

The Politics of Correspondence:  
Letter Writing in the Campaign Against Slavery in the United States

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## ABSTRACT

### The Politics of Correspondence: Letter Writing in the Campaign Against Slavery in the United States

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The abolitionists were a community of wordsmiths whose political movement took shape in a sea of printed and handwritten words. These words enabled opponents of slavery in the nineteenth-century United States to exert political power, even though many of them were excluded from mainstream politics. Women and most African Americans could not vote, and they faced violent reprisals for speaking publicly. White men involved in the antislavery cause frequently spurned party politics, using writing as a key site of political engagement. Reading and writing allowed people from different backgrounds to see themselves as part of a political collective against slavery. “The Politics of Correspondence” examines how abolitionists harnessed the power of the written word to further their political aims, arguing that letter writing enabled a disparate and politically marginal assortment of people to take shape as a coherent and powerful movement.

“The Politics of Correspondence” expands the definition of politics, demonstrating that private correspondence, not just public action, can be a significant form of political participation. The antislavery movement’s body of shared political ideas and principles emerged out of contest and debate carried on largely through the exchange of letters. People on the political fringes and disfranchised persons, especially African Americans and women, harnessed the medium of letters to assert themselves as legitimate political agents, claiming entitlements hitherto denied them. In doing so, they contested the presumed boundaries of the body politic and played key

roles in advancing demands for immediate emancipation, civil rights, and equality to the forefront of national political discussions. “The Politics of Correspondence” argues that correspondence was a flexible medium that abolitionists used throughout this period in efforts to both shape and respond to the changing conditions of national politics.

A vast and dispersed archive documents the antislavery movement and serves as the basis of research for the dissertation. Scholars of antislavery have used the extensive manuscript collections of prominent abolitionists and print archives of antislavery newspapers, pamphlets, and circulars to investigate the movement’s ideas and organization. But this is the first project to focus on letter writing itself and its role in the movement. Rather than view letters as transparent windows into the past, “The Politics of Correspondence” examines them as tools that ordinary people and unexpected political agents used to advance the antislavery cause. Abolitionists relied upon conventions associated with handwritten letters, which they creatively manipulated to achieve political ends. Writing a letter was an act of composition that involved self-reflection, imagined discussion, and staking a claim to one’s beliefs. Correspondents drew upon shared cultural understandings, ranging from the anonymity of the postal system to the sense of physical intimacy associated with handwritten letters. They inventively employed these understandings to make political statements that simultaneously relied upon and subverted letter-writing conventions.



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The seeds for this project, and for my academic career in American history, were planted when I was an undergraduate at Williams College. There I was lucky enough to find a work study job at the Chapin Library of Rare Books, where Bob Volz, Wayne Hammond, and Elaine Yanow fostered my interest in archival research. Charles Dew taught the first class I took on

American slavery and advised my senior thesis, which emerged from my work at the Chapin Library. He instilled in me the importance of curiosity, good writing, and, above all, humanity, when grappling with history.

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### **Introduction: “I take the liberty to write to you...”**

An unfamiliar name and signature surfaced, one dreary March afternoon, amid the names of well-known abolitionists in the enormous Anti-Slavery Collection of the Boston Public Library. Writing from Portland, Maine, Reuben Ruby addressed the prominent Boston abolitionist, Amos A. Phelps, then acting as editor of *The Emancipator*, an antislavery newspaper based in New York. The letter, dated September 29, 1836, appears to have been written in haste, with the ink smudged in several places and words crossed out, as though its author had not had time to write out a clean final copy before addressing an urgent request to Phelps:

Dear Sir,

I take the liberty to write to you to Request you To go or send to the jayl  
and see a man by the Name of Jemirah Roggers that is put in on Pretence  
of Mutiney on Bord there Brig And se what can be don for him if you  
please I should not have trouble you if I had known Any one that I could  
depend on and if it wont be to much trouble you would ablige him verry  
much I send ten dollars and you will give it to him if you please and I will  
be good To the a mount of fifty dollars if wanted Please to write as soon as  
possable if you pleas

yours &c  
Reuben Ruby

In a note after his signature, Ruby added, “Please to continue my paper,” crossing out another redundant “if you please.” Finally, Ruby scrawled in pencil, probably immediately before he mailed the letter: “Court last Monday in Oct.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Reuben Ruby to Amos A. Phelps, 29 September 1836, Anti-Slavery Collection, Boston Public Library (BPL).

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Reuben Ruby  
Portland Sept. 29<sup>th</sup> 1836

Dear Sir—  
I take the liberty to write to you to Request you  
To go on fend to the gaol and see a man by the  
Name of gemimah Rogers that if put in on  
Pretence of Mutiny and see on Board there Brig  
And see what can be don for him if you please  
I should not shawe trouble you if I had known  
Any one that I could depend on and if it wont  
Be to much trouble you would oblige him  
Verry much I send ten dollary and you will  
Give it to him if you please and I will be good  
To the a mount of fifty dollary if wanted  
Please to write of soon af possable if you pleas  
Yours &c — Reuben Ruby

BB Please to Continue my paper if you please.  
Cordt East Monday 6 Oct.

Figure 1: Letter from Reuben Ruby to Amos A. Phelps, 29 September 1836, Anti-Slavery Collection, Boston Public Library

The irregular spelling and punctuation suggest that Ruby was not highly educated and probably did not write letters very often. Nevertheless, he showed fluency with some of the familiar tropes of nineteenth century letters. The phrase “I take the liberty to write to you” was a typical way to demonstrate respect and deference in writing to an authority figure or someone of a higher social class. After requesting Phelps’s help on Rogers’s behalf, Ruby reiterated his

deference: “I should not have trouble you if I had known Any one that I could depend on[.]”<sup>2</sup>

Both in the conclusion to the letter and in his postscript, Ruby used exceptionally polite language. Even while promising to fund any rescue attempt up to \$50, a considerable sum, Ruby was conscious of making a significant demand on Phelps’s time and energy.<sup>3</sup>

Ruby was a prominent member of Portland’s African American community, active in the antislavery cause, as Phelps made clear in a letter to his wife two years earlier. Phelps was working as an agent of the American Anti-Slavery Society, traveling through northern New England, when he remarked to his wife: “[T]o night I took tea at a Mr Ruby’s [a] colored man,” adding that “there were several colored persons there, & I did not see but the tea tasted as good as if it had been prepared & served by some white lady.” Phelps, who was a Congregationalist minister as well as an antislavery agent, also mentioned preaching to a group of local African Americans at “a small house & easy speaking” where he “baptised a little colored William Wilberforce.”<sup>4</sup> The “small house” in question was the Abyssinian Meeting House, which served as the place of worship for Portland’s black Congregationalists and a community center that hosted antislavery gatherings. Ruby had led a group of African American residents in building the meetinghouse and founding the Abyssinian Congregational Church in Portland in 1828.<sup>5</sup> The

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<sup>2</sup> Reuben Ruby to Amos A. Phelps, 29 September 1836, Anti-Slavery Collection, BPL.

<sup>3</sup> Present-day readers may be surprised that Ruby should have felt secure transmitting such a considerable amount of cash through the mail. He shared an assumption, prevalent during the nineteenth century, of the sanctity of the post. Wealthy merchants sent thousands of dollars through the post on a daily basis. See Richard John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 55.

<sup>4</sup> Amos A. Phelps to Charlotte Phelps, 7 December 1834, Anti-Slavery Collection, BPL.

<sup>5</sup> The Abyssinian Meeting House still stands in Portland today and has recently been added to the National Register of Historic Places. Restoration efforts are ongoing. *The Abyssinian Restoration Project, Portland, Maine*, <http://www.abyme.org>.



child Phelps mentioned in his letter was William Wilberforce Ruby, Reuben Ruby's son, named for the famous British abolitionist.

Neither Ruby's letter nor the historical record offers many clues about Jemirah (or Jeremiah) Rogers (or perhaps Rogers or Rodgers), the man who was jailed under "Pretence of Mutiny." It seems likely that Rogers was black, and he was probably a sailor, a profession that engaged a substantial portion of the city's African American community and one of the few open to both white and black men at the time.<sup>6</sup> In asserting that Rogers had been wrongfully charged with mutiny, Ruby may have meant to signal to Phelps, a prominent abolitionist, that Rogers was imprisoned merely on the evidence of racist assumptions made by his captors about his supposedly mutinous behavior. Rogers may have been involved in local political agitation alongside Ruby and therefore perceived as a threat by local authorities.

Although the circumstances of Rogers's imprisonment are unclear, it is evident that Ruby's correspondence was instrumental, a tool he exploited to help a friend. Through his letter, Ruby intervened, deliberately, in an alarming and dangerous situation. He deployed familiar conventions of language to create a respectful, even deferential, tone that he hoped would convince Phelps, and perhaps also the jailers, of the legitimacy of his claims. Seeking Phelps's assistance in an urgent and potentially explosive matter, Ruby sought to establish himself as a sophisticated and reputable correspondent. He thereby took part in a national discourse concerning slavery, abolition, and equal rights for African Americans. In other words, Ruby claimed a voice in national politics.

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<sup>6</sup> I searched for Jeremiah Rogers in the federal census and Portland city directories could find no one matching or resembling that name. On African American sailors, see W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

This letter from an obscure local abolitionist to a nationally prominent one offers a convenient entrée to the questions about the engagement of ordinary people with the antislavery cause that engage the pages that follow. Ruby's letter reveals a number of details about him and his circumstances: he was in a rush; his friend's imprisonment was a matter of urgency, and he appealed to Phelps as an authority figure who might intervene on his friend's behalf. Letters such as Ruby's thus offer insight not only into the details of individual lives but also into the varied ways people used letters to intervene in political debates over slavery. Letters are artifacts as well as texts. They are pieces of evidence that reveal how the act of writing shaped the political consciousness of ordinary people.

The abolitionists were a community of wordsmiths whose political movement emerged from a sea of printed and handwritten words.<sup>7</sup> Those words enabled opponents of slavery in the nineteenth-century United States, even those excluded from mainstream electoral politics, to claim political standing and exert political power. Women and most African Americans could not vote and faced violent reprisals for speaking publicly. White men involved in the antislavery cause also faced public violence and frequently spurned party politics in favor of correspondence as a tool of political engagement. Reading and writing letters allowed people from different backgrounds to see themselves as part of a political collective against slavery. Harnessing the power of the written word, abolitionists relied on letters to organize as a group and to articulate radical ideas. "The Politics of Correspondence" tells the story of how letter writing enabled a disparate and politically marginal assortment of people to come together as a coherent and powerful movement.

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<sup>7</sup> Manisha Sinha uses the term "wordsmith." See Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 5.

I take an expansive view of politics, arguing that private correspondence is sometimes as significant a form of political participation as public action. The body of shared political ideas and principles that came to characterize the antislavery movement emerged out of contest and debate carried on largely through the exchange of letters. People on the political fringes and disfranchised persons, especially African Americans and women, harnessed the medium of letters to assert their legitimacy as political agents, claiming rights hitherto denied them. In doing so, they challenged the presumed boundaries of the body politic and played key roles in advancing demands for immediate emancipation, civil rights, and equality to the forefront of national political discussions. Through the flexible medium of correspondence, abolitionists simultaneously responded to and helped to shape the changing conditions of national politics.

### **A Nineteenth-Century Democracy of Correspondence**

Correspondence had been a vital tool of American politics at least since the Revolution, when Patriot leaders organized their rebellion against Great Britain through “committees of correspondence.”<sup>8</sup> The committees were nimble and effective in their time, given slow travel and sporadic contact among individuals engaged in a common political enterprise. But the reach of correspondence broadened dramatically after the Revolutionary period. By 1850, letter writing had become a tool of mass communication, including the exchange of political ideas and information. Like digital forms of communication today, correspondence often operated

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<sup>8</sup> On committees of correspondence and letter writing during the American Revolution see: Richard D. Brown, *Revolutionary Politics in Massachusetts: The Boston Committee of Correspondence and the Towns, 1772-1774* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970); Mary Kelley, “‘While Pen, Ink & Paper Can Be Had’: Reading and Writing in a Time of Revolution,” *Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 10, no. 3 (August 9, 2012): 439–66; Nathan Perl-Rosenthal, “Corresponding Republics: Letter Writing and Patriot Organizing in the Atlantic Revolutions, circa 1760-1792” 2011; William Beatty Warner, *Protocols of Liberty: Communication Innovation and the American Revolution* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013).

unpredictably, even chaotically, but it opened the door for political expression to ideas and people lacking any other outlet.

Starting from an understanding that the nineteenth-century antislavery movement unfolded across a national postal space, not just in the major Northeastern cities of Boston, Philadelphia, and New York, “The Politics of Correspondence” emphasizes the diversity of the movement’s geography, membership, and political activities. It encompasses actions and actors with varying levels of access to electoral politics. Unlike recent studies of abolition that highlight the significance of women and free black abolitionists but tend to examine these groups in isolation from one another, “The Politics of Correspondence” incorporates men and women, white and black abolitionists, rural and urban residents, and enslaved and free people, all taking part in a national movement against slavery.<sup>9</sup> Through its emphasis on letters written by ordinary people,

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<sup>9</sup> For interpretations of women’s roles in abolition see for example: Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Debra Gold Hansen, *Strained Sisterhood: Gender and Class in the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993.); Nancy A. Hewitt, *Women’s Activism and Social Change: Rochester, New York, 1822-1872* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984); Julie Roy Jeffrey, *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism: Ordinary Women in the Antislavery Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Julie Roy Jeffrey, “Permeable Boundaries: Abolitionist Women and Separate Spheres,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 21, no. 1 (2001): 79-93; Gerda Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina: Pioneers for Women’s Rights and Abolition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Stacey M. Robertson, *Hearts Beating for Liberty: Women Abolitionists in the Old Northwest* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010.); Beth A. Salerno, *Sister Societies: Women’s Antislavery Organizations in Antebellum America* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2005); Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Women’s Rights Emerges within the Antislavery Movement, 1830-1870: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s 2000); Kathryn Kish Sklar and Stewart, James Brewer, eds., *Women’s Rights and Transatlantic Antislavery in the Era of Emancipation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Deborah Bingham Van Broekhoven, *The Devotion of These Women: Rhode Island in the Antislavery Network* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002); Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horne, eds., *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women’s Political Culture in Antebellum America*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); Jean Fagan Yellin, *Women and Sisters: The Antislavery Feminists in American Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.); Susan Zaeske, *Signatures of Citizenship: Petitioning, Antislavery, & Women’s Political Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

On African American abolitionists see for example: Stephen David Kantrowitz, *More than Freedom: Fighting for Black Citizenship in a White Republic, 1829-1889* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012); Jane H. Pease and William Henry Pease, *They Who Would Be Free: Blacks’ Search for Freedom, 1830-1861* (New York: Atheneum, 1974); Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969); Patrick Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Julie Winch, *Philadelphia’s Black Elite: Activism, Accommodation, and the Struggle for Autonomy, 1787-1848* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988).

it offers a social history of abolition.<sup>10</sup> Many historians have analyzed the ideas of the movement's leaders through published sources, and others have mined major collections of antislavery correspondence for information about the movement's ideas and organization. In contrast, "The Politics of Correspondence" focuses on letters themselves as a form of political activism.

"The Politics of Correspondence" challenges the notion of homogeneity and natural unity among abolitionists. A portrait of nineteenth-century reformers as largely white, middle class, and Protestant, cohesive until differences of opinion later divided them, has become ingrained in popular memory.<sup>11</sup> Focused on public forms of political action, this view overlooks the activities

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On black women abolitionists see for example: Erica Armstrong Dunbar, *A Fragile Freedom: African American Women and Emancipation in the Antebellum City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); Dorothy Sterling, ed., *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984); Shirley J. Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828-1860* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992).

<sup>10</sup> My social history approach stands in contrast to the recent fashion among historians to redeem white male political abolitionists from supposed obscurity and to disclaim the effectuality of so-called Garrisonian radicals. See for example, Corey M. Brooks, *Liberty Power* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2016); James Oakes, *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861-1865* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 2013); James Oakes, *The Scorpion's Sting: Antislavery and the Coming of the Civil War* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2014); Sean Wilentz, *The Politicians & the Egalitarians: The Hidden History of American Politics* (New York; London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016).

Caleb McDaniel makes the useful counterpoint that Garrisonian abolitionists saw their agitation outside of political institutions as crucial to enacting dramatic change in those institutions. See Caleb W. McDaniel, *The Problem of Democracy in the Age of Slavery: Garrisonian Abolitionists and Transatlantic Reform* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013).

Other recent historians including have usefully argued for the intellectual foundations of abolitionism in an African American political tradition, including slave resistance and rebellion. "The Politics of Correspondence" takes lessons from these historians in arguing for an expansive definition of politics that encompasses actions and actors with varying levels of access to electoral politics. See for example: Eric Foner, *Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015); Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South, from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003); Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*.

<sup>11</sup> See for example: Aileen S. Kraditor, *Means and Ends in American Abolitionism: Garrison and His Critics on Strategy and Tactics, 1834-1850* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969); James Brewer Stewart, *Holy Warriors: Slavery in Republican America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996). A recent exception to this narrative is Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*.

Some historians have argued that a consequence of antislavery ideology was to displace uncertainties about industrialization and thereby help to justify capitalist exploitation. For the origins of this idea, see David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1975).

of people who squeezed into the political arena when it was supposedly closed to them. Surveying a broad field of political agents and activities connects the extensive historiography of abolition in the United States to studies of early American letter writing and to feminist scholarship on life writing. It also highlights a diverse group of individuals who achieved coherence as a political community in large part by exchanging letters. Examining trends in correspondence over several decades reveals that abolitionists made a conscious effort to achieve group unity and that they reformulated their visions of antislavery politics with the passage of time.

Accounts of abolition in the United States usually focus on the movement for immediate abolition that emerged in the 1830s, identifying New England, especially Boston, as the birthplace of this movement. William Lloyd Garrison founded his antislavery newspaper, *The Liberator*, in Boston in 1831 and continued to publish it there through the end of the Civil War in 1865.<sup>12</sup> Recent scholarship has placed Garrison and the abolitionists of the mid-nineteenth century in a broader chronological and geographic context, drawing on the work of scholars of slavery and abolition who take a comparative and transatlantic approach to the unfolding of emancipation in the context of various revolutionary and reform movements.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Historians first lionized abolitionists like Garrison as saints, then criticized them as fanatics and troublemakers. On early heroic narratives of abolition see: Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Abolitionists Remember: Antislavery Autobiographies & the Unfinished Work of Emancipation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

On the historiography of abolition see: Andrew Delbanco, *The Abolitionist Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); Timothy Patrick McCarthy and John Stauffer, eds., *Prophets of Protest: Reconsidering the History of American Abolitionism* (New York: New Press, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> New narratives emphasize two “waves” of abolition in the United States, beginning around the American Revolution and concluding in the aftermath of the American Civil War. See for example: Richard S. Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Patrick Rael, *Eighty-Eight Years: The Long Death of Slavery in the United States, 1777-1865* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 2015); Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause*.

Robin Blackburn, *The American Crucible: Slavery, Emancipation and Human Rights* (London; New York: Verso, 2011); Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 1776-1848* (London; New York: Verso, 1988); David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014); Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*; Seymour Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and*

The first wave of abolition began with the American Revolution and persisted, marked by emancipatory reforms in the Northern states, through the late 1820s. Within the newly-independent United States, the Revolution had a profound intellectual and material impact for determining the future of slavery. Rebellious colonists invoked metaphors of servitude and enslavement to describe their relationship to Britain. Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence, among other founders, grappled with the problem of slavery in a nation based on the principle of liberty. Slaves struck out against their bondage by fleeing by the thousands to British lines when the army promised them their freedom. Black Northerners in Boston and elsewhere drew upon revolutionary language in petitions and legal cases to claim the right to freedom. The actions of various people and groups gradually set in motion the process of emancipation first in New England, and then in Mid-Atlantic states.<sup>14</sup>

After the revolutionary fervor faded, with emancipation underway in the North, a conservative version of antislavery emerged in the colonization movement, which was dominated by elite white men. Colonizationists called for the gradual abolition of slavery and the compulsory removal of black Americans from the United States.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, though, slaves and free black Americans advanced radical articulations of abolition and equal rights.<sup>16</sup>

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*Antislavery* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009). For a comparative approach to emancipation, see also: Eric Foner, *Nothing but Freedom: Emancipation and Its Legacy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007).

<sup>14</sup> On the impact of the American Revolution and revolutionary ideology on slavery see for example: Sylvia R. Frey, *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1991); François Furstenburg, “Beyond Freedom and Slavery: Autonomy, Virtue, and Resistance in Early American Political Discourse,” *Journal of American History* 89 (March 2003), 1295-1330; Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: Norton, 1975).

<sup>15</sup> On colonization see: Nicholas Guyatt, *Bind Us Apart: How Enlightened Americans Invented Racial Segregation* (New York: Basic Books, 2016); Beverly C. Tomek, *Colonization and Its Discontents: Emancipation, Emigration, and Antislavery in Antebellum Pennsylvania* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> Manisha Sinha, “To ‘Cast Just Obliquely’ on Oppressors: Black Radicalism in the Age of Revolution,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (2007): 149–60.

While some supported voluntary, self-directed emigration efforts from the United States to places including Haiti, Sierra Leone, and Liberia, others agitated from within the nation's borders, laying the groundwork for future activism. Tied to demands for civil, political, and economic rights, the first wave, also known as the "neglected period" of abolition, secured the promise of eventual freedom for African Americans in the North and left an ambiguous opening for slaves elsewhere, particularly in the Upper South.<sup>17</sup>

The second wave of abolition began in the 1830s and continued through the end of the Civil War, and, I argue, into the early years of Reconstruction. Scholars have come to recognize the origins of the antebellum antislavery movement in the ideas and tactics of earlier black activists. Free African Americans, who ardently opposed colonization, inspired Garrison to publish his newspaper, which called for immediate and universal emancipation. Following the lead of black abolitionists, Garrison helped to build a new movement whose democratic message appealed to a broad range of participants. The antislavery movement began in Boston and spread first throughout New England, following the circulation of *The Liberator* and the travels of Garrison and other antislavery agents. The agents traveled through New England, and then beyond, delivering antislavery lectures and organizing local societies. In 1833, these local efforts gained a

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<sup>17</sup> See Chapter One. On gradual emancipation in the North see for example: David Nathaniel Gellman, *Emancipating New York: The Politics of Slavery and Freedom, 1777-1827* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006); James J. Gigantino, *The Ragged Road to Abolition: Slavery and Freedom in New Jersey, 1775-1865* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014); Max L. Grivno, *Gleanings of Freedom: Free and Slave Labor along the Mason-Dixon Line, 1790-1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011); Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Graham Russell Hodges, *Root & Branch: African Americans in New York & East Jersey, 1613-1863* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780-1860* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); Gary B. Nash and Jean R. Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees: Emancipation in Pennsylvania and Its Aftermath* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Richard S. Newman and James Mueller, eds., *Antislavery and Abolition in Philadelphia: Emancipation and the Long Struggle for Racial Justice in the City of Brotherly Love* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011); Shane White, *Somewhat More Independent: The End of Slavery in New York City, 1770-1810* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991); Arthur Zilversmit, *The First Emancipation; the Abolition of Slavery in the North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).



national framework with the formation of the American Anti-Slavery Society, based in New York. Many local and state societies became auxiliaries of the AASS, which helped to disseminate information and publications and to channel activism towards efforts like fundraising and petitioning.

Almost immediately, Garrison and his allies became notorious for their radical views on topics such as women's rights and opposition to existing political and religious institutions. Garrisonian abolitionists saw emancipation as one part of a complete social revolution that could only be achieved by transforming all aspects of society. They pioneered the tactic of "moral suasion:" the idea that members of the public, including slaveholders, could be converted to antislavery views through moral discourse, by imbibing arguments that presented slavery as evil. The antislavery movement was never monolithic, however, and Garrison's radicals coexisted uneasily alongside evangelical perfectionists and advocates of political action. By 1840, areas of disagreement had become major divisions that split the organizational framework of the movement. Scholars have underscored these divisions, although the commitment to immediate emancipation provided a common denominator. Through correspondence, opponents of slavery across the ideological and geographic spectrum asserted unity in their devotion to this cause.

The movement against slavery occurred alongside the democratization of communication in the United States. Between 1800 and 1870, letter writing became an everyday phenomenon that fostered intimacy and interconnectedness among individuals and groups scattered across long distances.<sup>18</sup> Advancements in postal communication made letter writing, formerly the preserve of

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<sup>18</sup> From 1840 to 1860, the number of letters carried annually by the United States Post Office increased nearly six-fold, from about 27 million to about 161 million. This figure does not account for letters conveyed by private means. David Henkin, *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 3.

an elite minority of merchant families, accessible to a majority of Americans.<sup>19</sup> The development of public education led to a dramatic increase in literacy, newly constructed canals and railroads carried information rapidly, and postal reforms substantially decreased the cost of sending letters. The postal system became the most robust arm of the federal government.<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, as urbanization, industrialization, and westward expansion separated families and friends, letter writing became a necessity of life.<sup>21</sup>

The ideas and personnel of abolition blossomed first in Northeastern cities, and radiated outwards into the countryside, eventually following the westward migration of settlers into frontier areas. Out of that pattern emerged an abolitionist diaspora that spread through the United States. The national postal infrastructure sustained the exchange of letters across long distances. Looking at abolition through the lens of letter writing emphasizes the enormous—and new—mobility of Americans over the course of the nineteenth century. Opponents of slavery experienced the results of this mobility as their friends, family, and neighbors left their homes in New England cities and towns to make lives elsewhere, carrying their political ideas with them.<sup>22</sup> Reuben Ruby is a quintessential example of this pattern. He was born in Gray, Maine, and spent

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<sup>19</sup> On letter writing in eighteenth-century America and the British Atlantic see: Eve Tavor Bannet, *Empire of Letters: Letter Manuals and Transatlantic Correspondence, 1688-1820* (Cambridge, UK ; Cambridge University Press, 2005); Konstantin Dierks, *In My Power: Letter Writing and Communications in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); Toby L. Ditz, “Shipwrecked; Or, Masculinity Imperiled: Mercantile Representations of Failure and the Gendered Self in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia,” *The Journal of American History* 81, no. 1 (1994): 51-80; Lindsay O’Neill, *The Opened Letter : Networking in the Early Modern British World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); Sarah Pearsall, *Atlantic Families: Lives and Letters in the Later Eighteenth Century*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Perl-Rosenthal, “Corresponding Republics.”

<sup>20</sup> John, *Spreading the News*, 3.

<sup>21</sup> On the transformation of the postal system see: Henkin, *The Postal Age*; John, *Spreading the News*.

<sup>22</sup> On the impact of nineteenth-century mobility on letter writing and the post see Henkin, *The Postal Age*, Ch. 5.

much of his early life in Portland, but around 1840 took his family to New York, where he lived for several years. In 1849 he traveled to California to take part in the gold rush. Ruby struck it rich, collecting about \$3000 worth of gold, including a nugget weighing ten-and-a-half ounces. After the discovery, he returned to settle down in Portland.<sup>23</sup> Such mobility was not uncommon in the nineteenth century, especially taking into account the movement of family members across multiple generations, and it contributed to the emotional and political import of correspondence in this period.

In the abolition movement, letter writing held mass political significance going well beyond the eighteenth-century Euro-American intellectual community that scholars have christened the “Republic of Letters.”<sup>24</sup> With rising literacy rates and rapidly increasing access to the exchange of information in the nineteenth century, it was not just elite merchants and politicians who wrote letters about politics. The range of correspondents broadened, marking a decisive change in the

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<sup>23</sup> Several newspaper articles document Ruby’s discovery, including, “Gold,” *Maine Farmer*, 6 December 1849. Another article reported that Ruby’s gold nugget resembled “somewhat, an old fashioned, quite crooked, crooked neck squash.” See *The Newburyport Herald*, 28 November 1849.

<sup>24</sup> The idea of the “Republic of Letters” draws on Jürgen Habermas’s theorization of the bourgeois public sphere exemplified by eighteenth-century European salons. Habermas idealized the public sphere as a space of “inclusive critical discussion, free of social and economic pressures, in which interlocutors treat each other as equals in a cooperative attempt to reach an understanding on matters of common concern.” Definition from James Bohman and William Rehg, “Jürgen Habermas”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta(ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/habermas/>. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).

Scholars have applied Habermas’s ideas and European-focused discussions of the “Republic of Letters” to the early American context, focusing mainly on print culture. See for example: Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge Is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700-1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Robert Fanuzzi, *Abolition’s Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Trish Loughran, *The Republic in Print: Print Culture in the Age of U.S. Nation Building, 1770-1870* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Gilman Marston Ostrander, *Republic of Letters: The American Intellectual Community, 1776-1865* (Madison, Wis.: Madison House, 1999.); Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); Caroline Winterer, “Where is America in the Republic of Letters?,” *Modern Intellectual History* 9, no. 03 (2012): 597–623. For a current and evolving application of the “Republic of Letters,” see the *Mapping the Republic of Letters* project by Stanford University and the National Endowment for the Humanities, <http://republicofletters.stanford.edu>.

ideas and personnel of American politics. Letter writing offered a means of narration, reflection, and discussion that helped to build and influence mass political movements. The exclusive “Republic of Letters,” gave way to a nineteenth-century democracy of correspondence.

Through letters, abolition emerged as a social movement that intertwined public and private, inner and outer lives, personal and political realms. Correspondence represented a porous boundary between these worlds.<sup>25</sup> On one hand, the image of the sealed envelope conjured up the heartfelt intimacies exchanged between family members, friends, and lovers. On the other hand, the mixture of letters in a mailbag became a popular metaphor for the mingling of diverse

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<sup>25</sup> A growing field of scholars has studied the intellectual and cultural history of letter writing in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The literature branches out from scholarly interest in ways of knowing—how information was learned, transmitted, and understood in the past.

Recent historiography on the cultural significance of letters and letter writing includes: Bannet, *Empire of Letters*; David Barton and Nigel Hall, eds., *Letter Writing as a Social Practice* (Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins Pub, 2000); Celeste-Marie Bernier, Judie Newman, and Matthew Pethers, eds., *The Edinburgh Companion to Nineteenth-Century American Letters and Letter-Writing*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016); Caroline Bland and Máire Cross, eds., *Gender and Politics in the Age of Letter Writing, 1750-2000* (Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate, 2003); William Merrill Decker, *Epistolary Practices: Letter Writing in America before Telecommunications* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Dierks, *In My Power*; Ditz, “Shipwrecked; Or, Masculinity Imperiled;” Rebecca Earle, *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter-Writers, 1600-1945* (Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate, 1999); Theresa Strouth Gaul and Sharon M. Harris, eds., *Letters and Cultural Transformations in the United States, 1760-1860* (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2009); David A. Gerber, *Authors of Their Lives: The Personal Correspondence of British Immigrants to North America in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); Christopher Hager, *I Remain Yours: Common Lives in Civil War Letters* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018); Henkin, *The Postal Age*; O’Neill, *The Opened Letter*; Pearsall, *Atlantic Families*.

On topics adjacent to correspondence see: Christopher Hager, *Word by Word: Emancipation and the Act of Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); David M. Henkin, *City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Ian Kenneth Steele, *The English Atlantic, 1675-1740: An Exploration of Communication and Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Emma Rothschild, *The Inner Life of Empires: An Eighteenth-Century History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); Tamara Plakins Thornton, *Handwriting in America: A Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996.); Ronald J. Zboray, *A Fictive People: Antebellum Economic Development and the American Reading Public* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Ronald J. Zboray, *Everyday Ideas: Socioliterary Experience among Antebellum New Englanders* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006).

For the purposes of the dissertation, I am setting aside the voluminous scholarly literature on epistolary novels. It is worth noting the growing field of scholarship on letter writing outside the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British and American context. See for example: William E. French, *The Heart in the Glass Jar: Love Letters, Bodies, and the Law in Mexico*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015); Margaretta Jolly, *In Love and Struggle: Letters in Contemporary Feminism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Gabriella Romani, *Postal Culture: Writing and Reading Letters in Post-Unification Italy* (Buffalo, NY: University of Toronto Press, 2013).

crowds. Correspondence offered both intimacy and anonymity; security, privacy, and trust alongside the potential for unlimited access.<sup>26</sup> Abolitionists exploited these postal norms to advance their cause.

Abolitionist correspondence networks were often based in bonds of friendship and kinship, a point for which feminist scholarship on life writing provides a useful touchstone.<sup>27</sup> Far from belonging primarily to the domain of private life, letters were frequently circulated and read aloud among groups of friends, and writers copied particularly evocative passages into letters they sent to others. Correspondents only occasionally exchanged letters with the expectation that their words would remain completely private. They were usually quite explicit in such intentions, sometimes marking entire letters or sections “private,” “confidential,” or for those with a greater

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<sup>26</sup> On letters, intimacy, and anonymity see: See Decker, *Epistolary Practices*, 37-56; Henkin, *The Postal Age*, xi, 10-11, 93-171.

<sup>27</sup> Feminist scholars explore how women’s voices have been obscured by researchers’ inclinations towards public, often published, sources rather than private letters, diaries, and other forms of life writing. See Carolyn Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman’s Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), 17; Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Caroll Smith-Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual,” in *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

Examples of how feminist scholars have embraced women’s life writing sources include: Nina Baym, *Woman’s Fiction: A Guide to Novels By and About Women in America, 1820-1870* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978); Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: ‘Woman’s Sphere’ in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); Drew Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Martha Hodes, *The Sea Captain’s Wife: A True Story of Love, Race, and War in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006); Carol F. Karlson and Laurie Crumpacker, eds., *The Journal of Esther Edwards Burr, 1754-1757* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984); Megan Marshall, *The Peabody Sisters: Three Women Who Ignited American Romanticism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005); Lucia McMahon, *Mere Equals: The Paradox of Educated Women in the Early American Republic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012); Claire Putala, *Reading and Writing Ourselves into Being: The Literacy of Certain Nineteenth-Century Young Women* (Greenwich, Conn.: Information Age Publishing, 2004).

On African American women writers see for example: Dunbar, *A Fragile Freedom*; Farah Jasmine Griffin, ed., *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends: Letters from Rebecca Primus of Royal Oak, Maryland, and Addie Brown of Hartford, Connecticut, 1854-1868* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999); Frances Smith Foster, *Written by Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746-1892* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Elizabeth McHenry, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African-American Literary Societies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); Carla L. Peterson, *Doers of the Word: African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the North (1830-1880)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Sterling, *We Are Your Sisters*; Deborah Gray White, “Mining the Forgotten: Manuscript Sources for Black Women’s History,” *The Journal of American History* 74, no. 1 (1987): 237-42.

sense of urgency, “burn this letter.” Furthermore, the boundaries between private and public could be crossed in the space of a few lines, when a writer shifted topics from family news to political matters or, as in Ruby’s letter, to a personal appeal that had potentially volatile political implications. Unknown individuals discussed matters of enormous public import in their correspondence, thereby partaking in national political discussions. And even well-known public figures in the antislavery movement—William Lloyd Garrison, Angelina Grimké, Frederick Douglass—were freer to express themselves in letters than in public speeches and writings. The ideas in supposedly private letters often percolated into the public realm. Newspaper editors were constantly on the lookout for juicy letters to fill their columns, and prominent abolitionists often articulated their views first in personal correspondence before uttering them before an audience. Ideas and debates that emerged on the public political stage—such as immediate emancipation, women’s rights, and the balance between moral suasion and electoral politics—were originally hammered out in private correspondence.

### **The Anatomy of a Letter**

The research for “The Politics of Correspondence” spans archives throughout New England, Mid-Atlantic, and Midwestern states. By my estimate, I have consulted over ten thousand handwritten letters. I have examined large collections containing thousands of items belonging to major antislavery figures and organizations. In those collections, I look for hidden or overlooked parts—the discovery of Reuben Ruby’s letter is an example. Abolitionists assembled many of the major collections during the late nineteenth century as a way to preserve their legacy, refuting

portrayals of their movement as fanatical and reminding the nation that it was the moral evil of slavery that provoked the war.<sup>28</sup>

While acknowledging that abolitionists' published autobiographical writings and edited collections of correspondence dating to this era were part of a broader political agenda contesting the emerging reconciliationist memory of the Civil War, historians have been less aware that abolitionists and their descendants assembled manuscript collections for the same purpose.<sup>29</sup> As a result, both print and manuscript iterations emphasize the voices of the movement's leaders, overshadowing the contributions of ordinary people, particularly women and African Americans. Researchers have reinforced the biases of these collections by ignoring parts that run counter to their assumptions.<sup>30</sup> In consequence, many accounts of abolition continue to focus on a few leading men, and some exceptional women, at the expense of lesser known individuals. Furthermore, although the paucity of scholarly research on black abolitionists reflects genuine archival challenges, it also tends to obscure or discredit existing sources.<sup>31</sup>

To offset major collections of abolitionist correspondence, I have also examined dozens of small collections that contain a few or a few dozen letters relating to a single family or individual. In these collections, I study how lesser-known people used letters reflectively, strategically, or instrumentally in various ways to participate in abolition. In some cases, only a

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<sup>28</sup> Jeffrey, *Abolitionists Remember*. On reconciliation, see David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

<sup>29</sup> The Anti-Slavery Collection at the Boston Public Library, the May Anti-Slavery Manuscripts at Cornell, and the Pennsylvania Abolition Society Papers at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania are three prominent examples. I suspect, however, that there is a much broader history here to be investigated in future research.

<sup>30</sup> See Chapter One for an extended discussion.

<sup>31</sup> For scholars contesting such assumptions, see for example: John W. Blassingame, ed., *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977); Hager, *Word by Word*; Deborah Gray White, "Mining the Forgotten."

handful of letters survive that were written by a particular individual. This scarcity stands in stark contrast to the hundreds or thousands of letters written by the movement's leaders. In some respects, the contrast reflects what I think of as the politics of the archive: a general disparity in archival preservation between sources produced by elite historical figures and those of the ordinary people who made up a majority of the antislavery movement's membership. At the same time, the presence of the correspondence of such unknown individuals scattered throughout large and small collections reflects the democratizing changes occurring during the nineteenth-century communications revolution. Writing a letter continued to be an investment of time, energy, and money, but it increasingly became open and attainable to just about anyone. Abolitionist leaders spent hours per day writing letters. Correspondence was a central pillar of their work for their cause. And millions of ordinary Americans responded to their calls, sometimes going to great lengths to commit their words to paper.

Through the close analysis of sources, I focus on the form, conventions, language, and tone of letters alongside their content. "The Politics of Correspondence" concerns not just what people wrote about but also how they wrote about it: how they manipulated, exploited, and subverted cultural conventions to make political statements and claims. To understand how individuals used their correspondence in creative ways, it is important first to grasp the key material and organizational components that make up a letter. Most letters at the time were written on paper made from linen and cotton rags. By the early nineteenth century, rag paper mills in the United States had sped up the manufacturing process from individually handmade sheets. Recurring shortages of rags threatened to limit the paper supply and drive up prices, however. Paper production was fully mechanized by the 1840s, but during the Civil War, demand for paper threatened skyrocketing prices. European paper mills started using wood pulp,



and this method was imported to the United States. As a result, paper became much cheaper.<sup>32</sup>

Writers used a quill, or later a steel-tipped pen dipped in ink, usually made from a mixture of oak galls, copperas, and alum, or iron sulphate.<sup>33</sup> They occasionally resorted to pencil for writing first drafts or when pen and ink were unavailable or impracticable for various reasons; for example, writing in the dark, writing outdoors, or when unable to acquire better materials.

Letters were a ubiquitous genre in the nineteenth-century. Most educated writers learned how to draft letters in school or from printed letter-writing manuals.<sup>34</sup> Children often received additional guidance from parents and older siblings. Less-educated correspondents became familiar with the epistolary form by hearing letters read aloud or reading published examples in newspapers, periodicals, novels, and other printed ephemera. Because of widespread awareness of the letter form through both formal and informal educational pathways, the style and content of letters shared similar characteristics that writers adapted to meet the needs of various situations including business, politics, family, and romance.<sup>35</sup>

The first words that a writer inscribed at the top of the page were the date and location from which the letter originated. Next came the greeting, which was crucial for setting the tone for the letter. Friends and family members addressed each other easily: "Dear mother," "My dear

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<sup>32</sup> John Nerone, "The History of Paper and Public Space," *Media History* 21, no. 1 (January 2, 2015), 4; A.J. Valente, "Changes in Print Paper During the 19th Century" (2010). Proceedings of the Charleston Library Conference; A.J. Valente, *Rag Paper Manufacture in the United States, 1801-1900: A History, with Directories of Mills and Owners* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co, 2010).

<sup>33</sup> Auxiliary items related to writing included inkpots, penknives, writing desks, sealing wax, pounce (blotting powder), and, especially later in the nineteenth century, envelopes and postage stamps. On the material culture of letter writing see Dierks, *In My Power*, 178-185; Michael Finlay, *Western Writing Implements in the Age of the Quill Pen* (Wetheral, Carlisle, Cumbria: Plains, 1990).

<sup>34</sup> On letter-writing manuals see Bannet, *Empire of Letters*; Dierks, *In My Power*, 143-152.

<sup>35</sup> For more on the cultural implications of letters and the post, see Chapter Two. See also Decker, *Epistolary Practices*; Henkin, *The Postal Age*.

brother,” “My dearest friend.” Separated lovers or spouses sometimes indicated their passion with effusive expressions of affection or pet names. Distant acquaintances, or strangers, faced a more difficult choice in addressing one another. Many reverted to businesslike formality, stating simply “Dear sir,” or “Dear madam,” while others sought to ingratiate themselves with deferential salutations such as “Most revered sir.” Abolitionists often used their greetings to set a tone of solidarity. Even relative strangers often addressed one another as “brother,” “sister,” or “friend.” Doing so evoked traditional understandings of Christian fellowship but also produced some unexpected subversions of contemporary cultural norms. For example, according to dominant cultural standards, it was inappropriate for men and women to exchange letters without substantial prior acquaintance. Addressing each other as “brother” and “sister” sidestepped such concerns by signaling a family relationship that was based not on ancestry but shared political beliefs. Black writers also frequently used familial language when addressing white abolitionists, subtly holding them accountable to their proclamations of brotherhood and sisterhood with enslaved African Americans.

After the greeting came the opening of the letter. Some writers, especially those addressing relative strangers, chose to state their objectives as quickly as possible, with little rhetorical flourish. For example, in his letter to Amos Phelps, Reuben Ruby opened by stating simply, “I take the liberty to write to you...” before making his request for assistance. Ruby reverted to the language of business correspondence to make his urgent appeal. Familiar letters usually took a more meandering route. Correspondence was inherently a conversation, and many writers began by acknowledging the receipt of a previous letter. Those who were separated by long distances and uncertain circumstances expressed sentiments of joy or relief to know the welfare of their correspondents and reassured them of their own good health.

The abolitionist Elizabeth Buffum Chace outlined the proper approach to composing a letter in a letter to her sons, Arnold and Samuel, in 1860. “[T]here is one thing which you are both very remiss about when you do write, and that is, you seldom write so that I can tell whether you have received my letters or not,” she scolded them. Chace instructed the boys to place each unanswered letter in “one part of your port folio,” where they could refer to it while drafting a reply. She told them to “commence by announcing its receipt, and before commencing any new subjects, reply to any thing that the letter contains which needs a reply.” “It is very pleasant to have one’s letter thus analyzed. After this, proceed to whatever you wish to communicate,” Chace concluded.<sup>36</sup> Many writers followed Chace’s formula, creating a sense of structured conversational composition. Those who neglected such structural constraints frequently apologized for their scattered thoughts and poor writing habits.

The body of the letter was where writers stated their reason for writing. In some cases, they were merely responding to questions or comments posed by their correspondents, or, as was often the case in long chains of letters between family members and friends, documenting diary-style accounts of day-to-day events. In this type of letter, writers catalogued information such as their daily work or chores, the health and activities of family members, local news, and social encounters with other relatives, neighbors, and friends. Oftentimes the writer seized the opportunity to offer an opinion about political goings-on, extending an invitation for further discussion. Other letters were more obviously aimed at achieving a particular purpose beyond sharing news or casually conversing. Letters could be instrumental or transactional: making a specific request for information, money, materials, or assistance. As in Ruby’s letter, the tone

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<sup>36</sup> Elizabeth Buffum Chace to Arnold, 8 February 1860, Elizabeth Buffum Chace Letters, Rhode Island Historical Society.

and language of such letters was especially important. One did not want to appear impetuous or crude in posing requests.

The concluding portions of the letter, like the first words, were also significant for signaling the relationship between the correspondents. Family and close friends felt comfortable using terms of endearment, such as “Your loving wife,” or “Your affectionate daughter.” Strangers were more likely to revert to formalities. Closing a letter with the phrase “Your humble servant,” or “Your most obedient servant,” was a clear way of communicating respect, especially when making claims on the attention of a stranger. Alternatively, however, signing a letter to someone who was no more than a distant acquaintance, “Your friend,” asserted a respectful relationship between equals. Opponents of slavery also often used the closing of their letters to reinforce the sense of a bond based on a shared commitment to abolition. They concluded with phrases such as “Yours for the slave,” “Yours for the cause of freedom,” or “Your sister in the cause,” before signing their names. Such declarations clarified the writer’s intentions and reinforced the message conveyed in the body of the letter. On the other hand, excessive expressions of intimacy or deference, or the presumption of shared political sentiments, risked alienating rather than endearing the letter’s target audience. Writers took a calculated risk in defining their relationships in epistolary terms.

Correspondents often added further information or remarks in postscripts below the signatures, in the margins of the pages, and in cross-written notes. Cross-writing was a technique eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers used to save paper and thereby reduce the cost of postage, which, until 1845, was calculated by the sheet.<sup>37</sup> After filling the pages of their letters, writers turned the sheet ninety degrees and wrote perpendicularly across the first layer of words.

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<sup>37</sup> Henkin, *The Postal Age*, 18-19.

This practice was particularly common among women, for whom its use was a conscious or unconscious demonstration of thrift and aptitude for domestic economy. Because writers usually added their postscripts last, sometimes immediately before posting their letters, the notes often took on greater directness and immediacy than other parts of the letter. Hastily-added notes and cross-written portions betray urgency and emotion that the writer might have attempted to suppress elsewhere in the letter. One imagines the writer filling her pages with small talk and then turning the sheet after gathering the courage to be candid. In other instances, postscripts include information learned by the author after finishing the letter, questions they forgot to ask earlier, or extraneous content that did not fit in elsewhere. In his letter to Phelps, for instance, Reuben Ruby added a note asking to renew his newspaper subscription, and, at the last minute, scrawled his friend's court date in pencil.

Abolitionists combined aspects of familiar letters while also advancing political objectives. Letters could persuade, convert, contemplate, predict, argue, reveal, mislead, demand, demur, despair, and rejoice, among many other purposes. They often did several of these things within the space of a few pages or a few sentences. While I offer some loose thematic categorizations in the pages that follow, I do not define a strict taxonomy. More important is the point that every aspect of a letter, from its physical appearance—aspects such as the quality of the paper and the penmanship—to rhetorical considerations like form, language and tone, was evidence of the writer's character. To write “good letters” was to signal respectability, and a failure to do so was a mark against one's character.

## **Narrative Arc**

Over the course of the nineteenth century, debate over the future of slavery moved from the periphery of American politics to the center. The political contest came to a head with the outbreak of the American Civil War, culminating in the rewriting of the Constitution to abolish slavery. “The Politics of Correspondence” takes a chronological and thematic approach to show how the meanings and uses of antislavery correspondence developed over this time period. The outline of the story is familiar to students of the history of abolition as told through published accounts, public speeches, and electoral developments. But I approach these familiar scenes from American history through back channels and backstories; through the overlooked private words of abolitionist leaders and ordinary people alike, who took up their pens with a sense of entitlement and obligation to express their views.

The analysis begins with the era of gradual emancipation in Pennsylvania. Drawing upon the correspondence files of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society between about 1800 and 1830, Chapter One examines slaves’ use of letters to contest their status and claim the right to freedom for themselves and their families. Through letters, early black writers expressed a far-reaching vision of liberty and equality that shaped the development of radical abolitionism in the 1830s. In this period, freedom was a tenuous legal category that could be proven or disproven not only by traditional legal documents but also by a more informal paper trail, such as correspondence between family members. Enslaved and free black people understood the legal power of correspondence and used letters to advance their claims to freedom and rights.

The story then turns to the antebellum movement for immediate abolition, examining the emergence of letters as an essential feature of antislavery activism. Correspondence helped in recruiting supporters, defining central ideas, and organizing across long distances. It provided a sheltered space in which abolitionists could articulate their views, assess their progress, and

respond to the violent opposition they faced. Letters offered a relatively secure setting for opponents of slavery to discuss delicate and controversial subjects and transmit sensitive information.

Chapter Two establishes the link between growing demands for immediate abolition and the rapid growth of postal communication in the mid-nineteenth-century United States. Opponents of slavery harnessed letter-writing conventions and changes in postal technology after 1830, creatively applying them to serve political ends. The chapter examines the social and cultural context in which letter writing became a principal tool of political discussion and organization used by the antislavery movement. Beginning in the early 1830s, abolitionists used letters as tools of persuasion and conversion. Correspondence was an essential means for communicating facts, but it also became a device by which opponents of slavery came to imagine themselves as part of a national moral and political crusade. The chapter culminates with the Great Postal Campaign of 1835, in which the American Anti-Slavery Society attempted to flood Southern mails with incendiary abolitionist materials.

Chapter Three focuses on the intellectual foundations of nineteenth-century abolitionism, demonstrating that as the antislavery movement found its footing in the later 1830s, individuals used letters to clarify their views about slavery to themselves, as well as to others. The decade marked the emergence of a widespread campaign that relied upon letters to condemn slavery, demand immediate emancipation, and advocate for equal rights for black Americans. While public debate over slavery was forbidden in the mainstream political arena, letters provided a semi-private arena for abolitionists to formulate and discuss their ideas. By discussing the topic of slavery in letters, writers contributed to the circulation of radical ideas that made antislavery politics attractive to a broader audience than ever before.

Chapters Four and Five explain how the functions of letters shifted alongside changes and debates within the antislavery movement and in the broader scope of national politics in the 1840s and 50s. By 1840, clashes over issues including women's rights, the role of the church, and the efficacy of the ballot had divided the antislavery movement into various factions that competed for the attention and sympathy of the public. Chapter Four looks at the aftermath of those divisions from 1840 to 1850, a period during which letters served both as reports that transmitted information about persons and events and as a means of recruiting supporters. The emotional language suffusing many of the reporting letters reinforced the social and affective ties that unified the movement during a period of uncertainty. The sentimental tenor of correspondence in this era was especially important for mobilizing the numerous women who served as the backbone for major fundraising and petitioning campaigns.

Chapter Five analyzes the use of letters in response to the fugitive slave agitation that peaked in the years between 1845 and 1860. This chapter focuses on letters as conduits of sensitive information regarding the status of escaped slaves, a development that confirmed slaveholders' suspicions that the post could pose a threat to the security of their property. Participants in the "antislavery underground" relied on letters to carry out daring rescues that defied federal law and to marshal material support for their efforts. Furthermore, abolitionists used letters to record the stories of fugitives, often emphasizing the theme of family separation that echoed popular published slave narratives of this era. Fugitives became powerful spokespersons for the antislavery movement, and in letters addressed to friends and potential political allies, fugitive slaves and free black Northerners advocated for equal rights, not just nominal freedom.

The final chapters deal with the Civil War and the early years of Reconstruction. Echoing the first chapter, the last two chapters draw attention to the roles played by slaves and freedpeople



during the process of emancipation and its aftermath. Freedpeople, along with their abolitionist allies, used letters to claim civil, political, and economic rights beyond a mere release from bondage. They drew a direct connection between literacy, writing, and citizenship.

The circumstances of the antislavery movement changed dramatically with the onset of the American Civil War, which brought growing national support for a policy of military emancipation. As the war to save the Union became a war to end slavery, abolitionists used letters to rehearse political contests yet to come. That process is the subject of chapter Six. The war brought many Northerners, including abolitionists, into direct contact with slaves and ex-slaves for the first time. Some abolitionists witnessed the process of emancipation by traveling to the South to work for the cause of freedmen's aid and education. Their letters document the realization that emancipation alone was not enough to ensure the incorporation of former slaves as equal members of the national civil and political body.

Chapter Seven continues the story into the first years of Reconstruction, from 1865 to 1870, demonstrating that letter writing was a way for abolitionists and freedpeople to articulate together a radically democratic vision of post-war politics. After emancipation, a contingent of radical activists continued to rely on letters to convey their dissatisfaction with the shortcomings of freedom. Former slaves wrote to proclaim their rights as equal citizens and to make demands for economic redress.

The dissertation concludes in 1870 with the dissolution of the American Anti-Slavery Society and the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment, which together marked an end of the organized campaign for the abolition of slavery and attainment of equal rights for black Americans. Although isolated activists continued to operate in parts of the country, the epistolary structure that had sustained the movement for the previous forty years dissolved. While it prevailed,

however, opponents of slavery used letter writing to influence the changing political situation, setting the agenda for the most significant issues of the nineteenth century and forever altering the dimensions of national politics.

### **A Note on Literacy and Authenticity**

Most of the people whose words appear in the following pages were what we would consider literate: they could read and write, often with a substantial degree of fluency. Some of them, such as William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, and Lydia Maria Child, were substantial literary figures in their own right. Others, though they were not published writers or renowned lecturers, deployed language powerfully and creatively to express their political views, even if those views were mostly confined to the realm of letters. In addition to these conventionally-literate individuals, however, I have made an effort to include the writings and perspectives of people whom we might consider illiterate, barely literate, or “neoliterate.”<sup>38</sup> These individuals usually lacked extensive experience with the art of correspondence and struggled to write intelligibly. Nevertheless, as literary scholar Christopher Hager points out, they were “not necessarily handicapped in their expressive abilities,” and the letters of barely literate writers sometimes display a remarkable degree of sincerity and eloquence.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, such letters provide insight into the broader public culture of correspondence. The same conventional expressions and tropes appear in letters written by slaves and newly-freed people as in those of highly-educated elite writers. The repetition suggests that newly-literate writers modeled their

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<sup>38</sup> Hager, *Word by Word*, 34.

<sup>39</sup> Hager, *Word by Word*, 22.

compositions on letters they heard read aloud, saw printed in newspapers, or, in the case of slaves, glanced at over their masters' shoulders.

There were other ways to compose letters from the margins of literacy. Some illiterate individuals, including prominent figures such as Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth, used amanuenses, usually trusted friends, to record the words they spoke aloud. Others paid scribes or asked sympathetic strangers to write for them. For example, Rebecca Primus, an African American woman from Connecticut who worked as a teacher for freedpeople in Royal Oak, Maryland, after the Civil War, reported in a letter to her family, "One of the colored women has just been here to get me to write a letter to her daughter in Balt[imore]. ... She's not told me a word yet & I've written all that I can think will be suitable, & it now awaits her approval and a few additional words from herself."<sup>40</sup> As Primus's account suggests, the people who transcribed the words of illiterate people did so more or less accurately, depending on the circumstances.

While most amanuenses, including Primus, intended to record the messages faithfully, other situations were not so simple. Prior to the Civil War, most slaves had hardly any opportunity to commit their words to paper, but their thoughts and speech were sometimes represented by others who had an agenda of their own. Slaveholders and their agents included messages from their slaves in their letters or wrote letters on behalf of individual slaves. In such cases, the power disparity between the purported author and the transcriber and the divergence of their respective agendas significantly alter the meaning of the letter. I have done my best to call attention to these circumstances and to give the reader a sense of the social position and personality of the individuals I discuss. Other than in exceptional instances, however, I deliberately make little

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<sup>40</sup> Rebecca Primus to family, n.d., Primus Family Papers, Connecticut Historical Society. On Rebecca Primus's life and correspondence see Griffin, *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends*.

intellectual distinction between the expressions of highly literate and literary persons, simple letters written by less educated people, and words of illiterate persons that have been transcribed by others. In that sense, I consider the dissertation to be an interwoven series of stories, a chorus of voices that together argues for the power of correspondence to reveal the political consciousness of ordinary Americans.

## Chapter One

### Rehearsal for Abolition: Pennsylvania Slaves in the Era of Gradual Emancipation

On June 11, 1804, James Gipson, a slave, addressed the secretary of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, Thomas Harrison, to express disappointment with the Society's failure to act on his behalf.<sup>1</sup> Gipson employed a conventional opening: "I now take this opportunity to let you kow that I am well and Hope Ing thes few lines will faind You thesame[.]" After his polite greeting, however, Gipson's tone changed abruptly. He told Harrison, "I am very sorry thaht You think so litle of me If it was In my power as it is in yours I would Dow more for yu but I am A Slave and ever expect to be[.]" "[F]or all You mean to do for me dear sisters And brothers I am sorry that you Think so litle of me ... iexpect To be Sold every moment and If you men to Dow any thing for me Dow know as soon possible," Gipson explained. A third party, Mr. Jackson, had informed Gipson that a man, possibly a relative, was coming to help him—to free him or to prevent him from being sold—but "he has not come yet And I am very sorry for it[.]" Gipson demanded to know the reason for the delay, "for I am here A way ting with a greyte deal of pasiane[.]" Despite his apparent desperation, Gipson resumed a gracious attitude in closing the letter: "I have no more to say at Present[.] I Remain your affectionate And lovein brother."<sup>2</sup>

Gipson's letter exemplifies the way enslaved and free African Americans used letters to press claims for the recognition of the basic injustice of slavery and to hold self-proclaimed opponents

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<sup>1</sup> There is no location given to place the letter or Gipson. Thomas Harrison was a Philadelphia tailor who was one of the most active members of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society. He served as the secretary of the Acting Committee, and he was the primary contact person for slaves seeking their freedom through the assistance of the PAS. See Gary B. Nash and Jean R. Soderlund, *Freedom By Degrees: Emancipation in Pennsylvania and its Aftermath* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 123-124, 130-131.

<sup>2</sup> Lack of punctuation is a ubiquitous feature of eighteenth and nineteenth correspondence. I have indicated where I have inserted punctuation at logical sentence breaks to clarify Gipson's meaning for the reader. James Gipson to Sir [Thomas Harrison], 11 June 1804, Pennsylvania Abolition Society Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (PAS-HSP).

of slavery accountable to their principles. The correspondence files of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society (PAS) reveal a side of early antislavery activism that scholars have overlooked.<sup>3</sup> The famous movement for immediate abolition that arose in the 1830s based its organization on the exchange of letters, enabling a diverse range of people to make explicit and implicit claims to political recognition. In the earlier period of antislavery agitation, spanning the 1780s through the 1820s, black people tested the possibilities of letter writing for pressing their claims to freedom, and their white allies relied on correspondence to transact and deliver legal and financial assistance. This correspondence differs both in volume and nature from the letters and writing practices of the later movement. It is worth examining here, however, because it helps to explain the significance of letter writing to the antebellum campaign.

The PAS's correspondence demonstrates that early black activists expressed through letters a far-reaching vision of freedom and equality that shaped the emergence of radical abolitionism. Underlying this body of correspondence is the changing nature of American slavery in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. During these decades, the center of gravity of slavery shifted definitively southward, driven by emancipation in the North, the expansion of cotton into the old Southwest, the closing of the international slave trade, and the accompanying rise of the domestic slave trade.<sup>4</sup> The letters highlight families who were separated by the uneven reach of gradual emancipation laws and sought to manipulate the legal system or make use of the resources of the PAS to reunite in freedom. On a related note, there are letters written by or about

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<sup>3</sup> The New York Manumission Society performed similar work to the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, but their records have not preserved correspondence, though it probably existed.

<sup>4</sup> On the impact of the expansion of slavery and the rise of the domestic slave trade see: Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2016); Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); Adam Rothman, *Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

former slaves, who had been freed under emancipation laws or by individual manumissions, seeking documentary proof of their freedom as a defense against re-enslavement. Runaway slaves wrote to the PAS for support in bargaining with their masters for the ability to purchase their freedom or to negotiate their status from slavery for life to an indenture for a limited period. There are also numerous letters relating to victims of kidnapping—free black Pennsylvanians, often children, who were illegally abducted by traders and sold into slavery in the South. Finally, the PAS files include letters written by white Southerners who were willing to help people who were legally free and even some who were willing to part with their own slaves. Such sentiments are nearly always coupled with the hard-nosed expectation that the author's charity should come at minimal cost to them.

Together, these letters help to reveal the PAS's strategies for legal activism. The reformers exploited loopholes and technicalities in emancipation laws, providing legal aid to individual claimants. In doing so, they would not overthrow the entire institution of slavery, but they hoped to chip away at its margins, weakening the system without violating sacred property rights. More importantly, however, these documents demonstrate that African Americans learned how to exploit letter writing and the developing postal communication network to their political advantage. In doing so, they not only worked to secure freedom for themselves and their families, but they also articulated a radical abolitionist agenda that emphasized the universal injustice of slavery and the moral obligation to oppose it. Starting in the 1830s, these key insights were built upon and magnified by the second wave of the antislavery movement.

