in slavery is not the work', recounted Lockhart; 'it is the abuse of a man, and, in my case, of a man's wife and children'.[37]

Meanwhile, others were motivated primarily by a long-term desire for freedom. From a young age, enslaved people understood that they were

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[35] Drew, *North-Side View of Slavery*, 54-55.
[36] Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 42.
[37] Drew, *North-Side View of Slavery*, 46-50.

deprived of the same liberty as others. Across the South, enslaved men, women and children were forced to work without pay, were physically beaten, sexually assaulted, and separated from their families with relative ease. Most hoped to obtain their permanent freedom, and some were willing to attempt escaping from bondage. James Curry, who escaped from North Carolina, recalled in his memoir, 'From my childhood, the desire for freedom reigned predominant in my breast, until I resolved, if I was ever whipped after I became a man, I would no longer be a slave'.[38]

When considering the profiles of freedom seekers, it is clear that young men were able to escape more than any other group. This was largely due to the greater degree of movement afforded enslaved men by their enslavers. Enslaved men were often hired out by their enslavers, which afforded them greater mobility and improved knowledge of their surroundings. Hired-out men were able to work alongside enslaved and free African Americans and expand their social networks.[39] Sailors and boat workers enjoyed the most mobility of hired out enslaved people. In the Chesapeake and Tidewater Virginia, for instance, enslaved men often worked aboard ships, schooners, rafts, and other vessels. Similarly, enslaved men worked on steamboats and smaller vessels on the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. Boatmen, writes Thomas C. Buchanan, became 'heroic figures in the slave community'.[40]

Enslaved women possessed fewer opportunities to escape from bondage – a fact reflected by the lower proportion of female freedom seekers from each state. In Virginia, for example, African American women comprised less than one-tenth of self-emancipators between 1838 and 1860. Similarly, freedom-seeking women from Tennessee only accounted for twelve percent of all reported escapes, while in North Carolina they represented only fourteen percent of all cases. Deborah Gray White notes

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[38] J. Curry, *Narrative of James Curry, A Fugitive Slave* (Originally printed in the *Liberator*, Jan. 10, 1840), https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/curry/curry.html, accessed September 1, 2019.
[39] For more on enslaved hiring in the antebellum South, see J. D. Martin, *Divided Mastery: Slave Hiring in the American South* (Cambridge, MA 2004); J. J. Zarboney, *Slaves for Hire: Renting Enslaved Laborers in Antebellum Virginia* (Baton Rouge, LA 2012).
[40] T. C. Buchanan, *Black Life on the Mississippi: Slaves, Free Blacks, and the Western Steamboat World* Chapel Hill, NC 2004) 10. For more on black watermen and sailors, see D. S. Cecelski, *The Waterman's Song: Slavery and Freedom in Maritime North Carolina* (Chapel Hill, NC 2001).

that 'the responsibilities of childbearing and child care seriously circumscribed the female slave's life… women tended to be more concerned with the welfare of children, and this limited their mobility'. Moreover, the practical difficulties of escaping with young children deterred prospective freedom seekers from seeking permanent liberty in free-soil spaces. Stephanie Camp contends that enslaved women possessed 'a relative lack of knowledge of the geography beyond the plantation'.[41]

Family escapes were less common given the logistical and practical difficulties of traveling in groups and with women, young children, and elderly enslaved people. Indeed, escaping in family units proved difficult from the outset because enslaved families were often divided over various farmsteads. According to Emily West, abroad partnerships (i.e. husbands and wives living on different farmsteads) comprised approximately one-third of all enslaved unions in South Carolina. Across the Upper South, abroad unions and families were also commonplace. Indeed, the prevalence of enslaved hiring raised the prospect of family members living on separate farmsteads. Diane Mutti Burke notes that abroad partnerships 'were by far the norm' in Missouri.[42] Nevertheless, despite the logistical challenges, freedom-seeking families attempted to escape together. In some instances, husbands reunited with wives on neighbouring farms before making their escape. Other cases illustrate that parents escaped with their children, and that even extended families tried to run away together.

The most common freedom networks ran from the Upper South through the Mason-Dixon borderland, the Ohio River borderland and the Mississippi River borderland. During the antebellum period, growing numbers of slave refugees from Maryland, Virginia, Kentucky, Missouri and elsewhere made their way northward via these regions.[43] Slave refugees

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[41] Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 212-213; D. Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York, NY 1987) 70-71; S. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill, NC 2004) 36-38. For more on the gendered dynamics of self-emancipation, see M. Johnson, 'Runaway Slaves and the Slave Communities in South Carolina, 1799 to 1830', *William and Mary Quarterly* 38.3 (1981) 418-441.