James Gipson took his time in choosing his words carefully and composing his message to achieve a forceful rhetorical impact. His penmanship is well-defined; each of the letters and words is clearly formed (see Figure 2). There is only one minor correction in the whole

composition, which suggests that Gipson read over his letter after he was finished.<sup>5</sup> He may have drafted the letter on a separate sheet of scrap paper, before copying it onto the thick half-sheet he used for the final version. Gipson generally capitalized the first letter of each new line of text, rather than the first word in a new sentence, and some of his spellings are irregular: “kow” for “know,” “Dow” for “do,” and “pasiane” for “passion.” Overall, however, Gipson showed himself to be a proficient writer. While employing the phonetic spelling patterns that are common among people at the margins of literacy, he also demonstrated his knowledge of more complicated words, such as “affectionate,” and concepts like silent letters.<sup>6</sup> His regular penmanship suggests that he had access to well-made writing implements and had enough education and practice to use them with aplomb. Furthermore, Gipson displayed his familiarity and confidence with employing the conventions of letter writing. The language he used in his opening and closing signaled courtesy and respectability. Gipson’s hope “That if we don’t met here that we Will meet here after,” which he expressed in the middle of making a plea for Harrison’s help, echoed common epistolary tropes that referred to the distance separating correspondents and the uncertainty of future meetings. It also underscored Gipson’s piety. Writing to Harrison, a man he barely knew and who occupied a more prestigious place in society, Gipson sought to capture his attention, and his sympathy, by establishing himself as a savvy and reputable correspondent.

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<sup>5</sup> Gipson inserted the word “me[e]t” in the phrase “I hope That if we dont met here that we Will meet here after[.]” Gipson to Harrison, 11 June 1804, PAS-HSP.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Hager uses the linguistic term “hypercorrection” to describe such errors. See Christopher Hager, *Word by Word: Emancipation and the Act of Writing*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 153. See also Daniel Schreier, “Hypercorrection and the Persistence of Local Dialect Features in Writing,” in Anita Auer, Daniel Schreier, and Richard J. Watts, eds., *Letter Writing and Language Change* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 264-276.



and I should to know the reason  
 of his not coming for I am here  
 at wayling with a greye Deul  
 of his name  
 I have no more to say at  
 present  
 I remain your affectionate  
 and loving brother  
 James Gipson

June 11<sup>th</sup> 1804  
 Dear Sir, I regret this opportunity  
 to tell you how that I am well and  
 hoping these few lines will express  
 your thanks so little of me if it was  
 for my power it is in your power  
 to do more for you but I am not  
 slave and ever expect to be for all  
 you mean to do for me dear sister  
 I think I am sorry that you  
 think so little of me and I hope  
 that if we don't here that we  
 will meet here after and respect  
 to buy all every morning and  
 if you men to have any thing  
 for me you know as soon possible  
 I heard buy Mr Jackson that  
 I may mighta Gipson was coming  
 on but he has not come yet  
 and I am very sorry for it

Figure 2: James Gipson to Thomas Harrison, 11 June 1804, Pennsylvania Abolition Society Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

In addition to helping Gipson establish the general worthiness of his character, the use of common letter-writing conventions also enabled him to make powerful criticisms of Harrison and the Abolition Society. Gipson did more than plead for assistance; he openly pointed to the imbalance of power between himself and Harrison. He challenged Harrison to measure up to his reputation as an abolitionist and reminded him, at the end of the letter, “I am here A way ting with a greyte deal of pasiane,” signaling his impatience. Gipson was too frustrated to wait in vain to be rescued, and he wrote to Harrison demanding an explanation for the lack of advocacy on his behalf. He articulated an expansive idea of justice, positioning himself at odds with the very person in whom he also placed his hope for delivering the means of his liberation. Gipson shrouded his potentially explosive demand for accountability in the epistolary language of courtesy and deference, perhaps even with a degree of irony. He pointed out Harrison’s avowed devotion to the abolition cause when he mentioned “all You mean to do for me dear sisters and brothers.” Gipson echoed this familial language in his closing, where he referred to himself as “your affectionate And lovein brother,” drawing on a customary trope to express their shared humanity and commitment to opposing slavery. He contrasted this assertion of unity with Harrison’s apparently low estimation of him, repeating “I am sorry that you Think so little of me” twice in the letter. Gipson also entertained the hypothetical situation that, if their roles were reversed, “I would Dow more for you[.]”<sup>7</sup> Throughout the letter, Gipson skillfully wove respectful language together with pointed criticisms to hold Harrison accountable for his failure to fulfill his pledged ideals.

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<sup>7</sup> Gipson to Harrison, 11 June 1804, PAS-HSP.

## Slavery, Abolition, and Correspondence in Pennsylvania

During the era of the American Revolution, New England and Mid-Atlantic states began to pass emancipation laws that sealed the eventual demise of slavery in the North. As recent scholars have pointed out, these laws did not represent the natural decline of slavery—slave labor remained essential to the Northern economy, especially in the Mid-Atlantic region—but they reflected the results of the concerted activism of slaves, free black people, and white abolitionists.<sup>8</sup> The process of gradual emancipation spanned more than half a century, but with the passage of the first laws came the rapid increase of numbers of free black residents in the North, especially in urban areas like Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. In these cities, and throughout the Northeast, free black communities built organizations and institutions that underwrote formal and informal political activism. As historians have now come to recognize, the roots of the movement for immediate abolition that arose in the 1830s lay in these networks of community activism that championed the abolition of slavery alongside equal civil and political rights.<sup>9</sup> The arguments and tactics developed by black activists from the Revolutionary era through the 1820s fundamentally shaped the emergence of the mid-nineteenth-century antislavery movement. The later movement included black and white abolitionists, men and women, who made bold claims for the immediate abolition of slavery and equal rights for free black people.

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<sup>8</sup> See for example: Manish Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 65-97; Leslie Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), Ch. 2-3; Graham Russell Hodges, *Root and Branch: African Americans in New York & East Jersey, 1613-1863*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), Ch. 6-7; Shane White, *Somewhat More Independent: The End of Slavery in New York City, 1770-1810*, (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1991). Arthur Zilversmit, *The First Emancipation: The Abolition of Slavery in the North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967) is an earlier study of gradual emancipation that exemplifies the tendency of historians to focus on white activists.

<sup>9</sup> Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*; Eric Foner, *Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad* (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 2015); Hodges, *Root and Branch*.

The community activism of African Americans in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries developed alongside early antislavery organizations that were dominated by elite white men, most prominently, the Pennsylvania Abolition Society (PAS) and the New York Manumission Society (NYMS). These organizations forged uneasy alliances with the people they sought to aid. While white abolitionists and free black communities shared certain goals and interests, such as providing opportunities for education and employment to free black people, they frequently clashed on the questions of immediate emancipation and equal rights. Wealthy white members of antislavery organizations saw themselves as generous benefactors to poor, degraded people, but they quickly learned not to expect unconditional gratitude from the subjects of their charity. They had to work closely with free black community leaders to align their offers of assistance to the demands of the people they sought to help. Meanwhile, African Americans constantly asserted the expectation that their participation in programs of moral uplift was conditional—they claimed not only the right to economic advancement out of the bonds of slavery and indenture but also equal civil and political standing. Even as some free black people accepted the basic tenets of moral uplift, especially through education, they sought to shape and control the programs and institutions designed for their advancement.<sup>10</sup>

White opponents of slavery harbored doubts about the ability of slaves to move from bondage to freedom without becoming a burden upon local governments and private charity. They supported gradual emancipation because it promised to ease the process for impoverished slaves and owners who relied on their labor. Over time, more and more members of early antislavery societies came to embrace schemes of colonization, which purported to circumvent

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<sup>10</sup> Leslie Harris highlights class differences among free black people that shaped their responses and relationships to the efforts of early abolition societies that were dominated by white men. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery*; Hodges, *Root and Branch*; Nash & Soderland, *Freedom by Degrees*.

the sticky social and political questions associated with a growing free black population by removing them entirely from the United States.<sup>11</sup>

In contrast, black Northerners resisted the constraints of gradual emancipation. Slaves often ran away from their masters to avoid years of continued service. Others negotiated for wages so that they might purchase their freedom or that of their family members. Paying careful attention to their legal rights, many sued for their freedom on the grounds of unlawful enslavement, pointing to the infractions of owners who attempted to illegally prolong their enslavement or amass profits by selling them illegally across state borders. Parents were especially protective of the rights of their children, who, according to the dictates of gradual emancipation laws, could be bound as unpaid servants for close to thirty years.<sup>12</sup> Free black people also vocally resisted the growing colonization movement, asserting their right to be included within the American citizenry.

Though the relationship between early white abolitionists and black Northerners was often clouded by racist paternalism and concessions to slaveholders, antislavery organizations provided much-needed support—financial, legal, and political—for the cause of emancipation. Despite the shortcomings of their plan for emancipation, the men who made up the membership of these organizations appeared fanatical to their peers. More importantly, cooperation between white opponents of slavery and black activists helped to advance African Americans' claims for equal citizenship rights. Historians have rightly pointed to some of the most successful results of

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<sup>11</sup> On colonization: Nicholas Guyatt, *Bind Us Apart: How Enlightened Americans Invented Racial Segregation*, (New York: Basic Books, 2016); Beverly C. Tomek, *Colonization and its Discontents: Emancipation, Emigration, and Antislavery in Antebellum Philadelphia*, (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> Sarah Levine-Gronningsater, "Delivering Freedom: Gradual Emancipation, Black Legal Culture, and the Origins of Sectional Crisis in New York, 1759-1870" (PhD Diss, University of Chicago, 2014).

these collaborations, including the development of schools serving black children, assistance to fugitive slaves, and the legal contestation of kidnapping and unlawful enslavement.<sup>13</sup>

The correspondence files of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society contain numerous letters written by or about people claiming to be unlawfully held as slaves. That the PAS preserved such letters suggests that they served a potential function as a form of legal evidence in cases of people attempting to obtain or prove their freedom. In other words, these letters reveal that freedom was a tenuous legal category that could be proven or disproven not only by traditional legal documents, such as deeds of manumission, but also by a more informal paper trail, such as correspondence between family members. Furthermore, these letters show that enslaved and free black people understood the legal power of correspondence and used letters whenever they could to advance their claims to freedom and rights—either by writing themselves or persuading someone to write on their behalf. They saw letters as a powerful resource available to them in negotiating their status. Finally, letters written by the claimants demonstrate that their authors, including those in the most desperate of circumstances, relied on contemporary rhetorical conventions associated with letter writing to convey their sense of personal dignity, probably knowing that even private correspondence between family members could be used as proof of good character on a public stage. Like James Gipson, they deployed and manipulated these conventions in ways that enabled them to make demands that challenged the limits of the PAS's activist project.

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<sup>13</sup> Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 9-160; Christopher Densmore, "Seeking Freedom in the Courts: The Work of the Pennsylvania Society for promoting the Abolition of Slavery, and for the Relief of Free Negroes unlawfully held in Bondage, and for improving the Condition of the African Race, 1775–1865," *Pennsylvania Legacies* 5, no. 2 (2005), 16-19; Richard S. Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Paul J. Polgar, "'To Raise Them to an Equal Participation': Early National Abolitionism, Gradual Emancipation, and the Promise of African American Citizenship," *Journal of the Early American Republic* 31, no. 2 (2011), 229-258.

A strange historiographical silence has greeted this body of sources. Many historical studies rely on other parts of the PAS collection, and a few cite individual letters from the correspondence files. But no scholar has discussed in depth any of the materials I cite below. Curiously, even those authors who set out to overturn heroic narratives of the elite founders of the PAS and their Revolutionary crusade for liberty tend to inadvertently replicate those narratives by failing to notice sources that subvert them. Others sensitively interpret sources from other parts of the collection, such as files of legal proceedings, emphasizing the key roles played by African Americans in raising and transacting court cases. Yet they omit further sources that would only strengthen their arguments.<sup>14</sup>

Meanwhile, another group of scholars has busily spilled ink on the similarly overlooked topics of literacy and writing among slaves and free black persons. These authors have focused their attention almost entirely on the antebellum South or, occasionally, have examined early black intellectual life in the North.<sup>15</sup> In the latter project, however, historians tend to highlight exceptional individuals or social groups who produced writings for a public audience.<sup>16</sup> As a

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<sup>14</sup> E.g. Nash & Soderland, *Freedom by Degrees*; Newman, *Transformation of American Abolitionism*. Dee. E. Andrews goes so far as to mention the correspondence as a major untapped source and mentions the existence of letters written by slaves and free black people, but she only briefly discusses a few examples of these letters and considers their significance primarily in the context of understanding the process of gradual emancipation as a matter of enforcing gradual abolition and manumission laws. Here, I examine such letters as a form of political expression that transcended the boundaries of these laws. See Andrews, "Reconsidering the First Emancipation: Evidence from the Pennsylvania Abolition Society Correspondence, 1785-1810," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 64 (Summer 1997), 230-249.

<sup>15</sup> John W. Blassingame, *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977); John Ernest, *Liberation Historiography: African American Writers and the Challenge of History, 1794-1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Hager, *Word by Word*; Stephen G. Hall, *A Faithful Account of the Race: African American Historical Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> For example: Richard S. Newman, *Freedom's Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AMR Church, and the Black Founding Fathers* (New York: New York University Press, 2008); Julie Winch, *A Gentleman of Color: The Life of James Forten* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). Exceptions include: Erica Ball, *To Live an Antislavery Life: Personal Politics and the Antebellum Black Middle Class*, (Athens, GA: University of Georgia

result, almost nothing is known about the private writings of ordinary black Americans prior to the 1830s.

Contrary to the common assumption that slaves were almost entirely illiterate, which is based on the antebellum South, the letters in the PAS correspondence files written by slaves display sophisticated knowledge of language and epistolary conventions. This discovery is surprising in light of historiographical blind spots that have masked the existence of African Americans' personal letters in the historical record. The collection includes a few letters written by free black educators and community leaders, such as Richard Allen and Absalom Jones. But many letters were composed by ordinary black people, both enslaved and free, who wrote with the expectation that their words would travel through a broad network of black readers in their community and beyond. In some cases, the letters appear to be isolated acts of writing that occurred only under the most extraordinary and traumatic circumstances. But others fit into an implied chronicle of family letters spanning the dislocations of distance and time.<sup>17</sup> The overall assemblage of this correspondence, which traffics in the ubiquitous expressions and tropes of contemporary letter-writing conventions, testifies to the existence of a much broader awareness of and participation in epistolary communication by African Americans than scholars have previously recognized.

Beyond the simple fact of their existence and survival, some letters are surprising because of their geographic origins. In the antebellum period of abolitionism, especially post-dating the

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Press, 2012); Erica Armstrong Dunbar, *A Fragile Freedom: African American Women and Emancipation in the Antebellum City*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

<sup>17</sup> On letters mediating dislocations: William Merrill Decker, *Epistolary Practices: Letter Writing in America Before Telecommunications*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); David Henkin, *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).



notorious postal campaign of 1835, it was rare for antislavery postal communication to occur between the North and South. In that era, the privacy of the mail was under siege by federally sanctioned censorship and vigilante surveillance (and reprisals) conducted by Southern postal employees and customers.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, laws that went into effect after the notorious 1831 rebellion of Nat Turner made it illegal in many Southern states for slaves to learn how to read and write.<sup>19</sup>

During the first wave of antislavery activism led by the PAS, however, the post had not yet been singled out as a seditious vehicle. Sectional political polarization over slavery had not manifested itself yet to the degree it would in decades to come. Whereas open-mindedness on the issue of slavery among Southerners would later be stamped out by its most aggressive defenders, at the height of the PAS's legal activities, from about 1800 to 1830, letter writing offered a feasible means of expression, and possibly deliverance, to people held unlawfully as slaves in Southern states.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, this tactic was still only available to a limited number of people: those who were literate or able to recruit literate allies with knowledge of the PAS. And, given the limited reach of the PAS's activist vision, only those with a legitimate legal claim to freedom could expect a response to their pleas for justice.

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<sup>18</sup> On the postal campaign see Richard John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), Ch. 7. Chapter Five discusses exceptions to the rule of the absence of contact between North and South regarding abolitionism as well as the measures taken to ensure the secrecy of that contact.

<sup>19</sup> Scholars have debated the efficacy of these laws for suppressing literacy among slaves, but most agree on the conservative estimate that five percent of slaves were literate to the point of composition in the antebellum South. See Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*; Hager, *Word by Word*.

<sup>20</sup> A note on geography: most of the letters come from states bordering Pennsylvania: Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia. This pattern makes sense for several reasons. Proximity to Philadelphia facilitated ties to the free black community and existing antislavery activism in the city. Also, these border areas were more directly connected to Philadelphia by usual modes of transportation such as railroads and ships, making it easier for information to escape. Finally, the institution of slavery was more tenuous in these border areas in general. Large free black populations existed in pockets throughout the Mid-Atlantic and Upper South states.

Many of the letters in the PAS correspondence files relate to the efforts of the society to provide legal assistance to people who were held in slavery illegally. Dating to the era of gradual emancipation in Pennsylvania and other parts of the Northeast, when the legal boundary between slavery and freedom was uncertain, numerous people were held in bondage in violation of state laws or of terms they had negotiated individually with former masters. In other instances, free black people were kidnapped from areas surrounding Philadelphia and were forcibly taken South, where they were sold into slavery.<sup>21</sup> Members of the PAS, many of whom were lawyers, sought to contest these cases on an individual basis through the court system. They were often called upon by victims of wrongful enslavement and their families to help gather legal evidence of a person's claims to freedom. Unlike later activists, most PAS members and other early white opponents of slavery did not consider abolition to be an uncompromising national moral and political question. They did not push for the immediate overthrow of slavery in the South, though they hoped that gradual emancipation in the North might encourage Southern slaveholders to follow their example. Early abolitionists avoided breaking laws, refusing to disrupt the existing social order. Instead, they advised cautious political change, moral uplift, and legal aid for individual people who were held in slavery in violation of the letter of the law.

The PAS sought to attack slavery through what it deemed the most concrete means possible: politics and the law. Pennsylvania was the first state to pass a gradual emancipation law, in 1780 (Vermont passed the first immediate emancipation law in 1777). According to the law, "every Negro and Mulatto child born" in Pennsylvania after the passage of the act in March 1780 who would otherwise be a slave, "shall be ... the servant of such person or his or her assigns, who

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<sup>21</sup> On kidnapping, see Foner, *Gateway to Freedom*, 50-52; Nash & Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees*, 196-201; Carol Wilson, *Freedom at Risk: The Kidnapping of Free Blacks in America, 1780-1865* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1994).

would in such case have been entitled to the service of such child, until such child shall attain unto the age of twenty eight years[.]”<sup>22</sup> In other words, children of enslaved mothers who were born after 1780 would serve an apprenticeship period as indentured servants until they were twenty-eight years old.<sup>23</sup> Slaves who were born before 1780 were not granted freedom by the law, but slaveholders were required to register their slaves within six months of the law’s passage. Any slaves who entered Pennsylvania with their masters from another state would be considered legally free after six months elapsed.<sup>24</sup> The latter sections of the law left significant leeway for individual slaves to contest their bondage if their masters failed to register them properly or attempted to carry them across state lines illegally. Despite the law’s limitations, the number of slaves in Pennsylvania dropped dramatically in the following decades, and the free black population grew accordingly. Furthermore, the PAS used the gradual abolition law as a mandate for using governmental power to chip away at slavery. Their activism, however, was wholly reliant upon the demands for freedom brought to them by people claiming to be unlawfully enslaved. The correspondence in the PAS’s files reveals the various claims to freedom African Americans made in their letters and asserts the claimants’ expansive vision for opposing slavery that often exceeded the society’s legalistic imperatives.

### **“Please God i Live to Returne:” Families Separated by Gradual Emancipation**

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<sup>22</sup> “Pennsylvania – An Act for The Gradual Abolition of Slavery, 1780,” *The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History, and Diplomacy*, accessed 23 March 2017, [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th\\_century/pennst01.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/pennst01.asp).

<sup>23</sup> An earlier version of the law had a less onerous requirement: girls would be enslaved until age eighteen, boys until age twenty-one. The age was changed under pressure by slaveholders. Nash & Soderland, *Freedom by Degrees*, Ch. 4.

<sup>24</sup> An exception was made for slaves of members of Congress and foreign ministers. Nash & Soderland, *Freedom by Degrees*, Ch. 4. An example of this loophole is discussed in Erica Armstrong Dunbar’s *Never Caught: The Washingtons’ Relentless Pursuit of their Runaway Slave, Ona Judge* (New York: 37 Ink/Atria, 2017).

On August 3, 1801, Ann Childers (or Childres) wrote to the PAS secretary, Thomas Harrison, requesting information about her son, William, whom she left in his care. She told him, “Sir [I] take this opportunity of Writing to You To Let you know that i am gone to Meriland,” before asking him “How my Son Comes On Wether he a Good Boy Or Weather he is Bound or no....” The nature of Childers’s prior relationship to the PAS and her own legal status as a free person or a slave is opaque based on this communication. If Childers was, until this point, a resident of Pennsylvania, her child would be entitled to freedom at age twenty-eight under the provisions of the gradual emancipation law of 1780. Depending on her age, Childers herself might also have been affected by that law. It is more likely, however, that Childers hailed from Maryland, where there was no emancipation law. She instructed Harrison to direct his response to “Fransis Rogester” at “Sadlers cross Roades.” In 1801, Francis Rochester lived in Queen Anne’s County in Maryland’s Eastern Shore region, where there is a Saddler Road. There were eleven slaves in Rochester’s household in 1790, one in 1800, and seven in 1810.<sup>25</sup> Over that time, there were also between one and five free black people living in the household.

Slavery remained legal in Maryland until 1864, during the Civil War. But by the time of the war, the institution had followed an irregular pattern of erosion since the Revolution. With the decline of tobacco production in the Chesapeake region by the late eighteenth-century, many slaveholders in Maryland and its neighboring states sold their slaves South, feeding into the cotton boom. Others chose to practice mixed agriculture and retained slave labor on a seasonal basis. Meanwhile, the rapid growth of Baltimore fueled a new system that mixed slavery and

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<sup>25</sup> United States Federal Census, *Ancestry Library*.

other forms of bound labor.<sup>26</sup> As Baltimore's craft and manufacturing sectors grew and agricultural production in rural counties ebbed, rural slaveholders began moving, selling, or hiring out their slaves to the city. In this transition, many slaves negotiated for eventual self-purchase or manumission, exchanging a lifetime of enslavement for a term of years. Manumission became common while slaveholders also purchased more slaves after some of their slaves had negotiated for and attained their freedom.<sup>27</sup>

Ann Childers's letter indicates her attempt to take advantage of the malleable terrain of slavery and freedom. Perhaps she had spent time in Philadelphia as a servant to the Rochester family during their visits to the city. Or maybe she lived there for a longer time, with or without her master's permission. She may have raised her son there. If William was born in Pennsylvania, Childers could have made a strong case for his freedom.<sup>28</sup> In any case, Childers seized on the uncertain line between freedom and slavery that characterized life for African Americans in Pennsylvania and its neighboring states in this period.<sup>29</sup> She put her trust in the PAS, reminding Harrison, "You no the Morning I Left [William] Sir upon you Word Left him With a Contented Mind As You told Me...." Childers used her letter as an opportunity to thank

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<sup>26</sup> Seth Rockman, *Scraping By: Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

<sup>27</sup> Stephen T. Whitman, *The Price of Freedom: Slavery and Manumission in Baltimore and Early National Maryland*, (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1997), 4-5, 8-14, 24, 27-28.

<sup>28</sup> Jessica Millward, *Finding Charity's Folk: Enslaved and Free Black Women in Maryland* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2015).

<sup>29</sup> Pennsylvania's gradual emancipation law encouraged slaves in nearby "border states" (i.e. Maryland, Delaware, and Northern Virginia) to run away more frequently. Another option was for enslaved parents to attempt to move their children to Pennsylvania to avoid perpetual enslavement. This pattern was one factor that helped to weaken slavery in those states. See Newman, *Transformation of American Abolitionism*; Whitman, *The Price of Freedom*. Richard Newman and James Mueller call Pennsylvania "the equivalent of abolitionist borderlands throughout the Atlantic world." See "Introduction," in Newman and Mueller, eds., *Antislavery and Abolition in Philadelphia: Emancipation and the Long Struggle for Racial Justice in the City of Brotherly Love*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011), 4.

Harrison for his assistance, but she offset her humility with specific claims. She demanded to know how her son was faring—whether he was behaving well and whether he was “Bound” as an indentured servant.<sup>30</sup> She also coupled her gratitude with appeals to Harrison’s sense of justice and honor. She told Harrison, “I Shall Never No how to You A Mends for your Kindness To Me I hope you Will see him weel done by According to promise In the fear of God & Man,” cloaking her vehement demand—that Harrison must honor their agreement—in humble praise. Childers allowed herself only a few words that hint at the emotional anguish she experienced upon being separated from her son, which also served to underscore the urgency of her claim to ensuring her son’s welfare. At the midpoint of her letter, after recounting her experience leaving her son “With a Contented Mind,” Childers exclaimed, “Please God i Live to Returne,” and in closing, she reminded Harrison, “iam very anxious to no About my Son ... pleas to Write to me,” signing herself, “Your humble servant.”<sup>31</sup>

Despite her irregular spelling and capitalization, Childers deftly shifted between several rhetorical roles in the space of a single page: deferential correspondent, anguished mother, and righteous claimant. She peppered her composition with conventional markers, especially in the opening and closing lines: “[I] take this opportunity of Writing,” “Directs Sadlers cross Roades,” “Your humble Servant.” In doing so, Childers demonstrated her literacy on two levels. Firstly, she could read and write, and the formation and flourishes of each individual character testified

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<sup>30</sup> Children were bound as servants for a period of years to avoid their becoming dependent on the city. They were legally entitled to receive a proper education during the period of indenture, and they would receive payment upon their release from bondage. This was one way the PAS and other advocates of gradual emancipation hoped to ease the moral and economic transition from slavery to freedom. See Nash & Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees*, Ch. 6.

<sup>31</sup> Ann Childers to Thomas Harrison, 3 August 1801, PAS-HSP. Richard Newman briefly discusses Childers’s letter as an example of rhetorical deference among African American writers in the early republic, though he acknowledges that Childers “transcended her own deferential tone to make a none-too-subtle point.” He describes Childers as a “dirt-poor Philadelphia woman.” See Newman, *Freedom’s Prophet*, 125.

to her careful attention to detail in her penmanship. Secondly, Childers proved herself fluent in contemporary epistolary language. She sandwiched the real meat of her letter—her request for information about her son’s wellbeing and demand for Harrison to stick to his word—in between stock phrases and expressions of gratitude that were no doubt genuine but also served to offset her forthright demands. In other words, Ann Childers deployed her prose to best ensure that she would get what she wanted: reassurance of her son’s safety in Philadelphia under the protection of the PAS.

Childers was not alone in her aim to seek help for her family from the PAS through writing letters. In other instances, supporters of emancipation, including Quakers living in border states, wrote to the PAS on behalf of black people in their area. In 1796, two men from White Marsh, Maryland, wrote on behalf of Samuel Ogles, a slave whom they had attempted to help in his quest to procure his own freedom and that of his wife and infant child. The authors stated that they decided to help Ogles because he “had behaved him[self] as well as might reasonably have been Expected, his (Situa[tion] &c. being Considered),” and they successfully raised money and acquired a bill of sale to purchase his family. They were thwarted, however, when the owner of the woman and child violated their agreement and sold the infant, and Samuel’s master also sold him. While Ogles did not write the letter himself, the authors sent him with it as the bearer, so that he might present his case in person while also removing himself physically from the clutches of his new owner.<sup>32</sup>

The complicated and uneven process of gradual emancipation often separated parents and children on opposite sides of slavery and freedom. Many people lived in a borderland of unfreedom: not slaves for life but bound for a number of years, able to be bought and sold during

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<sup>32</sup> Tho[mas] W. Pryor and Jesse Trump to Pennsylvania Abolition Society, 11 September 1796, PAS-HSP.

that time, unable to live and travel where they pleased, and not paid adequate wages to make a life for themselves. Even for families in which all members were legally free, parents frequently had to face the decision to bind out their children as servants in exchange for the promise of upkeep and education while they pursued employment elsewhere. Black families and their allies came to see the PAS as a means of enforcing the terms of agreements they made, thereby mitigating the anguish they felt when they were separated. They used letters when they could to communicate their expectations. These letters also show that while the PAS saw itself as an organization that relied on strictly legal means to aid deserving individuals, African Americans throughout the Mid-Atlantic and Chesapeake region sought to impose their own vision of justice upon the organization.

In addition to writing to the PAS, members of black families also exchanged letters among themselves seeking reunion and assistance in attaining freedom. These letters show that the PAS's formal structure for legal aid existed alongside a much more widespread informal network of black families and communities. The PAS only intervened after the resources of these connections had been exhausted. The recipients of the letters showed them to their relatives and friends, who, in turn, directed them to leaders in the free black community. Those community leaders—ministers, teachers, and others involved in local activism—pointed them to their contacts at the PAS. The society filed these letters with their other official correspondence, preserving it as a possible source of evidence in case of further legal action.

For instance, Hannah Vanbulkerk, a slave living in Caldwell, New Jersey, wrote to her son Cato in June of 1805. Cato Vanbulkerk was living in Philadelphia, presumably as a free man, and working as a fiddler. Hannah began her letter by expressing sentiments typical to any mother long separated from her son. She told Cato, "I long to see you in my old age... my dear son I



pray you to come and see your dear old Mother. Or send me twenty dollar and I will come and see you in Philadelphia.” Hannah also conveyed the delicate news that she was now living with “Mr Grover the Minister” and had taken his last name. If a visit was not possible, she suggested that Cato send her a letter describing his life: “what family you have and what you do for a living[.]” The tone of her letter abruptly shifted at this point, and Hannah explained the pressing reason for contacting her son. She lamented, “I am a poor old servant I long for freedom,” and explained that “my Master will free me if any body will engage to maintain me so that I do not come upon him.” In closing, Hannah made an emotional appeal, “I love you Cato you love your Mother-- You are my only son.”<sup>33</sup>

Hannah Vanbulkerk’s letter sheds light on her situation somewhere at the fringes of slavery and freedom. She was technically a slave, but she lived with a man who was not her master and saw a chance for legal manumission. New Jersey enacted a gradual emancipation law in 1804, the last Northern state to do so. Like Pennsylvania, New Jersey’s law applied only to children born after its passage, who would serve their mothers’ owners for a term of up to twenty-five years. Despite its limitations, however, the emancipation law created room for enslaved adults to negotiate for their manumission.<sup>34</sup> Hannah’s letter suggests her awareness of the law and its broader implications. Her master’s stipulation that she find someone to “engage to maintain” her after her manumission indicates that, at least from his point of view, Hannah’s age or physical condition rendered her incapable of laboring to support herself as a free woman. Of course, her master’s concern was not for Hannah’s welfare but for his own liability. He faced legal

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<sup>33</sup> Hannah Vanbulkerk to Cato Vanbulkerk, 3 June 1805, PAS-HSP.

<sup>34</sup> James Gigantino, *The Ragged Road to Abolition: Slavery and Freedom in New Jersey, 1775-1865*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 6-7.

repercussions for manumitting a person who could become a burden on the state. Although Hannah had not seen her son for twenty years, Cato was her best hope for helping her to secure her freedom. Hannah wrote her letter to reconnect with her son and to advance her claim for manumission.

Correspondence enabled separated family members to communicate crucial information about their legal status and wellbeing. Letter writing also provided an opportunity to strategize, advise, or warn correspondents about ways to improve their condition. Gradual emancipation had a broad impact across the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic states. Black families often found themselves separated geographically with some members legally free and others remaining enslaved. They used letters to mitigate threats of emotional and physical dislocation and in attempts to exploit and manipulate legal possibilities.

With only a few surviving examples of letters exchanged between family members involved in legal contests over enslavement and manumission, it might be tempting to assume that African Americans only used letters as a last resort, to communicate duress and desperation. A further example counters this notion. The PAS preserved two letters written by Ann Warrick to her mother, Hannah Armstrong, over the course of five years. Warrick was held as a slave in Portsmouth, Virginia, while her mother resided in Philadelphia as a free woman. Her first letter, dated May 7, 1818, resembles the letters above in its tone of emergency. Warrick opened her letter with a conventional greeting, informing Armstrong that she had received her prior letter, which was directed to her master by “witch I am happy to find you well as this Leves me at Preasant,” but she quickly revealed that she was in a state of dire emotional distress. She scolded her mother, “you would Obliged me much if you had said Lithel more” in the letter to her master, because it had “very Lithel Efect on my master our Mrs ... as the former Letter you Sent

hade none[.]” Warrick continued, “I begged them to Lett me Go but they would not....” She explained the situation. She was currently “Stopping along” with a man named Johnson, who wanted to help her purchase her freedom. Johnson lacked sufficient funds to meet the price set by her owners (\$300), however, who were in “very Power Circumstances[.]” Then, Warrick revealed the heart of her dilemma. If she could not raise the money to purchase herself, her owners would sell either her or her children South to relieve their financial distress. By purchasing her own freedom, Warrick hoped to avoid being permanently separated from her children. She implored Armstrong, “Dear Mother if et is In your Powre to help your Pore Doter ... Do Dear Mother Tank on your forlorn Child your only Dotter ... Think on the hardship of Slavery.” In her closing lines, Warrick lamented that if she could not raise the money, “Heaven only no where I will Go if I am Sould ... God only no where I will be Brout to ... The Slavves her is Selling Every Day and Caried to N Orlines if Iam Sould of my hope is over forever ... tank on your Pore unfortunate Girl[.]” She signed her letter, “I Remain your Dutifull Dotter.”<sup>35</sup>

Warrick’s letter echoes many qualities of the previous examples. She employed conventional epistolary language along with sentimental depictions of motherhood, both her own and her mother’s, to strengthen her claim for assistance in gaining her freedom. Her anguish is made visceral in her pleas for aid. Yet she also referred to a previous exchange of letters, suggesting that this document is only part of a longer correspondence, representing an exceptional moment of emotional suffering.

The second letter by Warrick dates to just over five years later, July 29, 1823. She wrote again to Armstrong in a much calmer state of mind. Her penmanship and spelling improved, suggesting that she had more opportunities to practice her writing and improve her literacy. She

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<sup>35</sup> Ann Warrick to Hannah Armstrong, 7 May 1818, PAS-HSP.

wrote more fluently, carefully observing epistolary etiquette, while also adding her own embellishments. Warrick opened the letter by informing her mother, “I avail myself the pleasure of writing you these few Lines hoping they may find you enjoying the perfect Blessings of Health as thank the Supreme Ruler of the Univirse leaves me at present[.]” This opening repeated the sentiment she expressed at the beginning of the first letter in a more elaborate fashion. Warrick instructed her mother to “take particular care in writing me with information how I may find you or write, as it is my intentions to leave this [place] as quick as I can make it convenient....” Evidently, in the intervening years, Warrick made a legal case for the freedom of herself and her children, although the lawsuit was still pending at the time she wrote. She described herself as “perplexed” about its lack of progress, “on account of mine and childrens Freedom having been twice cleared ... God knows how it will terminate.” Warrick drew her letter to a close by informing her mother of her new address and signing herself “Your ever affect. Daughter.” Warrick buried an important piece of news in postscript, perhaps her primary reason for writing in the first place. She added that she had recently married a man named Peter Edwards, and “he sends his respects to you.”<sup>36</sup>

The second letter by Warrick to her mother builds upon an implied family history of correspondence with all the usual elements of an intimate exchange, including affection, information, and tension. Gaining confidence as a writer, Warrick displayed her knowledge of the conventions of letter writing. Perhaps she meant to impress her proud mother or irritate her with her superior understanding of the epistolary form. As in most relationships between parents and children, it was probably some combination of both. Either way, her familiarity with letter writing allowed her to present a dignified face to her mother and made her sympathetic to the

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<sup>36</sup> Ann Warrick to Hannah Armstrong, 8 July 1823, PAS-HSP.

members of the PAS, who took on her case. For Warrick, correspondence was an ongoing means of advancing her claim to freedom for herself and her children and escaping from the brutal whims of her master.

Letter writing was a weapon used by black families and their allies to combat the threats of distance and dislocation that were aggravated by the growth of the domestic slave trade. As gradual emancipation took hold in Pennsylvania after 1780, family members found themselves divided between slavery and freedom. The PAS offered the promise of legal aid to those who were wrongfully held in slavery, but this course of action was a last resort. Many people relied on their own family and social connections first to improve their situation before turning to the PAS. For both audiences, however, claimants used letters to communicate their expectations for assistance as a matter of justice.

### **“aninstrument of writing to protect me:” Letters as Tools for Negotiation**

While slaves sought to exploit legal loopholes created by Pennsylvania’s gradual emancipation law to gain their liberty, African Americans who were already legally free, by birth or by manumission, still found themselves in a tenuous position. Without proof of their freedom, they faced the constant threat of being forced back into slavery. They could be kidnapped and sold into the domestic slave trade or enslaved on their home ground by white employers seeking to take advantage of their ambiguous legal status. Free black people understood the power of written documentation of their legal status. They used letters to obtain necessary proof of freedom, and, as the records in the PAS files demonstrate, the letters themselves became a form of legal evidence. These letters encompassed not only an individual’s claims to free status but also their self-presentation as respectable, upstanding people who deserved freedom.

Slaves and free black people during the era of gradual emancipation depended on paperwork to attain and preserve their freedom. Slaves who suspected that their masters failed to register them properly according to Pennsylvania's abolition law had grounds to claim their freedom. Wills and deeds of manumission documented the status of former slaves who were freed by their masters. Even those who were born free, including children born after the passage of the 1780 law, often relied on indenture and apprenticeship agreements to certify their status as temporarily, as opposed to permanently bound laborers.<sup>37</sup> Black people, regardless of their age, birthplace, legal status, or employment, were vulnerable to the assumption, supported by discriminatory laws, that their labor belonged to white employers, either as slaves, servants, or low-paid workers. Any person who appeared to be idle or outside of the control of a white employer faced being pressed into bound labor or, an even more disturbing prospect, kidnapped and sold into slavery. It was not possible for free black people to carry their freedom and employment documents with them always, but they faced further challenges when their papers were not readily available to them, or if they were misplaced or lost.

The PAS attempted to mitigate the treacherous terrain of obtaining and recording freedom documents for African American clients. They often relied on the social connections of free black community leaders in Philadelphia to identify people at risk of being unlawfully re-enslaved and to gather evidence in favor of their legal freedom. Richard Allen, a black minister and influential community leader, passed along cases and evidence to be supported by the greater legal power of the PAS.<sup>38</sup> For example, in 1801, Allen wrote to a claimant in New York, John

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<sup>37</sup> Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery*; Nash & Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees*, Ch. 6; Amy Dru Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Era of Slave Emancipation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998) traces a similar struggle for control over freedpeople's labor in the South after the Civil War.

<sup>38</sup> See Newman, *Freedom's Prophet*, esp. Ch. 5.

Hall, to inform him that “your papers are in the hands of Thomas Harrison Secretary of the Abolission Society,” who would ensure that they were properly recorded. The Society would then “keep the origenoral and forward you a ccopy....” Allen urged Hall, “you may therefore Rest easy in your mind...” Almost as an afterthought, Allen added, “your time he [Hall’s former master] gave for 55£ after beating him down,” suggesting that Hall originally claimed his freedom as a fugitive.<sup>39</sup> As this example illustrates, black people and their allies used correspondence to obtain access to their freedom papers, sometimes offering payment or negotiating a lifetime of slavery down to a matter of years. When those documents failed to materialize, however, the letters themselves became evidence of their legal freedom.

In May of 1803, Sarah Prior of Dover, Delaware, informed her daughter in Philadelphia, Hannah Walters, that she was “still on the top of the hill making cake & beer for a honest living.” She urged Walters to “be good and Every body will love you take care of your self ... and keep no bad company[.]” Prior provided news of Walters’s siblings before she clarified the main purpose of her letter: to ask Walters to send the copy of her master’s will that she had left in her custody. This matter, Prior wrote, “is of great consequence,” and she warned her daughter “I doo not wish you to come down to see me until some things which you know is settled[.]”<sup>40</sup> Like Ann Warrick’s correspondence with her mother, the tone and content of Sarah Prior’s letter to her daughter implies that it fit into a longer chain of exchanges. She relied on common letter writing tropes, such as asking that her daughter “send your poor old Mother a letter by the very first chance you have[.]” Prior’s request for the copy of her master’s will, which presumably

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<sup>39</sup> Richard Allen to John Hall, 22 February 1801, PAS-HSP. Notes that appear to be penmanship practice appear on this letter in a different handwriting. This detail suggests that John Hall used the letter to practice his penmanship, possibly before composing a reply to Allen.

<sup>40</sup> Sarah Prior to Hannah Walters, 23 May 1803, PAS-HSP.

provided for her manumission, reveals that she chose to send this precious document to her daughter for safekeeping in Philadelphia. Now, however, Prior had reached a moment of crisis and needed the will to prove her free status and perhaps that of her other children. The presence of this letter in the PAS's correspondence files suggests that Walters sought their help to reinforce her mother's legal claims. In the absence of the will itself, the letter testified to the existence of the document elsewhere.

Letters could become a field of debate over an individual's free or slave status, and ambiguities arose when masters and slaves put forth contradictory accounts in letters. In August 1817, Zebulon Beaston of Elkton, Maryland, forwarded to the PAS a letter addressed to him written by his slave, William Anderson. Anderson wrote from Philadelphia to Beaston, informing him that he was in "A very critical situation ... unaccount of my not having A feew Lines from under your hand to protect me from the cunstables hear who are taken up every parsan as runaways tha can lay thare hands upon...." Anderson had explained his situation to the mayor, who told him to "bee shure to write Down to you and get from under your hand aninstrument of writing to protect me[.]" Following the mayor's instructions, Anderson implored Beaston to "bee so good as to sen mee up Afew Lines to cirtify that I was your property So that I may goin safety and get my money that is owing to me and come Down to sea you and my children[.]" Anderson asserted these main points repeatedly: his request that Beaston send a letter disproving the accusations that he was a runaway, the fact that money was owed to him from gainful employment in Philadelphia, and his desire to return to Maryland. Anderson offset his demand that Beaston authorize his autonomy in Philadelphia with assurances that he was not abusing the privilege and that his greatest wish was to come home after collecting the income due to him. He revealed that his children still resided with Beaston in Maryland, providing a



significant incentive for him to return (perhaps an intentional decision on Beaston's part). In closing, Anderson told Beaston, "Noe more at present But Remain your moss obedient and very humble sarvant." The sentiment took on a double meaning in this context as both adherence to conventional epistolary deference and a literal reference to Anderson's status as Beaston's slave.<sup>41</sup>

On the same sheet of paper, Beaston added his own account of the situation, and sent the whole packet to the PAS. According to Beaston, Anderson was a "slave for life" but allowed to "work for himself" until he paid Beaston fifty dollars, at which time Beaston would "git him a full discharge from Slavery." But Beaston had not yet received any payment from Anderson, and he heard rumors that Anderson was refusing to pay because "the Laws of Pensilvana would free him." Now that Anderson was facing legal trouble in Pennsylvania, Beaston requested that the PAS "see him wrighted ... and likewise to endeavour to git me the money from him."<sup>42</sup> Beaston presented himself as fair minded: he sought to recoup the money paid for Anderson "with out one cent profit." Yet he also pitted Anderson's description of himself as a hardworking family man against his own claim that Anderson sought to take advantage of him by slipping through a legal loophole. Beaston attempted to use the PAS as a mediator that would serve his interests, supposing that the propertied men who made up its membership would sympathize with his desire to avoid a financial loss. Even Beaston's desire to "see him wrighted" did not spring from a humanitarian impulse to prevent Anderson from being punished as a runaway. If Anderson was found to be a fugitive, he could be returned to slavery elsewhere—most likely sold further south

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<sup>41</sup> William Anderson to Zebulon Beaston, 10 August 1817, PAS-HSP.

<sup>42</sup> Zebulon Beaston to William Wayne, Jr., 15 August 1817, PAS-HSP.

into the domestic slave trade. Perversely, to Beaston the PAS appeared to be the best resource for preserving his property rights in man.

Contrary to Beaston's expectations, the PAS supported Anderson's claim to freedom, and the two letters served as the "paper establishing the freedom of said William" after he remained in Philadelphia for six months.<sup>43</sup> The PAS recorded Anderson's free status in their manumission book. While Beaston attempted to use Anderson's letter to support his property rights, the PAS seized on different evidentiary claims. Anderson was no runaway slave; Beaston gave his consent for him to leave Maryland to live in Philadelphia. And Anderson carefully calibrated his letter to present himself as an honorable person. He stressed his family and fair compensation for his labor, and the tone of his letter was polite and respectful. Anderson struck a careful balance between clearly and authentically stating his demands to his master without overstepping the bounds of deference and submission. Whatever agreement existed between Beaston and Anderson, the PAS rested their treatment of the case on the basis of epistolary conduct. In this instance, the claims of the slave for humanity and justice outweighed the financial interests of the master.

While Anderson was probably not aware that his letter to his master would serve as evidence of his character and legal status, others explicitly used letters as a form of bargaining power to secure freedom for themselves and their families. For example, James Cooper, a black man living in Philadelphia, attempted to negotiate for the freedom of his wife, Sarah, who was the slave of James Guthrie in Greene County, Tennessee.<sup>44</sup> The circumstances of their separation are not clear, but James had only recently discovered the location of his wife when he addressed a

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<sup>43</sup> Note on verso of Anderson to Beaston, 10 August 1817 and Beaston to Wayne, 15 August 1817, PAS-HSP.

<sup>44</sup> James Guthrie died Greene Co., Tenn. in 1829. Will from *Ancestry Library*.

letter to Guthrie in early 1818. Only Guthrie's response to Cooper's letter is preserved, in which he made the contradictory statement that "The Ties of Humanity compells me to part with her under these Serious Circumstances of Restoreing to a Disconsolate Husband a Beloved wife – no Sum of Money would induce me to part with Sarah...." Guthrie continued to praise Sarah's work in his home before revealing the nature of his misgivings: that "the Price of Black People is so Enormously High in this Country that I could not Replace Such a one as her ... for Less than Between Six & Seven Hundred Dollars...." Guthrie suggested he would accept \$550, a price at which he would "Sacrifice fifty Dollars at Least," to gratify the desire of the couple to be reunited. Guthrie ordered Cooper to reply to his letter with a detailed plan for exchanging the money and retrieving Sarah so that he could arrange to purchase a new slave to replace her. Guthrie explained, "I Cannot do without two [slaves], Living in such a Publick Place," suggesting that his primary concern was preserving his reputation, not the welfare of the couple.<sup>45</sup> While it is not clear what James Cooper proposed in his initial letter, Guthrie treated the correspondence as a negotiation.

Guthrie displayed a preoccupation with his interests as a slave owner throughout his letter, so it is no surprise that the first mention of Sarah's point of view comes in a postscript. According to him, "Sarah has Frequently mentioned ...that she had lost all Hopes of Ever Seeing you but Seemed to be Revived in a Transport of Joy when she heard your letter."<sup>46</sup> Sarah was illiterate, and she relied on Guthrie both to read James's letter aloud to her and to faithfully record her reply. Guthrie added a note at the bottom of his letter transcribing Sarah's response to her husband. The note reads:

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<sup>45</sup> James Guthrie to James Cooper, 26 February 1818, PAS-HSP.

<sup>46</sup> James Guthrie to James Cooper, 26 February 1818, PAS-HSP.

My Dear Husband I Was Glad to Hear from you when your Letter Come to hand and that you was well and Had not forgot me my Dear Husband Try to Redeem me and I will assist you in Reimbursing the money so that We may git together once More and Live together the Balance of Our Days I am Well and With her Respect your Loveing Wife  
Till Death

her  
Sarah X Cooper  
Mark

Though Sarah's brief addendum was clearly filtered through the surveillance of Guthrie, she still managed to assert her sense of dignity and her ardent desire for reunion and freedom. Sarah responded as if her husband's original letter had been addressed directly to her, and she used the conventional phrase "when your Letter Come to hand," suggesting her familiarity with epistolary language. The only gaps in the illusion that the letter came directly from Sarah's pen are when Guthrie wrote in closing, "With her Respect," and in the signature, where Sarah made her "Mark."<sup>47</sup>

In addition to this note, a longer letter from Sarah Cooper, dated March 20, was addressed to James separately. This letter explained that Sarah "has now the happiness of being privileged to write through a friend," whose identity is not revealed. Perhaps the amanuensis was another Guthrie family member who gave in to Sarah's pleas to extend her communication with her husband.<sup>48</sup> Regardless of the writer's identity, the letter allowed Sarah more space to record her reaction to James's attempt to reunite. Sarah told James that his proposal to redeem her from slavery "makes my heart Leap with Joy." She expressed her faith that "If it lays in your power you will yet save me for your own." Sarah also assured James that Guthrie "feels desirous to further the cause of humanity" and "will make the terms much easier to you than he would to any

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<sup>47</sup> Sarah Cooper to James Cooper in James Guthrie to James Cooper, 16 February 1818, PAS-HSP.

<sup>48</sup> The handwriting is similar but not the same, suggesting that the writer was a family member instructed in the same style of penmanship. The letter is dated only March 20. From context it appears to be 1818, though it is dated on the verso 1819, possibly by a member of PAS who filed it later on.

other person,” echoing Guthrie’s ambivalent commitment to securing the reunion while preserving his financial interests. A note of desperation crept into Sarah’s letter when she begged James, “I want you to write me immediately – and inform me If I may Live in expectation that you will one day eyre Long Ransom me or Whether I shall be doomed to deplore in absent bondage the dearest of husbands.”<sup>49</sup> As in her previous note, Sarah tempered her fervent desire for freedom with attention to the practical challenges she and James faced in achieving their reunion. She earnestly expressed her constant love and affection for her husband while also maintaining dignity and control over her emotions. Sarah had little autonomy in the negotiations occurring between her husband and her master over her fate, but she exerted what little power she had by instructing James to write to her directly to inform her of their prospects.

The letters to James Cooper probably ended up in the files of the PAS when he sought the Society’s aid in raising money to purchase his wife’s freedom. It is not clear whether the couple reunited successfully, but the high price set by Guthrie for Sarah’s freedom make it doubtful.

Letters opened a field of negotiation between slaveholders and slaves. Slaves exercised political shrewdness in taking advantage of Pennsylvania’s gradual emancipation law to escape from bondage. Once slaves left the confines of their masters’ households—by running away or with permission—they continually sought to better their lives, reunite with their families, and claim their free status. Letters offered former slaves outside of their masters’ control a means of asserting power. Drawing on personal resources as well as the support of community organizations and the PAS, absentee slaves could raise money to purchase their own freedom and that of family members, offering compensation to their former owners for the loss of their

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<sup>49</sup> Sarah Cooper to James Cooper, 20 March [1818], PAS-HSP.

labor in exchange for a legal record of manumission. When slaves exchanged letters with their masters, they gathered written documentation of their negotiations for release from bondage.

Informal agreements between masters and slaves that promised eventual manumission gained force and urgency when invoked from afar in letters. Slaveholders faced the choice of living up to their promises and receiving some payment or denying manumission and never receiving a penny from an absentee slave. Pursuing a fugitive was a costly and time-consuming process, so many slaveholders chose to cut their losses. As the example of William Anderson shows, slave owners who resisted manumission ran up against the laws of Pennsylvania that implicitly bestowed freedom on any black person dwelling in the state for more than six months.<sup>50</sup> In another case, an officer of the PAS wrote to a Maryland slave holder, John Shebbard, regarding “an absconding slave called Charles.” He asked Shebbard to respond with the “lowest sum” he would accept to sign a deed of manumission. The writer denied any knowledge of Charles’s current whereabouts and assured Shebbard that he was simply seeking to orchestrate “an arrangement mutually satisfactory to yourself and Charles.”<sup>51</sup> After escaping from his master’s control and beginning life as a free man elsewhere, Charles used his social connections to enlist a

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<sup>50</sup> The 1780 Pennsylvania Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery stated that: “no man or woman of any nation or colour, except the Negroes or Mulattoes who shall be registered as aforesaid, shall at any time hereafter be deemed, adjudged, or holden within the territories of this commonwealth as slaves or servants for life, but as free men and free women; except the domestic slaves attending upon delegates in congress from the other American states, foreign ministers and consuls, and persons passing through or sojourning in this state, and not becoming resident therein; and seamen employed in ships not belonging to any inhabitant of this state, nor employed in any ship owned by any such inhabitant. Provided such domestic slaves be not aliened or sold to any inhabitants nor (except in the case of members of congress, foreign ministers and consuls) retained in this state longer than six months.”

In other words, slaves who crossed into Pennsylvania and lived as residents for at least six months could argue that they became free according to the law, even though neither their owners nor the law explicitly manumitted them. “Pennsylvania – An Act for The Gradual Abolition of Slavery, 1780.”

<sup>51</sup> Isaac Barton to John Shebbard (copy), 20 January 1823, PAS-HSP. Spelled Shebbard on the letter, but writer could refer to Sheppard or Shepherd.

representative at the PAS to write a letter to his master opening a discussion of terms for his legal freedom.

Letters written by slaves, slaveholders, and other bystanders became evidence in the process of obtaining freedom. Slaves often had the upper hand in these discussions, taking advantage of the possibilities offered by emancipation laws. They used letters to present themselves as morally upstanding individuals deserving of freedom; whereas their masters' attempts to appear benevolent rang hollow. Still, black people in Philadelphia and other parts of the Northeast faced constant legal and extralegal challenges to their free status. They were asked to present documentary proof of their freedom and employment status or risk being charged as vagrants or runaways. Furthermore, black people throughout the Northeast were in danger of being seized illegally and sold into the domestic slave trade without an opportunity to demonstrate their legal record of freedom.

### **“use Every Industry in your power to Releave me from this place:” Kidnapping Cases**

Cases of kidnapping generated a large volume of postal exchanges in the PAS's files and represented the height of human drama expressed in letters. The issue of the illegal enslavement and kidnapping of free black Northerners came to a head as the sectional divide over the issue of slavery widened in the decades immediately preceding the Civil War. Long before the fugitive slave crisis of the 1850s, however, kidnapping posed a significant threat to black Northerners and to the legal order of Northern states.<sup>52</sup> Providing legal aid in kidnapping cases was one of the PAS's primary tasks. As gradual emancipation progressed in the North, cities including

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<sup>52</sup> For a discussion of the term “kidnapping” and how it applies to the abduction of free black people to be sold into slavery see Wilson, *Freedom at Risk*, 3-6.

Philadelphia, New York, and Boston became centers of growth for free black communities. But freedom was a tenuous status that was not always easy to prove. African Americans were constantly vulnerable to being kidnapped and sold into slavery. Once separated from their families and communities, victims of kidnapping had little recourse to contest their enslavement. Most abductees lived out the rest of their lives as slaves. After years of absence, and with few advocates to help them search, families and friends lost hope of reunion. But some kidnapping victims found assistance. Sometimes on their own, or often with the help of white supporters, abducted people used letters to protest their unlawful enslavement and to seek redemption from slavery. The PAS preserved a remarkable number of letters written by or on behalf of victims of kidnapping.

Sectional politics became increasingly polarized in the decades preceding the Civil War, driven by clashes over the future of slavery in the United States. The issue of fugitive slaves was explosive. Southern politicians fought for more stringent enforcement of the federal government's responsibility for capturing and returning suspected runaway slaves. In response, Northerners mobilized to protest what they perceived to be an infringement upon their sovereignty as free states. The problem of kidnapping was an especially contentious one. A substantial body of Northerners bristled at the notion that slave catchers were removing legally-free black people from their homes and families under the pretense that they were escaped slaves.<sup>53</sup> Prior to the immediate antebellum period, however, political relations remained cordial between the North and South, and cases involving fugitive slaves and kidnapping victims tended

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<sup>53</sup> Abolitionists argued that all forms of slavery were akin to kidnapping, enraging slaveholding Southerners. See Wilson, *Freedom at Risk*, 5. This argument was also taken up by slaves themselves, especially in response to forced migration caused by the expansion of slavery into the Southwest. See Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told*, 189-200.



to be negotiated on an individual basis. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, most Northerners and Southerners considered the legality of a person's enslavement as a moral question—the idea, perhaps derived from revolutionary ideology, that a person who was born free could not be robbed of that freedom—and a practical concern. A slaveholder who purchased a person who turned out to be free risked losing his investment; a slave trader known to sell victims of kidnapping might be forced to reimburse purchasers and could develop a reputation as untrustworthy.

While a few decades later it was almost unheard of for amicable discussions to occur across sectional boundaries regarding the legal status of an individual slave, prior to 1830, the PAS dealt with numerous cases involving this sort of negotiation. These discussions often occurred in letters. Runaway or absentee slaves called upon the PAS to support their attempts to negotiate for their freedom or that of family members once they left their masters' households and found refuge in free states. They used letters to document their claims. Victims of kidnapping also used letters, when possible, to contest their unlawful enslavement. In some cases, they wrote directly to family and friends in the North who could corroborate their free status. More often, circumstances forced them to rely on white allies or witnesses to heed their pleas to write letters to follow up on their stories. These letters show that there were white Southerners who endorsed and participated in the slave market while also taking a sympathetic stance towards people who claimed to have been kidnapped. In part, their actions probably stemmed from self-interest. Purchasers of unlawfully enslaved people could owe fines in addition to losing their human property if they were discovered. But their actions also indicated respect for the laws defining slavery and freedom, as well as flexibility in defining the status of individual black people. These actions and attitudes stand in stark contrast to those during later decades in which there was

almost no willingness to acknowledge cases of unlawful enslavement in the South, let alone to take the risk of committing one's concerns to paper. As the political divide over slavery widened, any person caught writing about such matters across sectional lines would face accusations of abolitionist meddling or worse.

Besides forcible abduction, free black people living in the mid-Atlantic region also faced an insidious form of legal kidnapping and enslavement. Written proof was necessary for former slaves and free black people to assert their free status, but most people did not carry these valuable documents with them everywhere they went. Authorities in slave states could capture free black people as accused runaway slaves and hold them in jail until they produced proof of their free status. Those who could not obtain documentation were sold into slavery. Furthermore, inmates were charged for the cost of their captivity. As they languished in a cell awaiting the documents that would guarantee their release, prisoners accrued debts that threatened to legitimize their sale as slaves. Even if captives managed to prove their free status, state laws could justify their enslavement to pay jail and court fees.<sup>54</sup> Long before the battles in the 1850s over slave catchers who seized free black Northerners as fugitives, denying them due process of law, free black people faced a significant danger of enslavement sanctioned by federal and state laws.

On September 20, 1822, Daniel Clark addressed a letter to the PAS, describing his experience of legal kidnapping. Clark assured them that “Nothing but my distressed situation would induce me to trouble you at this time,” before describing how he was “apprehended and committed as a runaway slave” while passing through Hagerstown, Maryland. Clark lacked access to any documents that would prove his free status, so instead, he instructed the recipients

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<sup>54</sup> Wilson, *Freedom at Risk*, 40-46.

of his letter to obtain a deposition from a local witness, Eliazer Brustun, along with “as much other testimony as you can” that would satisfy his captors as legal evidence. While he wrote with authority, Clark tempered his demands with humility. He promised that “I pledge myself as a man, a distressed prisoner and every thing that is dear & sacred to me in this world to do everything in my power to reciprocate the favour, which I shall ever be under to you for your trouble....” Despite his desperation, Clark ended on a formal note, instructing the PAS to “Send all the proof of my freedom as soon as in your power and very much oblige your humble servant &c.”<sup>55</sup> His closing used the language of professional correspondence in a context with very high personal stakes.

Clark addressed another letter to a PAS Acting Committee member, Isaac Barton, ten days later, apparently having received a reply to his initial message in the interim. He expressed surprise that his witness, Brustun, had proven to be elusive and told Barton to look for “a man of colour” who dwelt “on the left hand of the coloured Baptist meeting house, in a frame house.” Clark also suggested that Barton contact his wife, Catharine, for further directions and to ask her whether she had received a letter from him asking her to send one hundred dollars. If she had not, Clark entreated, “I wish you would inform her that I wish she would send [the money] on as soon as in her power.” Clark struggled to sustain a respectable, businesslike tone while impressing upon his audience the urgent nature of his situation. In closing he wrote, “I was born free and have lived in and about Philadelphia for several year. If you have any funds in your hands for the abolition society by sending me ten Dollars you will much oblige... .”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup>Daniel Clark to Isaac Barton, 20 September 1822, PAS-HSP.

<sup>56</sup> Daniel Clark to Isaac Barton, 30 September 1822, PAS-HSP.

While Clark addressed his letter directly to the PAS, others relied on family members to seek relief from their imprisonment. In March of 1814, Moody Jackson wrote to his daughter from Salisbury, North Carolina, recounting his seizure as a suspected fugitive slave. With conventional epistolary restraint, he informed her, “I am obliged to give you the unpleasant news I am now Confind in Salisbury Jail for the want of something to shew that I am a free Man, and the want of Money to pay my Expencis in Jail[.]” Jackson had served as a sailor during the War of 1812, but his ship was seized and burned by the British near Charleston, South Carolina.<sup>57</sup> The assailants took most of the crew with them but left Jackson, who had an injured leg, and two other sick men behind. Jackson explained, “when I got well a nuf to travel I started to come home by land,” but he ran across some “waggoners” who “took up the Ide that I was a slave and had me committed to Jail[.]” Like Daniel Clark, Jackson instructed his daughter to seek out witnesses who could provide legal testimony to his freedom. He told her in closing, “I hope and trust that you will use Every Industry in your power to Releave me from this place[.]”<sup>58</sup> His language echoed that of Clark’s letter; both men relied on a common epistolary trope—everything “in my/your/her power”—to convey the urgency of the situation while maintaining a sense of control and dignity.<sup>59</sup> Responding to Jackson’s pleas, his daughter probably turned over the letter to the PAS as a written record of his experiences that might prove useful in making a case against his confinement.

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<sup>57</sup> On black sailors in the Atlantic world and the War of 1812 see: Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), esp. Ch. 4; Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).

<sup>58</sup> Moody Jackson to Daughter, 27 March 1814, PAS-HSP.

<sup>59</sup> Konstantin Dierks argues that this phrase acted as an assertion of personal agency. He focuses on eighteenth-century correspondence, arguing that such assertions were limited to elite white men, intentionally excluding illiterate people, especially women and African Americans, from making similar claims. See Dierks, *In My Power: Letter Writing and Communications in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

While individuals like Clark and Jackson exemplify the ambiguous legality of the abduction and imprisonment of free black travelers, many others were forcibly taken from the immediate vicinity of their homes in unequivocally criminal circumstances. Kidnappers frequently acted as the agents of slave traders. Targets were lured or taken forcefully from their homes, often at night, and transferred to traders, who might hold them nearby for a few days while they gathered a larger group of people to sell before traveling further south. Free black people throughout the United States shared the risk of being abducted and sold into slavery, but the large free black population of southern Pennsylvania and its geographic proximity to the South made this region especially attractive to kidnappers.<sup>60</sup> Abductees called upon the resources of the PAS and other opponents of illegal enslavement in Philadelphia to seek justice.

Some victims of kidnapping were sold as slaves in border and Upper South states like Maryland, Delaware, and Virginia. These states contained large free black populations and had fairly generous manumission laws, but slavery remained legal through the Civil War.<sup>61</sup> The labor market was flexible, resembling Pennsylvania and other Mid-Atlantic states in its assortment of wage, contract, and enslaved workers.<sup>62</sup> Abductees who were sold to owners in Upper South states may have stood a better chance of contacting a sympathetic person and seeking redemption from bondage. Practically speaking, they were closer to their homes, which increased the likelihood that they could get a message to family or friends. Slaveholders in these states were

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<sup>60</sup> See Wilson, *Freedom at Risk*, 9-11.

<sup>61</sup> Slavery ended in Delaware and Virginia with the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment on December 6, 1865. Slavery was abolished in Maryland during the war when the state passed a new state constitution in 1864.

<sup>62</sup> Many scholars have traced the decline of slavery in the Upper South and its contribution to the internal slave trade that fed the cotton boom in the Southwest during the early nineteenth century. Few, however, have carefully investigated the persistence of slavery alongside other forms of labor. For discussions of free and slave labor in Maryland see: Barbara J. Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland During the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Rockman, *Scraping By*.

also careful in making their purchases. With emancipation unfolding just across the border in Philadelphia, many buyers demanded legal proof of their transactions to avoid future challenges and were apt to be suspicious when documentation was not forthcoming. Under these circumstances, some victims successfully protested their kidnapping or managed to escape from their abductors. Escapees, however, still faced the threat of being recaptured and imprisoned as fugitive slaves unless they could prove their free status.<sup>63</sup>

Apprehension regarding the unlawful sale of free people as slaves sometimes came from white witnesses who were not affiliated with organized abolitionism. An unsigned letter dating to December 16, 1810, in Clarksville, Tennessee, and addressed to the prominent Quaker abolitionist Warner Mifflin, provides an example of the importance of bystanders' correspondence in kidnapping cases. Though the author committed a breach of etiquette by addressing a letter to a stranger, he insisted that his letter would "not require the preface of an apology" or need "any other incentive to awaken your earnest & industrious exertions, than what it carries in itself." The letter recounted the history of a young man, Elijah Morris, whom the author encountered in the local jail and who claimed to have been originally bound to Mifflin as a child.<sup>64</sup> According to Morris, Mifflin found him employment with a ship captain who sold him illegally as a slave in Maryland. After being sold a second time to a slave trader in Tennessee, Morris found himself on a vessel on the Mississippi River bound for Natchez or New Orleans. Morris escaped the boat along with two others, but they were quickly captured and jailed by

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<sup>63</sup> Wilson, *Freedom at Risk*, Ch. 2.

<sup>64</sup> Elijah Morris was apparently free: Mifflin's father had previously manumitted his father. He was probably bound to Mifflin until he reached adulthood, similar to the conditions of the Pennsylvania abolition law, though Mifflin lived in New Jersey. See Unsigned [H.M. attorney at law] to Warner Mifflin, 16 December 1810, PAS-HSP.

local authorities. The writer informed Mifflin that the prisoners would soon be put on another boat bound for Natchez and would be sold there or at another town along the Mississippi.<sup>65</sup>

After detailing Morris's journey, the author called upon Mifflin to fulfill his duty to the boy. The writer reminded him, "This unfortunate being was placed under your protection – you confided him to another who has treacherously violated his Trust. He can only look to you for protection & for justice & I trust he will not look in vain[.]" He demurred, "It would look like ostentation, after what I have here said, to tell my name," but he revealed that he was a lawyer and demanded that Mifflin inform him whether Morris's story was true and whether "any steps are taken to releive him." Like the letter written by Patton, this anonymous message placed the author in an ambiguous position as a witness to the crime of kidnapping and illegal enslavement. He related Elijah Morris's tale while also offering his own moral commentary, which he argued overruled any concerns about epistolary propriety. Addressing a stranger, a self-proclaimed friend of slaveholders—he defended one of the men responsible for the slave trading operation, John Chew, as a personal acquaintance—lectured his correspondent on his responsibility to a wrongfully enslaved young man.<sup>66</sup>

One of the most dramatic and well-documented exchanges in the PAS correspondence files is the case of James Harris, a free black man from Philadelphia who was kidnapped and taken to North Carolina in 1816. He escaped but was quickly recaptured and imprisoned after crossing into Virginia. In a lengthy petition addressed to the mayor of Philadelphia, Harris told his life story. He was born in Philadelphia in 1786 to free black parents and remembered that the PAS had recorded his free status. In a previous incident, Harris had been kidnapped from his home

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<sup>65</sup> Unsigned [H.M. attorney at Law] to Warner Mifflin, 16 December 1810, PAS-HSP.

<sup>66</sup> Unsigned [H.M. attorney at Law] to Warner Mifflin, 16 December 1810, PAS-HSP.

and taken to New Orleans, where he lived as a slave for over a year before escaping by ship in 1806. He returned to Philadelphia, where the city mayor restored his freedom. Harris went on to serve as a sailor in the Navy in the War of 1812, until he was honorably discharged after sustaining an injury during a gunboat battle. After a short respite of peace, Harris was kidnapped again from Philadelphia in January 1816. He claimed to have been lured away by a man who promised paid work for transporting a boat of wood from Delaware. A gang of white men forced Harris and several other victims onto a vessel headed south. His captors tore up the papers he carried with him that documented his free status, including his military discharge. The men took him to North Carolina, promising that if Harris cooperated, they would return him to Philadelphia in exchange for help luring other victims to take his place. Harris escaped and headed for Petersburg but was captured and imprisoned as a runaway just as he crossed the border from North Carolina into Greensville County, Virginia.<sup>67</sup>

Harris's experiences are preserved in remarkable detail, with eight letters and one petition documenting his struggle to regain his freedom.<sup>68</sup> The first letter in the series, dated March 25, 1816, was written by Isaac R. Walton, Jr. and addressed to James Harris's wife, Phoebe.<sup>69</sup> Walton acted as a concerned bystander, alerting Phoebe Harris to James's plight and instructing

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<sup>67</sup> James Harris's story is related in several documents in the PAS correspondence, including letters and a petition that he wrote or dictated himself. See: Isaac R. Walton to Phebee Harris, 25 March 1816; Robert Shaw "To whome it may concern," 9 April 1816; Petition of James Harris to the Mayor of Philadelphia, 5 June 1816; James Harris to Phoebe Harris, 5 June 1816; James Harris to Robert Shaw, 5 June 1816; John Hinton to Robert Wharton, 1 July 1816; Thomas Shipley to John Hinton, 13 July 1816; James Harris to Robert Walton, 11 August 1816; John Hinton to H.B. Gwyn, 18 September 1816, PAS-HSP.

<sup>68</sup> Most other cases in the PAS files are documented by only one or two pieces of correspondence.

<sup>69</sup> Census records indicate that Isaac R. Walton, Jr. was a large slaveholder by Virginia standards. Walton owned twenty-nine slaves in 1810 and twenty-four in 1820. He seems to have held some official or unofficial county position of authority, since he told Phoebe Harris that her husband, "This day was brought before me...." See Isaac R. Walton, Jun. to "Phebee Harris a Black woman," 25 March 1816, PAS-HSP. Federal census records from *Ancestry Library*.



her to send documentation of his freedom. Phoebe Harris apparently began gathering information promptly. The next letter, dated April 9, 1816, consists of a statement “To whome it may concern” by a prominent Philadelphia magistrate, Robert Shaw, testifying to his acquaintance with Harris. Shaw’s letter gives interesting insight into how Phoebe Harris interpreted the letter from Walton. Shaw recalled that Phoebe “states that the said James directed her through the interference of Isaac R. Walton Jr. to call on me... .”<sup>70</sup> Though Walton wrote and signed the letter, Phoebe understood the instructions to have come directly from James.

A flurry of further documents arrived in Philadelphia about a month later, in June 1816: a detailed petition recounting James’s story addressed to the mayor of Philadelphia as well as two letters directed individually to Harris’s wife and to Robert Shaw. In the interim, Harris escaped from the prison in Greensville County, only to be recaptured yet again in the next county over.<sup>71</sup> All three documents were written by the same hand, and they were originally sent together under one cover to Shaw. The petition is written in the third person, with numerous corrections, including Harris’s given name (changed from John to James) in the first line. The two letters are in the first person—in Harris’s voice—to “My dear Wife” and “Worshipful Sir” respectively, but they are not signed with his name or his “mark.” Together, these details suggest that Harris did not write the letters himself but instead employed an amanuensis to transcribe his words.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Unfortunately, Shaw said that he had no papers belonging to James and that though he remembered the suit brought before him by James Harris, “a collard man,” in 1813, “Whether he is a free man or slave I cannot say[.]” See Robert Shaw “To whome it may concern,” 9 April 1816, PAS-HSP.

<sup>71</sup> See letter from James Harris to Phoebe Harris, 5 June 1816, PAS-HSP.

<sup>72</sup> The letter to Phoebe Harris instructs her to direct letters and documents sent through the mail to Harris care of Peter Booth, Esq., County Clerk of Sussex County, Virginia. The instruction suggests that Booth acted as Harris’s assistant and transcriber in contacting Phoebe Harris and Shaw. See James Harris to Phoebe Harris, 5 June 1816, PAS-HSP.

It was rare for someone to imitate the voice of another person in a letter without signaling that person’s participation in the creation of the document. Transparency in revealing the process of composition, either explicitly or implicitly, was common under numerous circumstances, and seems to have been almost mandatory as a matter of

Both of Harris's letters to his wife and to Shaw recount details of his kidnapping similar to those in the petition. The tone of each letter, however, is distinct, reflecting Harris's efforts, perhaps amplified by his transcriber, to tailor his message to suit his correspondents. Harris opened his letter to his wife with straightforward instructions to seek out his free papers and gather assistance from Shaw and from the mayor in expediting their delivery. Harris focused on practical matters: sending the documents, raising money to offset his prison fees, and hiring a lawyer. He even instructed Phoebe to repay Shaw for the postage he had paid to receive the packet of letters. Several times throughout the letter, Harris urged her to "lose no time" in sending the papers. He left little room for emotion in his pleas. Near the end of his letter Harris wrote, "I am yet well, thanks God," and sent greetings to family and friends. To his wife he simply stated, "I long to see you very much," before imploring her again to "lose no time in answering this letter."<sup>73</sup>

In comparison to the simple language of the letter to his wife, Harris's letter to Robert Shaw is laden with elaborate articulations of humility. Harris addressed Shaw as "An unhappy person of colour, who has before experienced Your justice and kindness, and now reduced to perhaps a still greater calamity than has befallen him before," who "presumes to state to your worship his present miserable condition and humbly solicits Your kind assistance to his relief." After describing the circumstances of his kidnapping, Harris finally stated his reason for writing. He

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etiquette. Just as it was impolite to share a confidential letter without the permission of its author, it would be a violation to address someone intimately without notifying them that someone else was party to their conversation.

Signals describing circumstances of composition range from something along the lines of "I'm writing in the parlor surrounded by family and friends who keep interrupting me" to "Such-and-such took down these words as so-and-so spoke them aloud." More implicit signals might include a letter introducing "the bearer" and his or her story in circumstances under which "the bearer" probably was unable to actually read the letter, or cases like James Harris in which his wife, who was responsible for advocating on his behalf, would have been able to identify Harris's handwriting and would have imagined the process her husband underwent to commit his words to paper through a third party.

<sup>73</sup> James Harris to Phoebe Harris, 5 June 1816, PAS-HSP.

begged Shaw to send his free papers and assured him, “Almighty God will bless and reward your worship for the assistance you give to an unfortunate and innocent sufferer, and my gratitude towards Your worship shall be without bounds.” In his letter to Phoebe, Harris took charge of his situation and stated his instructions simply and straightforwardly. Here, addressing a powerful stranger, Harris left his demand for the end and portrayed himself as an innocent and defenseless victim. Writing to Shaw was a last resort, but it was also a calculated move by Harris to attract an influential man to his defense. Harris relied on tropes of subservience and gratitude to bolster his claims to Shaw’s attention and assistance. At the same time, he strove to convince Shaw of his respectability and trustworthiness. In a postscript, Harris asked “ten thousand pardons” for the presumption of enclosing a letter to his wife in the packet addressed to Shaw, ensuring him that “she will thankfully repay the postage.”<sup>74</sup> Harris implied that any further aid provided by Shaw would be similarly repaid in loyalty and gratitude if not in dollars.

A third letter, addressed to Robert Wharton, the mayor of Philadelphia, and dated August 11, 1816, is also written in Harris’s voice but in a different hand from the previous letters.<sup>75</sup> This time, Harris wrote from the Mathews County Courthouse, on the Virginia coast, apparently having escaped prison yet again only to be recaptured. The letter bears Harris’s signature, and there are no indications of an additional contributor, suggesting that he wrote it himself. Interestingly, this letter tells a different version of Harris’s tale: he wrote that he was taken to Georgia by slave traders, where he made his escape. He omitted his previous imprisonment in other parts of Virginia, reporting only that he “was pursuing [his] course back to Philidelphia

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<sup>74</sup> James Harris to Robert Shaw, 5 June 1816, PAS-HSP.

<sup>75</sup> Harris addressed the letter to “Mr Robert Walton, Esq.” but it is apparent from the contents of the letter that the intended audience is Mayor Robert Wharton. See James Harris to Robert Walton [sic], 11 August 1816, PAS-HSP.

travelling by night,” when, after departing from Petersburg and crossing Mobjack Bay, he was taken up and jailed in Mathews County. Contrary to the assumption that the letter written by Harris himself is more authentic than those in which his words were transcribed and interpreted by a third party, this letter provides a compelling example of how Harris himself adjusted the presentation of his tale according to his current circumstances. Still, the tone of the letter that Harris addressed to Mayor Wharton differs from the exceedingly deferential language of the previous message to Shaw. When given the opportunity to write his own words to address a social superior, Harris chose to present himself with polite humility coupled with firm demands. This tone stands in stark contrast to the language of exaggerated groveling in the letter to Shaw.

Some elements of the two letters are similar in their author’s attempts to appeal convincingly to a figure of authority. Harris also opened his letter to Mayor Wharton with a justification for addressing him. He apologized, “I am sorry that I am reduced to the necessity of calling on you at this time for assistance & taking the liberty to address you. However I hope that ~~the~~ my present state of necessity will apologize for calling on you and my not knowing who to write to that this letter could get to the hands of my friends.” Harris continued, relating the abridged story of his kidnapping and imprisonment. His closing also echoed the letter to Shaw. Harris promised to “return thanks to you and use my exertions to satisfy you for your trouble if you will try to get such documents as are necessary to get me released from this prison,” and he again asked the mayor to “Pardon me ... if I have ~~been~~ made too free in writing to you.” A note at the bottom of the page indicated, “My wife will pay all expenses [for postage].”<sup>76</sup> As in the letter to Shaw, Harris strove to portray himself as a deserving recipient of the mayor’s generosity.

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<sup>76</sup> James Harris to Robert Walton [sic], 11 August 1816, PAS-HSP.

Unlike the letter to Shaw, however, Harris's letter to Mayor Wharton offset a deferential tone with forthright requests for assistance and political appeals:

My wish is that I could get some documents or other from either the Abolition Society or from your office under seal[;] that I may be audentified and proved to the satisfaction of the people here that I am a free Born coloured man of the city of Philadelphia and as such have a right to freedom[;] that I may be released from this place and return to my family again in your city[;] that such outrages as these may be restrained- I pray that this may be done as soon as possible for fear of the worse.

In a rhetorical move calculated to provoke the mayor, Harris concluded his list of demands by telling Wharton, "[I]f it is too great a task for you I hope that you will convey or have this letter sent to my wife ... that she may use her exertions to do something for me." Harris switched to a more gracious tone in the conclusion of his letter, but his final sentences belied his submission to the mayor's authority. He told Wharton, "I am well well known in the city by many people. I expect there will be no difficulty in procuring the necessary papers."<sup>77</sup>

Like many other letter writers, James Harris balanced deference with demands and politeness with provocation to achieve greater rhetorical impact. He drew upon tropes of deference in addressing a powerful man who was almost a stranger to him, while also clearly stating his claims to freedom and justice. In his closing, Harris also implied that he was a man of some influence himself and hinted that Mayor Wharton's inability to defend his constituents could harm his reputation. If Harris painted himself as an innocent victim of a brutal kidnapping, in this letter he also challenged the mayor to use his authority to combat widespread injustice. Harris carefully calibrated his letter to paint himself in a flattering light while also hinting at the mayor's incompetence. Perhaps he felt more confident writing this way with no mediator present

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<sup>77</sup> James Harris to Robert Walton [sic], 11 August 1816, PAS-HSP.

to question his words, or possibly, months of fruitless struggle to escape his predicament led Harris to express his frustration in writing.

## **Conclusion**

During the era of gradual emancipation in Pennsylvania, black people tested the power of letter writing in efforts to advance their claims to freedom. The correspondence files of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society reveal how free and enslaved African Americans used letters in attempts to reunite their families, negotiate for their freedom, and protest the injustices they experienced. Freedom was an uncertain legal category, and correspondence became a means for probing the boundaries of the law to exploit its loopholes or circumvent legal obstacles. Slaves and free black persons exploited letter writing to their political advantage, working to secure freedom for themselves and their families. Their demands transcended their personal circumstances, however, and their vision often exceeded that of lawmakers, who supported a gradual abolition of slavery that accommodated the existing property rights of slaveholders. Their letters became a chorus of opposition to slavery and held white abolitionists accountable to their principles. Free and enslaved African Americans used letters to articulate a radical agenda that stressed the universal injustice of slavery and the moral obligation to oppose it.

## **Chapter Two**

### **“I take my pen in hand:” The Postal Revolution and the Antislavery Movement**

On August 7, 1834, Theodore Dwight Weld, then a student at Lane Theological Seminary in Cincinnati, Ohio, wrote to James Gillespie Birney in Danville, Kentucky, discussing his plans to distribute Birney’s “Extras” denouncing the American Colonization Society (ACS). The two men shared the view that, while the ACS might have been founded with benevolent intentions, its goals of achieving the gradual abolition of slavery by compensating slaveholders for their lost property and purifying the nation by deporting emancipated people to Liberia amounted to racist hypocrisy. Weld opened by informing Birney, “I have just received your letter of July 28,” remarking, “It is very strange that the letters which I receive from you are as long upon the road and sometimes longer than those which I receive from New York City.” It was conventional for correspondents to begin by acknowledging the date of receiving a previous letter, and it was not unusual for letters to be delayed in transit, sometimes resulting in unfortunate misunderstandings. Birney’s letter traversed a distance of about 120 miles, probably traveling in some combination of wagon and boat, before arriving in Weld hands on August 7, ten days after it was composed. In contrast, Weld’s correspondence from New York covered a distance of more than 650 miles in a shorter time.<sup>1</sup>

The discrepancy in the delivery speed of Weld’s mail can be explained by the transportation infrastructure that supported America’s postal system in the 1830s. Whereas mail entered and left New York City several times a day by boat, road, and rail, Cincinnati and Danville were significantly less accessible. Nevertheless, writing from one side of the Ohio River to the other,

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<sup>1</sup> Theodore Dwight Weld to James Birney, 7 August 1834, James G. Birney Papers, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan (WCL). The actual transit distance between Ohio and New York was probably longer than 650 miles, since the letter would have traveled by steamboat through the Erie Canal before being transferred to land at Cleveland, Ohio.

from a free state to a slaveholding one, Weld could not help being suspicious. He added a parenthetical note to his opening: “(I wonder if Abolition has anything to do with it).”<sup>2</sup>

In the summer of 1834, Weld and Birney were taking their first steps towards what would become illustrious careers in abolitionism. They had been corresponding for two years already, after meeting when Weld visited Birney’s former home city of Huntsville, Alabama. They had moved, almost exactly in tandem, from staunch colonizationists to ardent advocates for immediate and universal emancipation.<sup>3</sup> It was quickly dawning on them, however, that along with their newfound commitment to abolition came exposure to scrutiny from multiple sources. Weld, the leader of the Lane Rebels, a group of Lane Seminary students who advocated for immediate abolition, was in the midst of a public battle between students and trustees over the school’s association with such radical views. By October 1834, about seventy-five students and one trustee left the seminary after the trustees discouraged any extracurricular associations or discussions. Most of them eventually joined Oberlin College, and Theodore Weld became a famous antislavery lecturer.<sup>4</sup> Birney followed a similar path. He attempted to start an antislavery newspaper in Kentucky, but he was driven away by threats of violence. Birney eventually established the newspaper, *The Philanthropist*, in Cincinnati, but he continued to meet with

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<sup>2</sup> Theodore Dwight Weld to James Birney, 7 August 1834, James G. Birney Papers, WCL.

<sup>3</sup> Theodore Weld visited Alabama on a tour of Western and Southern states. He held a commission from New York philanthropists to search for a location for a theological seminary, but he also hoped to cultivate centers of antislavery sentiment during his travels. He eventually chose Cincinnati as the location for the seminary, which became Lane Theological Seminary. See Gilbert H. Barnes & Dwight L. Dumond, *Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimké Weld, and Sarah Grimké*, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1970 [1935]), xvii.

<sup>4</sup> Robert H. Abzug, *Passionate Liberator: Theodore Weld and the Dilemma of Reform* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1980) Ch. 5-7; Lawrence Thomas Lesick, *The Lane Rebels: Evangelicalism and Antislavery in Antebellum America* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1980); Owen W. Muelder, *Theodore Dwight Weld and the American Anti-Slavery Society* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2011); J. Brent Morris, *Oberlin, Hotbed of Abolitionism: College, Community, and the Fight for Freedom and Equality in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014); Manisha Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 241-243.



hostility. Anti-abolition mobs burned his press twice in 1836. In 1837, he moved his family to New York after the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS) recruited him as a corresponding secretary.<sup>5</sup> Before launching their careers in abolition in earnest, however, as Weld's parenthetical note indicates, the two men were aware that even their private correspondence had the potential to be incendiary. Their letters were vulnerable to unwelcome attention, particularly when they crossed the geographic boundary between slavery and freedom.

As the movement for immediate abolition gained momentum in the early 1830s, opponents of slavery used letters as tools of persuasion and conversion. Political ideas, tactics, and personnel endured from the earlier wave of abolition, which began around the time of the Revolution and crested with the passage of abolition laws in every Northern state by 1804. But the 1830s movement took on a greater sense of urgency. Abolitionists envisioned their cause as a moral crusade, especially as sectional polarization intensified, and slavery became entrenched in Southern states. In a subversive move, the antislavery movement launched their campaign by enlisting the strongest arm of the federal government in their cause: the postal system. Their efforts to achieve a national conversion, cutting off slavery at its source by convincing slaveholders to repent of their wrongdoings and surrender their human property voluntarily, did not succeed. But, by mid-decade, abolitionists forced a national debate and compelled the federal government to display its allegiance to the whims of slaveholding states, thereby confirming, in the minds of many Northerners, the existence of a "slave power" that controlled the destiny of the nation. Furthermore, the power of correspondence as an essential tool of the antislavery

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<sup>5</sup> William Birney, *James G. Birney and His Times: The Genesis of the Republican Party with Some Account of Abolition Movements in the South Before 1828* (New York: D. Appleton, 1890), Ch. 21-22; Dwight L. Dumond, *Letters of James Gillespie Birney, 1831-1857*, vol. 1 (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1938), xiii-xv; Betty Fladeland, *James Gillespie Birney: Slaveholder to Abolitionist* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1955), Ch. 4-7; Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 236-237

movement endured, only to develop and evolve as the campaign persisted, expanded its membership, and became more visible.

This chapter tells the story of how, during the early 1830s, the exchange of letters through the postal system became intertwined with the issues of slavery and sectional politics. It examines the social and cultural context in which letter writing became a principal tool of political discussion and organization used by the antislavery movement. The first two sections establish the link between growing demands for immediate abolition and the rapid growth of postal communication in the mid-nineteenth century United States. By 1835, the postal system, which began as primarily a vehicle for wealthy merchants to transact their business, had become entangled with major questions of states' rights, the extent of federal power, and the protection of civil liberties that gripped the nation's politics through the Civil War.

The next sections focus on the cultural conventions associated with letters, discussing how abolitionists exploited and interpreted these conventions to serve political ends. In particular, female abolitionists often flouted gendered letter-writing conventions in their choices of who to write to, what to write about, and how to write it. The famous abolition couple Theodore Weld and Angelina Grimké, for example, established their relationship as friends, intellectual equals, and political allies primarily through writing letters.

The latter part of the chapter examines the ways early abolitionists deployed correspondence as a means of persuasion and conversion. They imagined their movement taking hold in the hearts and minds of individuals across the United States. Many abolitionists, mostly men, who became leaders in the antislavery cause, tested correspondence as a field for converting new supporters and persuading opponents through rational discourse. This approach drew upon techniques they learned through their education and professional experience prior to their

involvement in the cause. They also tried to persuade and convert in person, but they were often met with mob violence, censorship, and dismissal. It could be dangerous to express antislavery views out loud, even in Northern cities and towns, so opponents of slavery came to see correspondence as a protected space in which to express their radical ideas.

Abolitionists envisioned a national postal space through which they could achieve conversion on a mass level. As Elizur Wright, Jr. put it in an 1832 letter, a year before he helped to form the AASS, opponents of slavery were committed “to the mighty enterprise of turning the tide of public sentiment on the subject.”<sup>6</sup> They acted upon this notion in their plans for the postal campaign of 1835, which conscripted the federal postal system in spreading the antislavery cause. The chapter concludes in the aftermath of this effort. Backlash to the campaign foreclosed the option of wielding the postal service as a federally-enforced weapon against slavery. This setback left the national postal space divided across the geographic lines of freedom and slavery.

Abolitionists did not succeed in their effort to achieve a national moral conversion, but they did bring the United States to a point of reckoning on the issue of slavery. The federal government showed its cards: it would use its power to uphold the status quo of slavery. The antislavery movement continued to rely on the postal system to publicize its message and built its base of supporters. But the post was no longer a viable means for reaching and converting white Southerners. Instead, the exchange of letters through the post took on a new meaning, offering a semi-private space for abolitionists to organize and formulate their ideas.

### **“When will it be politic?”: Slavery and Sectionalism in the Early 1830s**

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<sup>6</sup> Elizur Wright, Jr. to Henry Cowles, 14 December 1832, Henry Cowles Papers, Oberlin College Archives.

Despite the efforts of early antislavery organizations like the Pennsylvania Abolition Society (PAS) and the New York Manumission Society (NYMS), by the late 1820s, the prospects of American abolition were uncertain. On one hand, freedom reigned throughout the North. Even in Mid-Atlantic states like New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey, where slavery had previously maintained a strong hold over the economy, few slaves remained by 1830 as gradual abolition laws took effect. African Americans called for universal emancipation and equal rights, amassing vocal constituencies in Northern cities. But despite having obtained a measure of success, especially in increasing access to education, black activists remained frustrated in their efforts to combat racist employment practices, legalized segregation, and disfranchisement.<sup>7</sup>

Northern racism was one stumbling block to the progress of abolition, and developments elsewhere provided several more. The Missouri Compromise brought national politics to a tentative settlement on the issue of the westward expansion of slavery in 1820, but sectional tensions simmered beneath the surface, threatening to erupt at any moment. Early white opponents of slavery hoped that westward expansion would defuse the threat of slavery to American democracy by opening a vast American landscape to an army of white republican farmers. Slavery, they predicted, would naturally die out. Instead, slaveholders, and those who aspired to their ranks, used new Southern lands to feed the global cotton boom. In new Southwestern territories acquired through the Louisiana Purchase, slaves cleared land, built houses, planted crops, picked cotton, and prepared it to be transported to factories in the North

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<sup>7</sup> On free black people and political activism in the North see for example: Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Graham Russell Hodges, *Root & Branch: African Americans in New York & East Jersey, 1613-1863* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780-1860* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998); Patrick Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Julie Winch, *Philadelphia's Black Elite: Activism, Accommodation, and the Struggle for Autonomy, 1787-1848* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988).

and in Britain. Northern merchants, financiers, and industry captains grew rich from the products of Southern slave labor.<sup>8</sup>

The correspondence of one man provides an example of how national events shaped individuals' understanding of the politics of slavery. Just before Congress passed the Missouri Compromise in May of 1820, Roberts Vaux, a prominent Philadelphia Quaker philanthropist, addressed a letter to Thomas Clarkson, the famous British abolitionist, in which he condemned the measure for extending the reach of slavery. Vaux saw the Missouri Compromise as proof of the hypocrisy of the American Colonization Society and its elite membership, many of whom were slaveholders themselves. Henry Clay, the slaveholding Kentucky Congressman who brokered the legislative deal, was a founding member of the ACS and later served as the society's president from 1836 to 1849. Of him and his associates, Vaux asserted, "The false covering however is now off, they are seen in their native & naked character." He concluded his letter simply: "I blush for my country."<sup>9</sup> Despite his criticism, Vaux later reversed his stance on colonization. By 1830, after much consideration, he declared himself "a decided advocate of the colonization plan," in a letter to a Pennsylvania Congressman.<sup>10</sup>

Though Vaux declared himself an ardent colonizationist, he had reservations about how the growth of the cotton economy seemed to be permanently enmeshing slavery and inequality into

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<sup>8</sup> On westward expansion, slavery, cotton, and capitalism, see for example: Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman, eds., *Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014); Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013); Adam Rothman, *Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Roberts Vaux to Thomas Clarkson, 1 May 1820, Vaux Family Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP).

<sup>10</sup> Roberts Vaux to Charles Miner [draft], 26 January 1830, Vaux Family Papers, HSP. Miner had just ended his term in the House of Representatives, where he had unsuccessfully advocated for the gradual abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia.

the growing United States. In a draft of a letter that he wrote in 1831, Vaux predicted that cotton fabrics “will ‘ere long become the national dress” with the inevitable result that, “The demand for these articles will be in proportion to the consumption – the consumption must be in the ratio of the population, & slavery, with its indescribable cruelties, will only be limited by the wants of the market which its toils can supply, & by the appetite of avarice, whose coffers it will enrich!” He lamented the effects of the cotton boom that he observed in his home city of Philadelphia, observing,

Here, capital is provided to move the vast machine. It is affirmed that the prosperity which smiles around us, is attributable to this system – and that our former pursuits, & habits never could have brought us such abundant blessings! ... These new modes of industry, & means of subsistence, & sources of wealth, have produced a new order of thinking, & a new train of feeling even in this once sensitive community.<sup>11</sup>

In short, Vaux argued that the prosperity of his neighbors blinded them to the ways the cotton economy perpetuated the cruelty of slavery and threatened the prospects of achieving the peaceful, voluntary emancipation the ACS envisioned. This letter, which may have remained unsent—no recipient is specified, though the context suggests that Vaux may have intended it for another British abolitionist—shows how Vaux’s views shifted and intensified as he wrote them down, pushing him closer to abandoning his support for colonization.

By 1835, Vaux had experienced another change of heart. He was disgusted by what he perceived to be the ACS’s abandonment of the eventual goal of abolition, in favor of catering to the interests of slaveholders by focusing on the removal of free black people from the United States.<sup>12</sup> In another letter to a British friend, Vaux noted that in recent years, “the old fashioned

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<sup>11</sup> Roberts Vaux to [unknown] [draft], 31 May 1831, Vaux Family Papers, HSP.

<sup>12</sup> Nicolas Guyatt discusses how historians have mistakenly adopted similar views that the American Colonization Society was actually a proslavery organization. See Guyatt, *Bind Us Apart: How Enlightened Americans Invented Segregation* (New York: Basic Books), 267-268.

doctrine of abolition, which had been some what superceded, was revived.” He cited the influence of British abolitionist lecturers, such as George Thompson, whose tours in the United States stirred up new enthusiasm for immediate emancipation.<sup>13</sup> Over a fifteen-year period, Vaux used letters to report on significant political developments and to reflect upon and articulate his own changing views and allegiances.

Another early Quaker opponent of slavery, Benjamin Lundy, wrote to a colleague in 1828 about the question of petitioning Congress to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia. He advocated for taking a stronger stand, asking, “When will it be politic? Do you not know that our opponents will take advantage of this cautious, timid disposition? – and whenever we attempt to bring the question before the national Legislature, they will raise an excitement, with the view of arresting our proceedings?” Lundy’s aggressive strategy was a precursor to what was to come as the doctrine of immediate abolition gained popularity. He urged his correspondent, “Let us go to work – strip to it – and hold on, whatever our antagonists may say or do. If there be much excitement among them, regulate your conduct according to the dictates of wisdom – but never cease from laboring to effect your object. – Never abandon an inch of ground, after it has been taken.”<sup>14</sup> The rhetoric Lundy used in his letter became a common refrain of the antislavery movement in the 1830s. Letters became a place to persuade, rally support, and pontificate, enabling the movement to persevere as its members faced antagonism from all sides.

Even as the North and South became knitted together by the cotton trade, the two sections clashed politically and ideologically over the future of slavery. Early antislavery activism, led by relatively conservative organizations like the PAS and NYMS, sought to uphold the letter of the

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<sup>13</sup> Roberts Vaux to Frederick Tuckett, 26 April 1835, Vaux Family Papers, HSP.

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin Lundy to Isaac Barton, 30 January 1828, Pennsylvania Abolition Society Papers, HSP.

law in determining individuals' free or enslaved status. In contrast, by 1835, Northern opposition to slavery became more vocal and more radical. Colonization, which had gained steam among Northern and Southern white constituencies, faded in popularity alongside the rising stars of immediate abolition. David Walker's *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, which appeared in 1829, framed abolitionism as a call to action against slavery and for equality. Two years later, William Lloyd Garrison took up Walker's call and began publishing *The Liberator*, an antislavery newspaper through which Garrison became a leading proponent of universal emancipation and equal rights.

White Southerners perceived these events as clear evidence of Northern attacks on their way of life. Their suspicions were confirmed in 1831 when Nat Turner led a notorious slave rebellion in Southampton, Virginia. Though no tangible link was ever discovered, rumors abounded that Turner had been inspired by writings by the likes of Walker and Garrison, surreptitiously distributed by abolitionist agents among slaves and free black people throughout the South.<sup>15</sup> These rumors gave pause to some white opponents of slavery in the North, who vehemently opposed the idea of inciting violent rebellion among slaves. In January 1832, the New York abolitionist Arthur Tappan explained to William Lloyd Garrison that Turner's revolt had "paralyzed" the progress of their allies in Philadelphia towards forming a national antislavery society.<sup>16</sup> It would be over a year before the American Anti-Slavery Society was founded, led by Garrison and Tappan, with its headquarters in New York.

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<sup>15</sup> Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 211.

<sup>16</sup> Arthur Tappan to William Lloyd Garrison, [21 January 1832], Anti-Slavery Collection, Boston Public Library (BPL).



Links of comity and cooperation between North and South regarding individual cases of illegal enslavement were permanently shattered.<sup>17</sup> A climate of polarization took hold. One of the first places this new sectional politics made itself apparent was the post. A new culture of surveillance gripped the postal system in the South, especially when it came to letters and parcels exchanged with Northern correspondents.

### **The Nineteenth-Century Postal System: A Communications Revolution**

In the 1830s, the United States government was weak. Its strongest branch was the postal system, whose 8,764 postal officers constituted more than three quarters of the federal work force in 1831.<sup>18</sup> For most Americans, the postal system was the primary, if not the only, way in which they encountered the federal government in their daily lives. It reached into almost every corner of the growing United States, and it had the capacity to regularly transmit news about the wider world in a timely manner. Advances in printing and paper-making technology, government subsidies, and postal regulations made it inexpensive to publish and circulate newspapers, periodicals, and other printed documents. At the same time, a set of postal norms developed, including the inviolability of the mail, that made the transmission of information—and money—relatively secure. A system set up to facilitate the business dealings of wealthy men grew into something much larger.<sup>19</sup>

With these developments, dramatic changes occurred in Americans' ability to acquire and communicate information. While printed material made up the bulk of the mail's volume, more

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<sup>17</sup> See Chapter One for discussion of such cases.

<sup>18</sup> Richard John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 3.

<sup>19</sup> John, *Spreading the News*, Ch. 1.

and more people took advantage of the expediency and affordability of the post for their personal correspondence. Elite Americans, especially merchants, had long exchanged letters to maintain business and personal ties over long distances, but letter writing now became an everyday phenomenon that was widely accessible to a large proportion of the population.<sup>20</sup> Railroads and canals facilitated the expansion and increased efficiency of the postal network. Meanwhile, people spread out over greater distances, and they began to expect and demand constant contact with family, friends, and home communities.<sup>21</sup> Rising literacy rates and the declining costs of postal communication contributed to these expectations.<sup>22</sup> The communications revolution resulted in the growth of a broad reading and writing public that consumed and exchanged written information on a massive scale through the post. Shared expectations of access to a national network of written information promoted the growing sense of a national public. Writing a letter was an individual activity, but, in doing so, one participated in a national postal culture predicated on widely held expectations of contact and access, even over long distances.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> On eighteenth-century letter writing see: Eve Tavor Bannet, *Empire of Letters: Letter Manuals and Transatlantic Correspondence, 1688-1820*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Konstantin Dierks, *In My Power: Letter Writing and Communications in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); Toby L. Ditz, "Shipwrecked: Or, Masculinity Imperiled: Mercantile Representations of Failure and the Gendered Self in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia," *The Journal of American History* 81, no. 1 (1994), 51-80. Sarah M.S. Pearsall, *Atlantic Families: Lives and Letters in the Later Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Nathan Perl-Rosenthal, "Corresponding Republics: Letter Writing and Patriot Organizing in the Atlantic Revolutions, ca. 1760-1792" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2011).

<sup>21</sup> William Merrill Decker, *Epistolary Practices: Letter Writing in America Before Telecommunications* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1998).

<sup>22</sup> The most dramatic postal reforms took place in 1845 and 1851, when postage began to be assessed by weight rather than by the sheet. In 1845, letters cost five cents per half ounce. In 1851 the cost was reduced to three cents per half ounce for pre-paid letters. For comparison, a letter sent before 1845 on a single sheet that traveled more than four hundred miles cost twenty-five cents. See David M. Henkin, *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 18-22.

<sup>23</sup> See Henkin, *The Postal Age*; David M. Henkin, *City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

The nineteenth-century postal revolution produced many unforeseen consequences. The public space of the post office was the subject of popular fascination during this period as a herald of the modern age. Visitors to the post office had practical requirements for the cost, swiftness, and reliability of their communications, but they also expected their mail to be secure and private, which required the investment of a certain level of trust in postal employees. Beyond these practical concerns, however, the post office came to occupy a position in the popular imagination as a sensational and unpredictable space. Although most individuals communicated mundane matters, they imagined the envelopes they sent mingling within a wide spectrum of emotionally laden missives. Postal employees wrote sordid memoirs with titles like *Footprints of a Letter Carrier* and *Ten Years Among the Mailbags* that told tales of affairs, robberies, and other deceptions.<sup>24</sup>

At the New York City post office, mail came in and went out five or more times a day to places all over the country. The sheer scale of postal communication—hundreds of thousands of people sent and received letters on a daily basis—facilitated the anonymity of postal exchanges while also provoking public concerns about the nature and propriety of certain communications. The mixture of letters inside the mailbag represented the crowds who mingled in the space of the post office, a prospect that was both enticing and troubling. The specter of the dead letter office, immortalized in the line from Herman Melville’s 1853 short story “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street,” was even more disturbing: “Dead letters! Does it not sound like dead

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<sup>24</sup> James Holbrook, *Ten Years Among the Mailbags, or, Notes from the Diary of a Special Agent of the Post-Office Department* (New York: James Van Orden, 1874), James Rees, *Footprints of a Letter Carrier* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1866).

men?”<sup>25</sup> At the dead letter office, misdirected, illegible, and otherwise unwanted mail languished, fruitlessly awaiting collection by its proper recipients.

Apprehension abounded in the nineteenth century about the conditions of postal anonymity. Guardians of propriety especially feared that young ladies could exchange missives with unknown suitors. In New York, to combat promiscuous intermingling in the space of the post office, women used a separate ladies’ window to retrieve their letters.<sup>26</sup> The device of the ladies’ window was a means of spatially regulating women’s behavior, but it also cleared a niche for women in a space that had previously been monopolized by men. This attempt at sexual segregation was not always successful. Even at the ladies’ window, according to “Mrs. W.,” a female postal clerk in New York, “sometimes men would come to the window and insist on her getting the letters of their lady friends for them.”<sup>27</sup> In addition to the phenomenon of the ladies’ window, cautionary tales of seduction and ill-fated romance through the mail illustrated the dangers and temptations of unsupervised female correspondence.

Whether or not these fears of postal promiscuity were grounded in reality, there were people who used the anonymity of the postal system to their advantage. The post was the most public institution in the United States, but, by its very design, it allowed for the unconstrained, private exchange of information on all sorts of topics. Abolitionists understood its disruptive potential. Their infamous postal campaign, which originated at the New York City post office, is a dramatic example of how the anonymous conditions of the mail could shelter controversial

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<sup>25</sup> Herman Melville, “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street,” *Putnam’s Monthly* 2, no. 11 (1853), 609-615, <http://www.bartleby.com/129/>.

<sup>26</sup> Henkin, *The Postal Age*, 75.

<sup>27</sup> Virginia Penny, *How Women Can Make Money: Married or Single: In All Branches of the Arts and Sciences, Professions, Trades, Agricultural and Mechanical Pursuits* (Springfield, MA: D.E. Fisk, 1870), 407.

activities. In the summer of 1835, the American Anti-Slavery Society flooded mails across the United States with abolitionist literature, enraging slaveholders and planting fears of slave rebellion. Originating as a genuine attempt to convert the sympathies of Southern slaveholders to their cause, the campaign prompted a ferocious debate over slavery, states' rights, and the sanctity of the post. Most of the antislavery literature was distributed within the North, but approximately twenty thousand names of Southerners appeared on the mailing list, and the reaction in the South vastly outstripped the expectations of the abolitionists behind the campaign. Protests and riots erupted in Southern cities throughout the summer, and threats rained down on abolitionist leaders including Arthur Tappan and William Lloyd Garrison.<sup>28</sup>

The postal campaign had far-reaching consequences. It punctuated the creeping progress of sectional polarization that gripped the nation. White Southerners heightened the policing of their mailbags and their communities. Although the pamphlets did not aim to incite rebellion among slaves and Southern free black people, most of whom were illiterate, the campaign fed the fears of white slaveholders. They attempted to stamp out dissent against slavery not only in their own communities but also nationwide. Andrew Jackson endorsed measures favored by slaveholders of policing the mail in Southern slaveholding states, and he also supported a ban on abolitionist publications circulating in non-slaveholding Northern states. In debating this measure, Congress upheld the right to the freedom of the press under the First Amendment, but states passed laws preventing antislavery material from circulating in the South. The mail was the first but not the only target for censorship. The gag rule adopted by the House of Representatives in 1836 prohibited the discussion of abolitionist petitions. Furthermore, historians argue that anti-

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<sup>28</sup> For accounts of the Postal Campaign of 1835 see Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "The Abolitionists' Postal Campaign of 1835," *The Journal of Negro History* 50, no. 4 (1965), 227-238; John, *Spreading the News*, Ch. 7.

abolitionist mobs and violence targeting antislavery lecturers and publishers in free states, including the murder of the printer Elijah Lovejoy in 1837, sprang from Southerners' reactions to the postal campaign.<sup>29</sup>

Despite these repressive efforts, the connection between abolitionism and the postal system endured as antislavery activists based their own political community on the exchange of letters. The postal campaign provided a catalyst to abolition and set the tone for how antislavery activists reacted to further incidents of anti-abolitionist violence. For example, the riot in Charleston that targeted the incendiary shipment of antislavery literature that was being held in the city post office motivated Angelina Grimké, a Charleston native and member of a slaveholding family, to write to William Lloyd Garrison in August of 1835. This letter launched her career as a major antislavery figure.<sup>30</sup>

### **“a Copperplate letter:” Letter-Writing Conventions and Penmanship**

The fiercely-guarded privacy of the post ensured that sealed letters passed chastely from one hand to another without the interference of probing eyes. Letters carried with them an illusion of physical intimacy—they were intended to imitate in-person conversations.<sup>31</sup> Letters communicated information, ideas, and feelings, but they also expressed the aspirations of correspondents. These aspirations could be personal; for example, certain eighteenth-century letters attempted to alleviate strains of separation and uncertainty in transatlantic familial

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<sup>29</sup> John, *Spreading the News*, 257-280.

<sup>30</sup> The Charleston riot culminated with the burning of the pamphlets as well as effigies of Garrison, Arthur Tappan, and Samuel Hanson Cox. Gerda Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina: Pioneers for Woman's Rights and Abolition*, Rev. and expanded edition (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 85.

<sup>31</sup> William Merrill Decker discusses the materiality of letters at length. See Decker, *Epistolary Practices*, 37-56.

correspondence. Letter writers projected images of harmonious family life to reinforce familial bonds even as these ties were threatened by distance and dislocation.<sup>32</sup> Letter writing could also function as a subtle means of asserting personal agency in the wider world—a form of “covert power” that consolidated the writer’s place in the social and economic order without overtly disrupting the existing structure. Konstantin Dierks argues that eighteenth-century letter writers reinforced an “epistolary divide” that excluded illiterate undesirables.<sup>33</sup> While eighteenth-century letters mainly served the purposes of wealthy white men, as the medium became more broadly available, other groups harnessed the power of letter writing to serve their own purposes.

Alongside growing expectations of contact, correspondents attached cultural meanings to their compositions. Individuals had expectations for the level of intimacy letters could provide and how correspondence could foster personal relationships when face-to-face conversation was impossible. Letter writing stood in for oral discussion.<sup>34</sup> To mitigate distance, many nineteenth-century letters evoked the physical nature of writing by opening with the phrase, “I take my pen in hand.” Besotted lovers enclosed locks of hair, scented the page, or sealed their missives with a kiss—leaving further traces of the author’s physical presence.

Handwriting itself bore the physical mark of the author. Variations in penmanship told the story of a person’s educational history, indicating which style of script they learned as a child through printed manuals, tutored instruction, or trial and error. Handwriting acted as a marker of class, gender, and profession. The formation of one’s letters reflected years of disciplined tutelage and practice, or bits and pieces picked up from copying one’s social betters. The

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<sup>32</sup> Pearsall, *Atlantic Families*, 2-7. See also David Gerber, *Authors of their Lives: The Personal Correspondence of British Immigrants to North America in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

<sup>33</sup> Dierks, *In My Power*, 1-8.

<sup>34</sup> Decker, *Epistolary Practices*, 5.

penmanship style could be that of a young woman, a well-trained clerk, or an important man of the world. The author may have drafted the final product carefully on fine stationery with a well-trimmed quill or a fine steel (or gold) pen. Or she could have scratched it hastily on whatever scraps of paper were available with a dull pen and watery ink. Any and all of these minute details betrayed details of the writer's social position. It is no wonder that many aspiring middle and upper-class parents carried on lengthy correspondences with their children, devoting reams of paper to modeling the form and content of a respectable letter and correcting the mistakes of their offspring. Given this level of scrutiny, it is not surprising that the dominant theme of many nineteenth-century letters was that of apology: for writing too little, too much, too big, too small, too infrequently, or, as a blanket apology, for simply failing to write "good letters."

One young woman offered a novel defense of her slapdash writing habits, infused with a dash of resistance to feminine behavioral norms. In 1811, Susanna Vaux wrote to her mother and brother, Roberts Vaux, while she was traveling away from their family home in Philadelphia. At the end of her letter she lamented, "What a sad scrawl I have made of this[.]" Such a statement exemplifies a ubiquitous concern among letter-writers, especially women. It was often offered at the conclusion of a sheet that, to twenty-first-century eyes, appears to be meticulously composed. Susanna Vaux's letter displays signs of being written hastily: a few words are crossed out and the ink is smudged in places. Her penmanship, however, is entirely legible, and her words fill the sheet evenly and comfortably. Taken on its own, Vaux's acknowledgment of her letter's inadequacy was typical of declarations of epistolary modesty that were common among early American letter-writers, especially women.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> I discuss the idea of women's epistolary modesty further in Chapter Three. Ronald J. Zboray refers to this phenomenon as a "rhetoric of diffidence." Zboray, *Voices Without Votes: Women and Politics in Antebellum New England* (Durham, N.H.: University of New Hampshire Press, 2010), 12-13.



Rather than leaving her apology unremarked upon, however, Vaux offered justification for her sloppy letter. She wrote, “Indeed I begin to think with Elizabeth Smith that when the heart is interested, it is impossible to pay much attention to the pen, that is to its formation of letters—I think her expression is, when writing to a particular friend, and knowing it badly done, ‘when I send you a Copperplate letter, be sure I am going to quarrel with you.’”<sup>36</sup> Vaux referenced the recently published memoirs of Elizabeth Smith, a self-educated British woman translator who was fluent in several languages including Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Persian, and Arabic. Works such as Smith’s memoir, which was published after her death, offered inspiration and models of emulation for young women.<sup>37</sup> Susanna Vaux cleverly quoted from Smith to demonstrate her familiarity with a recent publication that may have been recommended to her by her mother, thereby portraying herself as a diligent student and obedient daughter. At the same time, however, she subtly challenged the expectation that her letters should display a restrained character. Vaux deployed Smith’s dismissal of “Copperplate letters” to justify the emotional and intellectual meanderings that made her letter appear to be a “sad scrawl.” Such ramblings, she argued, were far from careless. They evidenced the intensity of her emotional attachment to her correspondents.

In addition to the general anxiety surrounding the relationship of handwriting to a person’s place in the world, further scrutiny applied to penmanship as an indication of the more amorphous qualities of individual character. Handwriting instruction became increasingly standardized over the course of the nineteenth century, corresponding to the rising popularity of

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<sup>36</sup> Susanna Vaux to Ann Vaux and Roberts Vaux, 5 July 1811, Vaux Family Papers, HSP.

<sup>37</sup> Elizabeth Smith, *Fragments in Prose and Verse by Miss Elizabeth Smith. With Some Account of her Life and Character: by H.M. Bowdler* (Burlington, N.J.: D. Allison & Co., 1811), 20; Lucia McMahon, *Mere Equals: The Paradox of Educated Women in the Early American Republic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 56-57, 194.

the particular styles of script, such as the Spencerian style that swept the United States after around 1850.<sup>38</sup> Standardization reflected the growth of common school education, concentrated in New England and the Northeast, and it also demonstrated a growing preoccupation with the relationship between physical discipline and mental character. Proponents of strict penmanship education believed that particular methods of sitting and holding a pen as well as controlled physical movements while writing helped to discipline students mentally, instilling positive characteristics such as honesty, diligence, and humility. Neat, controlled penmanship indicated a tidily organized and disciplined mind. Conversely, a messy scrawl revealed impulsive, chaotic tendencies that lurked beneath a person's exterior self-presentation.<sup>39</sup>

Nineteenth-century cultural assumptions also drew a link between penmanship and individual identity. According to these assumptions, in some—perhaps most—cases, individual characteristics should be suppressed in the name of cultivating an orderly society in which certain people fulfilled their appropriate roles. The physical and mental discipline instilled through common school instruction was the proper path for most people, who would go on to live ordinary lives. Strikingly, women and men often learned different styles of writing. Male students learned a brisk style of writing that was useful for the large volume of business correspondence they expected to conduct as adults. Girls learned a more elaborate, embroidered script, which they practiced almost as a form of artwork.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Platt Rogers Spencer invented the Spencerian school of penmanship in the late 1840s. Spencerian penmanship reached its peak, however, after its creator's death in 1864. Tamara Plakins Thornton, *Handwriting in America: A Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 47-50.

<sup>39</sup> Chapter Seven discusses the relationship between penmanship and character development in the context of emancipation. Thornton, *Handwriting in America*, Ch. 2.

<sup>40</sup> On gender distinctions in Victorian-era handwriting instruction, see Thornton, *Handwriting in America*, Ch. 2.

As Susanna Vaux's letter indicates, however, many people held the somewhat contradictory notion that handwriting offered an unfiltered glimpse into a person's innermost psyche. Therefore, individual quirks or imperfections might also be interpreted as expressions of intimacy and emotion. Furthermore, the connection between handwriting and individuality could provide insight into the minds of exceptional people recognized for their genius, such as artists, authors, politicians, and military leaders.<sup>41</sup> Susanna Vaux justified the shortcomings of her penmanship as evidence of emotional attachment to her mother, and she also drew an indirect comparison between herself and Elizabeth Smith, a widely recognized example of female genius.

Abolitionists, convinced as they were of the moral integrity of their cause, were especially interested in what their handwriting revealed about themselves and their allies. For example, in an 1848 letter to his fiancée, Susan Lyman, Peter Lesley commented on a mutual friend, "I judge by his handwriting that he is a Genius. Nobody but a genius could possibly have written that letter, or nibbed the pen with which he wrote it. It looks and reads for all the world like Jupiter's thunderbolts after their first defeat ... scattering in all directions."<sup>42</sup> Lesley, his future wife, and the friend were all dedicated abolitionists. In a previous letter, Susan Lyman referred to the man in question as "a very wild fellow indeed, just like his handwriting, but with the best heart in the world."<sup>43</sup> At first glance, the man's penmanship seemed to evidence an unruly character, but, as Peter Lesley pointed out, it could instead indicate his virtuosity. Lesley was probably being glib

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<sup>41</sup> Thornton, *Handwriting in America*, Ch. 3.

<sup>42</sup> J. Peter Lesley to Susan Inches Lyman, 28 October 1848, Ames Family Historical Collection, Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University.

<sup>43</sup> Susan Inches Lyman to J. Peter Lesley, 21 October [1848], Ames Family Historical Collection, Schlesinger Library.

in his assessment, but, like most people, he saw handwriting as an essential part of an individual's personality.

Lydia Maria Child, a prominent feminist abolitionist and another friend of Susan Lyman, was curious about her own handwriting. A prolific author and editor of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* newspaper, Child was no stranger to public exposure, though she also struggled with depression throughout her life, which prompted her to periodically withdraw from the world.<sup>44</sup> In 1843, she had one of her manuscripts analyzed by an expert in handwriting. Child quoted extensively from his analysis in a letter she wrote to a friend:

‘My impression is that the letter was written by a woman; but there is so much of strong intellect in it, that it may have been written by a man. Would not like to say certainly that it was written by a woman, but the feeling is strong that it was so. The mind is good – very good. Not perhaps first-rate; that is, not a giant – but very good, and very far above mediocrity.’<sup>45</sup>

Child no doubt quoted this passage facetiously. The letter stumped the male handwriting expert, who struggled to reconcile the feminine handwriting with the “strong intellect” displayed by its subject matter. Child was a champion of woman's equality and made a career out of astonishing men with her intellectual capability.

Abolitionists were eager to gather supporters and raise funds by capitalizing on the popularity of handwriting analysis and its related hobby, autograph collecting. For example, in 1852, Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote to Susan Farley Porter, an antislavery woman from Rochester, New York, after Porter asked her to contribute to an autograph collection that would be sold to raise money for the abolition cause. Stowe heartily agreed to participate and offered

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<sup>44</sup> Carolyn L. Karcher, *The First Woman in the Republic: A Cultural Biography of Lydia Maria Child* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994).

<sup>45</sup> Lydia Maria Child to Louisa Loring, 22 June 1843, Lydia Maria Child Papers, WCL.

Porter some unsolicited advice. Instead of Porter's proposed title, "Antislavery Autographs," Stowe suggested "Liberty Autographs," or "Autographs for Freedom" because she felt that the term "antislavery" had become "hackneyed." Stowe had recently risen to mass popularity after the serial publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* the previous year, and perhaps she considered herself an authority on antislavery salesmanship. She also reassured Porter, "If my hand writing on the present occasion should rather discourage you in view of an autograph let me assure you that I can write better if I try - & will endeavor to do my prettiest for you when the time comes[.]"<sup>46</sup> Stowe understood that the aesthetics of her contribution were as important as the content of the message. Porter took Stowe's advice, and *Autographs for Freedom* was met with great popularity when it was released in 1853.<sup>47</sup>

Handwriting presented obstacles for certain prominent abolitionists. For example, Gerrit Smith, the prominent abolitionist philanthropist, was—and, among historians, continues to be—notorious for his impossibly cryptic scrawls.<sup>48</sup> Smith was a wealthy man, and he employed clerks to conduct his business correspondence. In abolition matters, which often mixed personal friendships and sensitive political information, Smith composed most of his letters himself, sometimes to the chagrin of the people he addressed. In a letter he wrote to Smith in February 1852, Frederick Douglass compared his penmanship to Smith's. Douglass first expressed some self-consciousness about his own handwriting. He wrote, "You quite encourage me about my

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<sup>46</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe to Susan Farley Porter, 20 June [1852], Porter Family Papers, Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation, River Campus Libraries, University of Rochester.

<sup>47</sup> *Autographs for Freedom* was edited by Julia Griffiths, a British abolitionist woman who worked closely with Frederick Douglass in Rochester, New York. Susan Farley Porter, and her husband Samuel D. Porter, were close friends of Douglass and Griffiths. Harriet Beecher Stowe contributed a poem, "Caste and Christ," to the volume. See Julia Griffiths, ed., *Autographs for Freedom* (Boston: John P. Jewett and Company, 1853), 4-6.

<sup>48</sup> My theory is that Gerrit Smith has not been widely studied in part because his correspondence is nearly impossible to decipher. He is one of the few prominent abolitionists for whom no edited collection of correspondence has been arranged. The same goes for Wendell Phillips.

chirography – My hand is a picked up one – gathered from different sources and therefore lacks consistency[.]” Douglass alluded to the precarious circumstances of his education. He taught himself to write as a slave and therefore followed no formal course of instruction. Examining his writings that survive today, his penmanship varies fairly widely, even among letters written just a few days apart.<sup>49</sup> Douglass continued, commenting on Smith’s writing, “How different with your self. I should know your hand, I had almost said – although you should make but a straight mark.”<sup>50</sup> In other words, Douglass pointed out that Smith’s writing was distinctive, but not legible, since he rendered every word as a straight line.

The prominent feminist abolitionist Maria Weston Chapman employed similarly illegible penmanship. As a woman, she lacked the excuse that the demands of business correspondence sacrificed aesthetics for efficiency. Chapman’s five younger sisters were also all actively involved in the antislavery cause, but they were dwarfed in public stature and personality by their sometimes-overbearing eldest sibling. While the younger Weston sisters each had neat, delicate handwriting befitting their station as daughters of a well-connected Boston-area family, Maria’s handwriting violated any such expectations, as did her conduct as an outspoken abolitionist and advocate for women’s rights. Her sisters chose to violate social norms in other arenas. At age twenty-four, Maria married Henry Grafton Chapman, a wealthy Boston merchant and fellow abolitionist. Together, they had four children, one of whom died, before Henry Chapman himself

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<sup>49</sup> There are many reasons for a person’s handwriting to look different from day to day: quality of paper, ink, writing implements, lighting conditions, writing surface, and health are all some practical considerations. Though Frederick Douglass’s penmanship varies, it is still distinctive and identifiable.