[42] E. West, *Chains of Love: Slave Couples in Antebellum South Carolina* (Urbana, IL 2004) 44; D. Mutti Burke, *On Slavery's Border: Missouri's Small Slaveholding Households, 1815-1865*, (Athens, GA 2010) 200.

[43] For more on slave refugees in the Mason-Dixon borderland, see D. G. Smith, *On the Edge of Freedom: The Fugitive Slave Issue in South Central Pennsylvania, 1820-1870* (New York, NY 2012); and M. Grivno, *Gleanings of Freedom: Free and Slave Labor along the*

usually avoided seeking assistance from white Northerners. Rather, freedom seekers usually sought refuge among rural and urban African American communities across the northern states. Legally free people of colour and other self-emancipated refugees provided newcomers with food, water, shelter and transportation.[44]

Meanwhile, cities like New York, Philadelphia and Cincinnati became home to sizeable African American communities. In various locales, black activists and white abolitionists also assisted slave refugees. These interracial networks, known as the Underground Railroad, aided thousands of slave refugees from the South each year. Activists like William Still in Philadelphia, or David Ruggles and Sydney Howard Gay in New York City, managed vigilance committees, anti-slavery organisations and freedom networks protected freedom seekers and aided them on their journeys.[45]

Slave refugees employed an array of strategies to escape from the South. Passing for legally free African Americans was the most common escape strategy. In 1801, the Baltimore *American and Daily Advertiser* published an advertisement for 'a negro lad named JIM', who purportedly 'passed for a freeman' during his escape.[46] Others procured forged freedom papers and passes during their escapes. In 1816, the *Western Sun* published an advertisement for a self-emancipator named David, who had escaped from neighbouring Kentucky. It claimed that he 'can read and write, and has in all probability written himself a pass'.[47]

Mason-Dixon Line, 1790-1860 (Champaign, IL 2011). For slave refugees in the Ohio River borderland, see M. Salafia, 'Searching for Slavery: Fugitive Slaves in the Ohio River Valley Borderland, 1830-1860', *Ohio Valley History* 8.4 (2008) 38-63. Many other readings address slave refugees in each of these regions.

[44] For more on free African American communities in the northern states, see C. Janifer LaRoche, *Free Black Communities and the Underground Railroad* (Urbana, IL 2013).
[45] For key readings on the Underground Railroad, see W. H. Siebert, *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom* (New York, NY 1898); L. Gara, *The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad* (Lexington, KY 1961); K. Griffler, *Front Line of Freedom: African Americans and the Forging of the Underground Railroad in Ohio Valley* (Lexington, KY 2004); F. M. Bordewich, *Bound for Canaan: The Epic Story of the Underground Railroad, America's First Civil Rights Movement* (New York, NY 2005); R. M. Blackett, *Making Freedom: The Underground Railroad and the Politics of Slavery* (Chapel Hill, NC 2013); E. Foner, *Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad* (New York, NY 2015).
[46] 'Ten Dollars Reward', *American and Daily Advertiser* (Baltimore, MD), Jan. 17, 1801.
[47] '100 dollars reward' *Western Sun* (Vincennes, IN), Jul. 13, 1816.

Furthermore, freedom seekers often changed their names, clothing and physical features to conceal their identities. One freedom seeker from Tennessee named Carry reportedly 'changed his name to BUCK, and will change it as often as he changes his situation'. Meanwhile, another notice in the *Western Sun & General Advertiser* claimed that another self-emancipator named Mack 'had a pass, and called himself AARON; he will probably also change his name again, and endeavour to get to a free state, by means of some pass improperly obtained'.[48]

Slave refugees fully understood that northward escape offered the greatest prospect of securing permanent liberty.[49] Yet, for those who remained in the northern US, the threat of re-enslavement was real. Southern enslavers, slave catchers and kidnappers regularly roamed the "free" states in search of self-emancipated refugees and legally free African Americans. Under federal law, namely the Fugitive Slave Acts of 1793 and 1850, enslavers were permitted to recapture freedom seekers across the North. In response, African Americans and white abolitionists resisted these efforts via legal and extra-legal methods.[50]

Despite this, many self-emancipators spoke highly of the North and Canada. Jacob Green, a freedom seeker from Kentucky, recalled in his narrative, 'I heard so much about the free States of the north that I was

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[48] '300 dollars reward', *Western Sun*, Jul. 13, 1816; '$50 reward', *Western Sun & General Advertiser*, Jun. 30, 1832.