<sup>50</sup> Frederick Douglass to Gerrit Smith, 13 February 1852, Gerrit Smith Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Bird Library, Syracuse University.

died of tuberculosis in 1842. In contrast, the other Weston sisters chose never to marry, freeing themselves to work for themselves and for the antislavery cause.<sup>51</sup>

### **“you have had my whole heart:” Building Emotional Connections through Letters**

As the previous examples indicate, the penmanship and writing style of an individual correspondent painted a picture of her personality. Writers themselves were aware of this association, and some, like Douglass, felt self-conscious of imperfections or irregularities. Most people were hesitant to ascribe too much significance to penmanship as an exhaustive barometer of character, but handwriting could leave a strong first impression and provoke snap judgments. On the other hand, correspondents often built close, long-term relationships through the exchange of letters. The physical inscription of words on a page along with the content expressed by those words could create deep intellectual and emotional connections, even among people who had only met in person once or twice before. As a historian working in the archive with letters written over 150 years ago, I sometimes cannot help but feel the thrill of recognizing an old friend when I see the familiar handwriting of one of the people I study.

The story of Theodore Dwight Weld and Angelina Grimké provides a compelling illustration of the potential for emotional and political intensity in relationships created through the exchange of letters. Weld, the Lane Seminary Student turned celebrated antislavery activist, befriended Angelina and Sarah Grimké, the daughters of a prominent slaveholding family in Charleston, South Carolina, after they spurned their upbringing, moved to Philadelphia, and rose

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<sup>51</sup> Lee Chambers, *The Weston Sisters: An American Abolitionist Family* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

to fame as vocal abolitionists.<sup>52</sup> Angelina and her sister Sarah corresponded frequently with Weld after meeting him at an antislavery convention in New York in November 1836. Weld, already an accomplished lecturer for the American Anti-Slavery Society, was training new agents for the field. The sisters soon embarked on a controversial lecture tour of their own, and Weld advised them from afar. The Grimké sisters traversed New England where they famously began to pair calls for abolition with demands for women's rights and spoke to "promiscuous assemblies" of both women and men.<sup>53</sup>

The Grimké sisters and Weld engaged in lively epistolary debate over the ideas and objectives of the antislavery movement, but the sisters, who themselves displayed impeccable penmanship, struggled to decipher Weld's letters. Weld, like Gerrit Smith, had notoriously illegible writing.<sup>54</sup> Angelina Grimké was always a blunt critic of Weld, though the same could be said about Weld of Grimké, and she was one of the few people who dared to point out his shortcomings as a correspondent. In May of 1837, Weld described a change in his writing implements. Having previously relied on a quill, Weld noted, "Angelina made such wry faces and outcries about the

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<sup>52</sup> For a full biography of the Grimké sisters see Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina*.

<sup>53</sup> See Angelina Grimké to Theodore Dwight Weld, 12 August 1837, Weld-Grimké Papers, WCL.

<sup>54</sup> Unlike Gerrit Smith, Theodore Dwight Weld's correspondence (and that of his wife Angelina Grimké Weld and sister-in-law Sarah Grimké) has been collected and published. There is no mention in the collection of the challenges such an endeavor must have entailed. Anecdotally, I have noted inconsistencies between some published and manuscript versions of Weld's letters, suggesting the issues that can arise when editors interpret penmanship uncritically.

Robert Abzug argues that Theodore Weld cultivated a romantic persona for himself as "rootless prophet from everywhere and nowhere in particular" that "combined the trappings of an American Everyman with those of a primitive Christian." Abzug calls Weld's "wild and illegible handwriting" evidence of inner turmoil and gloom; "an unresolved and tortured past." In his association between Weld's penmanship and his innermost character, Abzug unwittingly replicates the cultural assumptions of the nineteenth-century people he studies. See Abzug, *Passionate Liberator*, 3-5.



chyrography of my last letter – how she could’nt find out a word of it and all that – that I have just installed into office a new steel pen for her especial benefit[.]”<sup>55</sup>

The new pen apparently made at least a nominal impact on Weld’s legibility, although it failed to soothe his debates with the sisters. He and the Grimké’s argued ferociously over women’s rights in their letters for much of the fall and winter. Sarah Grimké attempted to maintain a tone of civility. In September 1837, she told Weld, “Angelina is so wrathful that I think it will be unsafe to trust the pen in her hands to reply to thy two last good, long letters[.]” Before sending the letter, Angelina crossed out “good” and replaced it with “bad” in her own handwriting, noting wryly that “Sister seems very much afraid that my pen will be transformed into a venomous serpent when it is employed in addressing thee My Dear Brother & no wonder for I like to pay my debts & as I received \$10s worth of scolding I should be guilty of injustice did I not return the favor.”<sup>56</sup> Angelina vehemently defended the lecturing practices of herself and her sister, arguing that they lectured exclusively on abolition and were not promoting the question of women’s rights unnecessarily.

Weld made the unfortunate mistake of quoting excerpts of Angelina’s letters back to her in his reply as evidence of contradictory views and violation of the “doctrine of charitable construction.”<sup>57</sup> In his next letter, Weld repented of his pedantry and admitted that “I am convinced with you my dear sisters that it will avail little for us to discuss with our pens,” proposing instead that they discuss their views in person upon their next meeting. He could not

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<sup>55</sup> Theodore Dwight Weld to Angelina Grimké, 22 May 1837, Weld-Grimké Papers, WCL.

<sup>56</sup> Sarah Grimké & Angelina Grimké to Theodore Dwight Weld, 20 September 1837, Weld-Grimké Papers, WCL.

<sup>57</sup> Theodore Dwight Weld to Sarah Grimké & Angelina Grimké, 10 October 1837, Weld-Grimké Papers, WCL.

resist one last jab, however, warning Angelina, “you have sore and long and multiple conflicts yet to wage with the powerful & subtle and endlessly rarified pride of your heart.”<sup>58</sup>

The conflict continued to simmer. In January 1838, Angelina told Weld that corresponding further was fruitless and asked him to destroy all of the letters they had exchanged on the subject of women’s rights because “we can not understand each other.” Weld evidently did not follow her instructions. Grimké referred to one “letter never to be forgotten” that haunted their friendship. She wrote, “I have never read it over since, I have often wished to but I am never alone for any length of time, & I can’t read it, I have not the courage to read it in any other way.”<sup>59</sup>

Rather than discontinue the correspondence, a few weeks later, Weld wrote a private letter to Angelina in which he professed his love for her, telling her, “you have had my whole heart.” Weld revealed that he was first drawn to her after reading the letter she wrote to William Lloyd Garrison, which appeared in *The Liberator* in August 1835, long before the couple met in person. He recalled:

I read it over and over and over, and in the deep consciousness that I should find in the spirit that dictated that later the searchless power of congenial communings which I had always been pining for and of which I had never found but one (C Stuart) I forgot utterly that you were not of my own sex! ... To write you and open a channel of communication with you was my immediate determination – but then it occurred – you were a woman! and of course I inferred unapproachable except as a woman.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Theodore Dwight Weld to Sarah Grimké & Angelina Grimké, 6 November 1837, Weld-Grimké Papers, WCL.

<sup>59</sup> Theodore Weld referred to a letter dated 10 October 1837. Angelina Grimké also referred to a letter she wrote that Weld “said I ought to be ashamed of.” Angelina Grimké to Theodore Dwight Weld, 21 January 1838, Weld-Grimké Papers, WCL.

<sup>60</sup> Theodore Weld referred to his friend and British abolitionist, Charles Stuart. Theodore Dwight Weld to Angelina Grimké, 8 February 1838, Weld Grimké Papers, WCL. Chapter Three discusses Angelina Grimké’s 1835 letter.

It was only after meeting the Grimkés in New York that Weld felt it was appropriate to strike up a correspondence. Even when Angelina reciprocated Weld's feelings, the couple continued their relationship secretly, through correspondence, until they were married at in a small, very unconventional ceremony in Philadelphia in May 1838. The guest list comprised black and white abolitionists, as well as members of Angelina's slaveholding family, and former slaves from their household.<sup>61</sup> The wedding cake was made by a local black confectioner from sugar produced by free labor, a rare commodity at the time.<sup>62</sup>

The correspondence between the Grimkés and Weld illustrates both the emotional connections that people in the nineteenth century developed through letters and the intellectual significance of letters to the ideas and organization of the antislavery movement. Though they hardly knew each other in person, the Grimkés and Weld participated in the free exchange of ideas, opinions, and even insults through their letters. Sarah, who was significantly older than both Angelina and Weld, always occupied a prominent position in their relationship as a sister and closest confidant. Weld and Angelina fell in love through the exchange of words on a page, punctuated by only fleeting meetings in person prior to their marriage. In the letter professing his love, Weld revealed how their correspondence transgressed the conventional boundaries that structured relationships between men and women. He could not pick up his pen to write to Angelina immediately because he assumed that she was "unapproachable except as a woman." In other words, it was inappropriate for a strange man to address a letter to a young, unmarried woman whose acquaintance he had not yet made. Furthermore, Weld implied that if he were to

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<sup>61</sup> Angelina Grimké to Jane Smith, 27 March 1838; Sarah Grimké to Elizabeth Pease, 10 June – 1 July 1838; List of wedding guests, [May 1838], Weld-Grimké Papers, WCL.

<sup>62</sup> Angelina Grimké to Theodore Dwight Weld, 6 May 1838, Weld-Grimké Papers, WCL.

pursue the connection, the only framework that existed was that of courtship—a framework that Weld eventually followed, if in a rather unconventional way.

In the meantime, the Grimké and Weld improvised, adopting the familial language of “brother” and “sisters” when they addressed one another. This convention made sense in the context of the antislavery movement’s evangelical roots, and it echoed throughout abolitionists’ correspondence as a means of asserting heartfelt affinity and unity of purpose. Weld and the Grimké relied on this familial rhetoric to write long letters on political subjects, and it licensed them to spar with one another as intellectual equals, before they became fast friends.<sup>63</sup> Their correspondence offers just one example of how abolitionists used letters in ways that both relied upon and subverted contemporary social and cultural assumptions, relying on the emotional power of letters to advance radical political aims.

### **“Abolition is in season:” Correspondence as an Arena for Persuasion and Conversion**

When the abolitionists embarked upon their campaign for immediate emancipation, they envisioned letters and the postal system as tools for converting skeptics to their cause. Opponents of slavery used correspondence as a means of individual persuasion. They bombarded their targets with facts and arguments about the injustice and immorality of slavery. Abolitionists were optimistic about their prospects of success through such means. In 1834, the Rochester abolitionist Samuel D. Porter predicted, “I look for an extraordinary reaction revolution in public sentiment on this subject in less than 3 years – at present in this region Abolition is in season.”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> See Chapter Four for a further discussion of family rhetoric in antislavery letters.

<sup>64</sup> Samuel D. Porter to William Farley, 22 November 1834, Porter Family Papers, Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation, River Campus Libraries, University of Rochester.

One of the primary aims of early abolitionists was to discredit supporters of colonization. Letters from the early 1830s are full of discussions of the merits of immediate emancipation and the flaws and hypocrisies of colonization schemes. Writing letters was a way for abolitionists to catalog their own reasons for supporting the antislavery cause, to debate with opponents and skeptics, and to strategize with allies. Letters offered a means for emulating face-to-face conversation from afar, and the antislavery movement treated correspondence as a political battlefield for persuading supporters, staging debates, condemning enemies, and narrating triumphs.

Conversion to the antislavery cause began with friends and relations. In December 1832, Edwin W. Garrison, from Cherryfield, Maine, addressed a letter to his long-lost cousin, William Lloyd Garrison, in which he espoused a shared commitment to abolition. “No doubt you have been long expecting to hear from me,” he began, apologizing that, “I confess, I ought, at least to have acknowledged before this the receipt of your valuable papers.” It turned out that Garrison had been sending him issues of *The Liberator* for nearly a year but had directed them to the wrong town. Edwin only received them after he paid a visit to a post office thirty miles away, where he “was surprised to find quite a pile” of newspapers addressed to him. He reported that he “took them all out of the office, and have them now filed in my room.” Edwin described himself as a devoted abolitionist who wholeheartedly supported his cousin’s endeavors. He expressed opposition to the Colonization Society and requested that Garrison subscribe him to the publications of the New England Anti-Slavery Society (NEASS).<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Edwin W. Garrison to William Lloyd Garrison, 22 December [1832], Garrison Family Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

Edwin Garrison presented himself as already a convert to abolition, but his contact with his cousin led him down the path of transforming sentiment into action. He volunteered to help Garrison raise awareness of the NEASS and to gather subscriptions to *The Liberator* in his area. He also ended up writing further letters that Garrison used as fodder for his paper. For example, in February 1834, Edwin recounted,

A few weeks since, I was in a neighbourhood where the people have heard little or nothing of slavery, and were entirely ignorant of its horrors, but who had embraced the colonization scheme on the ground of its tendency to overthrow that evil. I gave them an address on the subject pointing out some of the enormities of the vile system of blood and lust, and shewing that the only remedy was immediate abolition.<sup>66</sup>

Garrison published the introduction to the address in *The Liberator*. Through their correspondence, the target of Garrison's conversion efforts, a cousin he had never met, became an agent of conversion himself.

In November 1831, Joshua Coffin recounted his own conversion to abolitionism in a letter to his friend, John Farmer. He wrote, "The cause of the poor slaves at the South have of late engaged much of my thoughts, & I feel satisfied that the only safe course for our Southern brethren is to emancipate all their slaves[.]" If they did so, and provided adequate protection for the rights of former slaves, Coffin believed, "insurrections will cease, & both black & whites would lie down & rise up in peace & quietness, & grow rich & happy together." He criticized the ambitions of the Colonization Society, calling them "as preposterous as it would be to level the Allegany mountains & convey them to the Atlantic with a tea spoon."<sup>67</sup> Evidently, the arguments

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<sup>66</sup> Edwin W. Garrison to William Lloyd Garrison, 5 February [1834], Garrison Family Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

<sup>67</sup> J[oshua] Coffin to John Farmer, 1 November 1831, John Farmer Papers, New Hampshire Historical Society.

in Coffin's letter were convincing to Farmer, who soon became active in forming an antislavery society in his home city of Concord, New Hampshire.

In another instance, Jonathan Thomas, of Zanefield, Ohio, wrote to his brother, Nathan M. Thomas, who was an active abolitionist in Michigan, seeking his advice on the subject of abolition. Jonathan Thomas teetered on the brink of conversion. He admitted, "I profess to be a thorough Abolitionist ... as far as I can gather their principals from what I have read and heard expressed but I have not yet felt it right for me to join an abolition society yet." He had reservations, however that antislavery had "a branch of priestcraft attached to it" and sought his brother's input to convince him one way or the other.<sup>68</sup>

Other conversion efforts were not so easy. For example, James Frederick Otis wrote to William Lloyd Garrison in early 1832, first asserting, "I agree with you in toto," with respect to Garrison's views in *The Liberator* supporting immediate emancipation. But, Otis wondered, "[D]o the Colonization associations deserve such caustic and constant reprobation at the hands of those who profess the same ultimate object and whose means alone of producing that result are divers...?" Otis averred, "I ask merely for information," because, "I know many are honest men whose support of its object is as zealous as I know their intentions are honest and upright."<sup>69</sup> For Garrison and other enthusiastic converts to abolition, the hypocrisy of the Colonization Society was apparent. But people like Otis were hesitant to alienate friends and neighbors who disagreed with their extreme views. Instead, they turned to correspondence to probe these thorny political questions. The debate over the "means" versus the "ultimate object" of achieving emancipation

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<sup>68</sup> Jonathan Thomas to Nathan M. Thomas, 21 November 1837, Nathan M. Thomas Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>69</sup> James Frederick Otis to William Lloyd Garrison, 11 January 1832, Anti-Slavery Collection, BPL.

to which Otis alluded became a recurring theme in the disagreements that split antislavery factions.<sup>70</sup>

Joseph Horace Kimball, a young New Hampshire abolitionist, took a blunt tone in addressing a friend, Moses French Hoit, with whom he disagreed regarding the efficacy of gradual or immediate abolition. He lectured Hoit:

As to yr opinions of slavery, I must tell you I think you a little inconsistent. Don't be startled now, for if I did not value yr opinion, I wd not say so. You are opposed to slavery – it is an abominable thing – you abhor it with all yr heart – but – but – but – then it must be abolished gradually, v-e-r-y g-r-a-d-u-a-l-l-y[.]

Kimball was careful to flatter his friend by characterizing his candor as evidence of his regard for his opinion, and he left his rebuke until the end of a long letter. Still, he candidly expressed his disdain for Hoit's opinion by mocking the gap between Hoit's supposedly ardent abhorrence of slavery and his lukewarm approach to abolishing it. Kimball asked, "1. Is it a sin to hold an immortal soul in bondage? 2. Are we bound to abandon sin gradually or immediately?" He concluded, "Let yr own good sense answer."<sup>71</sup>

Kimball, who was just twenty-one years old when he wrote this letter, soon took an active role in the growing abolition cause. He became the editor of the New Hampshire Anti-Slavery Society's *Herald of Freedom* paper, and in 1837 he traveled to the West Indies as an agent of the American Anti-Slavery Society, where he investigated the effects of emancipation there. Though Kimball died from tuberculosis shortly after the trip, the AASS published an account of his West Indies observations. The book gave a positive evaluation of the consequences of abolishing slavery while denouncing the British policy of delaying full emancipation through establishing

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<sup>70</sup> For further discussion, see Chapter Four.

<sup>71</sup> Joseph Horace Kimball to Moses French Hoit, 29 December 1834, Joseph Horace Kimball Papers, New Hampshire Historical Society.



an apprenticeship period. It influenced public opinion in the United States regarding the West Indies as well as domestic plans for emancipation.<sup>72</sup> For instance, shortly after the book's publication, Francis Gillette professed himself to be "quite a recent convert to the Doctrine of Immediate Emancipation." His skepticism of the idea had been dispelled, he wrote, after reading Kimball's account of "the grand and conclusive experiments which have been made in the British West Indies[.]"<sup>73</sup>

Kimball continued his efforts to persuade Hoit of the rightness of the abolition cause. Several months after the first letter, and just after he assumed the editorship of the *Herald*, Kimball brought the topic up with Hoit again. He asked, "Why do we thus differ? Do we not understand each other, or are we so much at variance as we suppose?" "You know my views," he continued, "Why will you not state your objections, that I may endeavour to obviate them? If I have not been explicit enough, I will strive to be more so." Kimball went on to explain, in detail, his reasons for opposing colonization and supporting a doctrine of "immediate, unconditional emancipation, emancipation now, emancipation on the spot."<sup>74</sup> He promised to send Hoit a copy of the *Herald*. No subsequent letters survive between the two men, so it is not clear whether Kimball's conversion efforts were successful. As the existing letters indicate, however, Kimball saw correspondence as an important venue for engaging in intellectual and political debate.

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<sup>72</sup> The law abolishing slavery in the British West Indies passed in 1833 and took effect in 1834. According to the law, the apprenticeship period was supposed to last up to six years, but after much resistance, it was abolished in 1838. James A. Thome and Joseph Horace Kimball, *Emancipation in the West Indies: A Six Months' Tour in Antigua, Barbados, and Jamaica, in the Year 1837* (New York: The American Anti-Slavery Society, 1838).

<sup>73</sup> Francis Gillette to A.F. Williams, 18 June 1838, Francis Gillette Papers, Connecticut Historical Society.

<sup>74</sup> Joseph Horace Kimball to Moses French Hoit, 16 March 1835, Joseph Horace Kimball Papers, New Hampshire Historical Society.

Letters offered a way for Kimball and Hoit to pursue discussions they might have had in person across the distance of space and time.

As these examples indicate, antislavery discussions quickly became part of the public political landscape. Abolitionists escalated their efforts by envisioning a national space through which they could gather converts. The American Anti-Slavery Society dispersed lecturing agents across the Northeast, Midwest, and even into parts of the Upper South. Wherever the agents traveled, they attempted to establish what they hoped would be a lasting infrastructure for the abolition cause. They oversaw the founding of local antislavery societies, recruited supporters who could act as subscription agents for antislavery publications, and spoke to anyone who would listen—and some who would not—about the injustice of slavery and the imperative to take action for immediate emancipation. But as the prominent Quaker abolitionist Lucretia Mott pointed out to a friend in 1833, “it is easier to form societies & resolutions than to accomplish much beside.”<sup>75</sup> A conversion of public opinion would not happen overnight. In addition to formal efforts, opponents of slavery participated in a more nebulous realm of discussion, persuasion, and debate that straddled the lines between public and private; political and personal. Abolitionists came to see themselves as a far-flung but united movement, built upon ties of family, friendship, and, above all, a shared commitment to the goal of immediate abolition. Their vision for this interconnected community of common political sentiment manifested itself most fully in the widespread circulation of letters through postal space.

### **“a full volley of fanaticism:” Narrating Opposition**

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<sup>75</sup> Lucretia Coffin Mott to Phebe Post Willis, 22 October 1833, Phebe Post Willis Papers, Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation, River Campus Libraries, University of Rochester.

Abolitionists conducted in-person debates to convert new supporters at every available opportunity. They turned to letters to review these face-to-face conversations and often used them to inspire their allies. In their letters, they developed a common narrative for themselves as beleaguered crusaders in a great moral battle. But abolitionists were generally hesitant to trumpet themselves as martyrs. Instead, they adopted an understated epistolary tone that poked fun at the absurdity of their opponents and planted themselves firmly on the moral and intellectual high ground. Charles C. Burleigh, a traveling antislavery lecturer, described to his colleague, Amos A. Phelps, a scene that unfolded on a stagecoach in Virginia. The topic of abolition was broached by a “portly gentleman,” shortly before Burleigh disembarked, which “prevented my giving utterance to a full volley of fanaticism.” Nevertheless, he continued, “I had only thrown in a few incendiary sentiments, to see how they would mingle with the cool wisdom of my companions’ sage remarks.” That was “enough, it seemed, to lead them to look on me as at least bearing some affinity to the monsters who are prowling about to... excite the slaves to insurrection....” Burleigh reported that, “Of those who took part in the discussion, all were against me, but I thought there were some whose looks encouraged me to stand my ground.” He dismissed his interlocutors’ arguments, which “served more to expose the ignorance & bitter prejudices of the speakers, than to throw any light upon the subject.”<sup>76</sup>

Charlotte Cowles, a young woman from Farmington, Connecticut, narrated a similar episode in a letter to her brother. The incident involved a steamboat travelling through the Erie Canal on its way to New York, whose passengers included the abolitionists Theodore Weld and Gerrit Smith. According to Cowles, when the topic of slavery arose, “the passengers were so interested that not one of them went to bed that night.” She continued, “The principal opponent was so

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<sup>76</sup> Charles C. Burleigh to William Lloyd Garrison, 7 March 1836, Anti-Slavery Collection, BPL.

enraged to find himself beaten from all his positions, that he cursed Mr Smith in his fury.” After the long night, “At morning, a vote was taken, and a majority of the passengers were found to be in favor of Abolition.”<sup>77</sup> Cowles was not present herself for the debate. She heard about the incident from a neighbor, and it apparently left enough of an impression for her to record it in her letter.

These two incidents occurred within a few months of one another, and although they involved different persons, the accounts share many common themes. Abolitionists developed a common narrative framework for their accounts of encountering opponents during their efforts to convert skeptics. The antislavery agents—Burleigh, Weld, and Smith—were the heroes of the stories, though their heroism depended in equal parts upon their passionate advocacy for the cause of abolition and their modest, even self-deprecating, personalities. The villains, of course, were the opponents of abolition, sometimes slaveholders. The narrator invariably described the villain(s) in a way that made him appear ridiculous—gullible, lacking common sense—and often hinted at deeper failings of their moral character, such as a lack of restraint or intemperance. For example, Cowles recalled that the chief opponent to abolition on the steamboat “cursed” at Gerrit Smith. Such character flaws were often at odds with the opponent’s respectable class status. Finally, these accounts often included references to sympathetic bystanders or successful converts to abolition. Even when, such as in the case of Burleigh’s stagecoach, opponents dominated the conversation, Burleigh reported exchanging encouraging looks with some of the silent onlookers. In Cowles’s account, the results of the vote enabled the abolitionists to claim victory.

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<sup>77</sup> Charlotte Cowles to Samuel Cowles, 10 May 1836, Charlotte and Samuel Cowles Correspondence, Connecticut Historical Society.

Such anecdotes helped abolitionists to craft an encouraging narrative about the success of their efforts and the future of their cause. Narrators undoubtedly embroidered the tales as they passed through chains of communication, intensifying the tropes of abolitionist heroism and their antagonists' buffoonery. The stories also enliven our sense of the everyday political landscape. Political discussions happened in all sorts of spaces, public and domestic. Abolitionists understood this dynamic, and they made every encounter into a performance that they interpreted through a particular narrative lens. This lens became most apparent in their correspondence, where they reenacted face-to-face conversations and initiated new debates.

As public conversation about slavery became increasingly polarized, the discussion of slavery in public spaces was extremely volatile. Abolition was deeply unpopular, and it could be dangerous to express antislavery allegiances in unfamiliar settings. In the example above, perhaps Burleigh made his comments knowing that his opponents had only a limited time to react before he reached his stop. Exchanging letters offered a safer means for discussing abolition in the divided political climate and violent atmosphere.

### **Envisioning Postal Space: The 1835 Postal Campaign and the Ideal of Mass Conversion**

In 1832, Benjamin Lundy, the editor of *The Genius of Universal Emancipation*, articulated his hope for the future of abolition to his friend and colleague, Elizabeth Margaret Chandler. Lundy predicted: "as our cause becomes more popular, the public mind will be more sensibly impressed with its high importance;—and under these circumstances, some more honest hearts, that yet be dormant, will be roused to action."<sup>78</sup> Lundy's projection was not unusual. His

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<sup>78</sup> Benjamin Lundy to Elizabeth Margaret Chandler, 6 September 1832, Elizabeth Margaret Chandler Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

statement aligned with the strategy of “moral suasion” associated with the nineteenth-century antislavery movement from its beginnings. Writing in the context of the circulation of his newspaper, Lundy’s comment sheds light on another side of abolitionists’ plans for mass conversion. On one hand, the antislavery movement relied on hyperlocal grassroots organizing, building chains of supporters through the family, friends, and neighbors of abolition agents in every community. But on the other hand, activists also envisioned these local centers of organization within a national community of potential converts, all of whom were accessible through the postal system.

The postal campaign epitomized abolitionists’ vision for conversion via the mail. Financed by the New-York-City merchant brothers Arthur and Lewis Tappan, the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS) flooded the South with antislavery publications, transmitted through the federally-controlled postal system. In the summer of 1835, at the height of the campaign, at least 175,000 antislavery documents found their way into the mail, on the way to slaveholding states. The abolitionists carefully packaged the items to avoid scrutiny, and they addressed the material to a group of 20,000 prominent Southern men whose names they found in city directories and other published sources.<sup>79</sup> They envisioned scores of unassuming parcels traveling anonymously through the mail to their final destinations, where they would convince the recipients of the evils of slavery and the need for abolition. Furthermore, by harnessing the federal government to their project, they hoped to suggest an expansion of federal power to encompass the issue of slavery.<sup>80</sup> They expected some opposition, but the abolitionists greatly underestimated the backlash that

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<sup>79</sup> John, *Spreading the News*, 261-263.

<sup>80</sup> Richard John, *Spreading the News*, 260; Susan Wyly-Jones, “The 1835 Anti-Abolition Meetings in the South: A New Look at the Controversy over the Abolition Postal Campaign,” *Civil War History* 47, 4 (December 2001): 289-309.

would follow. Contrary to their vision, the violent and repressive outcome of the postal campaign, beginning with the infamous Charleston postal break-in and anti-abolitionist riot led by the “Lynch Men” in July, gave lie to the notion of the post as a private, secure space and forced the antislavery movement to find new means of enlisting postal communication in support of their cause.

Abolitionists’ correspondence during and after the postal campaign reflects their changing understanding of the position of their cause as the backlash unfolded. On August 19, 1835, Henry E. Benson, the corresponding secretary for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, addressed a letter of support to the AASS in New York. Benson “rejoiced to hear that our Friends in New York are firm & undaunted amid the perils that surround them.” While he acknowledged that “no genuine friend of the cause is afraid to lay down his life, if needs be,” Benson still hoped that “we may have a bloodless victory,” and concluded, “There is great joy in reflecting that our principles will be ultimately triumphant.”<sup>81</sup> While it was apparent that the conversion of slaveholders would not happen instantly, Benson remained optimistic as he conveyed his encouragement to his New York colleagues.

The AASS addressed its communications to locations all over the United States; only a small portion of campaign materials traveled to Southern states. Antislavery societies and agents all over the country assisted in the distribution of printed material as auxiliaries to the national society. In his next letter, dated August 25, Benson described the results of his own efforts in Massachusetts. “More than half of the publications which you sent to me have been circulated,” he reported, noting that, “Not a few of the southerners came in, if I may judge by their

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<sup>81</sup> Henry E. Benson to [R.G.] Williams, 19 August 1835, Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society Letter Book, Anti-Slavery Collection, BPL.

complexions, some of which are almost dark enough to entitle them to the blessings of colonization.” Benson did not elaborate on whether those Southerners who received the material greeted it with interest or with rage. He suggested that the general atmosphere in Boston was restless but promising. A recent public meeting “operated like oil upon the troubled waters, and the community has settled down in quietness and are preparing for a calm investigation of matters. ... The universal opinion is that it will greatly benefit Abolition.”<sup>82</sup>

Not all abolitionists approved of the New York leaders’ plan. On August 26, Edwin P. Atlee, an officer for the Philadelphia Anti-Slavery Society (PASS), drafted a letter to a local alderman, strongly denying his society’s complicity in the scheme. He separated the PASS’s version of moral suasion from that of the abolitionists behind the postal campaign, who, Atlee argued, went a step too far by using interfering in the mechanisms of government directly by attempting to yoke the postal system to the antislavery cause. Atlee asserted that, “From the first moment of the annunciation of the receipt at Charleston of Antislavery Pamphlets the friends of the cause in this city have individually deprecated the circumstances....” The question of whether the abolitionists meant to incite rebellion among slaves and free black Southerners was of particular concern. Atlee noted that the AASS sent him a letter denying such intentions, but controversy erupted in Philadelphia before their statement could be made public. Atlee declared, “We would not in any way excite the slaves to rebellion, for we hold it as a sacred principle, never to obtain our rights by physical resistance; and could we procure the ear of the bondsman, it would be to warn him from any and every such attempt.” He continued, “we expressly disclaim any right to interfere with the legislation or internal policy of the slave-holding States, in any other way than

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<sup>82</sup> Henry E. Benson to R.G. Williams, 25 August 1835, Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society Letter Book, Anti-Slavery Collection, BPL.



as brethren. That is, by calling upon them, to rectify, by their own acts, such things as we conscientiously believe will, by their continuance, destroy us all.” “We have resorted to moral means alone,” Atlee concluded.<sup>83</sup>

The controversy was not over for Atlee and the PASS. On August 28, Atlee addressed Elizur Wright, Jr., an officer of the AASS, demanding “a speedy & explicit statement in relation to a Box of Antislavery Publications forwarded from N.Y. a few days ago, & said to be consigned to Wm. H. Scott.” He recounted the discovery of the box:

Much excitement was produced by its arrival. It appears according to the statement of a committee of our citizens, that the lid having accidentally come off at the wharf, its contents were exposed, when packets of the ‘Liberator,’ ‘Human Rights,’ &c, we found directed to Georgia, Alabama, &c. A number of the citizens carried it on board of one of the Steam Boats to the middle of the Delaware, & there destroyed the contents. Nothing saved WH Scott & his property, from brutal violence, but the positive denial of any knowledge of the Box, directly or indirectly.

Atlee finished, “It is needless to say that if the statement be true,” despite the disclaimers of the AASS, “we as a body [the PASS] unequivocally censure the act.”<sup>84</sup>

Atlee’s narrative highlights the precarious state of politics in Philadelphia surrounding the issue of slavery. Though it was a Northern, free city with a strong abolitionist following, Philadelphia was also a major business hub for Southerners. It was home to many slaveholders and their relations, some of whom brought slaves to live with them for months at a time. In the two letters he wrote in response to the 1835 postal campaign, Atlee performed a delicate balancing act. He affirmed his abolition principles and those of the PASS while denying their intention to interfere directly, through legislation or action, with the institution of slavery. In his

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<sup>83</sup> Edwin P. Atlee to Alderman Morton McMichael [copy], 26 August 1835, Pennsylvania Abolition Society Papers, HSP.

<sup>84</sup> Edwin P. Atlee to Elizur Wright, Jr. [copy], 28 August 1835, Pennsylvania Abolition Society Papers, HSP.

letter to Wright, Atlee admonished the AASS for recklessly endangering an innocent man, Scott, and stirring up unnecessary excitement. Furthermore, by relating the detail that the lid of the box “accidentally” fell off—whether or not it was truly an accident is unclear—Atlee indicated how the sanctity of the post, a principle upon which the AASS relied for their plan to work, was far from guaranteed in a tense political climate.

Atlee’s allusion to the potential for violence played out dramatically in anti-abolitionist backlash throughout the South and the North in the months that followed the postal campaign. Amos A. Phelps, who was working as a traveling lecturer during the summer and fall 1835, reflected on the change he perceived in correspondence with his wife, Charlotte. On August 22 he wrote, “I am more & more persuaded that some of us will have to fall as martyrs....” He had heard recently that Arthur Tappan received an anonymous letter claiming that four men were on their way from South Carolina “under a vow that they would not leave New York & Arthur Tappan alive in it!” Though Phelps felt it was, “Very possible it is all a hoax,” he still took it as an ominous sign for the security of abolitionists.<sup>85</sup>

Phelps’s wife replied a few days later. Bedridden and bleeding from her lungs, she feared the prospect of her own death and desperately wanted her husband to come home, though she averred, “I do not say, leave the work” of abolition. In a cross-written note, added after she received her husband’s letter that referred to the possible assassination plot, Charlotte Phelps allowed herself a greater degree of emotion.<sup>86</sup> She observed, “I perceive by your letter that you are more & more convinced that you & others engaged in this cause are in danger of suffering

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<sup>85</sup> Amos A. Phelps to Charlotte Phelps, 22 August 1835, Anti-Slavery Collection, BPL.

<sup>86</sup> Cross-writing was the practice of writing perpendicularly across a page so that the two sets of text cross one another. The content of cross-written portions was usually added to the letter last, and, as a result, writers sometimes succumbed to a greater degree of emotion and intimacy in these parts of their letters—they had less time to consider and revise what they wrote. For further discussion, see Introduction.

personally & even to the loss of life. ... I cannot bear the thought that blood should be shed & that you or others should fall in this way.”<sup>87</sup> Their exchange illustrates the emotional toll the fallout of the postal campaign took on abolitionists and their families. It was only through letters that Amos and Charlotte Phelps could confide in one another about the threat of anti-abolitionist violence.<sup>88</sup>

By the close of 1835, opponents of abolition had not been silenced in the North or the South. Henry B. Stanton, another traveling lecturer, expressed his fears for the future of the cause in a letter to Amos Phelps. He wrote, “We don’t know to what a pitch of frenzy our non-slave-holding states may be driven. They may pass laws to gag us; — or, at least, may adopt such regulations as will embarrass our printing establishment in N. York.” Stanton opined, “How important then that there be one state open to free discussion & from which we may thunder down upon the north & south. At all events, it is important that we have one state which we can call our own: it will be a rallying point: - a beacon light, - a safe harbor, - a citadel in the enemies country.”<sup>89</sup>

While their opponents never managed to confine abolitionists’ influence to just one state, as Stanton feared, within a year antislavery petitions were banished from Congress under the gag rule. In the aftermath of the postal campaign, slaveholders and their allies were unable to completely censor the circulation of antislavery materials through the post, but Southern state laws effectively overruled congressional attempts to uphold the sanctity of the mail. James G. Birney became acquainted with Southern postal surveillance when he received an anonymous

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<sup>87</sup> Charlotte Phelps to Amos A. Phelps, 29 August 1835, Anti-Slavery Collection, BPL.

<sup>88</sup> See Chapter Three for further discussion of anti-abolitionist violence.

<sup>89</sup> Henry Brewster Stanton to Amos A. Phelps, 18 December 1835, Anti-Slavery Collection, BPL.

note recounting “a specimen of the quo modo, of the espionage system.” The writer described visiting “gentleman of great respectability and literature, as well as moral worth,” who, when he called at the post office, was denied service by “a chap of 10 or 12 years of age, who had looked into the boxes” because “there was a pamphlet or newspaper ... for him, but it was incendiary, and he could not hand it to him and did not.” According to the author of the note, “[T]his, I strongly suspect, is a specimen of what is by no means uncommon.”<sup>90</sup>

Several years after the postal campaign controversy, the abolitionist Joshua Coffin lost his job in the Philadelphia Post Office on account of “slave holding influence.” He told Gerrit Smith that he was “unceremoniously thrown out employment for fear perhaps that my carrying letters to the Southwestern portion of this city,” where many free black people resided, “must of necessity cause a civil war & dissolve the Union.”<sup>91</sup> As these incidents suggest, postal space was no longer neutral but abided by the same sectional divisions that haunted national politics.

### **Conclusion: “cool & temperate discussion”**

In March of 1836, the editor of New Haven’s *Religious Intelligencer* newspaper wrote a letter that encapsulated the original vision of antislavery leaders for effecting mass conversion to their cause and the challenges faced by abolitionists in achieving that objective. He wrote to Amos Phelps discussing his views of antislavery: he supported immediate emancipation, though he was hesitant to embrace all the beliefs of radical abolitionists. Furthermore, he noted, he had been slow to state his view publicly in the pages of his newspaper because even the whiff of

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<sup>90</sup> Aletherzetes to James G. Birney, n.d., James G. Birney Papers, WCL.

<sup>91</sup> Joshua Coffin to Gerrit Smith, 11 October 1841, Gerrit Smith Papers, Special Collections Resource Center, Bird Library, Syracuse University.

antislavery sympathies had lost him a number of subscribers already. He wrote in confidence to Phelps, fearing that if his views were discovered by either the radical abolitionists or their opponents, “I shall expect...to get a raking from the fires of both parties[.]” Still, however, when the two sides “rush together,” the editor admitted that, “I shall probably be found upon such an emergency among the abolitionists.” He assured Phelps, “My dialect, I perceive, is becoming somewhat belligerent; but dear sir, I assure you I do not feel so.”

In his private message to Phelps, the editor, who did not sign his name to his letter, was able to profess his views of abolition more candidly than he could in the columns of his newspaper, where he faced the prospect of censure, ridicule, or violence. At the same time, however, the writer professed the need for open debate. Though he was reluctant to comment on the matter himself, he pledged to publish articles on “any important subject,” as long as the authors kept their remarks brief and expressed “a candid Christian spirit.” The editor concluded his letter, “We shall gain nothing on this, or any other subject but by cool & temperate discussion.”<sup>92</sup> Like many abolitionists at this time, the editor struggled to reconcile the desire to convert supporters to the antislavery cause through measured discussion and reasoned debate with the heightened climate of political polarization that surrounded the issue of slavery. Abolitionists faced obstacles when they attempted to broadcast their message widely to a largely hostile public audience. Though they never gave up on trying to convince even their most ardent opponents, the polarized atmosphere created surprising opportunities for abolitionists to engage in creative means of political expression in the intimate space of personal correspondence.

By the end of the 1830s, political divisions had accelerated to the point that, although abolition had gained a significant following throughout the Northern free states, communication

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<sup>92</sup> Editor of the Religious Intelligencer to Amos A. Phelps, 3 March 1836, Anti-Slavery Collection, BPL.

on the issue of slavery was almost entirely cut off between North and South. While the plan for the 1835 postal campaign had been to enlist the postal service in triggering a mass conversion of slaveholders, the backlash had proven once and for all that, when pushed to its limit, the federal government would uphold the demands of slaveholders over the civil liberties of the abolitionists. This development crippled abolitionists' original vision of persuading slaveholders to embrace their doctrine of immediate emancipation: they could no longer reach their target audience. Furthermore, rumors that abolitionists planned to incite slave rebellions made them unpopular not only with white Southerners but also with many of their neighbors. Anti-abolitionist Northerners expressed their outrage in mobs and other acts of violence as well as by spreading fearmongering claims about possible consequences of emancipation such as so-called "social" equality and interracial sex.

Rather than lose hope, however, abolitionists turned inwards to build their movement, articulate their ideas, and strengthen every supporter's commitment to their cause. While abolitionists originally envisioned the post as a weapon of mass conversion, it instead became an introspective tool for self-definition, narration, and unification. Formally barred from the national political conversation, opponents of slavery found new ways to express their ideas. For some of the most committed abolitionists, every aspect of their lives—the clothes they wore, the food they ate, the material they read, the relationships they built—reflected their politics. To be a committed abolitionist was no longer just to profess antislavery views, but to live an antislavery life.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> On personal expressions of antislavery politics, see for example: Erica Ball, *To Live an Antislavery Life: Personal Politics and the Antebellum Black Middle Class* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012); Chris Dixon, *Perfecting the Family: Antislavery Marriages in Nineteenth-Century America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997).

### **Chapter Three**

#### **“Abler pens than mine:” Creating Antislavery Rhetoric through Letters**

In January 1835, twelve-year-old Jerome Treadwell, a student at the Hamilton Institute in New York State, wrote to his father inquiring about his “feelings on the Abolition Question.” For his own part, Jerome proclaimed,

I think that the American slave trade is a stain in the character of any Republican Country, especially such an one as our own[.] That we, whose Fathers so manfully shook of[f] the Lion of England, because their rights were infringed upon in so small a degree, should thus spurn the rights which God has given to our fellow man, trample down all rules of Justice and hold the Africans in ignoble bondage is unworthy the name of a Christian or at least an enlightened man. And for wh[at] Because he has a different colour than his own.<sup>1</sup>

Jerome apparently did not receive a satisfactory answer from his father, because he again asked him in November “whether or no you are a sound abolitionist” and reiterated his commitment to the cause, telling him, “For myself I am, from ‘Caput to Pede’ You may call me a Fanatic if you like but I Glory in the name for the meaning of the latin word Fanaticus is Inspired....”<sup>2</sup> By expressing his fervor in Latin, Jerome perhaps meant to demonstrate that he had heeded his father’s advice that he concentrate on his classical language studies.

Finally, in January 1836, almost a full year after his first inquiry, Jerome’s father, Seymour, told him, “Your sentiments on the Abolition question I think are consistent both with Christianity republicanism & common humanity[.]” Even so, he cautioned that politicians in “these united states or rather disunited states ... would seem to prefer that abolitionists – slave and all should be sacrificed soul & body than that a certain little man called Van Buren should not be elected

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<sup>1</sup> Jerome M. Treadwell to Seymour B. Treadwell, 25 January 1835, Seymour B. Treadwell Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>2</sup> Jerome M. Treadwell to Seymour B. Treadwell, 22 November 1835, Seymour B. Treadwell Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

next President[.]”<sup>3</sup> In other words, the senior Treadwell advised his son not to put too much stock in witnessing true political change on the slavery issue anytime soon.

Seymour Treadwell’s reticence on the antislavery issue and his seeming reluctance to answer Jerome’s questions about it suggest that he considered such political matters an unsuitable topic for his son’s letters. Even when revealing his views on the abolition question, he devoted only a few sentences to the topic after writing for three long pages about the progress of Jerome’s classical education. These comments gave Jerome only a brief glimpse of his father’s political beliefs. Young Jerome’s conversion to the abolitionist cause surprised and perhaps unsettled his father, who attempted to model in his letters to his son the topics that an educated young man should discuss.

In a similar letter, J.T. McKibben expressed more directly his opinion of the attempts by his son, Charles T. McKibben, a teenage student at Oberlin College, to discuss slavery in his letters. The elder McKibben reiterated advice he had previously offered that his son should not “meddle with the subject or discuss it” until he had “procured such an education as you have contemplated.” He was candid about the reason: “I think that it is unnecessary for you to make either friends or enemies by any expression of opinion on that subject.”<sup>4</sup>

It was not unusual for parents to instruct their children in the art (or science) of letter writing. The skill of composing elegant letters was an essential part of a respectable education;

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Van Buren was the Democratic candidate for president in the election of 1836. Seymour Treadwell refers to Van Buren’s support for the “gag rule” that prevented antislavery petitions from being discussed in Congress. This rule was passed in response to the abolitionists’ postal campaign of 1835, which is discussed in Chapter Two. Seymour B. Treadwell to Jerome B. Treadwell, 12 January 1836, Seymour B. Treadwell Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan; Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: From Jefferson to Lincoln*, (New York: Norton, 2005), 452.

<sup>4</sup> J.T. McKibben to Charles T. McKibben, 11 February 1840, Robert Fletcher Research Files, Oberlin College Archives.



correspondents followed conventions dictated by letter-writing manuals as well as by teachers, parents, and peers.<sup>5</sup> The letters between the Treadwells and the McKibbens demonstrate that these conventions impinged upon every exchange of letters, including those between family members. The illusion of intimacy inherent in personal letters did not preclude their content's being consciously calculated and tailored to fit particular cultural expectations.<sup>6</sup> Children were not encouraged to speculate about politics in letters to their parents. The senior Treadwell and McKibben discouraged their sons from thinking and writing about the political issue of slavery, directing them instead toward more scholarly pursuits. Nevertheless, these exchanges also demonstrate that the politics of slavery crept into the correspondence of men, women, and even youths asserting themselves as political actors. Jerome Treadwell and Charles McKibben were not yet old enough to vote, but, through correspondence, they entered the political realm.

Over the course of the 1830s, numerous conversations occurred similar to those between the Treadwells and the McKibbens as more and more Americans put pen to paper to articulate their opposition to slavery. During the nineteenth century, there grew in the United States a literate national public whose members were eager to assert their own personal power through the writing and exchange of letters. Letter writing ceased to be the preserve of an economic, political, and social elite. The revolution in postal communication and the looming debate over slavery opened the door for new people to use the power of letters to stake their claims to a voice

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<sup>5</sup> On epistolary education see: Eve Tavor Bannet, *Empire of Letters: Letter Manuals and Transatlantic Correspondence, 1688-1820*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Konstantin Dierks, *In My Power: Letter Writing and Communications in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); and Sarah M.S. Pearsall, *Atlantic Families: Lives and Letters in the Later Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> These conventions and expectations are discussed further in Chapter Two. See also: William Merrill Decker, *Epistolary Practices: Letter Writing in America Before Telecommunication* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); David Henkin, *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in the Nineteenth Century*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

in national politics. Unexpectedly, people on the political fringes harnessed the medium of letters to express radical ideas and to claim entitlements hitherto denied them. Abolitionists used letters consciously as a chief element of their organizational strategies in forming a national movement in opposition to slavery. They addressed one another through letters to form new social connections and to preserve familiar ties. They articulated political aims through chains of correspondence. Opponents of slavery used letters as keys to enter the political arena, and their letters demonstrate individuals' assumption not only that their opinions mattered but also that they were obligated to communicate them.

An episode in 1835 illustrates the significance of correspondence to shaping the 1830s antislavery movement. The Boston abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison chose to print a letter written to him by Angelina Grimké in the September 19, 1835 issue of his newspaper, *The Liberator*. The letter catapulted Grimké from relative obscurity into the heart of contentious antislavery politics.<sup>7</sup> In the letter, Grimké told Garrison: "It seems as if I was compelled at this time to address thee, notwithstanding all my reasonings against intruding on thy valuable time, and the uselessness of so insignificant a person as myself offering thee the sentiments of sympathy at this alarming crisis." She compared recent mob violence against Garrison and other abolitionists to the long history of Christian martyrdom. At the peak of her argument, she declaimed: "If persecution is the means which God has ordained for the accomplishment of this

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<sup>7</sup> By 1835, Angelina Grimké and her sister Sarah were living in Philadelphia and had joined the Quaker community there. Both of them were aware of the antislavery debates swirling in the early 1830s and they had firsthand knowledge of slavery growing up in a Charleston, South Carolina slaveholding family. Although the Philadelphia Quaker community attempted to retain its distance from earthly political disputes, Angelina began attending antislavery meetings in 1835. She was moved by Garrison's call in *The Liberator* for abolitionists to stand their ground against the mob violence that plagued their cause. This letter was Grimké's response to that appeal, and marked the beginning of her public career as an abolitionist. For a more detailed account of Angelina Grimké's absorption into the antislavery movement see Gerda Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina: Pioneers for Women's Rights and Abolition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), Ch. 8, 78-86.

great end, EMANCIPATION; then, in dependence *upon him* for strength to bear it, I feel as if I could say, LET IT COME; for it is my deep, solemn, deliberate conviction that *this is a cause worth dying for.*”<sup>8</sup> Within the space of a few paragraphs, Grimké’s rhetorical voice shifted from that of an insignificant sympathizer to a firebrand in her own right, a duality that she struggled to balance throughout her life.

Grimké’s letter raises interesting questions about letter writing in the antislavery movement in the 1830s. Why did Angelina Grimké feel “compelled” to write? What did she think her letter could accomplish? Why did Garrison choose to publish what was purportedly a private letter? What were the boundaries between public and private correspondence for people involved in the cause, some of whom, like Garrison, made a living as writers, editors, printers, and publishers? Finally, how did the individual voices represented in letters like Grimké’s combine to form a chorus of opposition to slavery that marked changes in national politics that would shape and shake the nation for decades to come? This chapter answers these questions, arguing that letters like Grimké’s and Jerome Treadwell’s helped to crystallize the antislavery cause as a nationwide social and political movement over the course of the 1830s. Furthermore, it argues that letter writing laid an intellectual foundation for the antislavery cause as individuals used correspondence to clarify their views about slavery to themselves, as well as to others. Even while mainstream electoral politics clamped down on free discussion of the slavery issue, and abolitionists faced threats of mob violence, more and more people felt compelled to speak out against slavery through the medium of letters. In doing so, they redefined the boundaries of political subjectivity.

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<sup>8</sup> “Christian Heroism,” *The Liberator* vol. 5, no. 38, (19 September 1835). This letter was also published as a separate broadside after its success in *The Liberator*. Angelina Grimké, “Slavery and the Boston Riot” [A Letter to William Lloyd Garrison] (Boston, 1835, broadside).

Garrison wrote an introduction to Grimké's letter almost as long as the letter itself. His framing of the letter underscores the sense that, in the autumn of 1835, the antislavery movement was at a point of crisis. Garrison described the time as one of "anarchy and peril."<sup>9</sup> Abolitionists faced opposition from all sides—physical and verbal attacks by mobs, the silencing of their views in the halls of Congress, and outright repudiation from church pulpits. At the same time, however, their ranks were growing. The American Antislavery Society (AASS) formed in 1833, lending a national presence to what had previously been a smattering of local societies and spreading the abolitionist message through publications and traveling agents. Local societies proliferated and flourished with the instruction and support of the AASS. Many Americans, including Grimké, found themselves swept up in newfound abolitionist fervor. Correspondence networks underwrote this explosion of activity, allowing Garrison and other prominent abolitionists to communicate with their sympathizers while also enabling others to take the first steps towards expressing themselves on the issue of slavery.

Grimké's letter provides a particularly instructive example because the archival record has preserved not only the letter itself (in printed format), but also Garrison's ambitions in publishing the letter as he articulated them in his introduction, and Angelina Grimké's own reflections in her diary on her intentions in writing the letter and her reaction to its publication. In his preface, Garrison devoted considerable energy to justifying the printing of a private letter without the author's permission, foreseeing the scorn and abuse Grimké would face upon its publication and also equivocating about her true intention in writing to him. Was the letter for "our private consolation and encouragement" or "meekly committed to the disposal of our judgment either for individual or general disposal?" Garrison asked. In the end, the answer was irrelevant, since,

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<sup>9</sup> "Christian Heroism," *The Liberator* vol. 5, no. 38, (19 September 1835).

“We cannot, we dare not suppress it, nor the name of her who indited it.” Garrison then drew his audience’s attention to his own aims in publishing the letter: to discredit his opponents; to encourage his sympathizers; to inspire female abolitionists in particular; and to reiterate the importance of the antislavery cause as one worthy of making sacrifices and overcoming hardship to support, even at the expense of one’s life.<sup>10</sup> In his hands, Grimké’s letter became a powerful rhetorical tool for the antislavery cause. It gained its power both from Grimké’s words and from its origin as a personal letter, an attribute Garrison chose to highlight. Candor, urgency, honesty, and emotional directness were all qualities associated with personal letters, even when elevated to a public stage.<sup>11</sup>

In her diary, Angelina Grimké reflected on her letter after learning of its publication:

As far as I can possibly judge I believ[e] that letter was pen[ne]d under right feeling, in the spirit of prayer. I felt that it might involv[e] me in some difficulty & therefore it was written in fear & after it was written I hardly knew whether to send it or not & therefore again implored divine direction[.] [A]t last I sent it to the Office & felt a degree of peace in doing so & as tho’ I had nothing more to do with it than if I had never written it. I had some idea it would be publishd but did not feel liberty to say it must not be, for I had no idea of my name being attachd to it if it was. As 3 wks elapsed & I heard nothing of my letter I concluded it had been broken open in the Office & destroyd; this was just what I hoped would be done if it was wrong in me to hav[e] written it[.] I think I had no will at all about it, but committed it [wholly] to the divine disposal.<sup>12</sup>

An acquaintance eventually informed Grimké of the letter’s publication and implored her to write again to Garrison to revoke or modify her claims. In her diary, Grimké described a period of extreme inner turmoil. She lamented, “O! the extreme pain of extravagant prais[e] – to be held up as a saint in a public newspaper before thousands of people when I felt I was the chief of

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<sup>10</sup> “Christian Heroism,” *The Liberator* vol. 5, no. 38, (19 September 1835).

<sup>11</sup> On intimacy in personal letters see: Decker, *Epistolary Practices*; Henkin, *The Postal Age*; Pearsall, *Atlantic Families*.

<sup>12</sup> Angelina Grimké, *Diary of Angelina Grimké*, September [1835], Weld-Grimké Family Papers, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan (WCL).

sinner – blushing and confusion of face were mine & I tho't the walls of a prison would have been preferable to such an exposure.” She explained that it was “not so much my name, as the name of Grimké associated with that of the despised Garrison” that she feared would bring “disgrace upon my family not myself alone.”<sup>13</sup> In spite of her doubts and suffering, Grimké ultimately concluded that she had been right to send the letter and stood ready to commit herself fully to the antislavery cause.

The diary entry suggests that, while perhaps Angelina Grimké did not understand the full implications of her letter when she first sent it to Garrison, whether or not she had composed it with the intention of publication, she came to understand her own compulsion in writing it. She explains this compulsion as divine direction to “make [her] instrumental in the great work of Emancipation.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, Grimké, like many others in the mid-nineteenth century, found her political voice in the epistolary sphere.

### **“There are ills attached to slavery:” The Rise of Immediate Abolitionism**

The movement for immediate abolition that emerged in the 1830s had deep roots, building upon the efforts of previous opponents of slavery, especially British reformers, Quakers, and free black people living in Northern states. These activists shaped the campaign to end the Atlantic slave trade and the pursuit of emancipation in the North, and they opposed laws that degraded the status of free black people and reinforced the institution of slavery elsewhere in the country. They also protested the American Colonization Society, an institution dominated by elite white men that professed opposition to slavery while maintaining a racist commitment to expelling

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<sup>13</sup> Angelina Grimké, *Diary of Angelina Grimké*, September [1835].

<sup>14</sup> Angelina Grimké, *Diary of Angelina Grimké*, September [1835].

emancipated people from the country to settle in Liberia. Indeed, many of the same individuals bridged these earlier struggles and the growth of the antislavery cause in the 1830s. But the reach of the movement changed. In part, receptiveness to the principle of immediate abolition grew from the spread of evangelical Protestantism during the Second Great Awakening and its accompanying commitments to moral and social reform.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, improvements in printing, transportation, and postal technology as well as rising literacy rates helped to create a mass reading and writing public that produced, consumed, and exchanged information at a greater rate than ever before. Individuals hungrily devoured antislavery newspapers, pamphlets, circulars, and other publications. If the opportunity presented itself, they attended local lectures on the topic of slavery and formed local antislavery societies.

Much discussion of antislavery ideas, however, occurred in personal letters. Advocates for immediate emancipation faced violent attacks and censure for their words and beliefs. Mainstream political circles spurned their views. For many, the only place they were able to speak out against slavery was in their letters. Antislavery men and women used letters as a habitual part of their activism to test, refine, and advance their political opinions, aims, and ambitions. They seized upon postal communication as a means of organizing as a group and as a venue for elaborating their radical ideas. As local antislavery societies proliferated throughout the Northeast and Midwest, abolitionism as a national movement relied on personal connections sustained by the exchange of letters. By articulating their ideas and ambitions on paper, participants established the rhetorical terms for a national movement that transformed the boundaries of politics and political subjectivity.

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<sup>15</sup> Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 195-196.

Even before the intensification of the antislavery movement in the 1830s, individuals turned to letters to reflect on the institution of slavery. In particular, Northerners travelling in the South often reported their observations of life in the slave states and their opinions about it. Shortly after her arrival in White Sulphur Springs, Virginia, in August of 1828, Hannah Sansom of Philadelphia informed her mother of her landlady's appalling behavior: "instead of attending to the comfort of her guests she was pestering us for patterns of our dresses and for the latest fashions; but in this country it is not the custom for the ladies to attend to any thing, all is done by the negroes...." As a member of a Quaker family, Sansom was predisposed against slavery in the abstract, but she struggled to come to terms with the reality. She expressed open disdain for her slave-owning hostess, but approached the slaves with ambivalence. "[I]t is really impossible for me to reconcile seeing so many filthy, wretched, looking creatures," she wrote in a letter to her mother, suggesting that the slaves "must conclude we are a different color of beings to what they are accustomed, as we require but little of their assistance...."<sup>16</sup> Through writing, Sansom attempted to imagine the point of view of her landlady's household slaves. Her understanding was oversimplified and incomplete; at the end of her letter she resolved to keep her door locked at night, suggesting that her pity for the household slaves was mixed with discomfort and fear when encountering them face to face. Nevertheless, her letter began a conversation about slavery that cast a shadow over the rest of her otherwise lighthearted correspondence.

Hannah Sansom's observations in a letter to her mother two weeks later suggest that further exposure to slavery pushed her towards a more definitive appraisal. "Nothing could induce me to settle in the Southern States and be surrounded by slaves as I am at present," she insisted. She

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<sup>16</sup> H[annah] S[ansom] to S[usan] S[ansom], 15 August 1828, George Vaux Papers, American Philosophical Society.



reported seeing gangs of chained slaves travelling further South, presumably to be sold there. She also discussed the situation of the housekeeper, a free black woman named Phillis whose husband, also free, had saved up to purchase the freedom of his wife and their eldest child, but whose youngest child remained enslaved. Sansom was not fully convinced by Phillis's claim that her son has "a very good master," although she seemed determined to end her account on an optimistic note.<sup>17</sup> Sansom had not advanced far enough in her antislavery education to consider that Phillis, whose family was precariously balanced between slavery and freedom, might be reluctant to confide in her temporary Northern employer, but writing letters permitted her to take her first steps in developing an opinion about slavery and conveying it to her mother, if not more widely.

Other Northerners reflected on their positions not just as observers but as participants in the slave system. In 1822, John A. Hart wrote from Natchez, Mississippi, to his father-in-law, Samuel Porter of Berlin, Connecticut. Hart had recently moved from his family home in Connecticut to Mississippi with his wife, Joann Porter Hart, and their son James. In his letter, Hart observed that "Master James as he is called in this climate" was taking well to his new home, often rebuking one of their slaves, "step quick or I'll thrash you." Hart noted that the family currently possessed four slaves: "business as usual."<sup>18</sup> Here, Hart adopted a flippant attitude toward the topic of slavery. Later in his letter, his tone became more serious.

Samuel Porter's sons were involved in a shipping company that had fallen deeply into debt, an event that had affected the entire family's financial security. Hart proposed that one of the

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<sup>17</sup> H[annah] S[sansom] to S[usan] S[sansom], 29 August 1828, George Vaux Papers, American Philosophical Society.

<sup>18</sup> John A. Hart to Samuel Porter, 20 March 1822, Porter Family Papers, Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation, River Campus Libraries, University of Rochester.

company's partners travel to Natchez with his wife to reinvigorate the business's prospects. On the way, he suggested, "they would want two servants which they might procure in Maryland and dispose of when they arrived here ... they would cost 4 or 5 hundred dollars and would sell for fifteen hundred."<sup>19</sup> Familiar with Porter's long career as a farmer, Hart added, "This would be making as much as most any of the farmers in Connecticut, who work very hard all summer and takes a ride once or twice a year but little out of sight of his winter quarters." Perhaps foreseeing that his father-in-law might have moral qualms, Hart closed with a series of platitudes justifying the scheme. He argued, "[I]f a man carries himself uprightly he must be excused if he does not correct the follies and vices of the world. --- There are ills attached to slavery but 'some are and must be greater than the rest.'" Hart continued metaphorically, "The claws and appetites of the Hawk are formed to prey upon other creatures – and it is difficult for us to say why it should be so. Eat or be eaten seems to be the law of Nature --- Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth the law of man. ---And do as Ye would that others should do, the law of God."<sup>20</sup>

Samuel Porter did not accede to his son-in-law's proposal, and his grandchildren went on to build the foundations of antislavery activism in Rochester, New York, in the 1830s and 40s.<sup>21</sup> Hart seemed to suspect that Porter harbored objections to slavery in the 1820s, but the argument he advanced suggests that most Northerners had difficulty seeing past slavery as an inevitable form of inequality and that they might even become direct participants in it.

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<sup>19</sup> On the interstate slave trade see: Edward Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*, (New York: Basic Books, 2014); Walter Johnson: *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

<sup>20</sup> John A. Hart to Samuel Porter, 20 March 1822, Porter Family Papers, University of Rochester.

<sup>21</sup> On the antislavery movement in Rochester, see Nancy Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change: Rochester, New York, 1822-1872* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984).

At a time when most Americans were still blind to the injustice of slavery, pioneers of immediate abolition were discovering the importance of letter writing to the progress of their movement. One such early proponent was Elizabeth Margaret Chandler, a young Quaker woman who had been born in Delaware and raised in Philadelphia, but who spent the peak years of her activist career as a pioneer settler in the Michigan territory. Letter writing enabled Chandler to define and maintain her position as a political outsider who exerted substantial influence on the development of the antislavery movement as a national political cause.

Because Elizabeth Chandler's parents both died when she was a child, she was raised and educated by her aunts and her grandmother, who inspired in her a sense of female independence. She began composing and publishing poems at a young age but was reluctant to have her name publicly attached to them. Chandler's first taste of celebrity came in 1826, when the Quaker abolitionist Benjamin Lundy published her poem, "The Slave Ship," in his newspaper, *The Genius of Universal Emancipation*. Lundy encouraged Chandler's budding antislavery interest, eventually convincing her to join his newspaper as the editor of the "Ladies Repository" section, where she went on to publish numerous poems and articles. In her column, Chandler encouraged women to take an active role in the antislavery cause.<sup>22</sup> In a biographical sketch accompanying a compilation of Chandler's work published in 1836, Lundy hailed her as "*the first American female author that ever made this subject the principal theme of her active exertions.*" Wary of her conspicuous position, Chandler refused to disclose her name as editor, Lundy reported, out of

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<sup>22</sup> Notably, Chandler's "Appeal to the Ladies of the United States" printed in *The Genius* in 1829 prefigured Angeline Grimké's "Appeal to the Christian Women of the South" published in 1836. Chandler's "Appeal" was reprinted in Benjamin Lundy, *The Poetical Works of Elizabeth Margaret Chandler with a Memoir of her Life and Character*, (Philadelphia: Lemuel Howell, 1836), 17-21.

“an anxious desire to avoid an ostentatious appearance.” She consistently tempered the political message of her column by appealing to her audience’s moral sensibilities.<sup>23</sup>

In 1830, Chandler settled in the Michigan Territory, still a frontier region at that time, along with her brother Thomas and her aunt, Ruth Evans. Letters written before they left suggest that Chandler was resigned to the move, if not enthusiastic about uprooting her writing career.<sup>24</sup> She soon overcame her feelings of reluctance and seemed to find beauty in her new surroundings. She named her family’s homestead, positioned on the banks of the Raisin River, “Hazlebank.” From this “semi-wilderness” location, Chandler continued her editorial work and poetry writing and corresponded frequently with her friends and family in the East.<sup>25</sup> She performed her work for *The Genius* by exchanging letters with Lundy, regularly receiving antislavery publications, including William Lloyd Garrison’s *The Liberator*, from him and other correspondents.<sup>26</sup> In addition to her editorial employment, Chandler had been an active member of a ladies’ antislavery society in Philadelphia prior to her move, though she did not participate in its public proceedings. In Michigan, she was instrumental in founding the territory’s first antislavery organization, the Logan Female Anti-Slavery Society.<sup>27</sup> Even from her isolated position, Chandler served as a key point of contact with the abolitionist ideas blossoming in Boston and

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<sup>23</sup> Lundy, *The Poetical Works of Elizabeth Margaret Chandler*, 12-13, 16. Emphasis is Lundy’s. For further biographic information about Elizabeth Margaret Chandler see: Marcia J. Heringa Mason, ed., *Remember the Distance that Divides Us: The Family Letters of Philadelphia Quaker Abolitionists and Michigan Pioneer Elizabeth Margaret Chandler, 1830-1842* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2004), xv-lviii.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas and Elizabeth Chandler to William and Sarah Chandler, 12 February 1830, Elizabeth Margaret Chandler Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>25</sup> Lundy, *The Poetical Works of Elizabeth Margaret Chandler*, 28.

<sup>26</sup> Garrison emulated Lundy and Chandler and began his own “Woman’s Department” as a regular part of his paper in 1832. Jean Fagan Yellin, *Women & Sisters: The Antislavery Feminists in American Culture*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 14.

<sup>27</sup> Lundy, *The Poetical Works of Elizabeth Margaret Chandler*, 39-40; Mason, *Remember the Distance that Divides Us*, xxxii-xxxiii.

Philadelphia. Separated from her old friends and political allies, she relied on the exchange of letters both as a publishing author and as a grassroots organizer.

Beginning immediately upon her departure for her new home in Michigan, Chandler's correspondents kept her informed of antislavery news. Her close friend, Anna Coe, reported on William Lloyd Garrison's lectures on slavery in Philadelphia in September of 1830. She knew Chandler would be particularly interested to hear about his proposal for publishing a newspaper, *The Liberator*. Judging by Anna Coe's letter, his visit sparked controversy both in the city and in her own household. "WL Garrison was here some days before he could secure a room for lecturing," Coe wrote to Chandler, adding, "I should have gone myself to hear him, but ... my duty called me at home – among the pots, kettles and Dutch Ovens." Not only did domestic obligations prevent Coe from attending the lectures, but a family member tore up a copy of Garrison's proposal for *The Liberator* before she could send it to her friend at "Lands End." Later in the same letter, Coe complained that, though she received the latest edition of *The Genius*, "my gentleman did not think proper to bring it in but just gave it a twirl across the store, it lodged I do not know exactly where[.]"<sup>28</sup> Coe wrote in a playful tone, but these episodes indicate that even her progressive Philadelphia Quaker household considered antislavery publications too incendiary to be appropriate reading material for their unmarried daughter.

In other portions of her long, diary-style letter (it spans over a month), Coe's melancholy bled into her writing. She beseeched her friend, "Why does thee not write to me ... I am looking day after day for a letter, and every day am disappointed. I think I shall attack the letter carrier some of these days, out of pure spite...." Commenting on Chandler's absence from a lecture she

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<sup>28</sup> Anna's father, Robert Coe, owned a dry goods store in Philadelphia. "Gentleman" may refer to an employee working at the store. Anna Coe to Elizabeth Margaret Chandler, 30 August 1830, Elizabeth Margaret Chandler Papers.

attended at the Franklin Institute, Coe lamented her inability to express herself in writing: “I have cords to tell thee and to think I shall have to keep it all treasured up for a year or two. No- I’ll forget it all on purpose, now.”<sup>29</sup> Distance strained Coe and Chandler’s friendship, but Coe’s outburst reveals how crucial correspondence was to people who lacked a ready outlet for political discussion, even in their own homes. Bound by domestic chores and with her reading material censored by male chaperones, Coe expressed her frustration in private letters into which she also smuggled political ideas.

Chandler did not face the same family obstacles that Coe did; her brother and aunt shared her antislavery commitments and supported her literary pursuits. Nevertheless, she faced logistical challenges in carrying on her activism from a remote location. In April 1831, she thanked her aunt, Jane Howell, for sending regular issues of *The Saturday Evening Post* because it seemed “almost like conversing with a Philadelphian.” Explaining that letters took two weeks to reach her, she reported that “Mail day stands out from the others in a kind of bold relief, and we have no sooner heard tidings from the post office on one week, then we begin to look forward to the same important day on the next.” Chandler often felt homesick. She could “only imagine” what her antislavery colleagues were doing in Philadelphia at the moment she wrote and felt “quite sick in the base expectation” of receiving more letters from her family and friends there.<sup>30</sup> Almost a year later, Chandler found a new, twice weekly, postal system “very much to my satisfaction.” Now, she could expect to wait just ten days for news to arrive from Philadelphia. Chandler reflected, “What a comfort a bit of written or printed paper is to one, out here in the

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<sup>29</sup> Coe uses “cord” in the sense of “a measure of cut wood,” referring to the large amount of paper she would need to convey the full extent of her thoughts. “Cord, n.1,” OED Online, September 2016, Oxford University Press, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/41428?rskey=EUaPEM&result=1> (accessed September 27, 2016); Anna Coe to Elizabeth Margaret Chandler, 30 August 1830, Elizabeth Margaret Chandler Papers.

<sup>30</sup> Elizabeth Margaret Chandler to Jane Howell, 15 April 1831, Elizabeth Margaret Chandler Papers.

‘back woods.’”<sup>31</sup> The ability to communicate efficiently with her friends back East eased the frustration of distance.

Postal communication was indispensable to Chandler’s labors as an antislavery writer and editor. In 1831, Benjamin Lundy lamented her removal to the “woods,” asking her, “[W]hat enticement – what prospect of gratifications, fame or usefulness, could be held out to thy view, to ... draw thee from a deep seclusion, that almost hides thee from the face of the world?” He continued, admonishing Chandler that if she knew of “half” the impact her writings had in spreading the antislavery cause, she “would see the propriety” of moving to a place where she would have access to “the most extensive and early information of passing events.” In the face of her separation, however, Lundy vowed, “rest assured, that I shall use every effort to furnish thee with whatever thee may request, or that I may consider useful to thee.”<sup>32</sup> Lundy held true to his promise and kept Chandler supplied with abolitionist publications as well as with letters containing his own observations and reports on the progress of the cause, which she responded to in kind.

Chandler’s correspondence indicates that, contrary to Lundy’s doubts, she found her isolation intellectually fruitful. Previously hesitant to expose herself to scrutiny, Chandler was emboldened to take a more public role in local activism. She was surprised by the intellectual vitality of her new home, describing the residents of nearby Adrian, Michigan, as “a reading people” and commenting to her aunt that “bumkins are very rare.”<sup>33</sup> These musings immediately preceded her organization of a local antislavery society, the first in the Michigan territory.

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<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth Margaret Chandler to Jane Howell, 12 February 1832, Elizabeth Margaret Chandler Papers.

<sup>32</sup> Benjamin Lundy to Elizabeth Margaret Chandler, 2 April 1831, Elizabeth Margaret Chandler Papers.

<sup>33</sup> Elizabeth Margaret Chandler to Jane Howell, 20 June 1832, Elizabeth Margaret Chandler Papers.

Chandler also gained confidence in her abilities as a political writer. Not only did she publish numerous articles and poems during this period, but she also used letters to educate her family and friends about her activism. In June 1831, Chandler wrote to her sister-in-law, Sarah, persuading her to subscribe to the *Genius of Universal Emancipation*. “Would you not like to take it?” Chandler asked, continuing, “I should like you to do so, because it would give thee particularly a better opportunity of becoming acquainted with my sentiments; and besides I should have an opportunity of lecturing you now and then...” Chandler reproached Sarah and her husband for their prior indifference to the antislavery cause. She instructed Sarah to tell her husband, Chandler’s brother William, “it is his sisters earnest request that both he and his wife will become better abolitionists...”<sup>34</sup> This letter suggests that antislavery politics were a point of contention between Chandler and her brother. In this instance, Chandler found it easier to convey her beliefs adamantly in writing than she did in person.

Chandler became seriously ill with a “remittent fever” during the spring of 1834. She never recovered.<sup>35</sup> Letters written by her family members indicate that Chandler received mercury treatment during her illness, which they believed contributed to her death on November 2, 1834.<sup>36</sup> In spite of her untimely death at age twenty-six, Chandler was a pioneer in the antislavery movement, serving as an inspiration for many women who followed her example. Her poems and writings, which Lundy published soon after her death, established an important rhetorical legacy for the antislavery movement just as the cause of immediate abolition truly took

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<sup>34</sup> Elizabeth Margaret Chandler to Sarah Chandler, 28 June 1831, Elizabeth Margaret Chandler Papers.

<sup>35</sup> Lundy, *The Poetical Works of Elizabeth Margaret Chandler*, 41. Marcia J. Heringa Mason suggests that Chandler’s symptoms were consistent with cholera or a malarial disease known as ague. Mason, *Remember the Distance that Divides Us*, 41-42.

<sup>36</sup> Jane Howell to Thomas Chandler, 12 March 1836, Elizabeth Margaret Chandler Papers. Mason, *Remember the Distance that Divides Us*, lvi.



off. Chandler relied on correspondence to complete much of this work, even as she found intellectual stimulation in her removal from Philadelphia.

### **Outside their “appropriate sphere:” Unconventional Political Actors**

By the mid-1830s, direct participation in the institution of slavery as buyers and sellers of human beings had become utterly inconceivable to many Northerners. Elizabeth Chandler, Benjamin Lundy, and Garrison, as well as free black activists including David Walker and James Forten, were founders of the movement for immediate abolition that swept through the North in the decade. Their message spread in the face of enormous obstacles—ranging from ignorance and ridicule to censorship and violent reprisals. Abolitionism was never a popular cause, but, unexpectedly, its message of radical equality gained momentum in its appeal to a broad spectrum of individuals, many of whom were typically excluded from active participation in mainstream electoral politics. Such people relied on personal letters to articulate their views on slavery. In doing so, they asserted themselves as legitimate political agents, contesting the presumed boundaries of the body politic.

In addition to pointing out the basic injustice of slavery, abolitionists began to question their roles as consumers of the products of slave labor. Attempts to minimize personal contributions to the profits of slavery gained in popularity as opponents of slavery sought to demonstrate their willingness to sacrifice personal comfort to uphold moral values. Charlotte Cowles, a young woman from Farmington, Connecticut, told her brother about Gerrit Smith’s advocacy for consuming only free produce. “Neither himself or his family make any use of cotton or sugar

except from the West Indies,” she explained, adding that the plan “will do for him, for he can afford to dress in silk and linen, but we could not do it quite so well.”<sup>37</sup>

As she reported to her brother three years later, the problem continued to frustrate her, “I was never more surprised to find myself influenced by any arguments, for when Mr Smith commenced, I did not think even he could make out the case; but I have tasted sugar only ~~one~~ two or three times since ... and I knew from my feelings then that I should have no peace until I left off....” At that point, though, she identified a limit to her ability to pursue a program as exacting as that prescribed by Gerrit Smith. “[I]t would be ridiculous for me to give up cotton,” she conceded, because the expense would be too great and would be borne by her father.<sup>38</sup> Her lack of an independent income circumscribed her ability to determine her own consumption habits. Furthermore, living in her father’s house entailed familial and social obligations over which Charlotte had little control. In another letter, she apologized for ending abruptly, explaining to her brother, “I have got to make some currant pies for those to whom slave sugar tastes good.”<sup>39</sup> Though Cowles remained steadfast in her personal boycott, the rest of her family did not share her dedication. They enlisted her to bake pies that she refused, on principle, to taste. Only through letters to her brother, Samuel, could Charlotte express herself freely.

Beyond their economic constraints, Charlotte Cowles and other women who opposed slavery were barred from participating directly in electoral politics, and most of them could not speak or write publicly about their opinions. In another remarkable letter, Cowles pointedly criticized the political system of the 1830s. After attending a Whig meeting for the ladies of Farmington,

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<sup>37</sup> Charlotte Cowles to Samuel Cowles, 7 July 1836, Charlotte and Samuel Cowles Correspondence, Connecticut Historical Society (CHS).

<sup>38</sup> Charlotte Cowles to Samuel Cowles, 30 May 1839, Charlotte and Samuel Cowles Correspondence, CHS.

<sup>39</sup> Charlotte Cowles to Samuel Cowles, 27 June 1839, Charlotte and Samuel Cowles Correspondence, CHS.

Connecticut, she wrote to her brother, “Who will say now that we do not live in the age of wonders?... I have not got over my astonishment yet, and I can hardly believe that I have really been to a political meeting.” She continued:

This, I suppose, is “the appropriate sphere” of woman. I am so delighted that this has happened here, and that those very ladies who think it improper for women to talk about slavery, have attended this meeting, that I do not know what to say first. I have written so fast now that my arm aches, and I have not begun to tell you any thing about the meeting. Talk now about women’s meddling with politics! Politics, indeed!<sup>40</sup>

In spite of her excitement at the previously unthinkable political mobilization of her peers, Charlotte came away from the meeting distinctly unimpressed by the Whigs’ recruitment efforts because of their reticence on the slavery issue. Judging by her correspondence, the organizers of the meeting did not repeat the experiment.

As historians have made clear, thousands of women participated in the antislavery movement through local societies and sewing clubs, petition drives, and fairs, although their contemporaries and later scholars have often overlooked their crucial work.<sup>41</sup> For some women, however, writing letters was the only means available to them to engage openly with political debates. As their letters demonstrate, they had a sophisticated understanding of antislavery issues, and they used their correspondence to formulate their own opinions and discuss them with family members and friends. In doing so, they implicitly claimed for themselves the right to participate in politics. Not only did they have ideas of their own, but they felt compelled, or even obligated, to express them.

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<sup>40</sup> Charlotte Cowles to Samuel Cowles, 26 March 1838, Charlotte and Samuel Cowles Correspondence, CHS.

<sup>41</sup> See for example: Lori Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Hewitt, *Women’s Activism and Social Change*; Julie Roy Jeffrey, *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism: Ordinary Women in the Antislavery Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

While Charlotte Cowles clearly felt confident in her ability to speak for herself as a political agent in letters to her brother, other women faced less favorable circumstances. In February 1838, Grace Denny Williams addressed a letter to Angelina Grimké from her hometown of Brimfield, Massachusetts. Though she was “personally a stranger” to Grimké, Williams’s knowledge of her public writings emboldened her to write and deemed any apology for doing so “superfluous.” In the body of her letter, Williams explained her situation. Brimfield could “boast of a young and vigorous Anti Slavery Society,” but Williams described her husband as “one who have stood so long waiting to see how things went before they ventured onto the car of abolition that they begin to feel awkward.” While Williams aspired to join the cause herself, her husband was “rather afraid to adopt all his Wife’s theology,” which limited her ability to participate. Furthermore, Williams delicately explained that her much older husband (he was almost twenty years her senior) thought it “proper to let his comrades see that a young Wife does not manage his politiks or religion[.]” Williams beseeched Grimké to visit her town, hoping that such a model of female activism might provoke a change in her husband’s demeanor. Unable to express her views forthrightly to her spouse, let alone in public, this New England woman instead described her dilemma to Grimké, a well-known proponent of both abolition and woman’s rights, in a personal letter.<sup>42</sup>

A further example shows how subtle women’s claims for political recognition can be at first glance. In a cluster of otherwise mundane family correspondence, a letter from Mary Jane Porter, who was living in Philadelphia, to her brother Samuel D. Porter in Rochester, New York, stands out. Mary Jane began by pondering how long it had been since she last heard from her brother, and by detailing some family news. Then she abruptly switched to a long discussion of

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<sup>42</sup> Grace Denny Williams to Angelina Grimké, 23 February 1838, Weld-Grimké Papers, WCL.

antislavery politics. “I should really like a full exposé of your opinion with regard to these ‘no church – no government’” people, she urged her brother, referring to radical abolitionists who argued that the churches and the government were proslavery institutions. After professing herself, “sadly at a loss what to think with regard to any thing or any body,” she proceeded to lay out her views without reticence:

I have lost all respect for dignitaries and from having had a sort of feeling that a mans being placed in authority whether in church or state elevated him above suspicion... I begin to feel that such elevation lays him open to suspicion and I find that the decisions of the congregated wisdom of the land in whatever capacity assembled appeal to my reason or conscience with very little authority.<sup>43</sup>

Mary Jane buried a political manifesto in an otherwise casual family letter, prefacing it by understating the strength of her convictions.

The Porter family was involved with the antislavery movement, but they did not align themselves with abolitionists on the radical end of the spectrum.<sup>44</sup> They did not campaign for women’s rights, and they generally frowned upon women taking a public role in politics. As her letter demonstrates, Mary Jane Porter clashed with her family’s views at several points in her life. She was the only Porter sister who never married, maintaining an independent career teaching at schools for free black children across the Northeast. A letter in 1846 from Samuel D. Porter to his and Mary Jane’s father indicates that she later applied for a job as a principal at Oberlin College. Her brother thwarted her plan by refusing to write her a letter of recommendation for the position.<sup>45</sup> In the letter quoted above, Mary Jane implicitly claimed the right to engage (and disagree) with her brother on political issues, but she did so in a venue that

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<sup>43</sup> Mary Jane Porter to Samuel D. Porter, 8 September [1842?], Porter Family Papers, University of Rochester.

<sup>44</sup> For example, Samuel D. Porter’s wife, Susan Farley Porter, served as the president of the Rochester Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society, which split off from the radical Rochester Female Anti-Slavery Society around 1852.

<sup>45</sup> Samuel D. Porter to Samuel Porter, 13 October 1846, Porter Family Papers, University of Rochester.

was private and personal. Mary Jane Porter and Grace Denny Williams exemplify the social and cultural expectations that often muted women's political voices, but they used their correspondence as an inventive means of criticizing male-dominated religious and political authority.

While male writers tended to be forthright, even aggressive, in expressing their political opinions, qualities of modesty, restraint, and self-effacement are ubiquitous in letters written by women giving their views of antislavery. Modesty was not an uncommon trait of letters written by both sexes, which often lamented the writer's deficiencies as a correspondent. But in women's letters regarding their political views, modesty often served to anticipate and deflect blame for the author's choice to write about a particularly unsuitable subject.<sup>46</sup> Humility could be an effective rhetorical strategy. In her letter to William Lloyd Garrison, Angelina Grimké made effective use of this technique, remarking on the futility of "so insignificant a person" contributing to the debate over slavery.<sup>47</sup> Like Mary Jane Porter, Grimké proceeded from self-deprecation to a forthright statement of her thoughts about the current state of abolitionism, in spite of her doubts (real or feigned) about her authority on the subject. Porter and Grimké both used a disclaimer that in fact allowed them to state their views more strongly than they might have had they chosen to exercise more authority from the outset.

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<sup>46</sup> Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray discuss the subtlety of political claims in antebellum New England women's letters and diaries as a "rhetoric of diffidence" that allowed them to flout gender expectations without facing rebuke or condemnation for their words. See Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, *Voices without Votes: Women and Politics in Antebellum New England*, (Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire Press, 2010), 12-13.

<sup>47</sup> "Christian Heroism," *The Liberator* vol. 5, no. 38, (19 September 1835).

Similarly, in a letter about Fourth of July celebrations that she wrote to her brother while she was studying at Oberlin College, Nancy Prudden reversed the procedure, offering the political commentary first and the self-deprecation afterwards. Prudden wrote:

It would seem that a government founded on such principles must be holy, righteous and equitable. But alas! What a sad spectacle of human nature does she exhibit. No sooner did she free herself from the shackles of slavery than she hastened to fasten them with double weight on a portion of her own innocent and unoffending sons, but pardon me, I did not intend to give a dissertation on slavery, no[w] I will leave that, for abler pens than mine to do....<sup>48</sup>

Like Grimké and Porter, Prudden shielded her political comments behind a thin veil of modesty. Her maneuver demonstrates that even at Oberlin College, one of the most progressive sites of political and intellectual discussion in the mid-nineteenth-century United States, and the first college to admit female and African American students, women felt limited in their ability to speak with authority on political subjects.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, letter writing offered an outlet for their thoughts and opinions not available elsewhere. Shielded by modest rhetoric, these women and many more like them seized the opportunity to articulate their opposition to slavery. They may have felt obliged to disclaim their authority, but they were committed to writing down their thoughts.

Other individuals had even fewer resources to exercise their pens in the campaign against slavery than these Northern white women. Free black Northerners were active abolitionists throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, but in the 1830s their efforts often remained separate from white antislavery activists. Black abolitionists concentrated on mobilizing free black people in the North to advocate for equality for themselves in addition to calling for an end

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<sup>48</sup> Nancy Prudden to George P. Prudden, [4 July] 1837, Prudden Family Papers, Oberlin College Archives.

<sup>49</sup> For a discussion of abolitionism at Oberlin College see J. Brent Morris, *Oberlin, Hotbed of Abolitionism: College, Community, and the Fight for Freedom and Equality in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

to slavery in the South. The notion of civic and political equality gained traction among some white radical abolitionists, but more conservative opponents of slavery hesitated to embrace these goals. Even many of the most progressive proponents of equal rights balked at the notion of “social” equality. Black abolitionists faced an additional burden of open racism that came not just from supporters of slavery but also from within the antislavery ranks. A letter from Angelina and Sarah Grimké to their friend Sarah Mapps Douglass, a member of a prominent free black family in Philadelphia, illustrates the point. Referring to the upcoming Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, the Grimkés told Douglass how she must comport herself in the face of racism:

You my dear Sister hav[e] a work to do in rooting out this wicked feeling as well as we. You must be willing to come in among us tho’ it may be your feelings may be wounded by “the putting forth of the finger,” the avoidance of a seat by you, or the glancing of the eye. To suffer these things is the sacrifice which is calld for at your hands & I earnestly desire that you may be willing to bear these mortifications with Christian meekness, gentleness & love.<sup>50</sup>

The movement gains power when white and black activists cooperate, the Grimkés insisted; together, they must endure abuse for the good of their cause. At the same time, however, the Grimkés suggested that Douglass bore the responsibility of demonstrating, through her physical presence and decorous behavior, her worth as an equal ally in the campaign against slavery.

Sarah Douglass’s reply to the Grimkés’ letter does not survive.<sup>51</sup> As a well-educated, literate woman, she undoubtedly used letters when possible to express her own views, but she, and many other black abolitionists, found their political activities circumscribed by the racism they

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<sup>50</sup> Angelina and Sarah Grimké to Sarah Mapps Douglass, 3 April 1837, Weld-Grimké Family Papers, WCL.

<sup>51</sup> Sarah Mapps Douglass destroyed most of her personal correspondence before she died. The few letters authored by her that do survive are scattered in archives across the United States. Margaret Hope Bacon, “New Light on Sarah Mapps Douglass and Her Reconciliation with Friends,” *Quaker History* 90, no. 1 (Spring 2001), 28, 46.



constantly faced. Still, Douglass frequently used literacy, writing, and education as means of political engagement and mobilization. In 1831, early in her activist career, she, along with a group of about twenty other elite black women, formed the Female Literary Association of Philadelphia. The society enabled Douglass and her peers to engage with political issues within the socially acceptable setting of female friendship.<sup>52</sup> Some of the few letters written by Douglass that survive document her involvement in establishing the association. In February 1832, Douglass wrote to William Lloyd Garrison in her capacity as secretary to inquire why he had not yet printed their constitution in *The Liberator*, though she sent it to him months beforehand and asked him to publish it immediately. She expressed her displeasure in decided terms, informing him that “no one (except myself) had any right to forbid” its appearing in print. Nevertheless, Douglass concluded her letter on a warm, sentimental note. She assured Garrison of her support for his cause and told him, “O Sir, could the enemies of our race look for one moment into the hearts of this little band of females, they would be constrained to acknowledge that ingratitude is not a national trait.”<sup>53</sup> Douglass rapidly shifted the rhetorical register of her writing. She strongly asserted her right to be heard by Garrison and the audience of his paper, while also cushioning the impact of her claims with deferential and gracious language. Like many antislavery women, Douglass manipulated the conventions of letter writing to transgress the gendered boundaries of politics.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> On Sarah Mapps Douglass and the Female Literary Association, see Erica Armstrong Dunbar, *A Fragile Freedom: African American Women and Emancipation in the Antebellum City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 97, 101-102; Marie Lindhorst, “Politics in a Box: Sarah Mapps Douglass and the Female Literary Association, 1831-1833,” *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 65, no. 3 (Summer 1998), 263-278.

<sup>53</sup> Sarah M. Douglass to William Lloyd Garrison, 29 February 1832, Anti-Slavery Collection, Boston Public Library.

<sup>54</sup> Garrison responded to Douglass on March 5, 1832, informing her that he had mislaid the constitution of the Female Literary Association for some time, but that he had published it in the December 3 issue of *The Liberator*. He explained that one bundle of the issue in question, destined for subscribers in Philadelphia, had been lost in

Unlike Sarah Mapps Douglass, many other black opponents of slavery were prevented from becoming literate by a lack of resources, or, in the case of enslaved persons, by force.<sup>55</sup> Very few letters survive that were written by ordinary free black Northerners in this time period, and even fewer exist that were written by slaves. One very unusual letter, written by a man named Milo Thompson in Danville, Kentucky in 1834, is an exception. Thompson wrote to a slave woman on a neighboring plantation, Louisa Bethley, revealing that his master had thwarted their plans to get married, at least for the time being:

Master says I must put it off a little longer, untill he can see farther into the matter. he says probably Mr Birney may break up house keeping or something of the kind and he dont know what may become of you, for that reason we must defer it a little longer. I will come up and see you shortly and then we will make some arrangements about it it is with great reluctance that I put it off any longer, but I am compelled to do it owing to the circumstances I have related. I shall remain your affectionate lover until death.<sup>56</sup>

Milo Thompson made no explicitly political claims. Instead, he made an implicit claim to some degree of control over his own life. Although this power was limited dramatically by his position as a slave subject to the decisions of his owner, Milo still made a point of emphasizing that the delay in their marriage plan was only a temporary setback and that he and Louisa would “make some arrangements about it” themselves next time they met.

Louisa Bethley’s master, “Mr Birney,” was the father of James G. Birney, who had recently declared himself a proponent of immediate abolitionism, much to the chagrin of his slaveholding

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transit, so Douglass and her colleagues did not receive it. William Lloyd Garrison to Sarah Mapps Douglass [typescript], 5 March 1832, Anti-Slavery Collection, Boston Public Library.

<sup>55</sup> Notably, laws went into effect following Nat Turner’s 1831 rebellion in Southampton, Virginia, prohibiting slaveholders from allowing their slaves to learn to read. The same year, William Lloyd Garrison began publishing *The Liberator*, and shortly afterwards, copies of David Walker *Appeal ... to the Colored Citizens of the World* appeared in various parts of the South. The convergence of these events created a link, in the minds of Southern slaveholders, between Northern abolitionism and slave resistance. See David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 209; Manisha Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause*, 210-213.

<sup>56</sup> Milo Thompson to Louisa Bethley, 15 October 1834, James G. Birney Papers, WCL.

relatives.<sup>57</sup> In a letter dated October 18, 1834, Milo Thompson's master, George C. Thompson, revealed to James G. Birney (his brother-in-law) his true reasons for preventing the marriage. Contradicting what he apparently told Milo—that Birney's father "may break up house keeping"—George Thompson told Birney that he was afraid Milo would continue to slip away to visit his wife without his permission. He offered to buy Louisa ("the negro girl"), so that the couple might live together on his plantation. Buried beneath his seeming benevolence, however, lay a more pressing reason for opposing the marriage, as George Thompson told Birney later in his letter:

The colored people of your household and your Father's, will of course, become familiar with the arguments, which you will permit me to repeat, I sincerely think calculated to do great harm. My servant, if connected there, and consequently visiting frequently would naturally imbibe all the same notions; they would be brought home and propagated. My slaves are numerous – they are now I hope contented as their condition will admit of - they would not, I fear, be benefitted.<sup>58</sup>

Not only did George Thompson fear that Milo's marriage to Louisa would result in further instances of delinquency and disobedience, but by the end of his letter he admitted that he considered Birney's antislavery views to be so dangerous that even indirect contact with them could provoke widespread discontent, if not open rebellion, among his slaves.

The full context offers further insight into Milo Thompson's letter. His formal language suggests that his carefully chosen words reflected his sense of personal dignity. Beyond that, it is likely that his master, George Thompson, read the letter himself before allowing it to reach Louisa. Moreover, Milo may have known all along about the true source of his owner's objections to the match. In fact, it is possible that Milo cultivated the relationship knowing about

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<sup>57</sup> At the time this letter was written, in 1834, James G. Birney still owned slaves himself. He freed his remaining slaves in 1839.

<sup>58</sup> George C. Thompson to James G. Birney, 18 October 1834, James G. Birney Papers, WCL.

the Birney family's growing connection to abolitionism. His relationship with Louisa may have been as much a means of political empowerment as a source of personal satisfaction. That is not to discredit the genuineness of Milo and Louisa's attachment to each other. But the two letters together indicate that, as early as 1834, rumors of Northern antislavery politics may have penetrated Southern plantations.<sup>59</sup> In the simple act of putting pen to paper, Milo not only asserted his individual worth, but also, in the eyes of his master, revealed his potential to unsettle the relationship of personal domination that lay at the heart of the institution of slavery.

### **“A Spirit of Violence”: Responding to Opposition**

As the antislavery movement gained visibility over the course of the 1830s, abolitionists used letters to respond to the opposition they faced from all sides. Lecturers and agents recounted the mob violence and resistance they witnessed over the course of their travels in their correspondence. Connecticut abolitionist Charles C. Burleigh reported that after delivering a lecture in Pennsylvania, “When I returned to the house where I was to lodge, I found that an egg or two had been thrown at the door & lay sprinkled about the step & doorsill. ... This morning before I was dressed, I took a glance at our carriage which stood within view from my window, & saw that it stood on three wheels.”<sup>60</sup> In a more violent instance, Samuel J. May wrote to his wife in 1835 about a lecture he gave in Haverhill, Massachusetts, “The audience was one of the largest I ever addressed, and I expected to have a nice time – but I had not spoken more than 15

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<sup>59</sup> On the potential for antislavery politics to influence slaves on Southern plantations through rumor see: 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), 51-61.

<sup>60</sup> Charles C. Burleigh to James Miller McKim, 9 August 1839, May Antislavery Manuscripts, Rare and Manuscript Collections (RMC), Cornell University. On Burleigh see Ira V. Brown, “An Antislavery Agent: C. C. Burleigh in Pennsylvania, 1836-1837,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 105, no. 1 (1981), 66-84.

or 20 minutes – when a parcel of rude men and boys assembled around the house and commenced throwing stones or brick [bats] through the windows. I tried in vain to quiet the people and to go on, but in vain.”<sup>61</sup> An Oberlin student described an unusual form of abuse in a letter dating to April 1837. An abolitionist friend of his was captured by a mob and “held across a stump by half a dozen men ... where they intended to cut his face & paint it with India ink, which would always remain.” Fortunately, the victim was able to kick over the dish of ink, and, “not being able to obtain any more they concluded to let him go finding that they could do nothing to him.”<sup>62</sup>

Violent incidents shocked those who lived in the seemingly placid communities in which they erupted. Another Oberlinite told a female relative about a lecture in nearby Brownhelm, Ohio in which a judge interrupted the speaker with epithets of “Fanatic, Upstart, Youngster,” after which the audience pelted the lecturer with rotten apples. The observer reflected, “We have always thought that our peaceful town was above such meanness, and although the spirit of Mobocracy might distract our country, we thought that Brownhelm would be free from its ravages.”<sup>63</sup>

Such attacks confounded the local authorities tasked with keeping the peace. On October 27, 1836, the Maine abolitionist Samuel Fessenden reported in a letter to the state antislavery society that he visited the mayor of Portland, Levi Cutter, to “request the protection of the City Government” for a meeting they had planned for that evening. Mayor Cutter assured Fessenden

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<sup>61</sup> Samuel J. May to Lucretia May, 1 September 1835, May Anti-Slavery Manuscripts, RMC, Cornell University.

<sup>62</sup> James D. Prudden to George P. Prudden, 8 April 1837, Prudden Family Papers, Oberlin College Archives.

<sup>63</sup> James H. Fairchild to Elvira Fairchild, 12 October 1835, James H. Fairchild Presidential Papers, Oberlin College Archives.

that he “acknowledged our right, and that we ought to be permitted to hold our meeting in peace,” but “he knew of no way in which he could afford us efficient protection.” Furthermore, the mayor informed Fessenden that “he had good reason to believe” that their meeting would “be assailed ... by a more powerful attack than any heretofore made[.]” Cutter “had no power” to prevent it and warned that any constables stationed to protect the meeting “would only increase the evil[.]”<sup>64</sup>

Fessenden’s description of his conversation of the mayor highlighted the complicity of the city in mob agitation. The mayor did not openly endorse anti-abolitionist violence, but he suggested that it was inevitable that a mob would attack the meeting. Cutter characterized himself as powerless to prevent it and implied that his own police force would join in the proceedings. According to Fessenden, “it was his settled belief that we could not be protected.”<sup>65</sup> Unable to prevent mobs from assembling, and lacking the support of local law enforcers, abolitionists were often frustrated in their basic attempts to assemble their supporters. Recounting such incidents in letters restored a degree of control to the abolitionists like Fessenden who narrated the events.

Sharing these examples of mob violence in correspondence with friends and family offered relief to the abolitionists who witnessed it. Touring lecturers like Charles Burleigh and Samuel May were subject to public outcry wherever they went and perhaps grew somewhat accustomed to the bellowing of their opponents. On the other hand, however, prominent men like Burleigh, May, and William Lloyd Garrison repeatedly risked their lives by speaking out against slavery to

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<sup>64</sup> Samuel Fessenden and David Thurston to the Maine Antislavery Society, 27 October 1836, Maine Anti-Slavery Society Papers, Maine Historical Society.

<sup>65</sup> Samuel Fessenden and David Thurston to the Maine Antislavery Society, 27 October 1836, Maine Anti-Slavery Society Papers.

hostile audiences. Their correspondence offered a respite from sneering crowds and the threat of projectiles. Furthermore, in this climate of opposition to their cause, abolitionists often were physically isolated from one another. Lewis Tappan, a high-profile New York abolitionist and wealthy merchant, described ongoing attacks on his home in an 1834 letter. He wrote, “The misrepresentations of individuals, and the mob-like temper exhibited by several of our newspapers, have aroused a spirit of violence that has partly expended itself on demolishing some of my furniture.” Tappan was unsure whether the worst of the attacks were over. “[W]hile I am writing I learn there are collections of people before my late residence, & probably at other places,” he concluded.<sup>66</sup>

Tappan’s correspondent was Theodore Weld, who was becoming well-known at the time for his activities as one of the “Lane Rebels.” This group of Lane Seminary students held a series of antislavery debates in Cincinnati, Ohio, and they faced considerable opposition, both from mobs and from the administration of the school. If anyone could sympathize with Tappan’s predicament, holed up while his house was surrounded by rioters, it was Weld. In spite of the physical distance between them, the exchange of letters allowed them to commiserate and learn from one another’s experiences.

In addition to building bonds of shared sympathy and support, letters were a means of asserting the respectable, peaceful, and civilized, nature of abolitionists in contrast to the mobs that attacked them. This was especially true as news of violent incidents travelled beyond the places in which they occurred. Correspondents added layers of interpretation as they narrated the events and evaluated their significance. For example, Joseph Horace Kimball wrote to his friend, the New Hampshire abolitionist John Farmer, in May of 1836 describing a recent uproar at the

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<sup>66</sup> Lewis Tappan to Theodore Weld, 10 July 1834, Weld-Grimké Papers, WCL.

annual meeting of the Ohio Anti-Slavery Society. One of the speakers, James G. Birney, had been assaulted by a mob during the meeting. As Kimball put it, the mob drove Birney out of town “amid a shower of addled eggs.” Though “He was pelted most antagonously,” Kimball wrote, Birney emerged unscathed and “bore it all with his usual equanimity, & Christian forbearance.”<sup>67</sup> According to Kimball’s interpretation of the events, Birney’s heroism lay in his refusal to succumb to panic or rage in the face of his attackers. Kimball drew a contrast between Birney’s composure and the wild behavior of his opponents. Through letters, abolitionists constructed a narrative of their movement that stressed their moral integrity and their refusal to be corrupted by the tactics of their abusers.

One of the most famous instances of mob violence was the burning of Pennsylvania Hall, a building erected in Philadelphia for the purpose of holding abolition meetings, in May 1838. In a letter to her brother-in-law, Thomas Chandler, the father of the late Elizabeth Margaret Chandler, Jane Howell described days of horrific violence. She wrote, “Our fine spacious building, the Pennsylvania Hall, was destroyed last week by a Mob of about three thousand who fired the house, and has left nothing standing but its naked walls.” In the following days, they attempted to burn an orphanage for black children and the African church, but they “were soon dispersed by the interference of the Sheriff, Mayor, Police, Marines, Citizens &c[.]” Howell concluded, “it is to be regretted that they did not present themselves and use the authority that the law allowed them in dispersing the mob, at the Pennsylvania Hall. The City seems now pretty quiet again which I hope may be of long continuance.” Echoing Samuel Fessenden, Howell’s passive language suggested a criticism of the intermittent attention of law enforcement paid towards

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<sup>67</sup> Joseph Horace Kimball to John Farmer, 7 May 1836, John Farmer Papers, New Hampshire Historical Society.



preventing mob violence. She also stressed the innocence of the targets: orphans and a church “filled with coloured people at worship.”<sup>68</sup> Though Howell’s tone was understated, her message of disapproval came through clearly. The abolitionists and African American targets of the mob were peaceful, orderly, and pious, whereas the mob was violent, unruly, and impulsive.

Another young woman offered a slightly different interpretation of the Pennsylvania Hall incident. Ann Thomas wrote a letter to her cousin, Nathan M. Thomas, in July 1838, to which she requested that her friend, Sarah Galbreath add a note reporting on abolition. Galbreath described her recent attendance at the antislavery anniversary meeting held in Granville, Ohio. She told Thomas, “I imagine Granville is very nearly abolitionized, or at least opposed to mobs, all was peace and quiet, no mob and no talk of any.” When she returned to her home in New Lisbon, however, the county antislavery meeting was denied access to the courthouse for fear that “a mob might be excited.” Still, she continued optimistically, “I trust our cause is gaining; the burning of the Pennsylvania hall will I presume add many to our numbers.” Referring to the marriage of Angelina Grimké and Theodore Weld, which occurred on the eve of the conflagration, Galbreath reflected, “what minds are there are there united; a few more such and a mighty work might be accomplished; We might look forward with some hope for a reformation of a portion of the world at any rate[.]” Galbreath concluded her letter with a jab at Thomas that built from her reference to Grimké and Weld’s marriage as one between equals. She informed him, “I am studying Algebra ... Perhaps thee will think women have left their sphere when they

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<sup>68</sup> Jane Howell to Thomas Chandler, 29 May 1838, Elizabeth Margaret Chandler Papers, Bentley Historical Library.

get at that, but they will sometimes step out of the sphere assigned them, though I say that is a subject they should all be acquainted with.”<sup>69</sup>

Galbreath connected three seemingly loosely related ideas: the burning of the hall, the Grimké-Weld union, and her own study of Algebra. The ties between them are deeper than they may seem at first. Pennsylvania Hall became a particular target for mob violence as the meeting site for the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women. The prominent feminist-abolitionists Maria Weston Chapman and Angelina Grimké addressed a diverse crowd that included men and women and black and white abolitionists while the mob gathered its energy outside. When Galbreath described the potential for “a reformation of a portion of the world” symbolized by the marriage of Weld and Grimké, she referred to their work as ardent opponents of slavery, but she also gestured towards a possible change in the relationships between men and women. She affirmed her meaning in discussing algebra. Her remark that women “will sometimes step out of the sphere assigned them,” referred both to her choice of study and to her political activities. Addressing her friend’s cousin, a man she knew to be an abolitionist, Galbreath tested the extent of Thomas’s egalitarian principles, challenging him to see women’s rights as an essential aspect of the antislavery cause. Galbreath’s account of the burning of Pennsylvania Hall focused less on the violence of the attack and more on its political meaning as a rallying call for abolitionists. She argued that in order for such a call to be effective, the antislavery movement would have to take a strong stand supporting women’s rights.

### **Conclusion: “I never would deny my principles”**

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<sup>69</sup> Anne Thomas and Sarah Galbreath to Nathan M. Thomas, 3 July 1838, Nathan M. Thomas Papers, Bentley Historical Library.

By the late 1830s, movement and communication between North and South was restricted and under surveillance. The polarized political climate, however, encouraged ordinary people throughout the North to invent new ways to engage with politics. Abolitionists portrayed themselves as calm in the face of mob violence and the virulent attacks of their opponents. They increasingly turned to letters to articulate their views and assert their dedication to their cause. Despite numerous assertions of unity and composure, however, the antislavery movement also faced fractures from within. Issues such as religion, the efficacy of the ballot box, and the question of women's rights roiled the movement.<sup>70</sup>

One young Rhode Island woman, Sarah Pratt, discovered how the sectional divide over slavery, as well as internal divisions within the antislavery movement, affected her career dreams. Pratt was a member of the Providence Ladies Anti-Slavery Society (PLASS), which experienced a schism in 1837 between radical women who demanded equal women's rights and more conservative evangelical women who believed women occupied a separate political role, presiding as a moral influence over the domestic realm. Pratt fell somewhere between the two positions, taking a neutral stance when a tumultuous election resulted in the departure of several women from the PLASS to form a separate society.<sup>71</sup> She dreamed of achieving personal independence by making a living as a teacher, and she received an offer in fall of 1838 to travel to the South to work. While Pratt was initially excited by the prospect, the question of her antislavery principles eventually foreclosed that option.

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<sup>70</sup> I discuss these divisions further in the following chapter.

<sup>71</sup> Sarah Pratt to Emily Winsor, 8 August 1837, Joshua Winsor Family Papers, Rhode Island Historical Society (RIHS). As Deborah Van Broekhoven points out, the two sides were not entirely distinct and Rhode Island women often worked together in grassroots antislavery efforts. See Van Broekhoven, *The Devotion of These Women: Rhode Island in the Antislavery Network* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002).

Pratt chronicled her struggle in a series of letters to her friend, Emily Winsor. Pratt first received a letter from her prospective employer, Mrs. Flagg, who told her that “she could welcome me as a friend but could hold no fellowship with me as an Abolitionist.” Such a statement presented a warning to Pratt that, if she should choose to go, she would either have to hold her tongue or face ostracism among her Southern peers. She was more troubled, however, by the resistance she encountered closer to home. Pratt initially may have seen her journey South as an opportunity to spread abolition among slaveholders, but her antislavery peers quickly disabused her of that notion. A friend told her that she would “commit sin by going to the South.” Pratt declared, “I could not ratify her by any arguments ... that I should do right by going among slaveholders.”<sup>72</sup> In the first letter on the subject that Pratt wrote to Winsor, she was still evaluating the situation, taking the opportunity to confide in her friend when she found few sympathetic ears at home.

A little over a week later, Pratt wrote again with more resolve. She told Winsor, “I regret that my abolition friends should disapprove of my going to the south and deem me a recreant to my principles.” Nevertheless, she declared, “I am still an abolitionist.” Though their remarks “caused me to waver a moment” and “their reproofs have caused me many painful sensations,” Pratt admitted, she stood by her belief that “I do not think that by going to the South I prove myself an Anti-Abolitionist.”<sup>73</sup> Pratt’s friends may, in fact, have been more concerned for her safety than the steadfastness of her principles, but even taking her at her word, her letters were a process of convincing herself as much as Winsor of the integrity of her decision to go South.

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<sup>72</sup> Sarah Pratt to Emily Winsor, 6 November 1838, Joshua Winsor Family Papers, RIHS.

<sup>73</sup> Sarah Pratt to Emily Winsor, 16 November 1838, Joshua Winsor Family Papers, RIHS.

In her next letter, dated almost two months later, Pratt told Winsor again, “you can form no idea of the painful emotions” her friends’ objections had evoked in her. She wrote, “O it is agonizing to have numerous friends whom you have loved believe you are influenced by dishonorable unworthy motives – to have them say you are recreant to principles which you cherish and love.” Pratt continued in a sarcastic tone, noting that she received “an excellent letter” from the president of the antislavery society “remonstrating with me and urging me to decide in such a manner, that their confidence may be renewed in me.” The letter reminded her that “a clear conscience” should be her highest motivator. In response, Pratt asserted, “I know it, but my conscience does not condemn me for the course I intend to pursue.”<sup>74</sup>

In a final letter to Winsor, dated January 26, 1839, Pratt explained how the situation reached a dramatic conclusion. Pratt received another message from her prospective Southern employer, who informed her decisively that she would not accept an abolitionist. Pratt turned to her mentor, Prof. Taylor, for advice, and she narrated their conversation in detail. Taylor advised her that she “could say I was not an abolitionist! because I could not be active I should not be one!” Pratt replied, “I never would deny my principles – that I was an abolitionist at the South as well as at the North.” Taylor, who had arranged the employment offer, revealed that he feared not for Pratt’s safety but for his own reputation if Pratt’s antislavery sympathies were discovered. Furthermore, he advised Pratt that she “should get rid of all my abolition notions by going to the South.” Pratt “expressed surprise at this declaration and told him that I thought he was an Abolitionist.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Sarah Pratt to Emily Winsor, 9 January [1839], Joshua Winsor Family Papers, RIHS.

<sup>75</sup> Sarah Pratt to Emily Winsor, 26 January 1839, Joshua Winsor Family Papers, RIHS.

Pratt's letters to Winsor illustrate changes in the national political climate by the late 1830s. The movement of people and information between free and slave states faced heightened scrutiny. Pratt could not safely accept an offer of employment in the South because she could not meet the requirement of surrendering her abolition principles when she crossed the Mason-Dixon Line. Secondly, whereas earlier abolitionists were eager to traverse the Southern states in attempts to attract willing converts, Pratt's peers were skeptical that she would be able to achieve any such conversions and instead feared that she would be converted herself.

The letters also reveal how the antislavery movement itself had changed. Pratt's mentor, Professor Taylor, was uncomfortable with the ardent political commitments of his young female student. He encouraged her to forget her "abolition notions." Though sectional divisions had limited the reach of abolitionists into Southern states, its participants broadened considerably as unexpected individuals, including young women like Pratt, asserted antislavery principles that they held far more strongly than mere "notions." Through her letters, Pratt gained confidence in the strength of her principles and her ability to judge for herself how she might wield them. In correspondence, she, and many others like her, practiced a new version of politics that operated outside the strict boundaries of the public electoral realm. Though in the end, Pratt's opportunity to go South fell through, she continued her teaching career in New York City, where she remained active in the abolition cause.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Strangers, Sisters, and Friends: Letters as Tools of Organization and Unity**

In February 1841, Harriet Hale, the secretary of the Providence Ladies Anti-Slavery Society, opened a correspondence with the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society (PFASS), addressing them as “Sisters” and explaining, “It is natural for those, who are engaged in a common cause ... to sympathize in each others joys, & sorrows, & to feel a deep interest in whatever may have a tendency to encourage or retard their progress in benevolent action.” Hale continued, “We would not address you as strangers, but we would take you by the hand, & sit down together as familiar friends, to talk over the wrongs & sufferings of our sable brethren & sisters, as something that most intimately concerns us, who are members of the same great family[.]” She proposed an exchange of information and strategies between the two sister societies, though she feared that the account from Providence “will not cheer you in your onward progress, but rather serve to dishearten & to discourage.” Still, Hale remained optimistic. She argued, “As Abolitionists our efforts may not be limited by time & place. A thousand avenues are open to the ardent friends of the slave, where they may exert an influence in his favor. By the fireside, at the social gathering, through the means of the printed page, we may excite an interest which shall widen till lost in the great ocean of influence, like the concentric circles produced by throwing a pebble into the waters of the peaceful lake.” Above all, Hale proposed, abolitionists needed to retain “a strong & overcoming Faith,” a quality of perseverance that she attributed to women, specifically as mothers.<sup>1</sup>

Hale’s Christian language and references to women’s special maternal place in the antislavery movement echo tropes common among letters written by female abolitionists. The

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<sup>1</sup> Harriet Hale to the Pennsylvania Female Anti-Slavery Society, 12 February 1841, Pennsylvania Abolition Society Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (PAS-HSP).

idea that women, through their domestic roles caring for men as wives, sisters, and mothers, were crucial to guiding the moral compass of the nation was a key aspect of nineteenth-century gender ideology.<sup>2</sup> Hale drew upon the cultural significance of motherly and sisterly relationships when she explained the commitment to the antislavery cause the Providence women shared with their counterparts in Philadelphia. In doing so, she articulated a natural bond between the two groups.<sup>3</sup>

Hale's letter reveals an important pattern in the way both men and women in the antislavery cause used and perceived letters as a habitual part of their political activism. Hale opened her letter by acknowledging that her correspondents were strangers to her, though she refused to address them as such. Instead, she adopted the language and tone of a family letter. As a woman, familial language was the most suitable rhetoric available to her, one with which she had a

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<sup>2</sup> For discussions of the ideology of separate spheres and the cult of true womanhood, see for example: Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); Julie Roy Jeffrey, "Permeable Boundaries: Abolitionist Women and Separate Spheres," *Journal of the Early Republic* 21, no. 1 (2001): 79-93; Linda K. Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 1 (1988): 9-39; Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966): 151-74.

<sup>3</sup> Both radical and conservative evangelical women drew upon this gender ideology to justify their participation in abolition, but they deployed it to different ends. Conservative women argued for a crucial but auxiliary role for women in the cause that rested on their feminine and maternal skills and instincts. Radical women articulated an early feminist argument for equality between the sexes and rejected the "separate spheres" ideology. They used the rhetoric of sisterhood to evoke solidarity in the twin crusade against slavery and for women's rights. Radical women also frequently addressed male correspondents as "brother," which evoked both equality and solidarity. See Jeffrey, "Permeable Boundaries."

On women and politics in the early republic, see for example: Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (New York: Norton, 1986); Rosemarie Zagari, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

On ideological divisions among women in the antislavery movement see: Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.); Debra Gold Hansen, *Strained Sisterhood: Gender and Class in the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993); Nancy A. Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change: Rochester, New York, 1822-187* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984); Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), Ch. 9.



degree of experience and fluency.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Hale's familiar tone aimed to justify the potential impropriety of addressing a group of strangers and reinforced ties of sympathy between two groups of women who had never met, yet who were actively engaged in the same object. This strategy was particularly common among women, although both male and female abolitionists drew on similar language and conventions to build rapport and sympathy with their correspondents. It signaled their shared belonging to a larger community devoted to the abolition of slavery.

This chapter examines how abolitionists adapted the rhetoric of family letters to assert unity in times of uncertainty and division within their movement. In doing so, they followed the lead of women like Hale who greeted strangers as sisters and friends. The chapter traces the circumstances of the schism among abolitionists that occurred around 1840 through correspondence. It focuses on alliances among women forged through correspondence surrounding particular events and activist campaigns, including the exclusion of female delegates from the 1840 World Anti-Slavery Convention in London and cooperation among women's societies for organizing antislavery fairs. The pervasive emotional language of family and friendship that suffused abolitionists' letters during this period demonstrates the significance of women in shaping the future of the movement. The emergence of woman's rights as an auxiliary cause to emancipation fractured abolitionists along ideological lines. But it also opened up a new space for women to take the lead in activism. Although they had few public outlets for their voices, women took matters into their own hands, literally, by writing letters in which they expressed increasingly radical ideas. Their rhetorical voice, which borrowed heavily from their

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<sup>4</sup> On the gendered dimensions of writing instruction see: Tamara Plakins Thornton, *Handwriting in American: A Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), Ch. 2.

experiences reading and writing family letters, deployed emotion and sentiment, thereby manipulating the genre to achieve political ends.

Hale's assertion that "our efforts may not be limited by time & place" exemplifies how abolitionists saw their movement unfolding in both formal and informal political spaces, public and private realms. If the ultimate goal was to achieve a fundamental change of public opinion regarding immediate emancipation, Hale argued, a fireside chat, or indeed, a letter read by the fireside, could have the same degree of influence as a public lecture. Thus, letters functioned as political instruments, coaxing a unity of purpose from dispersed individuals and enabling strangers to address one another confidently as "brothers," "sisters," and "friends."

By the time Hale wrote in 1841, the antislavery movement had embraced the significance of correspondence in advancing their cause. Letters had helped to unite a variety of individuals around the goals of immediate emancipation and equal rights for black Americans, and correspondence had become an established feature of abolitionists' assortment of political practices. But the movement's rapid growth and the diversity of its membership also threatened to undermine its unity. Disagreements that began as squabbles escalated and threatened to derail the cause. Abolitionists turned to letters in attempts to hash out their differences in a more private setting. And throughout the era of fracture, they relied on letters in the way that Hale suggested: as a means of collapsing time and space to continue the work of political organization across the nation and beyond its borders. The familiar, emotional, and oftentimes sentimental language of their correspondence reflected their enlistment of the conventions and tropes of family letters. Abolitionists used this language in attempts to mitigate geographic separation, ideological divisions, and the prospect of failure. Their letters helped to harness bonds of brotherly and sisterly sympathy towards a common political enterprise.

### **“the weight of mere professors:” Abolition and the Political Landscape of the 1840s**

By 1840, a sea change in abolition was underway. A letter from the Michigan abolitionist Nathan M. Thomas captures this sense. Thomas remarked to his correspondent that although little concerted effort had yet been possible among “the friends of that antislavery cause in this state,” the movement “is evidently on the advance here[.]” Throughout the Northeast and Midwest, the mobs and violent opposition of the mid-1830s had subsided, and abolitionist lecturers and publishers went about their business largely unmolested by popular outrage. Thomas affirmed this trend. “[T]hose who were formerly the most violent in their hostility against [abolition’s] avowing principles[,] the most at variance with those of immediate emancipation are gradually changing their grounds for those nearer in accordance with it,” he observed.<sup>5</sup>

Like Thomas, many opponents of slavery saw the changes as positive signs for the success of their cause. By this point, the movement had made many converts. Abolitionists were optimistic that more and more people would awake to the injustice of slavery and turn towards their gospel of immediate emancipation. Thomas perceived the tide of public opinion shifting in favor of abolition. According to him, the most violent opponents of emancipation became more moderate in their views, and, perhaps more importantly, “a milder class are imbibing our principles and becoming interested in its advancement.”<sup>6</sup> Many individuals had turned to their personal correspondence during the preceding decade to reflect upon the internal awakening they

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<sup>5</sup> Nathan M. Thomas to Benjamin Lundy [copy], 11 March 1839, Nathan M. Thomas Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>6</sup> Nathan M. Thomas to Benjamin Lundy [copy], 11 March 1839, Nathan M. Thomas Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

experienced—to test out and refine their new political ideas.<sup>7</sup> While the vocal public activism of leading abolitionists did much to advance the cause in the face of opposition, the culmination of these private reflections was to make antislavery a permanent and widely tolerated—if not embraced—feature of the national political landscape.

Even so, many abolitionists feared a waning of enthusiasm among their supporters alongside the subsiding of the mobs. Harriet Hale documented this apprehension in her 1841 letter when she wrote about the thin attendance at antislavery meetings and the difficulties the Providence society experienced in petitioning. She wrote, “[F]ew are found possessing that self denying spirit requisite to lead them from house to house to obtain signatures to a petition. This of all others is considered the most thankless, & difficult field of labor.”<sup>8</sup> Abby Kelley, a vocal proponent of abolition and women’s rights, perceived a more insidious shift occurring as early as 1838. In a letter to the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society on behalf of her home society in Lynn, Massachusetts, Kelly asked, “We would ask whether our standard is sufficiently high?” She explained, “Abolition is becoming so popular, that we even now begin to experience the weight of mere professors bearing us down and clogging the free circulation of the vital principle,” and inquired, “Can there not be some test of genuine abolition?”<sup>9</sup>

Hale and Kelley, like many others, turned to their correspondence to voice private concerns about the future of antislavery activism. Lydia Maria Child, another prominent female abolitionist and well-known author, articulated the power of correspondence in sustaining her through difficult times. Child experienced periods of depression and isolation throughout her life,

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<sup>7</sup> See Chapter Three.

<sup>8</sup> Harriet Hale to Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, 12 February 1841, PAS-HSP.