[49] M. Pinsker has recently argued that slave refugees were 'at least ten times likelier to succeed than fail if they just made it across the Mason-Dixon line or the Ohio River during the years immediately before the Civil War'. See M. Pinsker, 'After 1850: Reassessing the Impact of the Fugitive Slave Law' in: Pargas, *Fugitive Slaves*, 109.

[50] For more on the threat of re-enslavement and northern resistance, see S. W. Campbell, *The Slave Catchers: Enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, 1850-1860* (Chapel Hill, NC 1970); S. Lubet, *Fugitive Justice: Runaways, Rescuers, and Slavery on Trial* (Cambridge, MA 2010); J. Daniel Wells, *Blind No More: African American Resistance, Free-Soil Politics, and the Coming of the Civil War* (Athens, GA 2019); R. H. Churchill, *The Underground Railroad and the Geography of Violence in Antebellum America* (Cambridge, UK 2020). Slave refugees in Canada enjoyed much greater security from re-enslavement. The British and Canadian governments generally refused to extradite self-emancipators to the United States. However, that is not to say that southern enslavers and governors made no efforts to extradite self-emancipators from British North America. For key readings, see A. L. Murray, 'The Extradition of Fugitive Slaves from Canada: A Re-evaluation', *Canadian Historical Review* 43.4 (1962) 298-314; Prince, 'The Illusion of Safety', 67-80.

determined to be free'.[51] Others believed that only Canada offered true liberty. Beyond the jurisdiction of US federal law, slave refugees that escaped to Canada enjoyed much greater security from re-enslavement. After escaping to Upper Canada, Henry Bibb, a self-emancipator from Kentucky, wrote, 'I had heard Canada was a land of liberty, somewhere in the North; and every wave of trouble that rolled across my breast, caused me to think more and more about Canada, and liberty'.[52]

In short, slave refugees overcame a mixture of environmental, logistical, and physical challenges to reach the northern states and Canada. In memoirs and interviews, many recalled the array of difficulties which they encountered on their journeys. William Johnson recalled, 'My feet were frostbitten on my way North, but I would rather have died than to go back'.[53] On foot, by horseback, or aboard steamboats and ships, freedom seekers took various routes and were aided by a range of actors. Over the antebellum era, tens of thousands of freedom seekers managed to reach the northern US and Canada.[57] Across both regions, self-emancipators were confronted by poverty, racial discrimination, and (perhaps worst of all) the threat of re-enslavement. Nonetheless, life in the North and Canada remained immeasurably preferable to southern slavery.[58]

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[51] J. D. Green, *Narrative of the Life of J. D. Green, a Runaway Slave, from Kentucky, Containing an Account of His Three Escapes, in 1839, 1846, and 1848* (Huddersfield, UK 1864), 8, https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/greenjd/greenjd.html, accessed September 1, 2019.

[52] H. Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself* New York, NY 1849), 28-29, https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/bibb/bibb.html, accessed June 16, 2020.

[53] Drew, *North-Side View of Slavery*, 29.

[57] The exact number of freedom seekers that escaped to the North and Canada will never truly be known, given the need for secrecy and lack of historical records. It is generally accepted that most slave refugees remained in the northern US, despite the added risks. Over time, the estimate for refugees in Upper Canada has varied dramatically, ranging from approximately 15,000 to 75,000. For more on the subject, see M. Wayne, 'The Black Population of Canada West on the Eve of the American Civil War: A Reassessment Based on the Manuscript Census of 1861', *Histoire Sociale/Social History* 28.56 (1995) 465-499.

[58] For more on the realities of life in Upper Canada, see Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*; Silverman, *Unwelcome Guests*; G. S. Barker, 'Revisiting "British Principle Talk": Antebellum Black Expectations and Racism in Early Ontario' in: Pargas, *Fugitive Slaves*, 34-69.

Conclusion

The geopolitical landscape of slavery and freedom in North America underwent dramatic transformations between the American Revolutionary War and US Civil War (roughly 1775-1861). Before this, black enslavement was legally practiced across the continent. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, however, slavery was gradually abolished in the northern US and Canadian provinces. At the same time, the institution of slavery became entrenched across the US South. The shifting landscape of freedom impacted the nature of slave refugee migrations in North America. As slavery was gradually abolished in the northern states and Canadian provinces, self-emancipators fled to new spaces of freedom in each region. As black enslavement was increasingly confined to the South, the traffic of slave refugees escaping to the northern states and Canada increased exponentially. Numerous factors compelled enslaved men and women to escape from southern slavery. Most notably, the threat of sale and forced separation, brutal treatment, and a lifelong yearning to be free convinced many (especially those in the Upper South) to seek liberty in the North and Canada. While men were most likely to escape, women and children also fled northward. Indeed, freedom-seeking families also risked everything to escape from the South.