<sup>9</sup> Abby Kelley to the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, 16 March 1838, PAS-HSP.

and her despair was often aggravated by dire economic circumstances and a troubled relationship with her husband.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, however, she remained a public figurehead for the causes of abolition and woman's rights. Child struggled to reconcile her private feelings of despondency with the imperative to persevere in her work. In 1839, she addressed a letter to a close friend, Louisa Loring, that recounted the recent "dark hours" she had experienced and expressed her frustration that, "My worst, indeed my only real affliction is that I cannot do something." She described her spirit as "paralysed" by a vicious cycle in which she awoke each morning determined to write, but instead spent the day "with my eyes fixed on the wall, and my mind wholly engrossed with the cares and anxieties of this miserable existence," after which she succumbed to "bitter self-reproach."<sup>11</sup>

Child emphasized to Loring the significance of their friendship, which was sustained primarily through the exchange of letters. Loring lived in Boston, while Child often found herself alone at her home in Northampton. Her husband traveled frequently, sometimes without notifying her of his whereabouts for weeks at a time.<sup>12</sup> Child told Loring, "I dont know what I should do without you. If you ever ... are tempted to think yourself of no use in the world, remember that you have been one great means of keeping me from insanity and suicide." While the cycle she described was brought on by a mixture of personal and professional strain, Child was also dismayed by the current state of abolition. She told Loring, "As for Anti Slavery, I have lost my pleasure in it; though I am as ready to work as ever." Child expressed dissatisfaction

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<sup>10</sup> On Lydia Maria Child's life see Caroline Karcher, *The First Woman in the Republic: A Cultural Biography of Lydia Maria Child* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994).

<sup>11</sup> Lydia Maria Child to Louisa Loring, 16 April 1839, Lydia Maria Child Papers, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan (WCL).

<sup>12</sup> On Lydia Maria Child's marriage to David Lee Child see Karcher, *The First Woman in the Republic*, especially Ch. 9 and 11.

with the spirit of “unkind[ness]” that threatened to create damaging divisions among the members and ideology of the movement.<sup>13</sup> In her public writings and countenance, Child needed to express confidence in the future of the movement. It was only in her private correspondence that she could admit her fears and disappointments.

As Kelley and Child’s letters indicate, the question of authenticity and devotion when it came to one’s antislavery principles had become increasingly troublesome by 1840. While the mobs of the mid-1830s encouraged abolitionists to view themselves as moral crusaders and even martyrs for their cause, the decline of violence made being an abolitionist less dangerous. Their ranks might swell in numbers, but would these new members back up their declarations with dedicated action? This problem continued to plague abolitionists as their movement gave rise to political parties that competed to attract mainstream voters. In 1849, Wendell Phillips scorned the recent popularity of the Free Soil Party. He told fellow-radical Samuel J. May, “It has lifted just eno[ugh] of namby pamby Antislavery into the common papers to take off the edge of people[‘s] interest in ours[.]”<sup>14</sup>

While radicals like Kelley and Phillips worried that antislavery principles would be harmfully diluted by becoming too fashionable, others feared the opposite would occur: that abolition would fade from public awareness altogether. In line with their vision of spreading their message in the spirit of Christian revivalism by converting supporters, abolitionists often described themselves as “awake” to the evils of slavery while their peers slumbered in ignorance. For example, in September 1841, Edwin Kellogg reported to the Michigan abolitionist Nathan

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<sup>13</sup> Lydia Maria Child to Louisa Loring, 16 April 1839, Lydia Maria Child Papers, WCL.

<sup>14</sup> Wendell Phillips to Samuel J. May, 20 April 1849, May Anti-Slavery Manuscripts, Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University.

M. Thomas, “The subject of abolition has been publicly discussed but little in our County, and but few individuals to my knowledge have enlisted in the cause with any considerable degree of zeal or effort.” Although an antislavery society had been formed two years earlier, it never met again. Kellogg concluded, “I think I may say that the people of this county are as yet comparatively asleep on this subject, and it is doubtless true that I myself have partaken too much of the general apathy.”<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Sarah M. Rhoads described the condition of abolition in North Attleboro, Massachusetts, to Maria Weston Chapman, of the Boston Female Antislavery Society. Rhoads hoped that Chapman would help enlist William Lloyd Garrison to visit her town, which, she anticipated, would do “incalculable good” for the cause. According to her, North Attleboro had been little affected by recent divisions among abolitionists, mainly because, “we are all one but we are very much asleep[.]”<sup>16</sup>

Those who were awake to abolition turned to letters to express their trepidation and assert the need for clear principles and unity in advancing their cause. Throughout the 1840s, abolitionists used their correspondence to sort out true believers from false, to call for further publicity of their principles, and to express discuss fears for the future of the movement. Despite these concerns, above all else, their letters proclaimed the harmony and justice of their purpose in the face of divisions. They used letters to transcend distance—geographic and ideological—that threatened to unravel the moral certainty of their crusade.

In addition to the threat of declining zeal, the federal government steadfastly rejected the abolitionists’ demands for intervention in slavery. Congress finally voted down the infamous gag

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<sup>15</sup> Edwin Kellogg to Nathan M. Thomas, 8 September 1841, Nathan M. Thomas Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>16</sup> Sarah M. Rhoads to Maria Weston Chapman, n.d., Anti-Slavery Collection, Boston Public Library (BPL).

rule that limited the introduction of antislavery petitions in the House of Representatives in 1844. But abolitionists continued to perceive evidence of slaveholders' chokehold on national politics everywhere they looked: in the pursuit of fugitive slaves; in the censorship of antislavery publications and the surveillance of the mail in the South; and in the increasing curtailment of the rights of black people in Northern states through the passage of "Black Laws." By mid-decade, the United States stood at the brink of war with Mexico, an endeavor supported by proslavery politicians and whole-heartedly opposed by abolitionists who feared the expansion of slavery into new territories. Indeed, the acquisition of western lands during the war drove an even deeper wedge between North and South and brought on murmurs of disunion and civil war.

Perhaps the greatest threat to abolition by 1840, however, came from within the movement itself. The antislavery cause attracted a broad range of supporters encompassing free-thinking radicals, evangelical perfectionists, and more conservative practitioners of Christian benevolence. It included men and women, white and black Americans, and overseas supporters in areas including Britain, Ireland, France, and Haiti. The movement's diversity had initially been a strength, enabling it to quickly amass supporters, but growth also fed divisions over strategy and ideology.<sup>17</sup> Starting in the late 1830s, issues including women's rights, religion, and the efficacy of electoral politics deeply divided abolitionists. The movement, having only recently established a nationwide organizational network, began to split into factions. The divisions began in New England, particularly Massachusetts, surrounding the polarizing figure of William Lloyd Garrison. Garrison had risen to prominence through his vocal demands for immediate emancipation and equal rights for African Americans, but his radical opinions on a variety of subjects alienated a number of his erstwhile allies. Initially, Garrison's celebrity

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<sup>17</sup> Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 256, 264.



sprang from his skill at provoking outrage in his opponents. Even so, his propensity for using inflammatory language in *The Liberator* offended some antislavery sympathizers, including Arthur and Lewis Tappan, wealthy New York silk merchants and philanthropists who bankrolled the movement. Garrison's exuberant mode of expression and passionate disdain for the church were enough to drive away antislavery moderates and evangelicals.

Garrison also heartily embraced the controversial cause of woman's rights, which was first espoused by a select group of prominent female abolitionists such as Maria Weston Chapman, Lydia Maria Child, and Lucretia Mott. This issue began to boil over when Sarah and Angelina Grimké embarked on a lecturing tour of New England in 1837. It was proposed that the sisters would be financially supported as agents of the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS), but members of the group's male leadership objected to their addressing "promiscuous" audiences of men and women. More troublingly, they accused the Grimkés of diluting the antislavery message with claims for woman's rights. The sisters firmly denied such ulterior motives—though they defended the right of women to speak on any subject—and they continued their tour, garnering significant popularity as well as notoriety along the way. Antislavery leaders, however, had not managed to settle their differences. The New England Anti-Slavery convention in 1838 split over the question of whether women should be able to serve alongside men as delegates, leading to a schism in the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society the following year. This division paved the way for the separation of the national society in 1840.<sup>18</sup>

Woman's rights became the scapegoat for the disastrous divisions in the antislavery movement: a symbol of the stubborn, impractical radicalism of Garrison and his ilk. But another breach, over the prudence of using electoral politics as a tool for effecting abolition, was equally,

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<sup>18</sup> *The Liberator*, 8 June 1838.

if more subtly, divisive. Garrison and his supporters scorned the existing political system as corrupt. A fundamental transformation in the morals of American society would only occur, they argued, outside the boundaries of party politics and electioneering. Furthermore, by abstaining from voting, white men could stand by their disfranchised compatriots: women and African Americans. Garrisonians sought to revolutionize the American political system by boycotting it until all were included on equal terms. Skeptics questioned this policy of political abstinence. By withholding votes from candidates who took a tentative antislavery stance, did they not ensure the success of proslavery candidates? And could they not exert more influence over the national political system through their active participation than by removing themselves from it entirely?

At the root of the dispute over the means for effecting political change lay an ideological disagreement in defining politics. For almost all committed abolitionists, the antislavery cause came to impinge upon their daily lives: in areas such as the newspapers they read, the conversations they had, and the products they purchased. The difference lay in how individuals classified their various political actions. The so-called “political abolitionists,” mostly white men, who voted for antislavery Whigs and Democrats, stumped for the Liberty and Free Soil Parties, and later helped to form the Republican Party, considered electoral politics the most important means of advancing their cause. They were reluctant to introduce distracting issues to their goal of achieving the abolition of slavery, preferring to reform the political system as it existed in order to improve it.<sup>19</sup> By excluding woman’s rights and tiptoeing around the question of equal rights for free black Americans, political abolitionists sought to make their cause more

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<sup>19</sup> Although political abolitionists advocated for electoral politics as the key means by which to advance the cause of antislavery, they used the ballot box in unconventional ways. They did not usually vote for mainstream party candidates, but nominated third-party candidates and deployed their votes in creative ways to disrupt the two-party system. Political abolitionists also used electioneering to attract publicity to their cause. I am indebted to Eric Foner for this insight.

palatable to mainstream white American society. They participated in a range of political activities, including relying upon correspondence as an essential means of communicating and expressing their views, but they prioritized the ballot box as the central element of their political lives.

In contrast, radical abolitionists, including those who considered themselves allies of Garrison and those who shared his views, even if they denied allegiance to him, distributed a sense of political significance more evenly across a range of activities. With voting removed from the equation, every aspect of daily life took on political meaning. This concept of politics became especially significant to the numerous women and African Americans who participated in the antislavery movement. The simple act of walking down the street, raising one's voice in a conversation, or putting pen to paper to express political views in a personal letter was politically subversive. And scorning the ballot box and those who worshipped it became a staple argument for the broader social revolution that would occur alongside the abolition of slavery.

These divisions had a substantial impact on the ideas, organization, and membership of the antislavery movement and its sense of crisis around 1840. However, a simplistic image of the movement as factionalized fails to account for the ongoing exchange of ideas, information, and sentiment among a diverse group of abolitionists that is visible in correspondence. On the public stage, arguments over antislavery doctrine were played out in exaggerated battles splashed across the pages of newspapers. There was real competition for financial resources and supporters, not to mention genuine hurt feelings and fallings out among old friends and comrades. But disagreements encompassed substantial grey areas in the personal realm of letters. Many abolitionists did not fit perfectly into one camp or the other, and some, such as Frederick Douglass, Gerrit Smith, and Theodore Weld, were adopted by both. Furthermore, as Manisha

Sinha points out, it is a misnomer to classify some abolitionists as “radical” and others not, since any degree of opposition to slavery was looked upon by the vast majority of white Americans as somewhere between misguided and fanatical.<sup>20</sup>

During this period of crisis, opponents of slavery continued to rely on letters as a key means of organization and political expression: galvanizing supporters, converting skeptics, and clarifying their views about slavery to themselves and to others. But the movement had matured and changed. Opponents of slavery had established a place for themselves in the national political landscape. Rather than mob violence, they faced begrudging tolerance; they were more in danger of being ignored than killed. Correspondence had become a defining feature of the movement, and it took on new meaning in the period of fracture and infighting. Abolitionists had formed bonds of sympathy, united in a common cause. They had forged a national organization from what began as a geographically scattered and ideologically disparate assortment of people. Even if they were divided over the means by which their project would succeed and the relevance of peripheral issues to it, they were no longer strangers to one another or to the ultimate goal of immediate emancipation. In this context, abolitionists turned to letters as a means of organizing at a distance, using letters to transmit information, rally material and moral support, and invoke unity in the face of discord. The emotional language suffusing many of such reporting letters reinforced the social and affective ties that unified the movement during a period of uncertainty. The sentimental tenor of correspondence in this era was driven by the numerous women who served as the backbone for major fundraising and petitioning campaigns.

### **“Certain isms:” Origins of Division**

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<sup>20</sup> Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause*, 256.

Frustration with Garrison and the radical ideas he represented first erupted in Massachusetts in the summer of 1837. Clerical opponents of slavery were exasperated by the vocal criticisms of the church that Garrison printed in the pages of *The Liberator*. They also objected to his embrace of auxiliary causes alongside the central goal of abolishing slavery. Garrison took a strong stance on issues including nonresistance, or the rejection of all forms of government and institutions based on force, and women's rights. The dissenters started a campaign to expel Garrison from his pedestal atop the movement. The Reverend Amos A. Phelps, the general agent of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society (MASS) first came to Garrison's defense but soon joined forces with other clerical abolitionists to distance themselves from him.<sup>21</sup>

In February 1838, James Mott, husband of the Quaker abolitionist and woman's rights advocate Lucretia Mott, wrote to Phelps expressing concern over the building tensions with the movement. He "greatly feared that in the disputations & recriminations between the parties, the plea for bleeding & suffering humanity would be neglected & perhaps forgotten[.]" Mott urged Phelps to embrace the diversity of opinion within the movement and asked, "Why should we differ with a brother for doing his work, with tools, other than we use ourselves, when he thinks his are better[?]" Keeping an open mind was essential, Mott argued. A breach would not occur "unless our love of 'ism's' is greater than our love of the cause of the poor slave, or our hatred of 'ism's' is greater than our hatred of slavery."<sup>22</sup> Mott called for unity while gently mocking Garrison's opponents' view of his radical ideas as an incoherent mixture of "isms" that threatened to overshadow the main objective of immediate emancipation, or "immediatism." While Mott and Phelps landed on opposite sides in the aftermath of the forthcoming divisions,

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<sup>21</sup> Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 257, 279.

<sup>22</sup> James Mott to Amos A. Phelps, 26 February 1838, Anti-Slavery Collection, BPL.

Mott's letter offers a compelling example of how private correspondence, more than public doctrinal clashes, offered a space for asserting the unity of the cause and seeking a rapprochement.

Contrary to Mott's hopes, Phelps refused to tolerate Garrison's idiosyncratic views. The conflict came to a head in late spring 1838, at the annual meeting of the New England Anti-Slavery convention. The convention voted to seat women delegates with equal status to men, after which a group of ministers, including Phelps, resigned in protest.<sup>23</sup> In a letter to a colleague written shortly after the convention, Phelps expressed his satisfaction that, "The charm is now broken." He remarked that "a man may condemn him [Garrison], in all that is peculiar with him, & yet be an abolitionist," and took credit as the person who was "somewhat, if not principally instrumental in bringing about this result." Phelps explained his strategy to "stand in the ranks, hold up my head ... putting it out of the power of any one to impeach my character as an abolitionist." Only then could he safely express dissent from Garrison's views, after which, "the ice is broken," and many other abolitionists "are ready to call in question & oppose Mr. G's peculiarities, just as they would those of any other man."<sup>24</sup> Though Phelps had begun to express his dissent publicly, he remained an officer of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, alongside Garrison, for almost a year after the May 1838 convention.

Private letters enabled Phelps to express and justify his actions as a calculated political strategy. Oftentimes his correspondents ratified his decision-making. Around the same time that Phelps reflected on his course of action, Theodore Weld wrote to him with his own observations

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<sup>23</sup> *The Liberator*, vol. 8, no. 23, 8 June 1838; Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 259, 261-262. For a full account of the 1838 New England Convention, see Sarah M. Grimké to Elizabeth Pease, 10 June-1 July 1838, Weld-Grimké Papers, WCL.

<sup>24</sup> Amos A. Phelps to Jonathan Ward, 11 July 1838, Anti-Slavery Collection, BPL.

of his conduct. Weld wrote, “Though I differ from you dear brother [totally],” with regards to Phelps’s refusal to acknowledge the membership of women at the New England convention, “any man who acts on conscientious convictions on any subject I honor.” Weld continued, “To go against enemies is easy enough – indeed not to go against them is a sublime conquest over human nature – but to go against friends is the only real test of ... independence[.]”<sup>25</sup> Like James Mott, Weld sought to soothe tensions among his colleagues. Whereas Mott tried to reason with Phelps, Weld attempted to flatter his sense of independence and self-righteousness. Both Mott and Weld, however, essentially made the same point: they argued for the underlying unity of “brothers” and “friends” who worked to achieve abolition.

In August, Henry B. Stanton, the future husband of women’s rights activist Elizabeth Cady Stanton, echoed Mott’s focus on divisive “isms” in a postscript to a letter he wrote to James G. Birney, the prominent Kentucky abolitionist and former slaveholder. Unlike Mott and Weld, however, Stanton sought to foster divisions rather than soothe them. He devoted the body of his letter to concocting a plan to anger Garrison and his allies by diverting funds from Massachusetts to the AASS headquarters in New York. Stanton suggested that such a measure might provoke the radical Bostonians to defect from the parent society, a prospect about which he asked, “Would it not do good?” He warned Birney, “Please keep my opinions... strictly to yourself. To let them out will do hurt.” In the postscript, however, Stanton could not resist betraying further delicate information. He predicted, “Inter nos. Phelps has got sick of Boston management & will soon resign, I think. Certain isms cripple him, as in truth they do the entire cause. Wish we were

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<sup>25</sup> Theodore Dwight Weld to Aaron A. Phelps, 23 July 1838, Anti-Slavery Collection, BPL.

rid of them.”<sup>26</sup> He concluded with a final warning, “I hope you will keep this letter from every body but yourself[.]”<sup>27</sup>

Stanton soon felt that it was prudent to backtrack on some of his comments. He wrote again to Birney less than a week later using more cautious language. Stanton told Birney, “You evidently take for more than I consent, some remarks in my letter ... concerning a rupture between the Mass[achusetts] & Am[erican] Societies....” Stanton clarified that he “meant to speak only of a possible rupture in a certain contingency, which, altho’ quite possible, I trust would not happen....” “I think it will all blow over,” he concluded.<sup>28</sup> Stanton marked both of his letters “Private,” indicating that he intended their contents for the eyes of James G. Birney only. He was well aware of the delicate state of the cause and feared the consequences if his speculations were made public. Still, he could not keep his thoughts entirely to himself. He turned to private correspondence to voice opinions that he did not dare to speak aloud.

Despite Stanton’s optimism that disputes among abolitionists would “blow over,” the divisions continued to escalate. Phelps, along with several other men, officially broke away from the MASS to form a separate society at the next New England convention, during the spring of 1839.<sup>29</sup> Just prior to the convention, Phelps addressed his letter of resignation to the executive board of the MASS. He argued that the organization had strayed from its original principles.

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<sup>26</sup> *Inter nos* means “between us.”

<sup>27</sup> Henry B. Stanton to James G. Birney, 11 August 1838, James G. Birney Papers, WCL. See also Dwight L. Dumond, *Letters of James Gillespie Birney, 1831-18257*, vol. 1, (New York: Appleton Century Company, 1838), 464-466.

<sup>28</sup> Henry B. Stanton to James G. Birney, 17 August 1838, James G. Birney Papers, WCL; Dumond, *Letters of James Gillespie Birney*, 466-468.

<sup>29</sup> *The Liberator*, 31 May 1839, Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause*, 261-262.



“The society is no longer an anti-slavery society simply, but has become, in its principles & modes of action, a womans-rights-non-government-anti-slavery society,” he wrote.<sup>30</sup>

Ellis Gray Loring marked a letter he composed to Phelps around the time of the split “Private, but not confidential.” Loring was an attorney, so he drew this distinction in the legal sense. He intended the letter itself and his identity as the writer to remain private, while he hoped that Phelps would share its substance, the advice it contained, with a broader audience.<sup>31</sup> Loring denied any intention to interfere with the formation of the new society. He remained loyal to the MASS and to Garrison. He prefaced his remarks by describing his role “as a private friend, who may take the liberty of making a suggestion, without giving offence.” Loring asked Phelps to avoid calling the new organization a “state society,” which threatened to “trick” unsuspecting members of the public into thinking the new society was a legitimate auxiliary of the AASS. Loring couched his advice in patronizing terms. He claimed, “I have not a spark of ill-will towards any member of the new society & do not wish to see you put yourselves so in the wrong before the public, as I think you would do, by taking such a step.”<sup>32</sup> Loring’s intentions were good—he did not want to see Phelps’s new organization harm the larger cause of abolition through accusations of its fraudulence. Nevertheless, Phelps may have interpreted this unsolicited advice as an insult to the principled stance of his new society.

The schism that began in Massachusetts exploded on a national scale at the 1840 annual meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society. At the meeting, Abby Kelley was elected to the

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<sup>30</sup> Aaron A. Phelps to Francis Jackson [copy], 30 April 1839, Anti-Slavery Collection, BPL.

<sup>31</sup> Privacy applies to individuals and is a legal right. Confidentiality applies to information and is a duty placed upon the data collector.

<sup>32</sup> Ellis Gray Loring to Amos A. Phelps, 19 May 1839, Anti-Slavery Collection, BPL. The new society was called the Massachusetts Abolition Society.

business committee. Kelley, from Lynn, Massachusetts, had been present at the two previous New England meetings and was well aware of the ire her new position would draw from opponents of women's rights. Her election prompted a group of evangelical abolitionists, led by Lewis and Arthur Tappan, to leave the meeting. They broke from the AASS and formed the rival American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society (AFASS), derided by Garrisonians as the "new organization."<sup>33</sup>

While the defectors had reconciled themselves to the plan of dissolution, Garrison and his supporters opposed it bitterly, and many opponents of slavery found themselves caught between the two sides. Abolitionists who supported intervention in electoral politics, such as Gerrit Smith, opposed Garrison's policy of nonresistance but supported women's rights.<sup>34</sup> The split in the national society had varying degrees of impact on the ground—antislavery societies in parts of upstate New York and the Midwest, for example, had never been closely tied to the AASS, and often expressed bafflement over the infighting among the east-coast-based leadership. Many abolitionists, especially individuals located near major eastern cities, were caught up in the divisions, however. They turned to letters to voice their fears for the future of the movement and point fingers at their opponents while continuing to emphasize the need to persevere in their work for the cause.

For instance, Mary P. Henry, the corresponding secretary for the women's antislavery society in Salem, Massachusetts, asked the outspoken feminist abolitionist Maria Weston Chapman, "Has not the schism in the Antislavery ranks, but too truly proved the superficiality, or total want

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<sup>33</sup> Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 263-265.

<sup>34</sup> Gerrit Smith expressed his sense of being caught between the two factions in a letter to Aaron A. Phelps, 11 July 1839, Anti-Slavery Collection, BPL. See also Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 263-265.

of principle on the part of the seceders[?]" She noted caustically that, "they could not 'conscientiously participate' in the engagement, if women were not expelled from the corps...."<sup>35</sup> Writing the letter offered a way Henry, and by extension the rest of the Salem antislavery society, to assert their loyalty to Chapman and the Garrisonian wing of abolition.

While some were quick to sever ties with their opponents, others were disoriented by the consequences of the split. Francis Gillette, a Connecticut abolitionist, addressed a colleague, "Dear Friend," despite his correspondent's "surmisings to the contrary" after their recent disagreements. His friend had allied himself with Garrison and the "old organization," and Gillette hoped to convince him that he "had not gained many laurels in the war, and ... that it is a field quite trophyless where you can win nothing for which the poor slave will thank you." In response to his friend's charges that he had betrayed the cause, Gillette denied formal affiliation with either faction. He asserted, "Concerning Organizations I do not intend to trouble myself about anyone but that of slavery. This is a very old organization – as old as the devil, and in relation to that I am neworganized, have been for some years, and hope ever to be."<sup>36</sup>

Like Mary Henry, Deborah G. Palmer, who lived about thirty miles north of Boston, wrote to Chapman a few months after the schism. Ostensibly, she wrote about her town's possible contributions to the antislavery fair Chapman was organizing, but she seized the opportunity to give an account of her thoughts on the current status of the abolition cause. Palmer cited "the paralysing effects of New Organization, pro slavery opposition, and the Harrison Mania" as indications that "the poor slave is like to be forgotten by many sun shine pretenders."<sup>37</sup> In this

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<sup>35</sup> Mary P. Henry to Maria Weston Chapman, 30 November 1841, Anti-Slavery Collection, BPL.

<sup>36</sup> Francis Gillette to E.D. Hudson, 13 April 1841, Francis Gillette Papers, Connecticut Historical Society.

<sup>37</sup> Palmer referred to the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society (AFASS) as the "New Organization." By "Harrison Mania," she referred to the contentious presidential election of 1840, in which the Whig nominee William Henry Harrison gained the support of some abolitionists who preferred his party's conservative antislavery stance to

climate, Palmer predicted that “slavery is not to be done away by moral means; the south are so obstinately blind to their own interest, & duty, while the North, no less obstinate, madly continue to daub the slaveholder with their intempered mortar[.]” She expressed the radical “fear that a just God will yet permit the slaves to rise and take their unalienable rights at the expense of their master’s lives[.]” At the same time, however, Palmer asserted the necessity of continuing to work with “redoubled vigor” for peaceful emancipation.<sup>38</sup>

Palmer’s letter captures the sense of uncertainty that spread through the antislavery movement in the aftermath of the fracture in the AASS. After her political diatribe, she asked Chapman to “Excuse me ... I had almost forgotten that I was writing to a stranger so I have given you my thoughts just as they rose to mind[.]” Writing to a woman she had never met Palmer poured out her thoughts on paper. Though she expressed frustration with the limitations of the medium, telling Chapman, “I have hardly begun to write, what I feel that I could say” in a face-to-face conversation, Palmer explained that such a meeting was improbable because, “I have a young family, and an aged Mother residing with me, that I cannot well leave for any length of time.”<sup>39</sup> In her letter, Palmer mingled political views—allegiance to the “old” organization, fear for the future of the cause, and dedication to hard work towards its success—with a sense of intimacy that embraced Chapman as simultaneously a political ally and a trusted

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that of the incumbent president, Democrat Martin Van Buren. Harrison himself was a slaveholder, and he largely avoided discussing the controversial issue of slavery during the campaign. Many other abolitionists opposed him on these grounds. Palmer wrote in September 1840, a few months before Harrison defeated Van Buren in the election. Harrison died of pneumonia just a month after assuming his office. He was succeeded by his vice president, John Tyler.

<sup>38</sup> Deborah G. Palmer to Maria Weston Chapman, 24 September 1840, Anti-Slavery Papers, BPL.

<sup>39</sup> Deborah G. Palmer to Maria Weston Chapman, 24 September 1840, Anti-Slavery Papers, BPL.

friend. She used her letter to pose questions about the future path of abolitionist activism while also revealing more quotidian domestic frustrations.

### **“Every kindness has been offered to us as a substitution for rejected rights:” The World Anti-Slavery Convention in London**

The schism in the AASS came on the eve of the World Anti-Slavery Convention, which convened in London in June 1840. The transatlantic bonds of sympathy that tied British and American abolitionists together were forged by correspondence.<sup>40</sup> The World Convention was a landmark event in American abolition. It brought activists from the United States and Britain together for two weeks of meetings, speeches, and resolutions, helping to forge permanent ties between abolitionists across the Atlantic. The convention came at a turning point for the antislavery cause, as ruptures in the American movement reverberated among British allies.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Historians have long drawn a connection between British and American abolitionism. More recently, scholars have pointed to broader connections between reformers in Britain and the United States on issues including woman's rights, labor, anti-imperialism, and other radical movements. On transatlantic abolition in the nineteenth century see: Betty Fladeland, *Men and Brothers; Anglo-American Antislavery Cooperation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972); W. Caleb McDaniel, *The Problem of Democracy in the Age of Slavery: Garrisonian Abolitionists & Transatlantic Reform* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013); Margaret McFadden, *Golden Cables of Sympathy: The Transatlantic Sources of Nineteenth-Century Feminism* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1999); Clare Midgley, *Women against Slavery: The British Campaigns, 1780-1870* (London: Routledge, 1992); J. R. Oldfield, *Transatlantic Abolitionism in the Age of Revolution: An International History of Anti-Slavery, c.1787-1820* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, Ch. 11; Kathryn Kish Sklar and James Brewer Stewart, eds., *Women's Rights and Transatlantic Antislavery in the Era of Emancipation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

On transatlantic letter writing see: Eve Tavor Bannet, *Empire of Letters: Letter Manuals and Transatlantic Correspondence, 1688-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); David A. Gerber, *Authors of Their Lives: The Personal Correspondence of British Immigrants to North America in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); Sarah M. S. Pearsall, *Atlantic Families: Lives and Letters in the Later Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Edited volumes of correspondence between British and American abolitionists include: Annie Heloise Abel and Frank J. Klingberg, *A Side-Light on Anglo-American Relations, 1839-1859, Furnished by the Correspondence of Lewis Tappan and Others with the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society* (Lancaster, PA: The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, Incorporated, 1927); Clare Taylor, ed., *British and American Abolitionists: An Episode in Transatlantic Understanding* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1974).

<sup>41</sup> After 1840, British abolitionists divided their loyalties between Garrison and the AASS and the newly formed AFASS, led by the Tappan brothers. The resulting divisions in correspondence are visible in the two edited volumes of correspondence, assembled by Annie Heloise Abel and Frank J. Klingberg and Clare Taylor, that break down

The same “woman question” that had divided first the New England convention and the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society and then the American Anti-Slavery Society, erupted on the floor of the London convention.

Transatlantic cooperation was not new. British and American opponents of slavery had long communicated and taken an interest in each other’s causes. The United States and Britain both passed laws banning participation in the transatlantic trade in African slaves in March 1807, which took effect on January 1, 1808.<sup>42</sup> American abolitionists closely followed the campaign for emancipation in the British West Indies, and they looked to the colonies as a successful example of the positive consequences of abolition for formerly enslaved people. American and many British abolitionists, however, supported a policy of immediate and uncompensated emancipation, whereas the British government enforced a policy of gradual and compensated abolition. This policy was designed mainly to appease slaveholders, who feared economic losses and social upheaval. The centerpiece of the British plan was an “apprenticeship” system that required slaves to continue their unpaid labor for their masters for up to six years before claiming their freedom.<sup>43</sup> Former slaves rejected the apprenticeship system, and West Indian planters’ fears of economic destitution and chaos failed to materialize. American abolitionists cited the West Indian experience to support the call for immediate emancipation in the United States.

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along those lines. See Abel and Klingberg, *A Side-Light on Anglo-American Relations*; Taylor, *British and American Abolitionists*.

<sup>42</sup> As Manisha Sinha points out, “only in Britain did abolition [of the African slave trade] come about as a result of mass agitation. In the United States it was more of a constitutional postscript enacting the clause prohibiting the federal government from abolishing the African slave trade before 1808.” See Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause*, 103.

On British abolition as a mass movement see: Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, by the University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

<sup>43</sup> On abolition in the British West Indies, see for example: Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 1776-1848* (New York: Verso, 1988), 419-472; Seymour Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 205-266.

Abolitionists on both sides of the Atlantic saw the 1840 World Convention as an opportunity to celebrate the end of apprenticeship in the West Indies, to build momentum for their cause in the United States, and to protest coercive labor systems resembling slavery that persisted elsewhere in the British Empire, particularly India.

In addition to these landmark events, prominent British abolitionists had visited the United States and helped to galvanize the American antislavery movement in the early 1830s. George Thompson, a Scottish abolitionist and an especially well-known figure, was often the target of mob violence in the early 1830s when he traveled throughout the country delivering antislavery lectures. Thompson was present at the World Convention, and although by 1840 he had turned his focus towards combatting labor exploitation in British India, as a strong supporter of woman's rights, he sustained close ties to Garrison and his allies.

The 1840 convention brought people together who had prior acquaintance with one other only through the exchange of letters. It also opened the door for new friendships to form in person that would carry on in correspondence, sometimes for decades thereafter. For example, Mary Camlin Braithwaite, an English woman, met the American abolitionist James G. Birney during his visit to Britain for the convention in 1840.<sup>44</sup> Birney and the convention both sparked her interest in abolition. In February 1841 Braithwaite informed Birney, "American Slavery has been the engrossing subject which has occupied me and I am almost tempted to suppose that according to my measure, and consistent with useful attention to other duties, I am, and have been, as actively engaged in assisting your Cause as you yourself!" She continued, "I am

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<sup>44</sup> Mary Camlin Braithwaite was the sister of Anna Braithwaite, a prominent English Quaker minister. See Edward H. Milligan, "Braithwaite, Joseph Bevan (1818–1905), barrister and Quaker minister," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 19 Jan. 2018, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-47051>.

surprised to find how much time may be taken up by even a partial attention to the subject, and I feel that were I thoroughly and satisfactorily to enter into it, it would absorb nearly all my time and attention.”<sup>45</sup> Braithwaite’s tone was partly facetious—she implicitly compared her efforts crafting items to be sold at an antislavery fair in New York to Birney’s illustrious career as an antislavery lecturer, publisher, and politician. At the same time, however, Braithwaite alluded to the limits placed upon her “measure” as a woman. The “useful attention” she paid to “other duties” undoubtedly included the management of a household, if not direct participation in the domestic labor it required.

Furthermore, Braithwaite’s letter displayed enthusiasm and confidence in her endeavors. A few months later, she wrote again, reflecting on the impact the convention had on her social and political horizons. She observed that the World Convention “certainly introduced us into a circle, whose nature, description cannot pourtray.” Still, Braithwaite attempted to describe the results: “Christian & Anti Slavery Principles, joined the confidence and esteem of their English Brethren, and I hope what has since conspired, and it still going on, will prove to you, that Englishmen possess both discrimination and ‘adversiveness’ and that when their love & esteem once given to an individual, they are not easily to be turned from him to another.”<sup>46</sup> Though Braithwaite referred to the qualities of Englishmen, her use of the pronoun “us” indicates that she saw herself as part of the group she described. Writing letters to newfound American friends enabled Braithwaite to pursue her political awakening beyond the end of the convention.

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<sup>45</sup> M[ary] C[amlin] Braithwaite to James G. Birney, 3 February 1841, James G. Birney Papers, WCL.

<sup>46</sup> Braithwaite uses “adversiveness” to mean the ability to overcome adversity, or perseverance. M[ary] C[amlin] Braithwaite to James G. Birney, 1 May 1841, James G. Birney Papers, WCL.



Correspondence offered a comfortable space for her to do so. She stretched the boundaries of her “measure” without neglecting her domestic and social duties.

On the first day of the convention, the Boston abolitionist Wendell Phillips proposed a motion to include all of the people present as members, including both men and women. The majority of the mostly-male audience resisted Phillips’s motion heartily, and some accused him of deliberately misinterpreting the announcements and invitations for the convention in order to stir up trouble.<sup>47</sup> The AASS had sent a group of female abolitionists as delegates, including Lucretia Mott, but, in the end, they were banned from participation on the floor of the convention as members. Instead, they could only participate as spectators in the gallery, though their view was blocked by screens. When William Lloyd Garrison arrived in London a few days after the convention began—he was delayed because he attended the anniversary meeting of the AASS in New York—he refused to take his seat as a delegate, choosing instead to sit in silence with his female counterparts.<sup>48</sup>

Despite these dramatic events, the World Convention built lasting ties between British and American activists who met in person for the first time. Much of the work occurred beyond the

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<sup>47</sup> Phillips denied these accusations, but it is probably true that he raised the motion with the intention of drawing attention to the question of woman’s rights. A letter from Scottish abolitionist George Thompson to the British Quaker feminist abolitionist Elizabeth Pease in April of 1840 suggests that British abolitionists, including Anne Knight (another Quaker advocate of woman’s rights alongside abolition), had been in touch with the American female delegates in planning strategy for the position of women at the meeting. Thompson wrote, “A K [Anne Knight] has been asking very particularly how the ladies are to be treated at the approaching Congress. She thinks they (that is the distinguished ladies from abroad, and perhaps herself) should have seats at the Council board when the plans of the Convention are undergoing consideration.” See George Thompson to Elizabeth Pease, 8 April 1840, George Thompson Papers, WCL.

<sup>48</sup> Garrison discussed his reason for delaying his voyage in letters to Lucretia Mott and Edmund Quincy. See William Lloyd Garrison to Lucretia Coffin Mott, 28 April 1840 and William Lloyd Garrison to Edmund Quincy, 13 June 1840, Garrison Family Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

A few other men, including Nathan Peabody Rogers, William Adams, and the black abolitionist Charles Lenox Remond, also refused to take their seats in protest of the treatment of their female colleagues. See Garrison to Edmund Quincy, 13 June 1840 [postscript added 30 June 1840], Garrison Family Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

boundaries of the convention itself, at informal meetings and social gatherings in London. Furthermore, many of the delegates extended their visits to include tours of Britain before making the long journey back across the Atlantic.

The women who were excluded from the floor of the convention made the most of their situation. As Lucretia Mott put it in a letter to her children written a few days after the meetings began, “Every kindness has been offered to us as a substitution for rejected rights.”<sup>49</sup> Mott and her allies were savvy enough to seize the opportunity to put woman’s rights in the spotlight. The shared experiences of the American women at the convention provided a catalyst for lifelong friendships and political alliances.<sup>50</sup>

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who, at twenty-five years old, accompanied her new husband, political abolitionist Henry B. Stanton, to London on the first leg of their European honeymoon, expressed optimism for the future in a letter to Sarah Grimké and Angelina Grimké Weld written just after the closing of the convention. Despite the “discord” raised by the “woman’s rights question,” Stanton felt that “the convention has passed off more smoothly than any of us anticipated.” Later in the letter, Stanton passed along a message from Lucretia Mott for the Grimké sisters, “which condensed is that she thinks you have both been in a state of retirincy long enough, & that it is not right for you to be still, longer, that you should either write for the

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<sup>49</sup> [Lucretia Coffin Mott to children, copied by C. Palmer], 14 June 1840, Phebe Post Willis Papers, Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation, River Campus Libraries, University of Rochester.

<sup>50</sup> All of the American women stayed together in London, and many of them traveled together for the transatlantic voyages. See Elizabeth Cady Stanton to Sarah Grimké and Angelina Grimké Weld, 25 June 1840, Weld-Grimké Papers, WCL.

public or speak out for oppressed woman.”<sup>51</sup> Just days after the convention ended, the future leaders of the movement for women’s rights used letters to plan their next steps.

Stanton and Mott were not alone in looking back across the Atlantic even as they forged alliances abroad. Anne Knight, a British abolitionist and women’s rights activist, addressed a letter to Angelina Grimké Weld in August of 1840.<sup>52</sup> Knight expressed the wish that Grimké had been present during the convention “with the others who being rejected would yet by the addition of thy & M[aria] W[eston] Chapmans company have strengthened the cause of humanity[.]” She then asked, “alas why did you two noble women marry?” and asserted, “the cause of millions which you so well know how to advocate is surely more important than domestic comfort of some half dozen persons[.]” Knight imagined that if Grimké and Chapman, both ardent advocates for woman’s rights, had appeared, they could have “shamed our bigots into gallantry,” or at least, “your phalanx would have given an impulse to the question of the rights of man....”<sup>53</sup> It is unlikely that Grimké’s presence at the convention would have significantly altered the course of events, but the dramatic tone of Knight’s letter—she went on to proclaim not just equality for women but their superiority over men—indicates how the meeting became a landmark event for the political imagination of early feminism. Barred from

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<sup>51</sup> Angelina Grimké Weld had recently given birth to her first child, which prevented her and Sarah from traveling to London. They both withdrew from public life after Angelina’s marriage to Theodore Weld in 1838. Elizabeth Cady Stanton to Sarah Grimké and Angelina Grimké Weld, 25 June 1840, Weld-Grimké Papers, WCL.

<sup>52</sup> The signature of the letter has been cut out, leaving the identity of the writer anonymous and probably indicating that she was famous. The language suggests that the writer was Quaker, and the handwriting matches that of Anne Knight, a prominent British Quaker abolitionist and advocate for woman’s rights. Knight was present at the World Anti-Slavery Convention and was one of the few British women who stood by their American counterparts. For handwriting comparison, see Anne Knight to Maria Weston Chapman, 30 October 1839, Anti-Slavery Collection, BPL.

<sup>53</sup> [No signature, probably Anne Knight] to Angelina Grimké Weld, 5 August 1840, Weld-Grimké Papers, WCL.

speaking publicly at the convention, abolitionist women turned to letters to express increasingly radical views.

Another American woman's reflections provide further evidence of the convention's mobilization of women. Eliza Robbins, a middle-aged woman from Milton, Massachusetts, made the journey to London in the spring of 1840. Robbins came from a family who dabbled in multiple progressive movements, including abolition and transcendentalism. She lived a somewhat atypical life for a woman of her time, having never married and making a living as a schoolteacher and author of children's books. Still, Robbins was hesitant to embrace abolition fully. In an 1836 letter, she described her family's politics: "We have our own self interests like other people, but we do not enter into public interests as you do[.] We are abolitionists after a fashion, but we never went to an anti-slavery meeting in our lives[.]"<sup>54</sup> Robbins may have downplayed her engagement; she tended to be critical of just about everything and everybody, regardless of her true feelings. But even taking her at her word, Robbins's social circle included prominent abolitionists like Lydia Maria Child and Lucretia Mott, so it was almost inevitable for her to be caught up in the movement eventually.

Robbins arrived in London in 1840 intending to see her friends among the female delegates, including Mott and Sarah Pugh, but she initially did not plan to attend the convention herself. Robbins soon recognized an opportunity for entertainment, however. She recounted the decision in a letter to her sister written on June 27, shortly after the convention closed, "When I came here I made a covenant with my eyes that they should be satisfied with seeing, that they only should cater for my judgment," but, "Soon I began to feel that I was in the land of the most cultivated

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<sup>54</sup> Eliza Robbins to Mary Earle, 3 December 1836, Ames Family Historical Collection, Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University (Hereafter AFC).

people in the world, and was learning nothing of the living mind – so I resolved to go any where that I could to hear the speeches of distinguished persons and therefore I went almost daily to the meeting.”<sup>55</sup> According to Robbins, the convention “turned out precisely what the good mistaken female delegates did not expect it to be,” though Robbins was impressed by at least some of the proceedings. She praised the “calmness, dignity, and perfect self-possession” of James G. Birney as well as Daniel O’Connell, an Irish abolitionist, who “was very sweet to the excluded oratresses” and proved himself to be “a beautiful vituperator!”<sup>56</sup>

Robbins was more critical in letters she wrote a month later to her sister and to her friends George and Susan Hillard. The two letters form two parts of one account, and Robbins’s intention was that the two recipients would share them with one another, though not with anyone else, to avoid the risk that “some would say she is like all her tribe, an invidious observer[.]”<sup>57</sup> Robbins described the American delegation to her sister: “It was for the most part wretched. ... On the whole I was ashamed of them. ... What pity ... something truly worthy of American dignity had not been sent!”<sup>58</sup> To the Hillards, Robbins complained, “I have been dreadfully vexed with the plaguy world-convention ... the pretension of the women, and the Yankeeism of the men was a most disparaging exhibition on the whole.”<sup>59</sup> Still, Robbins reserved praise for her friend Lucretia Mott, who preached to a Unitarian congregation outside the convention. Though Mott spoke on radical topics—including antislavery and woman’s rights—Robbins admired her

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<sup>55</sup> Eliza Robbins to Catherine Robbins, 27 June 1840, AFC.

<sup>56</sup> Eliza Robbins to Catherine Robbins, 27 June 1840, AFC.

<sup>57</sup> Robbins described the logistical reason for dividing the contents of her letters: “I have to husband my subject-matter for I write nearly a dozen letters by every steamboat.” See Eliza Robbins to Catherine Robbins, 23 July 1840 and Eliza Robbins to George & Susan Hillard, 23 July 1840, AFC.

<sup>58</sup> Eliza Robbins to Catherine Robbins, 23 July 1840, AFC.

<sup>59</sup> Eliza Robbins to George & Susan Hillard, 23 July 1840, AFC.

dignity and modesty. She pointed out that Mott turned down a private audience with Queen Victoria, who, Robbins noted, “is not half so interesting as Lucretia.”<sup>60</sup> Overall, Robbins portrayed conflicting impressions of the convention and the abolition cause.

A turning point in Robbins’s experiences in London came during a visit she paid, along with Mott, to the home of Thomas Carlyle, a prominent Scottish writer and historian.<sup>61</sup> Robbins described herself as “no very great believer in Mr Carlyle,” who she felt tended towards self-aggrandizement and unnecessary pretension. She recounted their conversation in her letter to the Hillards, painting a picture of Carlyle’s pompousness that contrasted with Mott’s careful eloquence. Things took a turn for the worse after Carlyle asserted that “It was a perfect absurdity ... to emancipate stupid negroes,” when, he argued, they lived in comfort compared to “the men of the loom, and the children of the spinning jenny[.]” Robbins pointed out, “The word s.l.a.v.e – seemed to bejuggle them all[.]” The last straw came when Carlyle expressed his own feelings of oppression: “I am truly a slave – I have been in trouble of some sort all my days – many a great black slave has not felt so much as I have[.]” While Mott argued with him, Robbins simply took in her surroundings. She recalled:

I looked at the quietness and security in which he lived ... the piano, books, ~~busts~~, prints – the soft couch, ... and thought of the horse – (the very sign and emblem of a rich man in my conceit, at home – and saw the mistress of the whole embroidering some gay gaud in a Turkish pattern by the master’s side- the sophistry of self-deceiving, or the complacency of self-talk seemed to me to have besotted this sage[.]

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<sup>60</sup> Eliza Robbins to George & Susan Hillard, 23 July 1840, AFC.

<sup>61</sup> Fred Kaplan, “Carlyle, Thomas (1795–1881), author, biographer, and historian,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 18 January 2018, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-4697>.

Robbins identified “the inveterate fault of [Carlyle’s] discourse – conversation it is not” as the fact that “he is wholly engrossed with his own thoughts” and “does not pay the least regard to what another says[.]”<sup>62</sup>

Robbins characterized herself as a silent onlooker to the debate over slavery between Mott and Carlyle. In her letter, however, she drew her own conclusions. No great admirer of radical ideas and having criticized the audacity of American abolitionists earlier in her letter, Robbins was unlikely to voice her opinions about slavery aloud, even in a private social gathering. Nonetheless, she could not help but feel persuaded by Mott’s cool reasoning, especially when it contrasted with Carlyle’s self-absorption and hypocrisy. Robbins narrated her experiences in her correspondence, where she could express her views candidly. She may have arrived at the London convention with the intention of collecting enlightening, or perhaps merely amusing, scraps of news to report to her friends and family at home. But by the end of her visit, she could not help but make her own judgments of the ideas expressed by abolitionists and their opponents.

### **Women, Antislavery Fairs, and “Sister Societies”**

Long before their exclusion from the London convention, women distinguished themselves as “abolition’s most effective foot soldiers,” forming antislavery societies, leading petition campaigns, and expressing their political views both publicly and privately.<sup>63</sup> In the aftermath of the schism in American antislavery, women continued to be fundamental to shaping the ideas and organization of the movement. Both proponents and opponents of woman’s rights in the antislavery movement relied on the work of women in support of the cause. In particular, women

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<sup>62</sup> Eliza Robbins to George & Susan Hillard, 23 July 1840, AFC.

<sup>63</sup> Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause*, 266.

carried out fundraising campaigns, both at a local and national level. One of the most visible manifestations of their labor was the phenomenon of antislavery fairs. Much of the work for fairs and other fundraising efforts was achieved through the exchange of letters and other goods, such as clothing and hand-crafted items, through the post.<sup>64</sup>

The Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, under the formidable leadership of Maria Weston Chapman, popularized antislavery fairs as a key device of the movement.<sup>65</sup> Female societies throughout New England and beyond organized to send handcrafted artifacts and local delicacies to Boston for the fairs, which coincided with the Christmas gift-giving season.<sup>66</sup> Donations included knitted and sewn items such as purses, ribbons, and handkerchiefs, as well as artwork and other decorative objects. Some of the items recorded in letters to Maria Weston Chapman and other organizers of the Boston fairs include antislavery washboards, a bed quilt, a basket made from forest leaves, and food items such as mustard and an enormous wheel of Ohio cheese.<sup>67</sup> In November of 1848, Francis H. Drake of Leominster, Massachusetts, wrote to Anne Warren Weston, Maria Weston Chapman's sister, to inform her of her town's plans for the fair.

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<sup>64</sup> Julie Roy Jeffrey argues that women's activism for the antislavery cause was constant from the 1830s through the Civil War, despite previous historians' arguments that it died out after the major petition campaigns of the 1830s. I follow Jeffrey in focusing on how the communications networks established in the 1830s enabled women to organize fundraising campaigns and fairs in the 1840s and 50s. Jeffrey focuses on the commercial implications of antislavery fairs for sustaining women's involvement in the antislavery cause. See Julie Roy Jeffrey, *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism: Ordinary Women in the Antislavery Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 5-12, Ch. 3.

<sup>65</sup> On antislavery fairs see: Deborah Van Broekhoven, "'Better than a Clay Club': The Organization of Anti-slavery Fairs, 1835-60," *Slavery & Abolition* 19, no. 1 (April 1, 1998): 24-45; Jeffrey, *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism*; Julie Roy Jeffrey, "'Stranger, Buy ... lest Our Mission Fail: The Complex Culture of Women's Abolitionist Fairs," *American Nineteenth Century History* 4, no. 1 (March 1, 2003): 1-24.

<sup>66</sup> Alice Taylor, "Selling Abolitionism: The Commercial, Material and Social World of the Boston Antislavery Fair, 1834-1858," PhD. Diss., The University of Western Ontario (Canada), 2008, 22, 100-101.

<sup>67</sup> Abner Sanger to the Managers of the Antislavery Fair, 20 December 1841; I.E. Cheney to William Lloyd Garrison, 21 December 1841; Emma Parker to Maria Weston Chapman, 28 September n.y.; R.W. Stearns to Ladies of the Boston Anti-Slavery Fair, n.d.; L. Bissell to Francis Jackson, 7 October 1848, Anti-Slavery Collection, BPL.

On the Ohio donation of cheese, see Stacey M. Robertson, *Hearts Beating for Liberty: Women Abolitionists in the Old Northwest*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 1-3.



Drake downplayed the magnitude of the contributions of her peers, telling Weston, “Two or three will send a trifle of knitting or such a matter.” Drake herself planned to take charge of the refreshment room, for which she planned “several little nick nacks ... such as country apple sauce, baked apples &c.” She assured Weston, “I will bear in mind the Doughnuts.”<sup>68</sup> From this variety of goods emerged a veritable bazaar that drew a broad range of consumers, from ardent abolitionists to casual browsers.

The Boston fair also garnered numerous donations from overseas, especially Britain. Chapman received items from women in cities including London, Edinburgh, Dublin, Glasgow, and Perth. These imported wares were often among the most popular, drawing crowds of customers who jostled to snatch them up.<sup>69</sup> The British women who organized to send goods to Boston seized the opportunity to strike up a correspondence with Chapman. For example, Lucy Browne from Bridgewater, England, told Chapman, “For the first time in my life I commence a letter to an entire stranger, I feel, however, that an interest in the great cause which you have so much at heart, is a sufficient apology for addressing you.” Browne was inspired to send boxes of goods to Boston after hearing Frederick Douglass give a lecture during his tour of Britain, “which excited a very warm interest in the cause of Abolition[.]”<sup>70</sup> Sending items to the antislavery fair offered women like Browne in cities and towns spanning the Atlantic an entry point into the antislavery movement. Traveling lecturers like Douglass came and went, but correspondence networks persisted as a means for antislavery organization and an outlet for political expression.

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<sup>68</sup> Francis H. Drake to Anne Warren Weston, 17 November 1848, Anti-Slavery Collection, BPL.

<sup>69</sup> See Jeffrey, “Stranger, Buy ... let Our Mission Fail,” 14; Taylor, “Selling Abolitionism,” 24-28; Van Broekhoven, ““Better than a Clay Club,”” 30-31.

<sup>70</sup> Lucy Browne to Maria Weston Chapman, 15 October 1846, Anti-Slavery Collection, BPL.

The model of the Boston fair was emulated elsewhere, in cities including New York, Philadelphia, and Rochester, as well as in small towns scattered throughout the Northeast and Midwest. Each fair had its own local character. Abolitionist James Miller McKim followed the advice of Chapman in plans for a Philadelphia fair in 1840. He described one innovation, a poultry stall, in a letter to his fiancée, whom he was trying to recruit as “one of the actors” in the fair’s orchestration. “Our farmers are to be asked to send us each a fat turkey & our abolitionists in town are to buy their Christmas dinners of us,” McKim explained.<sup>71</sup> The organizers of a fair in Michigan in 1846 had difficulty mustering substantial contributions because the region was so sparsely populated. One woman wrote to them explaining, “when there is but 19 voters in town ... it cannot be expected that there will be verry many ladies[.]” Nevertheless, she vowed, “we shall a few of us doe a little hopeing it may be like a few drops before a more plentiful shower[.]”<sup>72</sup>

Larger fairs, such as the one in Boston, had a reciprocal relationship with smaller towns. Women in outlying areas sent their goods to the main bazaar, and the organizers would return leftover items afterwards to be sold at the smaller fairs. For example, in December 1841 a woman from Dover, New Hampshire, wrote to Chapman asking her to send a box of leftover goods to support a fair they planned to hold the following month. The woman explained, “in view of the many discouragements we have to encounter,” including a lack of local resources and enthusiasm for abolition, “we have believed it right to apply to thee, for sympathy and

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<sup>71</sup> James Miller McKim to Sarah A. Speakman, 21 June 1840, Garrison Family Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

<sup>72</sup> Mary R. Townson to Mrs. Treadwell Pres and Mrs. Harriet Hartwell Cor Secty, Seymour B. Treadwell Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

assistance.”<sup>73</sup> Another woman, from Salem, Massachusetts, explained that the women in her town “all have hearts that would gladly” furnish a table of goods for the Boston fair, “but have not the means to purchase articles, or time, to make what would be necessary to furnish such a table as we should wish.” Most of her peers were restricted by their work as seamstresses and school teachers, and others were recently married and burdened by housekeeping duties. Instead, the woman proposed, “we shall be likely to obtain as much, by keeping quietly to our Salem Fair[.]”<sup>74</sup>

When Charlotte Cowles, from Farmington, Connecticut, received an invitation to contribute to an antislavery fair in 1840, she expressed some reservations in a letter to her brother. She declared that she had “not enough confidence in the utility of fairs to do any thing which would commit me publicly in favor of them,” but she still concluded, “I think our Farmington ladies will do something handsome for the occasion. I, at least, shall make articles and ask my young friends to do the same.”<sup>75</sup> After getting started on the work, however, Cowles mustered more enthusiasm. About a month later, she told her brother, “We are going to make some very handsome purses and guard-chains, of purse-silk; morning-caps and night-caps, of very beautiful patterns; worsted lamp-mats and bags; braid bags, a new article which cousin Austin shewed us how to make; some most exquisite baby’s aprons; gentlemen’s false collars; needle-books, and I do not know what else.” Cowles noted that the project had attracted several women who were not previously members of their antislavery society, and she displayed clear satisfaction in her group’s fundraising successes and crafting ability. She asked her brother if he knew what the

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<sup>73</sup> Hannah Wilber to Maria Weston Chapman, 21 December 1841, Anti-Slavery Collection, BPL.

<sup>74</sup> L. Dean to Maria Weston Chapman, 25 April 1839, Anti-Slavery Collection, BPL.

<sup>75</sup> Charlotte Cowles to Samuel Cowles, 18 February 1840, Charlotte and Samuel Cowles Correspondence, Connecticut Historical Society (CHS).

ladies in Hartford were contributing, noting that “It would be unfortunate if every town should send very much the same things.” Any insecurities Cowles may have harbored quickly gave way to pride, however. She wrote, “I think we have struck out a new path – our articles I think will be quite out of the common course.”<sup>76</sup> Cowles wrote to her brother to gather information about the fair goods made by a neighboring community, but writing the letters also clarified her own impressions of the value of her efforts.

As Cowles’s initial hesitancy indicates, not everyone was an unconditional supporter of antislavery fairs as a means of galvanizing support. Financial resources were always scarce, but some feared the ideological consequences of commercializing abolition.<sup>77</sup> And there was often tension among the various organizers of rival fairs. The female organizers competed with one another for the best quality goods, the most desirable dates, and the attention of the public. In addition, the largescale operations required the cooperation of a number of female societies. Garrisonian abolitionists feared that the purity of message would be undermined by collaborating with “new organization” women.

Sarah Grimké expressed her objections to participating in antislavery fairs in a letter to her friend Sarah Mapps Douglass in 1845. She labeled antislavery fairs an “unsanctified means” of activism. Explaining her withdrawal from such affairs, Grimké remarked, “If I could work at all in the present fragmentary reforms, I could work with wicked people for this simple reason it is impossible to do otherwise[.]”<sup>78</sup> Grimké felt that the commercial aspect of fairs, which appealed to a broad swathe of the public, threatened to attract both organizers and customers who were not

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<sup>76</sup> Charlotte Cowles to Samuel Cowles, 11 March 1840, Charlotte and Samuel Cowles Correspondence, CHS.

<sup>77</sup> For a discussion of the ideological dispute over commercialization see Jeffrey, ““Stranger, Buy ... lest Our Mission Fail,”” 3-4.

<sup>78</sup> Sarah Grimké to Sarah Mapps Douglass, 27 January 1845, Weld-Grimké Papers, WCL.

truly dedicated to the cause of abolition. Douglass, who was a black abolitionist and schoolteacher in Philadelphia, may have been more receptive to the efficacy of fairs for raising much-needed funds that could be channeled not only towards the cause of abolition but also for the support of the support of free black people in her home city.

The correspondence between women in various parts of country was, on its face, instrumental. Women wrote to fair organizers to determine what to send for fairs and when to send it. They sent notes accompanying their local goods requesting information about how they would be disposed of. Sometimes they provided instructions for how items should be displayed, what specific causes the proceeds should be used for, and where to send any leftover goods. For example, in 1841, a Boylston, Massachusetts, woman told Maria Weston Chapman that her society “will to have the avails of their work ... sent to the New-York Vigilance Committee having learned that they were much in want of funds to assist the fugitives on their way to Canada.”<sup>79</sup> In 1848, the women of Milford, New Hampshire, instructed the Boston fair committee that the proceeds from their “bundle” should go towards the support of Frederick Douglass’s newspaper.<sup>80</sup> Requests like these caused some consternation for Chapman and her co-organizers. For example, in 1857, Chapman refused to support an antislavery fair in New York because she feared “entangling alliances.” The New York women proposed to raise money for fugitive slaves, rather than for the American Anti-Slavery Society.<sup>81</sup> From the point of view

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<sup>79</sup> H.S.P. Cotton to Maria Weston Chapman, 22 December 1841, Anti-Slavery Collection, BPL.

<sup>80</sup> 18 December 1848, E.D. Pillsbury to Managers of the A.S. Fair, Anti-Slavery Collection, BPL.

<sup>81</sup> See Elizabeth Neall Gay to Maria Weston Chapman, 1 June 1857; Maria Weston Chapman to Elizabeth Neall Gay, 25 June 1857, Sydney Howard Gay Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

of Chapman and her allies, any funds raised by donations to the fair should be placed at the disposal of the AASS, not earmarked for particular purposes or individuals.<sup>82</sup>

As this tension indicates, local women were not always in perfect agreement with the managers of major antislavery fairs. They used letters to seek advice and also to offer their own opinions and instructions. Women's involvement with the fair did not end when they sent off the boxes of goods. They demanded to shape the display, sale, and distribution of profits from the items they contributed. The creators of the fine wares displayed at antislavery fairs wanted to secure recognition for their hard work. Through their correspondence, they also felt linked to the proceedings of the event and the greater cause it supported.

Beyond the instrumentality of exchanging letters regarding the organization of antislavery fairs, many women also discussed the progress of the antislavery cause, reported on conditions in their vicinity, and reflected on their experiences with abolition in their letters. The correspondence transcended its utilitarian purpose to take on emotional and ideological value as part of a support network that tied women together in support of abolition. Even as tensions and divisions wracked the antislavery movement in the 1840s, most women prioritized the unity of their ultimate purpose over individual differences of opinion over the means by which that purpose ought to be achieved. They used networks of correspondence to assert their loyalty to the cause and to articulate bonds between "sisters" dispersed through the United States and abroad.

An exchange between a British abolitionist, Anna Richardson, and the members of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society illustrates this point. In March of 1849, Richardson

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<sup>82</sup> For another response of the fair managers to such demands, see Anne Warren Weston to Amy Post [draft], 19 December 1848, Anti-Slavery Collection, BPL.

wrote to the PFASS regarding her plans to send items for the antislavery fair they were planning for the following winter. Richardson, who was deeply involved in the free produce movement in Britain that called for the boycott of goods produced by slave labor, found herself stretched too thin to give the Pennsylvania fair her full attention. She described her labors to the PFASS: “Day after day I have to write by the hour to all sorts of persons – high & low rich & poor –... If you knew how my poor frame sometimes quails under all this, I am sure you would not put upon it any additional burden[.]” Therefore, Richardson, felt that “it is better to do a few things well, than to try to put a finger in to every thing[.]” She went on to explain that rival fairs in Boston and Rochester had already captured the attention of British women through personal connections, limiting their ability to produce items also for Philadelphia.<sup>83</sup>

Richardson knew that she was disappointing the Philadelphia women, and at points in her letter she seemed exasperated by the seemingly endless demands upon her time and labor. Nevertheless, the dominant tone of her letter is one of comradery. Richardson concluded with a call to arms for female abolitionists on both sides of the Atlantic. She proclaimed, “My dear friends, the cause before us is indeed emphatically ‘Woman’s question’ – Do you in America & let us in Great Britain & Ireland unite our energies in putting it forward, & most assuredly the hideous monster, slavery, would ere long begin to stagger, if not be laid prostrate.” Richardson asserted the significance of women’s labors in achieving the ultimate goal of emancipation, and she also articulated a bond between herself and her correspondents as “dear friends.”<sup>84</sup>

The PFASS echoed Richardson’s sentiments in their response. They wrote, “We regret the difficulties wh. you have met with in your efforts to obtain aid for our Fair, and are grateful for

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<sup>83</sup> Anna H. Richardson to the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, 22 March 1849, PAS-HSP.

<sup>84</sup> Anna H. Richardson to the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, 22 March 1849, PAS-HSP.

your willingness to cooperate with us.” They also commented on their relationship to other antislavery groups in the United States, particularly the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society. The PFASS informed Richardson that, “Neither with them, or with any other abolitionists, do we always agree in opinion respecting the best means of promoting our cause, or in sentiment upon collateral subjects.” “[T]here are diversities of opinion and feeling in the anti-slavery ranks,” they stated before concluding, “Nevertheless, being firmly united on the fundamental principles of our cause, we labor together in brotherly love.”<sup>85</sup>

Many women expressed similar sentiments in letters regarding the organization of antislavery societies and fairs. For instance, a Salem, Massachusetts, woman, told Maria Weston Chapman, “I most ardently desire that a portion of the same spirit, which is enabling you to accomplish so much for the cause, may be more fully infused into my own and other minds, that we may go firmly forward, a noble band of sisters[.]” She continued, “if we do not see eye to eye in all things, yet feeling that one spirit actuates us, we may not bind the conscience of another[.]”<sup>86</sup> Francis Drake thanked Chapman for sending her society a “kind & instructive letter,” which they used to “convince people that we could do something for the poor slave.” She found it “perfectly astonishing to hear really intelligent people ... wonder what those few women think they can do to abolish slavery.” Drake told Chapman, “to such people I lend your letter, in many instances it has not failed to convince them of their error.”<sup>87</sup> Such examples show how exchanging letters helped to tie abolitionist women together, even as ideological divisions threatened to tear the antislavery movement apart.

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<sup>85</sup> Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society to Anna H. Richardson [copy], 2 October 1849, PAS-HSP.

<sup>86</sup> L. Dean to Maria Weston Chapman, 25 April 1839, Anti-Slavery Collection, BPL.

<sup>87</sup> Francis Drake to Maria Weston Chapman, 6 August 1843, Anti-Slavery Collection, BPL.



## **Conclusion: Strangers and Friends**

In January 1846, Abby Kelley told fellow abolitionist Betsy Mix Cowles, “I want to say God speed to all who are engaged for the promotion of truth and the suppression of iniquity but more especially to women[.]” Kelley explained that “Woman can do more than man for the extension of righteousness,” not because of any biological predispositions but because their upbringing outside “the ticks and falsehoods of trade and politicks” gave them a clarity of moral vision that was not available to men. Kelley concluded her diatribe, “But no more ‘coals to New Castle,’” observing that Cowles, a supporter of woman’s rights, “need not even be reminded[.]”

From the tone of Kelley’s letter, and with the knowledge that Cowles, like Kelley, bucked contemporary gender norms by lecturing publicly about abolition, one might assume that the two women were longtime friends. In the next paragraph, however, Kelley admitted, “I want to be acquainted with you, and yet I have just bethought me that, stranger as you are I have been writing you just as if you were an old friend[.]” She reflected, “I don’t know why this is, only I am a Quaker, you know, and therefore follow my impressions.”<sup>88</sup> Indeed, the two women became friends and allies in the causes of abolition and women’s rights. Just a few months later, Cowles and Foster traveled east together to attend the anniversary meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society. Yet when Kelley wrote her letter, they were strangers. Although Kelley explained her familiar tone as a product of her Quaker religion, she followed the pattern of numerous women engaged in the antislavery cause who signaled unity by adopting the language and tone of family correspondence in a divisive political era.

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<sup>88</sup> Abby Kelley Foster to Betsy Mix Cowles, 28 January 1846, Betsy Mix Cowles Correspondence, Oberlin College Archives.

It was not just female abolitionists who used the rhetoric of family correspondence to assert unity. For example, Walter P. Flanders, a man living in a rural town in upstate New York, composed a letter to Gerrit Smith, a prominent New York abolitionist and leader of the Liberty Party. Flanders described himself as “a stranger, humble individual and unknown to you personally,” but told Smith, “it does not seem to me that you were a stranger to me.” Therefore, he decided, “I will not write to you as a stranger – I will write, and (had I an opportunity) I would speak to you as an old friend, or I would not write at all.”<sup>89</sup> Though the two men had never met, and might never speak face to face, Flanders seized the opportunity to question Smith about his political views. In a confusing time, when various antislavery factions competed for the sympathy and support of the public, letters offered the chance to cut through the noise and make a personal connection.

Men like Flanders followed the example set by female abolitionists. The many women who organized against slavery during the 1840s faced numerous obstacles to achieving their political objectives. Antislavery women have been recognized for their critical mobilization for petition campaigns and fundraising drives. They have been credited for developing the intellectual foundations and social networks of early feminism. In addition to these contributions, however, their deployment of the emotional language of family letters fundamentally shaped the rhetoric of abolition. The decade was a time of transition for the movement that at times threatened its dissolution. Correspondence offered a way for abolitionists to bridge the many divisions they faced: in geography, in ideas, and in tactics. Personal letters presented qualities of intimacy and candidness that could be elusive in the pages of a newspaper. The exchange of correspondence

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<sup>89</sup> Walter P. Flanders to Gerrit Smith, 5 June 1848, Gerrit Smith Papers, Special Collections Resource Center, Bird Library, Syracuse University.

allowed for nuanced discussion, emotional support, and polite disagreement, all while enabling writers to assert underlying unity in their loyalty to the cause of abolition.

## Chapter Five

### Fugitive Letters: Honesty, Storytelling, and Concealment in Fugitive Slave Abolitionism

On October 6, 1850, Susan Inches Lyman Lesley added a brief but portentous postscript to a long letter to a close childhood friend. “Are you not indignant with the Fugitive Slave Law, & don’t you hope it will be evaded in every possible way?” she asked, adding that her husband, Peter Lesley, “thinks Satan may have outreached himself this time[.]” Earlier in her letter, Susan Lesley wrote about many of the topics considered appropriate to the so-called “sphere of woman” in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> She described her health, recounted recent visits to family and friends, and discussed her enjoyment of the “girl talks” in *Margaret Percival*, a religious novel. Still, Susan’s letter was not without emotional substance. She reflected cryptically, “It is not, as you say, inspiring to compare our present attainments with what we hoped to be, ten years ago. But self knowledge makes looking at our attainments always a most discouraging process[.]” Susan found hope in the feeling that she still yearned for “real goodness, and holiness,” and told her friend, “I am sure ... that your ideal of what a woman may be, is not lowered.”<sup>2</sup>

It is not clear what aspect of her life Susan had in mind when she wrote this melancholy paragraph. A few months earlier, she had suffered a devastating miscarriage late in her pregnancy. She and her husband struggled for several years to conceive again. Perhaps Susan mourned the loss of her child and her diminished prospects of becoming a mother. Susan may

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<sup>1</sup> On nineteenth-century domestic ideology see for example: Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); Linda K. Kerber, “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History,” *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 1 (1988): 9–39; Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966): 151–74.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Inches Lyman Lesley to Margaret Eliot Harding White, 6 October 1850, Ames Family Historical Collection, Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study (Hereafter AFC).

also have suffered from a more general lack of intellectual stimulation and personal fulfillment. Married for about a year and a half, Susan was happy in the company of her husband, though their life together lacked financial stability. Peter Lesley first worked as a Congregationalist minister in Milton, Massachusetts, before he later took a more lucrative but itinerant job as a geologist. He traveled frequently while Susan stayed at home or visited family members. Despite her love for her husband, Susan was separated from many of her family and friends after her marriage, and she suffered from poor health throughout her life. After a young adulthood spent among vibrant, highly educated reformers and intellectuals, Susan was now isolated from a community that might enable her to advance her “attainments.” At various points in her life, Susan felt uneasy within the gendered boundaries of propriety in the mid-nineteenth century. An educated young woman, Susan viewed herself as an intellectual equal to her husband. Yet while he preached, lectured, traveled, and wrote publicly over their years together, Susan labored as a homemaker, mother, and caretaker. Her primary outlet for intellectual and political expression was correspondence with friends and relatives interspersed with periodic in-person visits.

Susan and Peter Lesley were abolitionists, though until 1850, they rarely spoke out about their antislavery principles. While Susan Lesley was a longtime friend and confidant of the prominent female abolitionist Lydia Maria Child, she seldom commented on slavery in her letters prior to 1850. Like many Americans, the Lesleys found the Fugitive Slave Law passed in that year to be a particularly egregious example of slaveholders’ influence over the federal government.<sup>3</sup> When Susan composed this letter, she did not know that just a few weeks later she

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<sup>3</sup> On the relationship between the federal government and slavery, see for example: R. J. M. Blackett, *The Captive’s Quest for Freedom: Resistance to the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Slaveholding Republic: An Account of the United States Government’s Relations to Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Paul Finkelman, *An Imperfect Union: Slavery, Federalism, and Comity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981); Paul Finkelman, ed., *Slavery & the Law* (Madison, WI: Madison House, 1996).

and her husband would feel compelled to do their part to evade the law “in every possible way.” They took a fugitive slave woman, Mary Walker, into their home, essentially incorporating her as member of their family. Over the next fifteen years, they witnessed and sometimes aided her in her quest to reunite with her children, who were still held in slavery in North Carolina.

The Lesleys’ extensive family correspondence documents Mary Walker’s struggle to secure freedom for herself and her children. Their story also provides a striking example of the impact of fugitive slave activism for uniting the increasingly divided and nebulous antislavery movement. The abolition cause encompassed radical firebrands, pragmatic political reformers, and thousands of ordinary people, who, like the Lesleys, had long held antislavery sentiments without acting publicly on their beliefs. Members of these groups debated and refined their views both publicly and in private conversations carried out in person and on paper, often coming into conflict with one another. But fugitive slaves brought the politics of slavery home in a way that debates and conversations never had. Escaped slaves from Southern states testified directly and authentically to the cruelty and injustice of slavery, reaching an immense Northern audience. These men and women occupied space in the minds and hearts of sympathetic Americans and literally stepped inside their homes, seeking temporary refuge on their way to points further north or incorporated as permanent members of Northern communities.<sup>4</sup>

This chapter examines how opponents of slavery used letters in response to the fugitive slave agitation that peaked in the United States from the mid-1840s through the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861. During this period, letters served as conduits of sensitive information regarding the

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<sup>4</sup> On the impact of fugitive slave narratives see: William L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1769-1865* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986); John Ernest, *Liberation Historiography: African American Writers and the Challenge of History, 1794-1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Stephen G. Hall, *A Faithful Account of the Race: African American Historical Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

status of escaped slaves, a development that confirmed slaveholders' suspicions that the post could pose a threat to the security of their property. White antislavery sympathizers followed the lead of black activists to defy laws and pursue courses of direct action in orchestrating dramatic rescues. Such missions called for secrecy, secure chains of communication, and sometimes anonymity, all of which were possible through the exchange of letters. On a more mundane level, opponents of slavery required financial and material resources to aid fugitive slaves, and they used letters to mobilize assistance and collect donations. Abolitionists also used letters to record and narrate the personal histories of the fugitives they encountered. The "abolitionist underground" encompassed not just the physical movement of fugitive slaves but also the recording and transmission of information about them and their experiences.<sup>5</sup> Finally, letters offered a space for white abolitionists, free black Northerners, and former slaves to reckon with the absorption of fugitives into the antislavery movement. The story of the Lesleys and Mary Walker, told below, offers one illustration of how complicated this process could be. In letters addressed to friends and political allies, fugitive slaves and free black Northerners advocated for equal rights, not just nominal freedom. Meanwhile, many white abolitionists still struggled to see fugitives as equal coadjutors and potential leaders of the movement, not just symbols for their cause.

### **Fugitive Slave Laws and Abolition**

Debates about the legal status of fugitive slaves in the United States have a long history that stretches back to the late eighteenth century. In 1789, the United States Constitution sanctioned

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<sup>5</sup> Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 384.

the return to their masters of escaped slaves who crossed state lines.<sup>6</sup> The Constitution expressed no clear directive for enforcing the return of fugitives, however, which left a substantial degree of interpretation open to individual states. Slaveholders soon attempted to remedy this ambiguity, and their efforts culminated in the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793.<sup>7</sup> The act created a legal procedure for enforcing the return of escaped slaves. It empowered slaveholders and their agents to seize accused fugitives. The law instructed claimants to bring the seized person before a local judge, who would assess the proof of the claim based on oral testimony or affidavits. If the judge supported the claim, the slaveholder or his agent would receive a legal certificate permitting him to remove the fugitive back across state lines. Furthermore, the law provided for the punishment of any person who attempted to aid or conceal a suspected fugitive with a five-hundred-dollar fine, payable to the slaveholding claimant.

Despite the passage of the 1793 act, ambiguities continued to plague relations between Northern and Southern states and the enforcement of federal laws. As Northern states passed abolition laws, conflicts erupted when slaves fled to what they perceived as free soil. Slaveholders were often frustrated in their attempts to lay claim to absent property. In practice, the legal procedure laid out in the 1793 act rarely operated as it was intended. Theoretically, it required slaveholders to take the initiative in pursuing runaways. But the law did not account for the counter-efforts of the accused fugitives and their abolitionist allies to dispute masters' claims. The inconsistencies between state laws and the enormous effort required of individual

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<sup>6</sup> Article IV, Section 2 of the U.S. Constitution reads: "No Person held to Service or Labour in one State, under the Laws thereof, escaping into another, shall, in Consequence of any Law or Regulation therein, be discharged from such Service or Labour, but shall be delivered up on Claim of the Party to whom such Service or Labour may be due." The Constitution never uses the word "slave." The absence of the word is evidence of the debates and eventual compromise on the issue of slavery in the constitutional convention.

<sup>7</sup> Fehrenbacher, *The Slaveholding Republic*; Paul Finkelman, "The Kidnapping of John Davis and the Adoption of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1793," *The Journal of Southern History* 56, no. 3 (1990): 397–422.



slaveholders to ensure the enforcement of the federal fugitive law left space for absentee or runaway slaves to evade their masters and negotiate for freedom.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, these conflicts were mainly arbitrated on an individual basis and seldom had far-reaching legal consequences. In a more sinister aspect, the law also failed to account for the illegal kidnapping of free black people.<sup>9</sup> Kidnapping was a lucrative pursuit of slave traders and their agents who targeted Northern cities and Mid-Atlantic areas with large free black populations. If the 1793 law placed the burden of proof on the slaveholding claimant, it also neglected to present a clear path for enforcing the rights of victims of unlawful enslavement.

By the 1840s, national conflict over the issue of slavery was brewing. Westward expansion and political debates over the extension of slavery into new territories had temporarily subsided after the Missouri Compromise of 1820. But slave owners clamored for stronger federal enforcement of their rights to their human property as the movement in favor of immediate abolition gained momentum. Southern slaveholders perceived the antislavery outcry as a direct assault on their property rights. Any incursion of antislavery sentiment into the South was met with reactionary violence and suppression, such as in the response to the 1835 abolitionist postal campaign.<sup>10</sup> With the increasingly publicized flow of fugitive slaves into the North, supported by abolitionists who went unpunished by Northern state governments, slaveholders claimed to be insulted and robbed of their legal rights. Southern planter politicians mounted a campaign to shore up the federal fugitive laws and dispute Northern states' rights to ignore or overrule them.

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<sup>8</sup> See Chapter One for extended discussion.

<sup>9</sup> David Fiske, *Solomon Northup's Kindred: The Kidnapping of Free Citizens before the Civil War* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2016); Adam Rothman, *Beyond Freedom's Reach: A Kidnapping in the Twilight of Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); Carol Wilson, *Freedom at Risk: The Kidnapping of Free Blacks in America, 1780-1865* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1994).

<sup>10</sup> See Chapter Two.

In 1842, *Prigg vs. Pennsylvania* paved the way for the controversial Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. In *Prigg*, the court held that the 1793 federal Fugitive Slave Act overruled a Pennsylvania state law designed to combat the kidnapping of free black residents. The Pennsylvania law prohibited the removal of black people across state lines to be held or sold as slaves.<sup>11</sup> Though the case was decided in favor of slaveholders' power under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793, it left the door open for Northern states to pass personal liberty laws in defiance of the federal law. The federal law bestowed the power to decide fugitive claims on local judges or magistrates. In the *Prigg* decision, Justice Joseph Story wrote, "As to the authority so conferred upon state magistrates, while a difference of opinion has existed, and may exist still on the point, in different states, whether state magistrates are bound to act under it; none is entertained by this Court that state magistrates may, if they choose, exercise that authority, unless prohibited by state legislation."<sup>12</sup> Based on this decision, states could avoid their responsibility to restore accused fugitive slaves to their masters by passing laws forbidding magistrates from cooperating. The decision in *Prigg* still set a precedent, however, for the power of federal law in upholding slaveholders' property rights.

Several Northern states took advantage of the legal loophole left in the *Prigg* decision by prohibiting state officials from interfering in runaway cases in any way. This course of action inflamed Southern politicians further, and when territorial conflicts reignited after the acquisition of western territory in the Mexican War, they seized the chance to strengthen federal authority in fugitive slave cases further. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, passed by Congress as part of the

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<sup>11</sup> The state law was first passed as an amendment in 1788 to Pennsylvania's 1780 Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery. A further law, passed in 1826, defined the removal of black people across state lines with the plan to keep or sell them as slaves as a felony. Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 390.

<sup>12</sup> *Prigg v. Pennsylvania*, 16 Pet. 539 (1842).

package of compromise bills designed to diffuse the post-war conflict, forced Northern officials to participate in the retrieval of accused runaway slaves by their masters. It asserted the power of federal law over state jurisdictions in the matter of fugitive slaves. The law also eliminated any semblance of due process in deciding the status of accused fugitives, provided financial incentives to judges to decide cases in favor of slaveholding claimants, and increased the fine levied against individuals found to be aiding fugitives to one thousand dollars.

Behind the escalation of legal conflict stood heightened awareness of and sympathy for fugitive slaves among the Northern public. Slave narratives, such as those by Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, Henry Bibb, and Sojourner Truth had attracted a wide readership by 1850. These first-hand accounts drew attention to the cruelty and injustice of slavery, contradicting the paternalistic descriptions of slaveholders. They reinforced arguments circulating among Northern abolitionists and articulated their own rejection of racism, becoming some of the most potent political voices of the antislavery movement.<sup>13</sup>

Some scholars have disputed the authenticity of slave narratives. They argue that white editors or collaborators exaggerated the political content of the stories, in effect using former slaves as tools to advance their antislavery agenda. This interpretation perpetuates the racist assumption that slaves were incapable of political thought, let alone artistic expression. Furthermore, it inadvertently replicates the arguments made against slave narratives by slaveholders and contemporary proslavery theorists. Proponents of proslavery ideology

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<sup>13</sup> Manisha Sinha calls slave narratives “the movement literature of abolition.” See Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause*, 421.

challenged the veracity of these texts at the time they were originally circulated, dismissing the authors as mouthpieces of white abolitionists.<sup>14</sup>

It is true that almost all published narratives were collaborations between former slaves and white editors or amanuenses. Such partnerships were usually described in explanatory introductions that affirmed the genuine nature of the narrative's contents. The preface material also often spoke to the good character and intellectual ability of the narrator. Many former slaves were illiterate and unable to put pen to paper to write their own story; Frederick Douglass was a notable exception in this respect. More broadly, most publications to this day, including autobiographies, involve collaboration between authors and editors. Furthermore, every instance of self-presentation in writing includes elements of composition, reflection, juxtaposition, and omission. Any good memoirist chooses and arranges her anecdotes to heighten drama and tell a coherent story. Scholars now recognize the significance of slave narratives as both historical and literary accounts. Analysis of slave narratives for elements of composition, collaboration, and potential points of dispute or power disparity between author and editor enriches our understandings of them without impugning their authenticity as historical sources.

This chapter examines letters as a smaller-scale variant of the slave narrative genre. Just as in published sources, letters demanded that authors make narrative choices and consider aspects of self-presentation. While published accounts were designed to appeal to a broader public, individuals also composed personal letters with an audience in mind.<sup>15</sup> Letter writers included,

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<sup>14</sup> For an important discussion of the problems in the historiography of slave narratives see: Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, eds., *The Slave's Narrative* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1985), esp. xi-xxxiv. See also: John Sekora, "Black Message/White Envelope: Genre, Authenticity, and Authority in the Antebellum Slave Narrative," *Callaloo*, no. 32 (1987): 482-515.

<sup>15</sup> Oftentimes letters bridged public and private audiences. For example, William Still's published record of his work on the Underground Railroad reproduces letters written by fugitive slaves narrating their experiences. William Still, *The Underground Railroad: A Record of Facts, Authentic Narratives, Letters, &c. ...* (Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, 1872).

omitted, alluded to, emphasized, and avoided carefully chosen details and themes to appeal to the person(s) they addressed. In addition, writers sometimes had an audience—real or imagined—in mind beyond the individual whose name they inscribed on the envelope. Letters discussing fugitive slaves highlight the importance to the antislavery movement of narrating and understanding their experiences, especially in the crisis decades of the 1840s and 50s. Correspondence in this period struck a balance between exposing the injustice of slavery through personal experiences and respecting a need for secrecy in life-or-death situations that defied the law.

### **“My eyes have seen what my tongue dare not speak:” Fugitive Slaves in the 1830s**

Agitation surrounding the issue of fugitive slaves peaked from the mid-1840s through 1861, but devoted abolitionists had been aware of it long beforehand. Early antislavery organizations, including the New York Manumission Society (NYMS) and Pennsylvania Abolition Society (PAS), as well as groups of Quakers, had long been involved in legal cases involving accused runaway slaves.<sup>16</sup> Free black communities and institutions, such as churches, had also developed strategies for aiding fugitives. In New York and Philadelphia, black activists founded Vigilance Committees designed to transport fugitive slaves and protect free black people from kidnapping.<sup>17</sup> As immediate abolitionism blossomed in the 1830s, tactics and personnel from these older efforts persevered, and they were joined by a growing new generation of

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<sup>16</sup> See Chapter One. On the significance of Quaker organizations in early abolition, see Nicholas Wood, “A ‘class of Citizens’: The Earliest Black Petitioners to Congress and Their Quaker Allies,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 74, no. 1 (January 2017), 109-144.

<sup>17</sup> See for example, Eric Foner, *Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015), Ch. 3; Graham Russell Hodges, *David Ruggles: A Radical Black Abolitionist and the Underground Railroad in New York City* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

sympathizers. Advocacy for fugitive slaves was an essential component of abolition from the movement's beginnings, though debates about how best to pursue this goal were ongoing.

At first, many leading white abolitionists continued to follow the legal strategy of their forbears in the NYMS and PAS. In May of 1834, Amos A. Phelps, at that time an agent of William Lloyd Garrison's American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS), reported to his wife that "To day at 10 I am to attend the trial of a col[ore]d woman – arrested two days since as a runaway. The result you sh[ould] know thro. the papers."<sup>18</sup> Writing during a whirlwind tour as an AASS lecturer, Phelps was terse and conveyed only the barest details of his travels.

Soon, however, abolitionists were captivated by stories of fugitive slaves. In September 1836, John Farmer, a New Hampshire abolitionist, was traveling in Boston when he encountered several men involved in a recent fugitive slave case. One of the men, Mr. Smith, sheltered one of the fugitive women in his home for a week, and he recounted "the whole history" of their concealment up until their voyage to Halifax, Nova Scotia, where he speculated that "they are out of the hands of their oppressors." Farmer added, "They have escaped the snare of the fowler," and mused that, "The whole story of their rescue would make an interesting tract, but it must not be told to pro-slavery ears."<sup>19</sup> Farmer discovered one of the central difficulties of the fugitive slave struggle. Stories with an intense degree of human drama and the potential to sway the hearts and minds of the public to the antislavery cause could also produce dangerous, even fatal, consequences for the characters involved if they reached the wrong audience.

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<sup>18</sup> A[mos] A. Phelps to Charlotte Phelps, 19 May 1834, Anti-Slavery Collection, Boston Public Library (BPL).

<sup>19</sup> John Farmer to Joseph Horace Kimball, 6 September 1836, John Farmer Papers, New Hampshire Historical Society.

Others similarly reckoned with the power of fugitive slaves' experiences early on. In 1835, the Philadelphia Quaker abolitionist Lucretia Mott wrote to a friend in Rochester, New York, "We have now under our care a poor runaway with her infant not yet a month old – whose husband was forcibly taken from her with his little boy 6 years old & carried into Maryland where they will in all probability be sold separately to some southern trader[.]" Mott noted, "scarcely a week passes without some case of the kind claiming our sympathy[.]" Overwhelmed by the intensity of the situation, Mott confessed to a rare moment of discouragement: "I feel sometimes as if we cant do enough in this cause & that after all 'we are but unprofitable servants' for indeed 'we are doing no more than is our duty to do[.]'"<sup>20</sup>

All that abolitionists could do, it seemed, was provide meager material support—food, shelter, clothing—to the fugitives they encountered who had endured unspeakable ordeals. Yet they also told stories in letters, recording the experiences of fugitive slaves and passing them along to a larger, if still private audience. A Westminister, Massachusetts, man, Edward Kendall, Jr., wrote to Amos Phelps about the meeting schedule of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society in March of 1838. After concluding his brief letter, he turned over his sheet and added an extensive "*nota bene*" describing "a slave (a female) with a young child" who had passed through his town recently. Kendall reported that she was "going (to use her own language) to a land of freedom!" and went on to recount her history "as given by herself." The woman's Virginia master was also her father. He provided for her freedom in his will, but she was thwarted by her mistress. Eventually, the woman found her way to Philadelphia by exchanging clothes with a white accomplice and passing as the woman's friend. Her mistress's new husband

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<sup>20</sup> Lucretia Coffin Mott to Phebe Post Willis, 10 March 1836, Phebe Post Willis Papers, Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation, River Campus Libraries, University of Rochester.

discovered her three years later and sent an agent to retrieve her, but the woman escaped once again during the journey back to Virginia. Kendall emphasized that during her passage to New York, “she was in company with her persuers & passed for the wife of a White man” while “her child was conveyed in a bag in charge of another woman (after taking a large dose of laudanum,” separately. Her hardships were not over when she passed through Massachusetts; she left her eldest child behind, “in charge of the Quakers.” Both of her children were born while she was living in Philadelphia and therefore had legal claims to freedom. Perhaps their mother did not want to subject them both to the dangerous trip north to Canada needlessly.<sup>21</sup>

The tone of Kendall’s letter suggests that his encounter with the fugitive woman was an unusual event in his Massachusetts town. Though he had no reason to commit her story to paper, he did so anyway. Kendall wrote hastily. The letter includes several cross outs and insertions, indicating that he did not have time to write out a first draft and then copy the final version onto a fresh sheet. He concluded the business portion of his letter only to turn to a blank page and commence with narrating the woman’s experience in what reads like one long stream of thought. Perhaps Kendall wanted to write down the details of her story before they faded from his memory. He dwelt on the themes of sexual exploitation and family separation, but he offered no explicit call to action or evocation of antislavery slogans. He mentioned the woman’s light skin tone several times and offered the parenthetical remark, “(& by the way, there was nothing in the way of color to prevent her passing for a white person).”<sup>22</sup> Besides this comment, however, he attempted to relate the story as she told it. Russell tried to capture the urgency of the woman’s

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<sup>21</sup> Edward Kendall, Jr. to Amos A. Phelps, 22 March 1838, Anti-Slavery Collection, BPL.

<sup>22</sup> Kendall used parentheses twice to distinguish his commentary from the story as the woman told it. See Kendall to Phelps, 22 March 1838, Anti-Slavery Collection, BPL.



narrative by filling his blank page with her words. In doing so, he advanced the idea that the most powerful indictments of slavery were firsthand accounts.

The same realization dawned on other abolitionists around the same time. In 1837, Sarah Grimké wrote to her friend Sarah Mapps Douglass during her well-known lecturing tour of New England with her sister Angelina. In a postscript, she told Douglass, “We have met with some very interesting runaway slaves their narratives were of thrilling interest,” and proposed, “oh that the slaves could write a book[.]”<sup>23</sup> The Grimkés’ pursued this notion. A few months later, they received a letter from a fugitive slave woman, Nancy Adams, whom they met in Uxbridge, Massachusetts, responding to their request that she give them an account of her experiences in her own words. Adams recounted a detailed history of her life. She grew up as a slave in Eastern Maryland but ran away with her husband and two young children after her master threatened to sell her. Her mistress instructed her and her family to hide in the woods nearby until her husband changed his mind. They lived in a hollow tree, eating acorns for five months, until their master sold them at a low price to a man who promised to let them work for their freedom. While their new master was kind at first, he betrayed them by selling them to slave traders. The traders separated Adams from her husband. They stole the family’s savings of seventy-two dollars, and took her and her children away. After making several stops at slave markets in New Market and Baltimore, the traders took them down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers until they reached Port Gibson, Mississippi. It was a long and difficult journey, during which one of Adams’s three children perished.

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<sup>23</sup> Sarah Grimké to Sarah M. Douglass, 23 November 1837, Weld-Grimké Family Papers, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan (WCL).

At Port Gipson, Adams recalled, “a gentleman came riding along by the water and came in among us. He said to me ‘what can you do.’ Said I, I can talk and eat and sleep thats what I’ve been used to.” This detail stands out in the letter as a moment in which Adams exercised a small degree of control over her future. When asked what she could “do,” Adams did not reply in the way her interlocutor expected, by listing her labor competencies. Instead, she offered a response that evoked her wit as well as a spark of resistance in reminding the purchaser of her human and social needs. Adams may have imagined this response after the fact, but by writing it into her letter, she recorded it as a fact of her history.<sup>24</sup> The man purchased Adams and her two sons, and they traveled to his plantation, where their purchaser gifted them to his eldest son, still a young boy. The plantation owner sent Adams to work in the fields picking cotton, and she said she “was treated as bad as was possible and live.” Her son, eleven years old at the time, was brutally whipped after riding in a boat with his master’s son because the family suspected him of plotting to run away.

Adams eventually hired herself out to a man who brought her with him to the North, to Norwich, Connecticut, where she made her escape. She hid in an ice house for two days, until the man left town. Adams remained in Norwich for the next twelve years until she heard that her master was pursuing her and subsequently moved to Uxbridge, where she resided at the time she wrote.

Upon concluding her tale, Adams acknowledged that her story, though dramatic, was far from complete. She wrote, “I have thus far tried to give some account of myself but I have not told half that I could tell. My eyes have seen what my tongue dare not ~~tell~~ speak.” Adams

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<sup>24</sup> This detail accords with Walter Johnson’s observations about slaves’ ability to participate in their own sales, and to thereby retain a sense of personal dignity in face of dehumanizing conditions. See Johnson, *Soul By Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

assured the Grimké, “What I have told is the truth and nothing but the truth.” Her health was poor, and she did not expect to recover. Writing the letter no doubt rekindled Adams’s sorrow for the family members she had lost over her journey. Still, she painstakingly recorded the story of her life for the Grimké, perhaps having discussed with them in person the significance her words held for advancing the antislavery cause.<sup>25</sup> The Grimké did not publish Adams’s letter, but they may have drawn anecdotes from it in lectures they delivered. They went on to publish, along with Theodore Weld, *American Slavery as It Is*, a collection of facts and testimony documenting the cruelty of slavery, drawn from Southern newspapers and first-hand accounts they solicited through correspondence.<sup>26</sup>

Nancy Adams recorded her story towards the end of her life, after living as a free woman for over a decade. Others, however, wrote down their thoughts less retrospectively. Charlotte Cowles, a young abolitionist from Farmington, Connecticut, devoted considerable space in her letters to describing her impressions of several fugitive slaves who passed through her town. Charlotte’s brother, Samuel, was an active abolitionist based in Hartford, and her family sheltered fugitives in their home regularly. In February 1839, Charlotte closed a note to her brother hurriedly because a “noble-looking Southern friend” had just arrived and was “giving father an account of his adventures.” Charlotte told Samuel, “You will not wonder that I want to

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<sup>25</sup> Nancy Adams to Sarah and Angelina Grimké, 30 March 1838, Weld-Grimké Papers, Clements Library. According to all appearances, the letter was composed by Adams herself, but it is possible that she dictated her words to another party. The quotation in this paragraph echoes the title of Edward Baptist’s, *The Half Has Never Been Told*, but he quotes from a different source. It is possible that Adams inadvertently adopted certain literary tropes, perpetuated by the antislavery movement, in making her statements about the horrific nature of slavery. See Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*, (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 19.

<sup>26</sup> Theodore Dwight Weld, *American Slavery as It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1839).

listen.”<sup>27</sup> In this instance, listening to an in-person conversation took precedence over continuing a written discussion with her brother, but Charlotte revisited the subject in her next letter, two weeks later. She wrote, “I think the man who is with us now, (we call him Thomas) is the noblest specimen of the ‘Southerners’ I have ever seen. We are all very much attached to him indeed. He is perfectly faithful, industrious, kind, and respectful, and has been in New York so long, and seen so much of all sorts of people, that he understands all sorts of things and characters. He amuses us very much by the ingenious answers he gives to various inquiries about his nativeplace, his business, &c.”<sup>28</sup>

It seems odd that Cowles would describe her interactions with Thomas as amusing. Unlike the previous examples, she did not recount his personal history. Perhaps her brother had already heard the story, or maybe the man was not comfortable sharing such intimate details with her. The rest of Cowles’s letter revealed that there were several fugitive slaves dwelling in her community. The fugitives ran a considerable risk of being exposed and recaptured. Cowles recounted one incident where a fugitive slave girl staying at a neighbor’s house narrowly escaped exposure. On the evening the girl arrived, a woman (probably a domestic servant) “asked her where she came from, and she in her simplicity told her ‘from Maryland.’” The host immediately called in another man, Philip, to defuse the situation. Philip was another fugitive slave who had been living in Farmington for almost a year.<sup>29</sup> He, “was frightened enough,” but he “gave the girl a charge to hold her tongue in future and then went to catechise the woman, to see how much she

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<sup>27</sup> Charlotte Cowles to Samuel Cowles, 14 February 1839, Charlotte and Samuel Cowles Correspondence, Connecticut Historical Society (CHS).

<sup>28</sup> Charlotte Cowles to Samuel Cowles, 28 February 1839, Charlotte and Samuel Cowles Correspondence, CHS.

<sup>29</sup> Charlotte Cowles mentioned Philip in a previous letter. See Charlotte Cowles to Samuel Cowles, 18 June 1838, Charlotte and Samuel Cowles Correspondence, CHS.

knew. He pretended to have a great curiosity to know where that girl came from, and inquired if she knew. The woman replied that the girl had told her the name of the place, but she really could not remember – it had ‘slipped her mind.’” Cowles concluded, “What a happy thing it is on some account that there is so much ignorance in the world! This poor woman, I suppose, had not in the most distant idea where Maryland was, or whether it was a city, a village, or an island.”<sup>30</sup> Of course, the woman might have been feigning ignorance to soothe the tension in her employer’s household.

Cowles pondered the conflicting imperatives for fugitive slaves of honesty and concealment. On one hand, they needed to prove themselves to be of good character to cultivate a relation of trust with their hosts. But by giving too much away they risked exposing themselves to unwanted scrutiny. “Most of these fugitives are very ingenious indeed in concealing their real situation,” Cowles wrote, perhaps thinking of Thomas and his “ingenious answers” and Philip’s subtle attempt to “catechise” the witness. But others were “the most complete patterns of honesty, innocence and simplicity....” Another man, Archy, refused even to change his name because “he was brought up to be honest, he has always told his name when he has been asked.” Cowles concluded that he must have “been more completely crushed by ‘the system’ than any other we have here,” and she reflected, “I hardly know when slavery seems most accursed; when we see a man reduced by it almost to a brute ... or when we think that there are among its victims such men as Thomas, who are still noble, dignified and unsubdued, notwithstanding all they have suffered.”<sup>31</sup> Cowles used letters to process her observations of and reactions to the various fugitive slaves she encountered. She was young, and her simplistic comparison of the two men

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<sup>30</sup> Charlotte Cowles to Samuel Cowles, 28 February 1839, Charlotte and Samuel Cowles Correspondence, CHS.

<sup>31</sup> Charlotte Cowles to Samuel Cowles, 28 February 1839, Charlotte and Samuel Cowles Correspondence, CHS.

reflects her ignorance. Nevertheless, Cowles came to realize that slavery's victims were complicated individuals with varied experiences, instincts, and personalities. Despite the risk of exposure, Cowles impressionistically recorded her interactions in letters to her brother.

By the time Cowles wrote this letter, in February 1839, her family had already been sheltering fugitive slaves for at least nine months. An earlier letter suggests that Cowles was taking a risk even by discussing these matters in family letters. On June 11, 1838, she wrote to her brother during another fugitive controversy. In the first page of the letter, Cowles covered ordinary topics, including the weather and the receipt of new bonnets. Flipping to the verso of the sheet, however, Cowles suddenly changed the subject. She told Samuel,

I wish you and I understood some language which no one else did; it would be a good time to use it now. I am sure you can not imagine how much I want to give you a full account of what has been going on here, but I dare not. There are a hundred chances by which what is put on paper may be exposed, and I know that you would rather wait a little while for particulars than that by any mischance the last drop should be added to the cup of misery that is now well nigh full. And if I had no fears, I could not by any words give you the least idea of the tenor and anxiety which we yet feel. – I fear I have written too much already: do be careful that this falls into no other hands. And by all means write to me tomorrow, if you have only time to say you have received this. The time will come when I can tell you the whole story.

After this enigmatic paragraph, Cowles concluded her letter abruptly. She rushed to put it in the mail before the post departed. She did not even sign her name, writing only, “Do not fail tomorrow. Yours &c.” as a closing statement.<sup>32</sup>

Taken out of context, Cowles letter makes little sense other than evoking a teenage girl's taste for mystery and drama. Within the scope of her family's activism, however, she testified to the anxiety, frustration, and danger involved in concealing fugitive slaves. About three weeks earlier, Cowles's brother forwarded information from New York that a fugitive man would be

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<sup>32</sup> [Charlotte Cowles] to Samuel Cowles, 11 June 1838, Charlotte and Samuel Cowles Correspondence, CHS.

arriving soon and needed gainful employment.<sup>33</sup> The man arrived only to be discovered and pursued, which Cowles alluded to in her letter of June 11.<sup>34</sup> A week later, Charlotte informed Samuel that there was no longer a need for absolute secrecy. She wrote, “The story of the pursuit, &c, is now common talk at Unionville, & probably will be here soon. I fear, too, that it got out through the imprudence of some of the abolitionists. ... [O]ur next door neighbor ... came home and told his wife, and she is telling it about, as every one likes to tell a great and strange piece of news.” Cowles was quick to deny, however, that she, or any member of her sex, was at fault. “Dont you know men always say that women cannot keep a secret?” she asked, before noting, “The story of Philip and John’s coming here was spread abroad by the men, and so was this; while the many women who knew it held their tongues.”<sup>35</sup>

Charlotte Cowles’s letters provide insight into the way in which news about fugitive slaves traveled both among sympathetic activists and into the broader community. Her mixture of caution and candor in correspondence with her brother shows that she balanced an acute awareness of the danger faced by fugitives, as well as members of her own family, in their endeavors, with a personal imperative to record and discuss her thoughts about these matters. Letters offered a relatively secure means of communication, but they were not immune to probing eyes or the accidents of the postal system. Writers had to weigh the risks and benefits of committing their secrets to paper. As Cowles’s letter of June 11 illustrates, correspondents employed strategies of allusion or vague, coded language to refer to illegal exploits. More often,

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<sup>33</sup> Samuel Cowles to Charlotte Cowles, 24 May 1838, Charlotte and Samuel Cowles Correspondence, CHS.

<sup>34</sup> Tom Calarco, *Places of the Underground Railroad: A Geographical Guide* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2011), 113; J.T. Norton, *Freedom’s Gift: or, Sentiments of the Free* (Hartford: S.S. Cowles, 1840), 9-14; Horatio T. Strother, *The Underground Railroad in Connecticut* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1962), 39, 101. Strother calls Farmington the “Grand Central of the Underground Railroad.”

<sup>35</sup> Charlotte Cowles to Samuel Cowles, 18 June 1838, Charlotte and Samuel Cowles Correspondence, CHS.

however, the urge to reflect and discuss the events outweighed correspondents' fear of discovery. Writers like Cowles related powerful and revealing anecdotes despite their desire to protect the parties involved in the narratives. The awareness of surveillance coupled with the reliance on postal communication to record and transmit information about fugitive slaves escalated as the North and South became increasingly polarized over the issue of slavery.

### **“There has been a line formed for some time...:” The Underground Railroad and Fundraising**

The efforts of black and white abolitionists throughout the northern United States to assist fugitive slaves developed into a network of activism known as the Underground Railroad. This network assisted slaves to escape to freedom by traveling covertly into Northern states. Fugitives often continued further northward to Canada to avoid the pursuit of slave catchers and remove themselves from the jurisdiction of federal laws. The Underground Railroad has evolved into an amalgam of historical fact and public memory, driven, at least in part, by the romanticized accounts of participants themselves. Historians have struggled to separate fact from fiction, given the clandestine nature of the endeavor and the resulting scarcity of non-retrospective accounts.<sup>36</sup> Contrary to popular depictions of heroic white “conductors,” runaway slaves drove the growth of the Underground Railroad, and black abolitionists were among its primary operatives.<sup>37</sup> The

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<sup>36</sup> On the Underground Railroad see for example: R. J. M. Blackett, *Making Freedom: The Underground Railroad and the Politics of Slavery* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013); David W. Blight, *Passages to Freedom: The Underground Railroad in History and Memory* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books in association with the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, 2006); Fergus M. Bordewich, *Bound for Canaan: The Underground Railroad and the War for the Soul of America* (New York: Amistad, 2005); Henrietta Buckmaster, *Let My People Go: The Story of the Underground Railroad and the Growth of the Abolition Movement* (Columbia, SC.: University of South Carolina Press, 1992); Tom Calarco, *Places of the Underground Railroad*; Hodges, *David Ruggles*; Foner, *Gateway to Freedom*; Still, *The Underground Railroad*.

<sup>37</sup> Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 381-393.



combined efforts of fugitives and their free black allies enlisted the support of white opponents of slavery, who were often inspired by stories of dramatic escapes.

Abolitionists used letters to organize the network and notify operatives of incoming travelers. For example, in 1853, William Harned, a Brooklyn abolitionist, wrote to Samuel D. Porter, asking him for assistance in maintaining a place of refuge in Rochester, which was the final stopping point before fugitives crossed the Erie Canal into Canada. “I like the idea of having a stopping place on the way, where the poor fellows may meet friends, who sympathize with them, & give them a kind word on their journey,” Harned reflected.<sup>38</sup> In 1856, W.E. Abbott, the treasurer of the Syracuse Fugitive Aid Society addressed a letter to Samuel D. Porter’s sister, Maria, who was also involved in abolition. He introduced the bearer of the letter: “The woman who accompanies the party on their way to Freedom is well known to us for her untiring devotion to the cause of the enslaved. she is herself an escaped bondwoman and this the second company that she has brought forth out of the land of servitude at great risk to her self.” Abbott most likely referred to Harriet Tubman. He explained that, “It has been our custom to forward all directly on to the Bridge [at Niagara Falls]. But now our funds fail us & we are obliged to send them forward to the different half way houses that are on their route[.]” He signed the letter, “Yours for the enslaved.”<sup>39</sup> These letters show how agents of various antislavery societies used correspondence to direct the movements of people and funds along the routes of the Underground Railroad.

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<sup>38</sup> William Harned to Samuel D. Porter, 31 March 1853, Porter Family Papers, Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation, River Campus Libraries, University of Rochester.

<sup>39</sup> W.E. Abbott to Maria G. Porter, 29 November 1856, Rochester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society Papers, WCL.

Despite the covert nature of the movements of fugitives, abolitionists often recounted their observations of the Underground Railroad in their correspondence. Anne Thomas, an Ohio abolitionist, reported on the growth of the system to her cousin, Nathan M. Thomas in 1839. She wrote, “There has been a line formd for some time from the River to the Lake where Colourd People were Convey’d from one place to another by the Abolitionist and agreat many escaped to Canada the latter part of last summer and fall[.]” Thomas described the risks involved in this venture. [U]nfortunately when there was several slaves in this neighbourhood who were waiting for a convenient Conveyance to the Lake they were alarmd by a Traitor, it was a Colourd man that was employ’d by the Slave holders to detect slaves,” she recounted.<sup>40</sup> Over a decade later, in 1852, Nathan M. Thomas’s brother, Jonathan, recounted a similar incident that resulted in a happier outcome. He wrote, “We had a fugitive cace here lately but not under the law....” Three accused runaways had been removed from a train car and taken before a judge, who ruled in their favor. Thomas reported, “their being no evidence to detain them they were discharged and put on the underground rail road and I suppose are in Canada safe....” Just “about 1 ½ hours after there were discharged,” the accusers returned with further documentation of their claims, but the fugitives had already departed.<sup>41</sup> As these accounts indicate, abolitionists used letters to narrate dramatic stories of runaway slaves and the Underground Railroad as they unfolded.

It was not just accounts of fugitives that traveled through the mail. Abolitionist women used the post to transmit funds and to organize fundraising and donation campaigns for the benefit of fugitives. For example, in 1846, Lucy H. Huse of Boston wrote to Elizabeth Mountfort, the

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<sup>40</sup> Anne Thomas to Nathan M. Thomas, 2 April 1839, Nathan M. Thomas Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>41</sup> Jonathan Thomas to Nathan M. Thomas, 26 November 1852, Nathan M. Thomas Papers, Bentley Historical Library.

corresponding secretary of the antislavery society in Portland, Maine, seeking her assistance in transmitting money to a fugitive woman named Hager. Huse was concerned that the surveillance of the post might endanger the money or risk exposing Hager's whereabouts. Nevertheless, she concluded, "I do not suppose there is much doubt but the medium of the post office is as safe a conveyance as a private one," though "we cannot help feeling a little anxiety until we hear that the money has reached Hager as much on her account as our own." Huse enclosed six dollars and instructed Mountfort to "give our love to [Hager] and say we are glad to hear she is well as usual ... hope it will cheer her heart."<sup>42</sup> Similarly, a woman from Boylston, Massachusetts, wrote to the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society in 1841 on behalf of her local society to request that "the avails of their work & the money which we have raised" be donated to the New-York Vigilance Committee, "having learned that they were very much in want of funds to assist the fugitives on their way to Canada."<sup>43</sup>

Hiram Wilson, an abolitionist who lived in "Canada West," now Ontario, was a major figure in fundraising campaigns for fugitive slaves. He lived in a fugitive slave settlement for much of his career and ran schools for the people living there that were designed to prepare free black people for full citizenship. Wilson was one of the "Lane Rebels," a group of theological students at the Lane Seminary in Cincinnati, Ohio, who rebelled against the school's attempts to suppress their abolitionist activism. Most of the Lane Rebels left for Oberlin College, where Wilson obtained his theological degree in 1836. He maintained close ties to Oberlin throughout his career.

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<sup>42</sup> Lucy H. Huse to Elizabeth Mountfort, 23 February 1846, Portland Anti-Slavery Society Records, Maine Historical Society.

<sup>43</sup> H.S.P. Cotton to Maria Weston Chapman, 22 December 1841, Anti-Slavery Collection, BPL.

Wilson aimed to combine free labor and education to encourage former slaves to become self-sufficient, republican-minded citizens. As this goal indicates, Wilson held racist, paternalistic attitudes despite his support for abolition. He represented a conservative version of antislavery that prized emancipation but balked at equal rights. Wilson's work was supported by the donations of local antislavery organizations, especially women's societies and sewing clubs, throughout the northern United States. Since Wilson was physically distant from the heart of the movement, he depended almost entirely on correspondence to recruit teachers, raise money, and solicit donations, especially clothing, to support his work. Wilson held the strong conviction that donors ought to receive something in return for their efforts, in order to believe that they were making a difference. Therefore, he wrote detailed letters that tugged at the heart (and purse) strings of his target audience.

In March 1850, Wilson addressed such a letter to Elizabeth Mountfort of the Portland Anti-Slavery Society. He opened, "Having a grateful remembrance of your kindness in affording aid for our Dawn Mission some two years ago I feel encouraged to address to you a few lines presuming that with the lapse of time your interest in the cause of humanity has increased rather than abated...." Wilson went on to describe his work and the "peculiarly trying circumstances" he faced. He and his wife were running a school together that served students who were "them recently from the house of bondage," but his wife had taken ill. They were now in desperate need of funds to support their endeavors and relieve the poverty of their school's constituents. Wilson acknowledged that the cause of abolition was not popular in Portland but hoped, "if the few who feel an interest in the cause of crushed humanity could make up a few Dollars & send my mail Postage Paid it would be very acceptable." He invited Mountfort to share his letter with other

prominent community members, and concluded, “The present is with us a most serious crisis[.]”<sup>44</sup>

Alongside Wilson, there were competing figures and groups also trying to raise money to help fugitives, as well as disagreements among abolitionists about whether sending money to Canada was the best use of their resources. Some feared the potential for fraud or the misappropriation of funds. In 1850, William Harned wrote to Emily Howland, a Quaker woman from Sherwood, New York, to advise her that, “We are fully satisfied of the impolicy of sending clothing to Canada, for distribution among the people there, unless there were persons there more competent than any we know of to take charge of them.” Instead, he suggested, “we have frequently fugitives passing through this city, in a very poor & destitute condition, both men & women - & if your clothing would probably be useful to such persons, & you approve, the box may be sent to me, & we will try to make good use of them.”<sup>45</sup> In 1852, Henry Ince, an abolitionist working in Canada West, warned Howland, “I wish to guard you and your friends from being imposed on by smug men begging over the heads of the poor fugitives here that very rarely receive on fraction from these impostors.” He explained, “The plans concocted are these, a white missionary locates in the woods among old ignorant colored settlers that are well off. He keeps those people on his honey by giving them what should be distributed to the needy and if any clamor occurs he has this people to sustain him.” According to Ince, one of the primary tools of such imposters were “Commisseration letters” meant to stir up the sympathies of potential

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<sup>44</sup> Hiram Wilson to Elizabeth Mountfort, 8 March 1850, Portland Anti-Slavery Society Records, Maine Historical Society.

<sup>45</sup> William Harned to Emily Howland, 16 October 1850, Emily Howland Papers, Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University (RMC).

donors.<sup>46</sup> Of course, Harned and Ince were also engaged in writing their own versions of such letters, competing for the resources of abolitionists like Howland.

The fugitive slave issue united the antislavery movement by making concerns of abolition more palpable and urgent to a larger public. While competition existed among various groups and causes within the antislavery movement, gathering aid for fugitives was one of the most effective fundraising strategies for the cause. This issue offered more concrete targets for material aid, rather than a broad ideological agenda. It also provided dramatic and powerful narratives that evoked sympathy relating to issues like motherhood and the separation of families.

### **The Postal Escape of Henry Box Brown**

In addition to raising funds to support the Underground Railroad, correspondence was also a useful tool for orchestrating daring rescues. For instance, in 1858, Maria Weston Chapman described the plight of a fugitive named Charles Carter who had escaped from Alexandria, Virginia, and traveled all the way to New Bedford, Massachusetts, making stops in Philadelphia and New York along the way. Carter wanted to retrieve his wife and four children who remained in slavery. Both Carter and his wife were illiterate, but according to Chapman, “he has so managed as to leave a sure way open for communication with her at any time.” Chapman wrote to Philadelphia abolitionist James Miller McKim, hoping that he could help them contact “captains of small vessels which run from points along the Potomac to Philadelphia who could be depended on.” Carter’s wife and children could travel to Washington each Sunday, providing

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<sup>46</sup> Henry Ince to Emily Howland, 26 October 1852, Emily Howland Papers, RMC.

an opportunity for her to receive a message and plan for an escape.<sup>47</sup> Chapman's letter provides an examples of the creative means by which fugitives and their abolitionist allies transmitted delicate information, blending written and verbal communication.

One of the most famous and dramatic fugitive slave escapes was carried out entirely through postal means. In 1849 Henry "Box" Brown mailed himself via the Adams Express Company from Richmond, Virginia, to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, spending over twenty-four hours nailed inside a wooden crate. Brown decided to flee slavery after his wife and children were sold away from him in August 1848. He sought assistance from Samuel A. Smith, a white Northerner who lived in Richmond and worked as a dry goods storekeeper, and a free black man, James C.A. Smith, whom Brown knew from the choir at the First African Baptist Church in Richmond. Samuel Smith accepted payment in return for arranging Brown's shipment. Brown arranged to be absent from work for a few days by dowsing one of his fingers in oil of vitriol (sulfuric acid) and procured a wooden box.

On the morning of March 23, 1849, Brown departed in a box marked "this side up" addressed to James Johnson, 131 Arch Street, Philadelphia. He bored three holes for air in the box, and he took with him only a gimlet (a tool to bore more holes) and a bladder of water. The journey was long and uncomfortable. Brown was not only curled up inside the cramped space, but the carelessness of various movers left him upside down for several stretches of his travels on wagons, trains, and a steam ship. The box arrived successfully in Philadelphia early the next morning, where it lay in the depot until a wagon arrived to convey it to the antislavery office. James Miller McKim, the corresponding secretary for the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society, received it, along with William Still, the office clerk and chairman of the society's Vigilance

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<sup>47</sup> Maria Weston Chapman to James Miller McKim, 9 April 1858, May Anti-Slavery Manuscripts, RMC.

Committee.<sup>48</sup> Brown's journey, after twenty-seven hours and 350 miles, was over. McKim promptly rapped on the lid of the box and asked, "All right?" Brown replied, "All right sir," to the great relief of the small group of abolitionists gathered around him. Once they opened the box, Brown recovered quickly enough to stand up and sing a "hymn of thanksgiving" for his audience.<sup>49</sup> McKim took Brown home, fed him breakfast, and drew him a bath. Next, McKim and Brown visited the home of James and Lucretia Mott, where Brown narrated his history to a rapt audience.

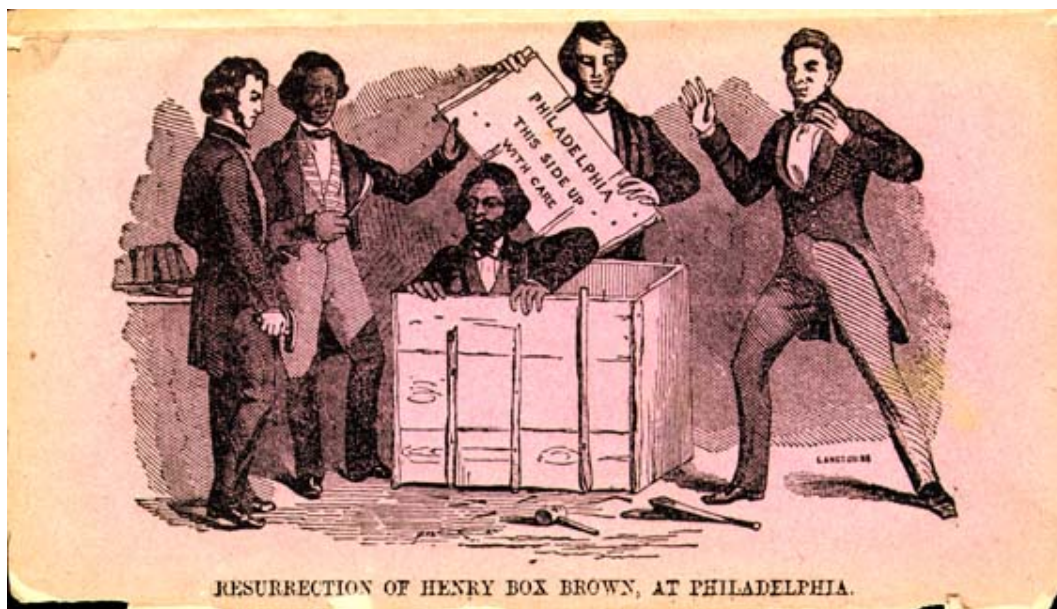


Figure 3: Frontispiece from *Narrative of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself*, Manchester: Printed by Lee and Glynn, 1851.

Henry Box Brown went on to be a successful abolitionist author and lecturer. He committed his story to print in two publications: first, in the story he dictated to the white abolitionist

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<sup>48</sup> William Still was a prominent black abolitionist who focused on aiding and transporting fugitive slaves. He kept records of the fugitives who passed through the Philadelphia antislavery office, which he used later to write a history of fugitive slave abolition, *The Underground Railroad*, published in 1872. Still, *The Underground Railroad*.

<sup>49</sup> Accounts of Brown's escape drawn from, Henry Box Brown, *Narrative of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself* (Manchester: Printed by Lee and Glynn, 1851).



Charles Stearns in 1849, *Narrative of Henry Box Brown, Who Escaped from Slavery in a Box 3 Feet Long and 2 Wide*, and then in *Narrative of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself*, published in Manchester, England, in 1851.<sup>50</sup> Brown toured throughout the Northeast, and he traveled to England after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850 threatened to jeopardize his safety. There, he created a one-man show, reenacting the means of his escape on stage to the delight of crowded audiences. He also created elaborate panoramas, including *Henry Box Brown's Mirror of Slavery*, that documented his life story and the history of slavery. The panorama was a popular theatrical art form that consisted of a series of paintings on a long sheet of canvas that would gradually unspool on stage to tell a story, accompanied by music and narration. Brown's first panorama was reported to be 50,000 feet long. He debuted it in Boston in 1850 before he took it with him to England in 1851. Brown toured with his panoramas in England for the next fifteen years before returning to the United States in 1875. Along the way, he took a second wife, having never reunited with the wife and children he left behind in slavery, and he transformed himself from a spokesperson from American slavery to a magician and mesmerist. Throughout his unusual career, Brown displayed a talent for resourcefulness and imaginative self-invention.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Brown was illiterate, so he relied on white amanuenses to record his story. The earlier narrative, written by the white abolitionist Charles Stearns, appeared in 1849. Brown's revisions to this account two years later, as well as the title "Written by Himself," suggests that he was not satisfied with Stearns's portrayal of his life. The writer of the 1851 version remains unidentified. Jeffrey Ruggles, *The Unboxing of Henry Brown* (Richmond, VA: The Library of Virginia, 2003), 129, 132.

Scholars have argued that Brown's revisions reflect his dissatisfaction with white abolitionists and the antislavery movement. While Brown removed Stearns's preface and letter in the later edition, however, he introduced new material relating to abolition himself in his new preface, introduction, and letters written by radical abolitionists Samuel J. May and James Miller McKim. Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 436-437.

<sup>51</sup> On Henry Box Brown see: John Ernest, ed., *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), Introduction; Richard Newman, ed., *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002); Ruggles, *The Unboxing of Henry Brown*.

The focal point of Brown's story, both in his time and afterwards, has been his harrowing escape: a powerful tale of near death followed by "resurrection from the grave of slavery."<sup>52</sup> Historians have rightly pointed out that this emphasis has been detrimental to a complete understanding of Brown and his significance. His narrative contains rich descriptions of his life in slavery and his interpretation of those experiences. His escape occupies only a few pages at the end of his narrative. Furthermore, scholars have investigated Brown's life and legacy after obtaining his freedom.<sup>53</sup> A working-class man who reveled in show business and had no qualms about profiting from his experiences, Brown did not fit the traditional antislavery mold. Frederick Douglass criticized him for publicizing the means of his escape because it undermined future opportunities for others to make use of similar strategies. Douglass pointedly omitted his own means of escape in his published narratives. As Brown built a career as a fugitive slave showman, he gained a wide public following that abolitionists appreciated. They were uncomfortable, however, with his eagerness to embrace sensationalism and self-promotion to increase his profits.

Historians have paid less attention to the orchestration of Brown's postal flight beyond the box in which he traveled. Not only Brown himself, but the plans for his escape, traveled by mail. Furthermore, before Brown recorded his story in publications and theatrical productions, the first accounts of his adventure appeared in letters exchanged among abolitionists. Brown certainly was not shy of advertising his exploits. His careful planning of the "thanksgiving hymn" he uttered upon crossing the threshold into freedom illustrates his taste for drama. Notwithstanding

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<sup>52</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr. discusses Brown as a Christ-like figure. See Gates, "Foreword," in Newman, ed., *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself*, ix-x.

<sup>53</sup> Ruggles, *The Unboxing of Henry Brown*.

Douglass's criticisms, however, Brown initially had little control over how the description of his escape was communicated. Perhaps that explains why he became so intent on telling his own story and earning the profits from it. Letters that discuss Brown's escape reveal how correspondence and the post could offer useful means of concealing plans and transmitting secret information regarding fugitive slave rescues. On the other hand, however, the audience for letters could spread quickly beyond the intended recipient. Behind the exciting story of a man who escaped slavery by counting on the efficiency and security of the mail were weeks of clandestine planning and discussion orchestrated through the exchange of letters.

James Miller McKim wrote to Samuel A. Smith, Brown's shipping agent accomplice, in Virginia on March 17, 1849, expressing doubts about sending Brown by the proposed mode of transportation. He wrote, "My mind continues unchanged as to the risk of injury to the contents of that box if kept so long confined. However you can do as you choose about sending it, as long as it is not your intention to send it to me."<sup>54</sup> McKim had several reasons to avoid putting his name to the package: if the plot was exposed, he could be arrested. Or worse, he would be responsible if Brown was severely injured or killed in transit. McKim was probably also concerned about Southern surveillance of the post. By 1849, McKim was a notorious abolitionist and known operative in assisting fugitives who came to Philadelphia. A letter from Norfolk, Virginia, in 1844 was addressed to "J. Miller" in Philadelphia in an attempt to obscure the purpose of the message and the identity of its recipient. A penciled note on the backside of the sheet explains: "Specimen of caution that had to be observed in writing from the South – probably on the subject of a proposed escape."<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> James Miller McKim to S.A. Smith (Draft), 17 March 1849, May Anti-Slavery Manuscripts, RMC.

<sup>55</sup> A.A. Cowdery to J. Miller, 25 March 1844, May Anti-Slavery Manuscripts, RMC.

Despite his concerns about the risks involved, both to himself and to the delicate cargo, McKim confirmed the practical details of the plan. A merchant friend would send his porter to receive the box when the train arrived. The porter would see to its “safe delivery.” In a note scrawled sideways on the edge, he asked whether the freight would be pre-paid. McKim used a businesslike tone, discussing the fragility of the box while being careful not to specify the nature of its “contents.” By the end of the letter, however, McKim was willing to risk a hint that the box might contain something more perishable than dry goods. He asked, “If you are determined to send it, had you not better see that there is a crack or two at the joints of the box?”<sup>56</sup>

McKim’s letter shows how correspondence could provide an effective means of covert communication in planning for the escape of slaves like Brown. There was always a risk of surveillance in conducting postal dealings between Northern and Southern states, but Samuel Smith, a dry goods merchant, would have ample excuses for communicating about the delivery of a package to Pennsylvania. In this case, business correspondence provided an effective cover for a more subversive transaction.

The chain of correspondence continued soon after Brown arrived safely in Philadelphia. On March 26, 1849, McKim addressed a letter to Sydney Howard Gay, an abolitionist agent and editor of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* newspaper who lived in New York City. McKim introduced Brown, “Here is a man who has been the hero of one of the most extraordinary achievements I ever heard of.” He enthusiastically recounted the tale of Brown’s escape. “Did you ever hear of anything in your life to beat that?” McKim asked, asserting, “Nothing that was done on the Barricades of Paris exceeded this cool and deliberate intrepidity.” McKim also dramatized his own role in the plot. He reported that he spent several days in “mortal fear ... lest

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<sup>56</sup> James Miller McKim to S.A. Smith (Draft), 17 March 1849, May Anti-Slavery Manuscripts, RMC.

his arrival should only be a signal for calling in the coroner.” McKim described Brown as “a noble looking fellow,” though Gay could judge his appearance for himself and hear the story in Brown’s own words. After his breathless account, McKim turned to more serious matters. He instructed Gay to send Brown and his letter on to another abolitionist agent in Boston, who would find employment for him. “He will be invaluable to somebody,” McKim stated. Finally, McKim asked Gay, “For Heaven’s sake dont publish this affair or allow it to be published,” because, “It would compromise the Express, and prevent all others from escaping in the same way.”<sup>57</sup>

Competing impulses were at work in McKim’s letter to Gay, which foreshadowed the controversy to come over the publicizing of Brown’s escape. McKim could not resist offering his own narrative of the situation and exclaiming over it even as he recognized the precarious nature of Brown’s freedom and the risk of exposing his means of achieving it. This conflict was embedded in the competing imperatives inherent in composing letters. On a practical level, writers sought to communicate information to the addressee clearly and efficiently. All Gay really needed to know was where to send Brown next. But letter writing was also an art, and writers sought to entertain or impress their audiences as much as they used letters as a means practical communication. McKim seized the opportunity to regale his correspondent with his version of Brown’s escape even though he knew that Gay, a newspaper editor, would be tempted to release the story in print.

The impulse to narrate and entertain became even more pronounced as McKim and his Philadelphia compatriots continued to embroider their accounts of Brown and his escape. Two

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<sup>57</sup> James Miller McKim to Sydney Howard Gay, 26 March 1849, Slavery Collection, New-York Historical Society.

letters— one from McKim to a friend and the other from Lucretia Mott to Joseph and Ruth Coffin—both dated March 28, 1849, describe Brown’s ordeal in detail. McKim discussed his own internal wavering over whether he was willing to accept responsibility for receiving the package containing Brown. He expressed his uncertainty in terms of his legal liability as an accomplice to a fugitive slave escape. The more troubling consequences, however, were moral. Would he be to blame if Brown had perished in transit, McKim wondered.<sup>58</sup>

McKim and Mott’s letters also include details of Brown’s life in slavery and his separation from his wife and children. Mott recounted how, after the sale of Brown’s wife and children away from him “almost broke his heart,” he “resolved on obtaining his own freedom[.]” The theme of family separation was an important one that evoked the tragedy of slavery and the humanity of slaves. Both writers emphasized the need for secrecy, especially keeping the story out of the papers. Mott compared Brown’s experiences to the escape of William and Ellen Craft, concluding that their tale “will tell well in history, some time hence, ‘in the days of freedom oh’!”<sup>59</sup> The Crafts escaped from Macon, Georgia, traveling openly by train and steamboat. Ellen, a light-skinned woman, posed as a white slaveholder, while William played the role of her manservant. These details from McKim and Mott’s letters show how they compared Brown’s dramatic escape to the stories told by other fugitives. Through their letters, they participated in the creation of the genre of the fugitive slave narrative.

McKim continued his correspondence with Samuel Smith in Richmond into the first weeks of April 1849. After their first successful rescue, the men debated whether to send more people

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<sup>58</sup> James Miller McKim to “Friend” (Draft), 28 March 1849, May Anti-Slavery Manuscripts, RMC.

<sup>59</sup> Lucretia Coffin Mott to Joseph and Ruth [Coffin?] (photocopy), 28 March 1849, Garrison Family Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

by the same method. On April 8, McKim wrote, “I am glad to hear that there is no uneasiness in Richmond. I must positively decline however receiving any consignments; and I advise you for your own sake not to send any.” He explained, “The thing is known to a multitude in this city & there is every reason to believe it will reach Richmond. You must not send any more of those goods, till you know all the circumstances of the last shipment.”<sup>60</sup>

On April 12, McKim received a letter from Smith proposing future transactions. Smith apparently had not receive McKim’s prior letter that warned against continuing the operations. McKim promptly responded and told Smith that he “positively declined acting the part you assigned me.” He continued, “You say you know there is no danger; I tell you you know nothing about it. It was a miracle your friend did not lose his life. You dont know half the dangers that he escaped; and it is absurd to attempt a similar project till you know the particulars of this. I cannot allow you to compel me against my will to be a party to what I strongly disapprove.”<sup>61</sup> In comparison to his previous communications, the urgency of McKim’s concern spurred him to write in less subtle terms about the logistics of the proposed plan.

By April 16, however, it seemed that McKim was open to taking responsibility for future rescue attempts. “I hope to find a consignee for your goods,” he wrote, “But before sending it let me here give you a few directions.” McKim laid out detailed conditions: “Don’t send unless you are sure there will be somebody here to receive it; and that he will be in town & on hand when it comes. Don’t send unless you allow much more breath in space.” Discussing Brown’s experience, McKim used the pseudonym Clark. He cautioned, “Clark was nearly suffocated for want of air. Any common man would have died. The box was of the very best ~~space~~ size and

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<sup>60</sup> James Miller McKim to Samuel A. Smith, 8 April 1849 (Draft), May Anti-Slavery Manuscripts, RMC.

<sup>61</sup> James Miller McKim to Samuel A. Smith, 12 April 1849 (Draft), May Anti-Slavery Manuscripts, RMC.

shape that could be hit upon. ... Don't send unless your man knows every thing to which he will be liable. He must have immense patience, courage, and endurance." Later in the letter, McKim warned that "Adams & Co. know of Clarks escape; and I promised them that I should never have another sent to me. ... The box should not be send as before to a fictitious name & address .... It should be sent in cool weather."<sup>62</sup> McKim also asked about "Clark's" wife and children. McKim's fears for the safety of any future escapees outweighed his caution in obscuring his own identity or the substance of the plan.

McKim's letters demonstrate that news of Brown's mode of escape got out quickly, rendering future postal escapes too risky to attempt. Brown made the most of his exploits, lecturing, writing his narratives, and constructing his panorama show. He did his best to seize control of his story and reap its proceeds. Even after Brown attained freedom and celebrity, however, the passage of Fugitive Slave Law towards the end of 1850 rendered life in the North untenable. He left for Britain and took his panorama with him. Brown stands as a symbol for how the law polarized North and South further over the issue of slavery and abolitionists' direct-action campaigns to aid fugitives.

### **Motherhood and Family Separation: The Case of Mary Walker**

Whereas Brown embraced publicity, other fugitives sought to maintain control over their stories by keeping them private. They understood the strategic power of narrative for advancing the cause of abolition but feared the personal consequences of exposing the truth of their circumstances. Mary Walker was one such person, who, throughout her life, carefully chose when to reveal and conceal information about herself in a decades-long journey to secure

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<sup>62</sup> James Miller McKim to S[amuel] A. Smith (Draft), 16 April 1849, May Anti-Slavery Manuscripts, RMC.



freedom for herself and to reunite with her children. Walker began her life as a slave in North Carolina, fled from her master's family during a trip to Philadelphia, and spent most of the remaining years of her life living as a free woman in Massachusetts. She joined the household of Susan and Peter Lesley in 1850. Walker provides a compelling example of the uses and significance of correspondence to the fugitive slave activism of the antislavery movement in part because her story is recorded almost entirely in the letters of other people. Her story would be unknown, if not for the narrative that emerges from the Lesley family's letters. Even though Walker knew how to read and write, only a few of her letters survive. The narrative of her life is only evident in the correspondence of the Lesleys, their close family members, and friends. In contrast to published slave narratives, her story unfolded gradually, over years of family correspondence. In her quest to attain freedom for herself and her children, Walker understood the power of correspondence in strategically withholding and disclosing information.<sup>63</sup>

Mary Walker fled from slavery in 1848, after which she remained in Philadelphia for a time, where she became acquainted with members of the free black community and local abolitionists. In 1850, the passage of the federal Fugitive Slave Law threatened Walker's safety. Slaveholders and their agents passed through Philadelphia frequently. The new law made it easier for slaveholders to arrest and kidnap accused fugitives, and it heavily punished anyone who was caught helping them. Walker was even more vulnerable than she had been before, and it became imperative for her to leave Philadelphia. In November 1850, she ended up in the household of Susan and Peter Lesley, who were then living in Milton, Massachusetts, just south of Boston.

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<sup>63</sup> For an account of Mary Walker's life story, pieced together through the Lesleys' correspondence, see Sydney Nathans, *To Free a Family: The Journey of Mary Walker* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

Walker had been working for Peter Lesley's brother in Philadelphia, who sent her to Massachusetts for her protection.<sup>64</sup>

While Peter Lesley's brother was directly responsible for sending Walker to Milton, the couple's long-term connection to abolition came primarily through his wife. Susan Lesley grew up among a group of reform-minded women and counted among her close friends the prominent abolitionist Lydia Maria Child. A strong tradition of female reform networks is reflected in the Lesleys' correspondence, along with the correspondence of Susan's female relatives, including her mother, Anne Jean Robbins Lyman, and her unmarried aunts, Eliza and Catherine Robbins. Mary Walker lived with these women in Northampton and Cambridge, Massachusetts, at various points. The women in Susan's family were well-educated, well-read, and fully immersed in the intellectual and political culture of their time. For example, Eliza Robbins visited London during the World Anti-Slavery Convention in 1840 and was a friend of Lucretia Mott.<sup>65</sup> They were not afraid of addressing controversial topics, including abolition, in their letters. Prior to their marriage, Peter Lesley himself expressed concern that Susan might not be satisfied if she was unable to continue her reform work.

When she came to the Lesleys, Mary Walker already knew how to read and write, and she became an active participant in the literary life of her new home. But only a few of her letters have been preserved in the archives of the family's correspondence. As a fugitive slave, she faced the constant threat of being captured and returned to slavery. Furthermore, Walker's children remained in slavery, and she feared that they might face reprisals if her situation were revealed. If they were sold, Walker feared that she would lose any possibility of reunion. All of

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<sup>64</sup> Sydney Nathans, *To Free a Family*, 35-42.

<sup>65</sup> See discussion of Robbins's experience of the convention in Chapter Four.

these factors combined to make Walker cautious about what she divulged in writing. An 1854 letter from Susan Lesley to her aunt reveals that Walker instructed Susan to “to keep her papers from every eye, & burn them unopened” in the event of her death.<sup>66</sup> Although Walker lived to see the abolition of slavery, she remained committed to her privacy, and it seems likely that her wish to have her letters destroyed was fulfilled following her death in 1872. This helps to explain why her correspondence was not preserved alongside that of the rest of the Lesley family.

Mary Walker was never a famous abolitionist, nor did she participate outwardly in the antislavery cause by delivering lectures or publishing her story. For that reason, her story differs from well-known individuals like Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and Henry “Box” Brown. In part, this privacy was a safety measure to protect her identity and her children who were still enslaved. She was also a naturally shy person who did not court the spotlight. Yet at the same time, both she and the Lesleys were absorbed into the antislavery movement simply because of her presence in their household.

The relationship between Walker and the Lesleys was complicated at times, but it is a useful example of how some of the major divisions and contradictions within abolition played out on a small scale. Though the Lesleys supported Walker and her mission to rescue her children from slavery, material and ideological constraints limited their ability to act according to her wishes. They feared exposing too much information in their letters, they lacked the funds necessary to enact a rescue, and they faced opposition from other abolitionists who felt it was improper to privilege the interests of Walker, an individual, over the greater goal of destroying the institution of slavery as a whole. Meanwhile, Walker was free, but she was dependent upon her white benefactors. She was frustrated by their lack of understanding of her anguish, yet she felt unable

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<sup>66</sup> Susan Lesley to Catherine Robbins, [1854], AFC.

to discuss her situation openly. The Lesleys and Walker used their correspondence to air these constraints and frustrations, but, for various reasons, they were limited in what they felt secure expressing in writing.

After Mary Walker came to his home, Peter Lesley became more active in the antislavery movement. He delivered lectures on the Fugitive Slave Act, and he ended up breaking away from the Congregational church after becoming disgusted by its willingness to compromise Christian values to appease its Southern slaveholding constituents. Susan Lesley confronted slavery politics on the domestic front. She frequently served as Walker's protector and advocate, ensuring that she was paid well for the work she did as a seamstress and making sure she did not become overburdened by demands for her services. Susan was also the first person Mary Walker trusted with a full account of her personal history, and she was a persistent supporter of Walker's campaign to find her children.

The Lesleys' relationship with Mary Walker was not perfect, however. Perpetually short on cash themselves, the Lesleys were reluctant to continue spending money on the search for Walker's children after several failed attempts lost them a significant portion of their savings. Susan Lesley also saddled Walker with the task of caring for her elderly mother, Anne Jean Robbins Lyman, whose dementia manifested itself in constant irritability and childish tantrums, not to mention regular attempts to throw Walker out of her home.<sup>67</sup> Mary Walker suffered from poor physical health and depression throughout her life. The Lesleys financed her treatment and cared for her, sometimes employing additional servants to do so. Nevertheless, they also took advantage of her vulnerable position to induce her to remain loyal to their family. While Walker was an accomplished seamstress, she spent most of her years with the Lesleys as a glorified

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<sup>67</sup> Nathans, *To Free a Family*, Ch. 3, 6, 9.

housekeeper. Despite declarations to the contrary, the Lesleys never embraced Mary Walker as an equal member of their family. They expected her to work for wages and earn her keep in their household. Furthermore, they asked her to shoulder a burden of emotional baggage as if she were a close relative without extending her their own unconditional love and support.

After arriving at the Lesleys' house in November of 1850, Walker quickly established herself in the community as a skilled seamstress, devoted caretaker, and close friend of the family. She was reluctant to trust the stability of her situation, however. She did not confide in the Lesleys the details of her life until over a year after she joined their household. Walker opened up about her past around the same time that Susan Lesley was wrapped up in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The wildly popular novel illustrated the hardships of slavery to the Northern reading public. Susan Lesley read the book during the spring of 1852, and she was deeply moved by it. The plot of Stowe's novel rests heavily on the theme of the emotional turmoil caused by the separation of slave families. For example, one of the most memorable characters from the book is Eliza Harris, a slave woman who chooses to run away to avoid being separated from her child. Eliza and her young son flee across the frozen Ohio river and find shelter among abolitionists, who help her to reunite with her husband and escape to freedom in Canada. Through stories like Eliza's, the novel prompted conversations about slavery between Susan Lesley and Mary Walker that led Walker to disclose more of her personal history.

During the early months of 1852, Walker heard news that prompted her to pursue her own family reunion. An acquaintance from Philadelphia informed her of the death of her former master.<sup>68</sup> Walker was concerned about the fate of her children but also hoped that the disposal of the estate might provide an opportunity to reunite by purchasing their freedom. These

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<sup>68</sup> Nathans, *To Free a Family*, 78.

circumstances pushed her to find a way to confide in the Lesleys and ask for their help. Walker may have seen echoes of her own experiences in Stowe's accounts of slave mothers tragically separated from their children. Stowe's book offered a common language of maternal affection that helped make slavery comprehensible to women like Susan Lesley, who would never experience enslavement themselves.

On June 8, 1852, Susan Lesley wrote a letter to her husband in which she discussed the antislavery message of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, exclaiming, "It is a book of wonderful power, & what a work it will do!" Later in the same letter, she recounted a recent evening during which Mary Walker had finally disclosed something of her life, though Lesley did not reveal the details. She recalled that Walker had approached her while she rested on a sofa, and then "She kneeled down by my side, took my hand, pressed it to her heart, then kissed it. She stroked my hair with the other hand...." "Since then," Susan reported, "she has told me the whole strange tragedy of her life, that it has taken two years of confidence & kindness to win from her. I would not have asked her to tell me for [the] world[.]"<sup>69</sup> Over the course of the rest of that summer, Walker gradually related more aspects of her life in slavery.

In a letter she wrote about a year later, Susan told her husband more about Walker's inner distress. Though Susan had discussed aspects of Walker's story with her husband before, she had withheld many of the details from him until now. Susan wrote, "I wish to speak to you today dear Love, about Mary- I have not felt like opening on the subject before, for fear of its leading me into a long letter for which I am unfit." She continued, "You must know that last winter, when she heard of the old man's death [referring to Walker's former master], she was in a state of the greatest mental suffering & excitement. She felt that she must make an effort to ~~save~~-free

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<sup>69</sup> Susan Inches Lesley to J. Peter Lesley, 8 June 1853, AFC.

her children at all hazards, & she had no rest day or night[.] Her own easy position became as nothing to her, indeed increased her misery for those she loved[.]”<sup>70</sup>

Susan described how Mary Walker had turned to an abolitionist friend, Ellis Gray Loring, asking him to assist her in purchasing her children. He refused on the grounds that he would not put any money in the hands of slaveholders, even in this case. Some radical abolitionists like Loring believed that, although the reunion of families was desirable, their commitment to the larger cause of eradicating the institution of slavery outweighed these individual cases. He and his wife “begged [Walker] to give up her mother & children, as if they were dead” and urged her to “form other ties.” Susan Lesley interjected her own interpretation of the situation, telling her husband: “Now dear, only see how impossible for a man merely because he is an Abolitionist, to enter into a mother’s feelings at such a crisis.”

Susan characterized Mary Walker’s response as “secretly indignant,” a phrase that captures the delicate position in which Walker found herself, caught between her desire to reunite her family and her benefactors’ commitment to abolitionist principles. Susan Lesley speculated that Walker was “wondering in her own heart, whether if their only child were where hers are they could give her up & form other ties[.]” At the end of the letter, Susan assured her husband, “Do not blame me dear Love for tiring myself with writing Mary’s story—It is a relief to me,” hinting at how Walker’s secrets weighed on her. “She has never spoken again, nor I to her, on the subject, & has resumed her ordinary quiet manner,” Susan concluded.<sup>71</sup> In relating Mary Walker’s dilemma to her husband, Susan dwelt on the same themes of family separation and maternal love that resonated with her after reading *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The novel opened a

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<sup>70</sup> Susan Inches Lyman Lesley to J. Peter Lesley, 19 June 1853, AFC.

<sup>71</sup> Susan Inches Lyman Lesley to J. Peter Lesley, 19 June 1853, AFC.

bridge of understanding between Walker and Lesley, and it gave Lesley the language to narrate Walker's story in her letters.

In the years following this letter, the Lesleys made repeated attempts to help Walker to reunite with her children, but their efforts failed. Susan and Peter Lesley were both always cautious about how they wrote about Walker and her circumstances in their letters. They often avoided using her full name, indicating that they feared exposing her. Furthermore, Walker's reluctance to speak openly about her past may have discouraged the Lesleys from speculating in their correspondence.

The few of Walker's letters that survive reflect her reserved character, barely hinting at the inner emotional turmoil she experienced. The letters discuss the activities of her daily life and do not give much insight into her deeper thoughts and opinions. The phonetic spelling illustrates the irregular nature of her education, and she frequently apologized for her "bad spelling" and "poor letters."<sup>72</sup> In a letter addressed to Susan Lesley in 1853, Walker described a trip to the sea shore with the Loring family. She told Susan that she missed her and Peter, "but I have enjoyed being with your dear mother who has bin a mother to me." She also mentioned that Susan's mother took her to the antislavery fair in Boston, but she says, "I did not enjoy my self as much as I expected."<sup>73</sup>

This letter reveals little about Walker's feelings. Why did she not enjoy the antislavery fair? Walker said she had a headache, but given what we know of her circumstances, she may also have felt frustrated that the resources of the white abolitionists she encountered at the fair were

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<sup>72</sup> On African American "neoliterate" writers see Christopher Hager, *Word by Word: Emancipation and the Act of Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

<sup>73</sup> M[ary] E. W[alker] to Susan Inches Lyman Lesley, [5-6 January 1853], J. Peter Lesley Papers, American Philosophical Society.



not available to her in her quest to save her children. Despite their proclaimed commitment to helping slaves attain freedom and rights, she found that they were blind to the realities of life under slavery that she had experienced.

In another letter from 1853 to Susan Lesley's aunt, Catherine Robbins, Walker mentioned her attempts to find and purchase her children. She wrote, "you neade not fear I wil feel bad or disappointed not to hear what I wish – I am very thankful to no I have friends ho ar willing to do all tha can for me."<sup>74</sup> This assurance suggests not only that she was aware of the enormous odds she faced, but also that she felt that her white northern friends did not quite understand her circumstances. At every step, both in her own letters and in her words relayed by others in their correspondence, Walker portrayed herself as meek and grateful, perhaps feeling hesitant to reveal her stronger emotions. As a further sign of her caution in committing personal details to written communication, she signed only her initials at the end of her letter. (See Figure 4)

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<sup>74</sup> Mary Walker to Susan Inches Lyman Lesley, 18 March 1855, AFC.

April 19. 1833?  
April 19.

My dear Miss Robbins

I received your very kind letter last week & was glad to hear you were through the your disagreeable task - I am now at home & happy - you cannot think how I miss you particular night & Sundays tho I shall try & be happy every body is very kind to me - Mr & Mrs Morison got home yesterday & we are very much pleased with the journey - Mr Morison seen Mrs Lesley in New York & say she was quite sick - tho she thought she would go to Philadelphia with Mr Lesley he was in New York before she left - tho she did not see him - Mr Morison seen Mrs Lyman & say she was very well & was going to stay with Mr Edward Lyman - Mr Morison is quite sick to day & we have had no meeting - I am very glad you heard from Mr Sumner - dear Miss Robbins you need not fear I will feel bad or disappointed not to hear what I wish - I am very thankful to me I have friends who are willing to do all they can for me - Mr Morison says he was speaking to a Lawyer in Baltimore & he thought there would be no difficulty in his getting a copy of the Will - I have had quite a pleasant time at Mrs Watsons & I expect to go to Mr Lyman & more I hope you will not come over here until I get back - If you should Miss Lizan Will get her bid dear Miss Robbins I hope you will be able to read my love speaking - Yours truly M. W.

Figure 4: M[ary] W[alker] to Catherine Robbins, 19 April [1853?], Ames Family Historical Collection, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study

Walker's letters demonstrate how she used the ability to read and write to assert her dignity as a fellow member of the community she found in Massachusetts. Her letters also suggest that she was very much aware of the political debates and circumstances that surrounded her, and that she had opinions about those debates, even if she did not always state them explicitly. In a letter to Susan Lesley from 1855, Walker wrote after an illness. She assured Lesley that, "I am much better and quite strong so that I go out hearty every day." Later in the letter she repeated sentiments of gratitude to the Lesleys and their family. She wrote, "I know how anxious [you

are] for me but you mus[t] not think I feel or care for eny thing[.] all things go well with me[.]”

Walker also described the close bond she felt with Susan Lesley’s mother. She told Lesley, “your dear mother has been a mother to me[.] ... I am quite at a loss to find words to express what she wer to me. only she fil the places that wer vacant. around my Bed[.] thay wer no mothers voice no Brother no Sister no Children but I wer not alone she [was] thar[.]”

Towards the end of her letter, Walker asked, “I hope you wil excuse all mistaks and bad grammer,” before wondering, “I suppose you heard of Anthony Burns liberty[.]” This seemingly offhand comment contrasts with the emotional language before it. Walker referred to a dramatic story that had riveted members of the Northern public. Burns was a fugitive slave who was captured in Boston and returned to his master under the terms of the federal Fugitive Slave Law. Abolitionists later raised money to purchase Burns’s freedom, and at the time Walker wrote, he had recently returned to Boston.<sup>75</sup> Though Walker avoided the public eye, she probably saw something of her own experiences reflected in Burns’s odyssey. She used her letter primarily to thank Susan Lesley for her protection and care, but this moment reveals a small glimpse into Walker’s political engagement. She may have felt inspired by Burns, or she may have resented that abolitionists had contributed funds to purchase his freedom when they refused to do the same for her children. With only a few surviving letters, it is difficult to discern Walker’s underlying emotions. What is evident, however, is that she was cautious in committing her words to paper. The ambiguity of her statement about Burns may have been intentional, leaving her opinion of his exploits open to the interpretation of her correspondent.

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<sup>75</sup> On Anthony Burns, see Charles Emery Stevens, *Anthony Burns: A History* (Boston: John P. Jewett and Co, 1856); Earl M. Maltz, *Fugitive Slave on Trial: The Anthony Burns Case and Abolitionist Outrage* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010); Jane H. Pease and William Henry Pease, *The Fugitive Slave Law and Anthony Burns: A Problem in Law Enforcement* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1975); Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause*, 515-520.

Mary Walker eventually reunited with her children, who were by then adults, close to the end of the Civil War. She worked briefly during the war as a teacher for freedpeople on the Sea Islands in South Carolina. After she returned to the North, General William T. Sherman's army took Raleigh, North Carolina, where the mansion of her former master was located. General Oliver Otis Howard, a Union officer who knew the Lesley family, helped to locate Walker's children soon after the city's occupation was achieved. Her children, Agnes Walker Burgwyn and Bryant Walker, were there. They joined her in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in summer of 1865. The Walker family eventually acquired a house of their own on Brattle Street in Cambridge, where it still stands today. Walker died in 1872 at age fifty-four.<sup>76</sup>

### **Conclusion: Shifting Terrain of Narrative Power**

On October 7, 1865, Mary Walker's daughter, Agnes Walker Burgwyn, wrote from Cambridge, Massachusetts, to her former mistress in Raleigh, North Carolina: "I have often thought of sending a letter to you, as you were kind enough to wish to hear from me, but many things have occasioned me to delay it." Burgwyn explained that she had arrived in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in July, just a few months after the end of the Civil War. She and her husband "had no difficulty in finding my Mother from the direction that we had." Burgwyn's brother, Bryant Walker, was already in Cambridge, and she reported that "we are all now living together at housekeeping very happily." Burgwyn worked alongside her mother as a seamstress, and her brother worked in the College Garden at Harvard.

After providing this news of her family's circumstances, Burgwyn turned to the central purpose of her letter. She instructed her mistress "to go to my minister, Mr Pell, & ask him to

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<sup>76</sup> Nathans, *To Free a Family*, 216, 255.

send me a letter of recommendation” so that she might join her local Methodist church. Burgwyn also requested news about her friends in Raleigh, and she concluded, “Please give my love to all my friends & companions who may enquire for me.”<sup>77</sup> The tone of the letter was cool but respectful. Burgwyn gave her instructions with confidence, conveying her sense of entitlement to the information she asked for while asserting independence from her former mistress.

The story of Mary Walker’s family follows an unusually dramatic trajectory, from Walker’s flight to freedom in 1848 to the reunion with her children almost twenty years later in Massachusetts, in the aftermath of the American Civil War. Burgwyn’s letter to her former mistress provides a satisfying epilogue to the story. On one hand, such a happy ending, complete with the purchase of a family home in Cambridge, was extraordinarily rare for the families of fugitives, let alone the vast majority of freedpeople after the Civil War. On the other hand, however, the sense of dignity expressed in Agnes Burgwyn’s letter captures a fundamental shift in everyday social relations that occurred after emancipation. The narratives of fugitive slaves had been a powerful galvanizing force for the antislavery cause. In the aftermath of the war, more and more people like Burgwyn were able to seize the power of narrative and use it, as she did in this letter, to command respect from their former owners and claim rights in the eyes of the federal government. The following chapter tells the story of how this process unfolded and examines its impact on the correspondence of the antislavery movement.

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<sup>77</sup> Agnes Burgwyn to Ms. Mordecai, 7 October 1865, Cameron Family Papers, The Southern Historical Collection, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Sydney Nathans suggests that Burgwyn used an amanuensis to write the letter because, “despite her literacy, handwriting did not come easily.” See Nathans, *To Free a Family*, 225, 257.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Writing the First Draft for Freedom: Bearing Witness to Emancipation**

“Probably, never before has private epistolary correspondence been so largely occupied with the condition of the nation as at the present time – the views presented being as diverse as the writers and numerous.” So proclaimed William Lloyd Garrison, editor of *The Liberator*, in an article titled “Epistolary Correspondence” in the February 22, 1861 issue. “Having accidentally seen two or three letters written only for private perusal,” he continued, “we have been permitted to make the following extracts for publication.” Writing in the midst of the secession crisis, just two months before the American Civil War broke out, Garrison illustrated how thoroughly personal correspondence had become preoccupied with the state of national politics. All three of the writers whose letters he excerpted demonstrated fluency with the affairs of the day, which they expressed through the medium of private correspondence.

The first extract described the scene during a recent lecture delivered by Wendell Phillips at the Boston Music Hall. While the writer reported little about the content of Phillips’s speech, other than that it was “the TRUTH, ‘very salt, and very bitter, and very good,’” she recalled that he had repeatedly faced down mobs and attracted “thousands of listeners, new ones” to hear him speak on behalf of the antislavery cause. “[T]he more they cry out, ‘Phillips ought to be hung!’ ‘Shoot him!’ the wider he is heard,” she argued. The second writer pondered the state of national affairs, wondering “is there to be all this fuss, to end, after all, in some miserable, mean compromise?” The author’s reaction to the recent secession of several slaveholding states was “Let them go in peace: it cannot last long for them,” with a prediction that, “Their beloved institution will soon destroy itself, and them too.” The third extract, written by “a noble woman,” and addressed to Garrison, implored him not to be “afraid in these times when the fruit of an awakened conscience threatens to be civil war” and closed with a poem emphasizing the

inevitable triumph of good over evil.<sup>1</sup> Together, the three excerpts offered insight into the individual musings of the correspondents, while supporting Garrison's argument that the potentially alarming events of the day were milestones towards the eventual triumph of the cause of abolition.

Between the fall of 1859 and the spring of 1861, momentous events framed a newly divided American political landscape. Sectional polarization and conflict over the issue of slavery had reached fever pitch over the course of the 1850s and came to a head in 1861. Several key incidents, occurring in rapid succession, led to the fracture of the Union along sectional lines. First, John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry, Virginia, in October 1859, made a frontal assault on the institution of slavery, threatening its overthrow from within. Though the raid was quickly squashed by federal troops and did not result in the mass insurrection Brown envisioned, it stoked the fears of white Southerners that Northern abolitionists meant to incite slaves to violence, fears that increased when Brown's capture and execution transformed him into a martyr for the antislavery cause.

Next, the presidential election of 1860 drew clear sectional boundaries across the political parties, unfolding not as a national election but as two separate political contests in the North and South. Abraham Lincoln ran as the Republican Party candidate against Stephen Douglas, a Democrat, in the North. John Breckinridge, a proslavery Democrat, ran against unionist John C. Bell in the South. When Lincoln won the election, he claimed victory by carrying nearly all of the Northern states. Shortly after his election, between December 20, 1860, and February 1, 1861, the lower South states of South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, and Texas seceded from the Union to form the Confederate States of America. The upper South

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<sup>1</sup> "Epistolary Correspondence," *The Liberator*, 22 February 1861.

states of Virginia, Arkansas, North Carolina, and Tennessee followed on their heels in April, May, and June of 1861. In the meantime, shots rang out over Fort Sumter, off the shore of Charleston, South Carolina, on April 12, 1861. The United States was at war.

The onset of the Civil War, which brought growing national support for a policy of military emancipation, dramatically changed the circumstances of the antislavery movement. As the war to save the Union became a war to end slavery, abolitionists rehearsed political contests yet to come through correspondence. Their letters document a dawning realization that emancipation alone would not be enough to ensure the incorporation of former slaves as equal members of the national civil and political body.

Accounts of abolition usually end with the Civil War as the culmination of antislavery agitation, after which most abolitionists smoothly absorbed into more mainstream avenues of political activism. As the military, the federal government, and the Northern public increasingly took an antislavery stance, it became easier for abolitionists to make their views heard on the national political stage.<sup>2</sup> Major figures such as William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, and Wendell Phillips expressed support for the war and endorsed representatives of the Republican Party. They pushed the administration towards a policy of emancipation and then further,

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<sup>2</sup> To take examples from two recent influential accounts: Manisha Sinha writes, “With Lincoln’s election to the presidency and the secession of most of the slave states, antislavery could finally harness the power of the state: the political legitimacy and military might of the United States government.” Manisha Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 543. Patrick Rael includes chapters on the Civil War and Reconstruction that mainly focus on Lincoln, the federal government, and the military as driving forces behind emancipation. See Patrick Rael, *Eighty-Eight Years: The Long Death of Slavery in the United States, 1777-1865* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015).

Older syntheses, such as James Brewer Stewart’s, *Holy Warriors*, present a narrative of male abolitionist leaders’ absorption into Republican Party politics. Stewart, *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery*, Rev. Ed. (New York: Hill and Wang), 1996 [1976]. See also James M. McPherson, *The Struggle for Equality: Abolitionists and the Negro in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964).

For recent studies of the relationship between Abraham Lincoln, the Republican Party, and antislavery politics, see Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010); James Oakes, *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861-1865* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013).



towards equal rights for former slaves. “We heat the bar and they catch the birds” is how Edmund Quincy had described the relationship between abolitionists and Republican Party leaders in an 1859 letter.<sup>3</sup> In other words, abolitionists primed politicians to take an antislavery stance; although, as Quincy’s letter indicates, they might resent being pushed to the sidelines as Republican politicians took credit for antislavery successes.

The Civil War brought about changes in both the ideas and the personnel of abolition, as scholars have recognized. Some veterans withdrew from the cause, leaving the work in the hands of younger activists, while others placed more faith in the efficacy of government institutions. Women, unable to participate directly in electoral politics or enlist in the military, channeled their energy into auxiliary causes. They joined the Sanitary Commission, led sewing societies that made clothing for soldiers and former slaves, and traveled to the South to teach in freedmen’s schools.<sup>4</sup> Abolitionists arrived at these shifts in the internal organization and outer manifestations of antislavery activism by a process both gradual and uneven, a fact that historians have not sufficiently registered.

Garrison published the extracts of “Epistolary Correspondence” in his newspaper just after the first wave of secessions but before the actual outbreak of war. He was prescient in anticipating the significance of correspondence to developing understandings of secession, the war, and its impact, as the abolitionist Sallie Holley illustrated when she pasted it into her scrapbook. The scrapbook consists mainly of printed letters written by Holley and her friends,

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<sup>3</sup> Edmund Quincy to Richard Webb, 9 October 1859, Garrison Family Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

<sup>4</sup> See for example: Jeanie Attie, *Patriotic Toil: Northern Women and the American Civil War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Carol Faulkner, *Women’s Radical Reconstruction: The Freedmen’s Aid Movement* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Melinda Lawson, *Patriot Fires: Forging a New American Nationalism in the Civil War North* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002).

carefully cut out of newspapers and pasted on the colorful pages of the book. Holley added the initials C.F.P. under the first extract in the 1861 *Liberator* article, indicating that the letter was originally written by her close companion, Caroline F. Putnam. It is possible that Holley herself was the original recipient of Putnam's letter and that it was she who passed it along to Garrison in the first place. Garrison's miniature assembly of "Epistolary Correspondence," housed in Holley's more extensive private collection, reveals how personal letters discussing political events generated substantial interest, offering both intimate friends and members of the broader public the opportunity to contemplate and comprehend the potential impact of the historic events unfolding around them.<sup>5</sup>

The major question for abolitionists throughout the era of the Civil War and Reconstruction was: what should we do now? Through correspondence, they wrestled with many of the same conundrums that had animated earlier debates within the movement, such as the place of women and the value of electoral politics. They also confronted new problems, particularly the plight of former slaves, known colloquially as "contrabands," in the midst of the war. Like many Americans, abolitionists struggled to comprehend the scale of the war and its impact. The upheaval of war presaged massive, immediate emancipation. And it brought abolitionists into direct contact with slaves—the people many of them had devoted decades of their lives to helping—on a much greater scale than ever before. Yet the antislavery movement fought to stay relevant. Ideological and material circumstances within and without threatened dissolution. Materially, they lacked the resources to meet even the basic needs of freedpeople for food, clothing, and shelter, not to mention their political claims to citizenship, land, and education.

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<sup>5</sup> I first encountered Garrison's article in Sallie Holley's scrapbook, not when browsing the pages of *The Liberator* or through searching an online database for key terms.

Ideologically, the exhaustion of their decades-long campaign for emancipation led some to conclude that they should entrust these issues to the federal government. But many, perceiving an opportunity to participate in radically reshaping American politics and society, hesitated to withdraw from the fight. Though bolstered by the prospect of achieving the goal of abolishing slavery, they faced new obstacles in contemplating what would come afterwards.

### **“I feel grateful that I may be even a spectator:” The Buildup to War**

Before the war began, John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry galvanized the antislavery movement. It was, as Manisha Sinha points out, “a culmination of abolitionists’ attempt to look to the slaves rather than to slaveholders in their fight against slavery.” After a decade punctuated by conflict over the federal Fugitive Slave Law, outbreaks of armed violence in Kansas, and the caning of Republican senator Charles Sumner on the floor of Congress, Brown’s raid was not so much a shocking anomaly as the next step in a series of violent altercations.<sup>6</sup> Brown’s legacy became apparent not through successful instigation of a slave rebellion but through the way Brown, and his coadjutors, “stole victory from failure,” to become a martyr to the antislavery cause.<sup>7</sup> John H. Crawford, an acquaintance of Brown, called him “infatuated, insane and impracticable ... [a] Misguided, injured persecuted, but honest man” but predicted, in a letter written on the eve of Brown’s execution, “John Brown may be hung tomorrow, but not die. He will live in fire in Northern hearts, and his specter will haunt slaveholders at their bedsides, till they shall grow haggard and pale.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Manisha Sinha, “The Caning of Charles Sumner: Slavery, Race, and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 23 (Summer 2003): 233-262.

<sup>7</sup> Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause*, 555-557.

<sup>8</sup> John H. [Crawford] to Achsa Sprague, 1 December 1859, Achsa Sprague Papers, Vermont Historical Society.

Brown's impact manifested itself on the public stage in much the way that Crawford forecast. Prominent abolitionists and Radical Republicans praised him in writings and lectures. James Redpath, an antislavery journalist, published a heroic biography of Brown soon after his execution, in January 1860.<sup>9</sup> And although many white Northerners disapproved of Brown's violent tactics, they were impressed by his courage. The tumultuous events of the 1850s convinced many that slaveholders had a chokehold over the federal government, and the tide of public opinion was turning towards abolition. While attuned to the public manifestations of Brown's legacy, historians have overlooked its impact in private correspondence.<sup>10</sup>

John Brown's story captivated Lydia Maria Child, who was a well-known advocate for abolition and women's rights. Writing to friends from her home in Wayland, Massachusetts, during Brown's imprisonment, she reflected on the public impact of his raid: "[H]ere as elsewhere, I can think and talk of nothing but Capt. John Brown. ... In no possible way could moral influence on the subject [of slavery] have been so widely disseminated thro the whole length and breadth of the land." She predicted that "Whether they hang the noble old man, or keep him shut up in prison, he will continue to be a dangerous agitator. No peace and quietness for Slavery after this! ... Henceforth, there is no peace."<sup>11</sup> After Brown's execution on December 2, 1859, Child considered her personal reaction to his death: "I have renewed my youth and

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<sup>9</sup> James Redpath, *The Public Life of Capt. John Brown* (Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860); Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 562.

<sup>10</sup> On John Brown see: Tony Horwitz, *Midnight Rising: John Brown and the Raid That Sparked the Civil War* (New York: Henry Holt and Co, 2011); David S. Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005); John Stauffer and Zoe Trodd, eds., *The Tribunal: Responses to John Brown and the Harpers Ferry Raid* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012); John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), esp. 236-281.

<sup>11</sup> Lydia Maria Child to J. Peter and Susan Lesley, 20 November 1859, J. Peter Lesley Papers, American Philosophical Society.

strength since the martyrdom of old John Brown; and I feel as if every day were lost, in which I do not try to do something to demolish slavery.”<sup>12</sup>

Child’s feeling of revitalization contrasted starkly with the emotion she had expressed several months earlier, before Brown’s raid. In January, lamenting that “Now I have no circle, either political, or religious, or social,” Child refused an invitation to an antislavery gathering. “At such gatherings, I also feel much like a ghost on its own grave,” she explained, “So many have passed away since the days when I enjoyed the Anti-Slavery meetings; and so few remain, in whom I take interest, or who seem to take interest in me.”<sup>13</sup> Child saw herself as part of a dwindling and irrelevant generation of aging reformers. Brown’s raid and martyrdom, however, delivered new energy and a sense of purpose to Child, helping to unite her with emerging younger activists.

Child took charge of raising money to support Brown’s family and those of his companions. Her actions made her a target for both Brown’s sympathizers and his opponents. Writing on Christmas day in 1859, Child apologized to a friend for a slow response to a previous letter, explaining that she would have answered sooner, “had I not been completely overwhelmed with letters about John Brown and his family. During the week that has just passed, I have answered thirty three; and a good many I shall not answer.” While most of the letters “are full of admiration of the old hero, and sympathy for his family,” others, mostly from the South, “are inconceivably violent and obscene,” Child reported. She did not regret her “curt replies” to those “old fogies,” explaining, “Recent events have filled me with electricity, and it don’t take much to make the sparks fly.” Although she described her usual demeanor as “a perfect dormouse,” she

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<sup>12</sup> Lydia Maria Child to Oliver Johnson, 20 December 1859, Lydia Maria Child Papers, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan (WCL).

<sup>13</sup> Lydia Maria Child to “My dearly beloved child” [Marie White Lowell?], Lydia Maria Child Papers, WCL.

revealed that “during these exciting weeks, I have lain awake half the nights; and always, always, I have been in that dreadful Virginia prison.”<sup>14</sup>

Brown’s passion reinvigorated Child, a veteran of long standing in the antislavery cause, inspiring her to reenter the fray by debating his opponents on paper. In private correspondence, she recorded her feelings and contemplated the future and her role in it. Letters provided her a means of taking action, as she processed her reaction to Brown’s raid and its aftermath.

Child was not alone. Another woman, Anna T. Jacobs, recorded a similar response in a letter she wrote to a friend from King’s Ferry, New York, a few days after Brown’s execution. “I share in thy admiration and sympathy for Brown,” she began simply but then described a more complicated emotion. “I have been accustomed so long to be a quiet spectator of the action and excitement of others. But tho’ deprived of active participation in the great conflict of the day, I feel grateful that I may be even a spectator,” she reflected. Her faith in God, she concluded, gave her confidence “to look on with calmness and joyful anticipation as to the result[.]”<sup>15</sup> Jacobs was less aggressive than Child in publicly supporting Brown or arguing with his detractors. But her letter demonstrates how even mere “spectators” to events unfolding on the national public stage seized the opportunity to consider the possible outcome in their correspondence.

Otto Smith, a German immigrant living in Iowa, likewise felt full of anticipation when he wrote to a friend in Massachusetts on the day of Brown’s execution. Smith was anxious to hear more about the reaction in Massachusetts, the state that “gives birth to a good many Pioniers of the holy cause of Liberty, men who march in the fore most ranks of the legions of Freedom, &

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<sup>14</sup> Lydia Maria Child to Susan Inches Lesley, 25 December 1859, J. Peter Lesley Papers, American Philosophical Society.

<sup>15</sup> Anna T. Jacobs to Emily Howland, 6 December 1859, Emily Howland Papers, Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University (RMC).

carry the banner through gloom to night.” Declaring Brown “a noble & heroic man,” Smith asked, “Was there ever such a hero in modern times?” He also praised Wendell Phillips and Lydia Maria Child as effective proponents of Brown’s legacy. “[T]o-day they murder immortal John Brown ... in cold blood, for the crime of having dared to be a herald of Liberty!” Smith exclaimed. “But as sure, as Heaven is just, those Southern pirates will suffer for it.”<sup>16</sup> Smith’s letter echoed the tone of anticipation in the letters that Child and Jacobs wrote around the same time. Brown inspired opponents of slavery from across the northern United States to record their hopes for the future in correspondence with friends and family members.

Though many abolitionists felt hopeful anticipation, even as the country stood at the brink of Civil War, the intensely polarized political climate could also be disorienting and dangerous, especially for persons whose claims to freedom were suddenly tied up in national debates over the future of slavery. Fugitive slaves and their abolitionist allies had always relied on correspondence to transmit sensitive information, as well as to convey the experiences of runaways.<sup>17</sup> They continued to do so into the early 1860s, but the correspondence took on a distinct tenor as both fugitives and their supporters tried to make sense of the new political landscape.

In January of 1860, Frederick Douglass wrote to Maria G. Porter, an abolitionist from Douglass’s adopted hometown of Rochester, New York. At the time, Douglass was in England, where he had taken refuge after John Brown’s raid.<sup>18</sup> Although he did not take an active part in the planning or execution of the raid, Douglass had met with Brown in the preceding months and

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<sup>16</sup> Otto Smith to Rufus Clark Hitchcock, 2 December 1859, Rufus Clark Hitchcock Papers, Vermont Historical Society.

<sup>17</sup> See Chapter Five.

<sup>18</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (Hartford, Conn: Park Pub. Co, 1881), 392.

feared being targeted by Southern sympathizers as a co-conspirator. Douglass's most pressing reason for writing was to ask Porter for help in raising money to sustain his newspaper during his absence; but he also took some time to discuss his own vulnerable position. Douglass had risen to fame as an antislavery lecturer, writer, and publisher, becoming the most prominent face of fugitive slave abolitionism. He served as a reference point for white abolitionists in envisioning the hardships of slavery, the plight of fugitives, and the humanity of slaves. The first impulse of many Northerners, when they encountered a fugitive, was to compare that person to Douglass. For example, a Hudson, New York, woman, wrote to William Lloyd Garrison in 1845 to notify him of the situation of "one who has lately left the far South, and appears to me to be a man of uncommon intelligence[.]" She declared that her purpose in writing was that "I have fancied that with the encouragement and kindly sympathies of the abolitionists of Massachusetts, he might prove a second Douglass."<sup>19</sup>

Douglass mentioned to Porter that, despite the recent assurances of an acquaintance that it was safe for him to return to Rochester, he had doubts: "So indeed it would seem if the shedding of the blood of the noble old Brown—and his four companions—could satisfy the alarmed and enraged tyrants of Virginia. But there is no satisfying any such vengeance."<sup>20</sup> Brown's raid had an invigorating effect on abolition, but uncertainty and danger lay not far beneath optimism. The danger was especially acute for Douglass. He was a celebrated fugitive abolitionist, despised by Southern slaveholders. Furthermore, his acquaintance with Brown threatened to implicate him in the Harper's Ferry raid and expose him to retaliation. Therefore, while "convinced" that his

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<sup>19</sup> Margaret M. Hyatt to William Lloyd Garrison, 14 September 1845, Anti-Slavery Collection, Boston Public Library.

<sup>20</sup> Frederick Douglass to Maria G. Porter, 11 January 1860, Rochester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society Papers, WCL.



newspaper “was never more needed than now,” and determined to carry on his work from afar, Douglass also took the opportunity to express doubts about his personal safety.<sup>21</sup>

S.C. Coakley expressed a similar apprehension in a letter to her former teacher, Emily Howland, in January 1860. Howland, an abolitionist, had spent about a year and a half in Washington, D.C., teaching at a school for African American girls.<sup>22</sup> Although she had left the school and returned to her home in New York in April 1859 after butting heads with the headmistress, Myrtilla Miner, Howland sustained relationships with many of her former pupils through correspondence. Coakley’s characterization of the students’ response to John Brown’s execution was succinct but oblique: “We feel deeply the death of Capt Brown and are very thankful to him for attempting to free the enslaved but we dare not express our thoughts here for we know not what may be done if we say what we feel.”<sup>23</sup> Coakley did not make clear exactly what obstacles to expression she and her peers faced. She may have feared punishment by the headmistress, Miner, who did not share the radical views of Howland or her students.<sup>24</sup> Or perhaps she feared that the school might become a target of racist vigilante violence if her envelope were opened in transit. Whatever the reason, her letter stands as a poignant example of how racism threatened to stifle the free expression of political ideas among African American correspondents in the wake of Brown’s raid.

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<sup>21</sup> Frederick Douglass to Maria G. Porter, 11 January 1860, Rochester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society Papers, WCL.

<sup>22</sup> Judith Colucci Breault, *The World of Emily Howland: Odyssey of a Humanitarian* (Millbrae, CA: Les Femmes Pub., 1976), 33-41.

<sup>23</sup> S.C. Coakley to Emily Howland, 27 January 1860, Emily Howland Papers, RMC.

<sup>24</sup> I discuss Emily Howland and her work with freedmen’s education during Reconstruction further in Chapter Seven. See also, Breault, *The World of Emily Howland Odyssey of a Humanitarian*; Faulkner, *Women’s Radical Reconstruction*.

The case of Sophia Johnson and her children provides another dramatic illustration of how the events leading up to the Civil War simultaneously presented opportunities and obstacles for black Americans. Johnson was a former slave from Maryland. An agreement with her master freed her once she turned twenty-eight, and the same rule was meant to apply to her children. By July of 1860, Sophia Johnson had claimed her freedom. She first lived in Philadelphia but subsequently moved to New Bedford, Massachusetts, for fear of being re-enslaved.<sup>25</sup> Although Johnson lived as a free woman, her children were still slaves in Maryland. Something occurred to interrupt the manumission agreement. It is likely that Johnson's master died, and the inheritors of his estate lost or ignored the documents guaranteeing freedom for her and her children.<sup>26</sup> Contrary to the terms of the agreement, her children had been sold as slaves for life to a new owner, Mr. Loates, who attempted to take them out of the state to Georgia. Two of her older sons, Alexander and Richard, were held in a "negro jail" in Baltimore, possibly because they resisted the sale.<sup>27</sup>

Johnson turned to legal channels to claim freedom for her children. According to the manumission agreement, and verified by Maryland state law, the sale of her children as slaves for life was illegal.<sup>28</sup> Upon petitioning for their freedom, the apprenticeship period of twenty-

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<sup>25</sup> See Chapter One on the threat of unlawful kidnapping and re-enslavement in Philadelphia and surrounding regions. See also Carol Wilson, *Freedom at Risk: The Kidnapping of Free Blacks in America, 1780-1865* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994).

<sup>26</sup> According to a letter from Joseph Truman to George Langston, Sophia Johnson was in possession of the illegal bill of sale for her children. To Truman, this fact indicated that the purchaser of her children, Loates, "did not place much importance on it then however much he may now." See Joseph M. Truman, Jr. to George E. Langston, 30 August 1860, Pennsylvania Abolition Society Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (PAS-HSP).

<sup>27</sup> George E. Langston to Jos. M. Truman, 7 August 1860, PAS-HSP.

<sup>28</sup> An 1817 Maryland state law prohibited the sale of slaves out of the state who had been promised manumission after serving for a term of years. The law was meant to protect slaves from being denied manumission once leaving Maryland. As Stephen Whitman points out, in practice, the law punished illegal purchasers much more often than sellers of slaves. T. Stephen Whitman, *The Price of Freedom: Slavery and Manumission in Baltimore and Early National Maryland* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 76, 78-79.

eight years would also be invalid, and the children immediately freed.<sup>29</sup> Johnson and her children were unable to act on their own, however, so Sophia sought assistance from an agent of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society (PAS), Joseph M. Truman, Jr. Truman acted as an intermediary representing Johnson in an exchange of information about her children with J.M. Kilgour, a lawyer in Maryland, and George E. Langston, a clerk or city representative in Baltimore.<sup>30</sup>

A three-way exchange of information and claims occurred between Johnson, Truman, and the Baltimore men. Johnson used correspondence to physically distance herself from potential threats and also to control the flow of information about her case and her whereabouts. She corresponded directly with Truman, who, in turn, exchanged letters with Langston and Kilgour, before relaying information back to her. Though she was living in New Bedford, Johnson asked Truman to give the impression to Langston and Kilgour that she remained in Philadelphia. At one point, she made a covert trip to Baltimore without the knowledge of any of the men involved in the case.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> The sketch of Sophia Johnson's personal history and legal status is drawn from a series of letters in the correspondence files of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society. See Joseph M. Truman, Jr. to J.M. Kilgour, 26 July 1860; George E. Langston to Jos. M. Truman, 27 July 1860; Joseph M. Truman, Jr. to George E. Langston, 2 August 1860; George E. Langston to Jos. M. Truman, 7 August 1860; Joseph M. Truman, Jr. to George E. Langston, 10 August 1860; George E. Langston to Jos. M. Truman, 27 August 1860; Joseph M. Truman, Jr. to George E. Langston, 30 August 1860; Joseph M. Truman, Jr. to George E. Langston, 20 September 1860; Sophia Johnson to Mr. Truman, 23 September 1860; George E. Langston to Jos. M. Truman, 28 September 1860; Joseph M. Truman, Jr., to Sophia Johnson, 29 September 1860; Sophia Johnson to Mr. Truman, 4 October 1860; Joseph M. Truman, Jr. to George E. Langston, 8 October 1860; ; Joseph M. Truman, Jr. to George E. Langston, 8 November 1860; Joseph M. Truman, Jr. to George E. Langston, 22 November 1860; Sophia Johnson to Mr. Truman, 29 November 1860; George E. Langston to Jos. M. Truman, 5 December 1860; Joseph M. Truman, Jr. to Sophia Johnson, 7 December 1860; Sophia Johnson to Mr. Truman, 6 February 1861; Joseph M. Truman to Sophia Johnson, 29 May 1861; Sophia Johnson to Friend, 7 June 1861, PAS-HSP.

<sup>30</sup> George E. Langston's profession is never directly stated in the letters, but he mentioned that Sophia "came to my office of information" seeking assistance in proving the right to freedom of herself and her children. Langston commented that "The situation I hold sometimes places it in my power to serve the poor "Derkeys" and makes it a duty probably as a matter of humanity[.]" See George E. Langston to Jos. M. Truman, Jr., 27 July 1860, PAS-HSP.

<sup>31</sup> Joseph M. Truman, Jr. to George E. Langston, 10 August 1860, PAS-HSP.

Sophia Johnson's case is interesting for several reasons. First, the correspondence indicates that Johnson, like many slaves and former slaves, was illiterate. Factors including variations in penmanship and styles of spelling, grammar, and punctuation across her letters indicate that she relied on different amanuenses to write to Truman. Secondly, the caution Johnson took in directing the stream of information between her representatives and the difficulties she faced in communicating directly with her family members and friends in Maryland illuminate the risks slaves and former slaves faced in committing information about themselves to paper. These risks were especially intense in correspondence that crossed the geographic lines between slavery and freedom. Finally, the danger escalated in the atmosphere of extreme political polarization over the issue of slavery that characterized the time in which Johnson's case unfolded: between the summers of 1860 and 1861. The prospect of war and its eventual outbreak threatened the outcome of her case, which at first seemed unassailable.

Johnson first contacted the PAS in July 1860, when, according to Joseph Truman, she applied to the Acting Committee for advice.<sup>32</sup> Truman took charge of her case and struck up a correspondence with Langston and Kilgour on July 26. The Maryland men were supportive of Johnson's claims, despite their reluctance to endorse the greater cause of abolition. Langston told Truman on July 27, "I will cherfully do all I can in this matter to see the woman & her children righted," while maintaining, "I am a southern man, in all my feelings - & of course no abolitionist – but I am in favor of having the negro protected in all their rights ... These are the only motives that have actuated me in this case[.]"<sup>33</sup> In response, Truman acknowledged, "I am aware that many in the South who have not been brought to see things as I see them on this

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<sup>32</sup> Joseph M. Truman, Jr. to J.M. Kilgour, 26 July 1860, PAS-HSP.

<sup>33</sup> George E. Langston to Jos. M. Truman, Jr., 27 July 1860, PAS-HSP.

subject [abolition] are nevertheless opposed to their enslavement in violation of the legal enactments of the State[.]”<sup>34</sup> Langston replied, “I do not confound the Pennsylvania Abolition society or its principals with the acts or principals of the Garretsons Phillips or Fred Douglass’es ... I dispise alike the fanatics of the north & the ‘fire eaters’ of the south[.]”<sup>35</sup> Truman chose not to pursue the political discussion further, instead focusing in his next letter, dated August 10, on the “prospect of a speedy trial” and noting that Johnson “naturally feels very anxious” as to its result.<sup>36</sup>

By September 1860, the tone of the correspondence had shifted, reflecting Johnson’s strategic use of letters to control the dialog around her case. On September 23, Johnson asked Truman, “You will please to send me word whether you have had any communication from Mr Geo Langston....” She also instructed him, “You would please write to Mr Langston as often as possible so that he will not know that I am not in Philadelphia as I do [not] wish him to know that I have left Philadelphia and you will please not to let him know about it[.]” Johnson enclosed two dollars in her letter and concluded, “write me as often as you can make it convenient and please sir not forget me.”<sup>37</sup>

On September 29, Truman responded, telling Johnson, “I hope thee will not for a moment suppose that I have forgotten the case of thy boys,” assuring her that he wrote to Langston twice since he last saw her. A few days later, Johnson replied, providing the names of several people who could offer evidence in her favor. At this point, Johnson shifted to a direct tone that

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<sup>34</sup> Jos. M. Truman, Jr. to G.E. Langston, 2 August 1860, PAS-HSP.

<sup>35</sup> George E. Langston to Jos. M. Truman, Esqr., 7 August 1860, PAS-HSP.

<sup>36</sup> Joseph M. Truman, Jr. to George E. Langston, 10 August 1860, PAS-HSP.

<sup>37</sup> Sophia Johnson to Mr. Truman, 23 September 1860, PAS-HSP.

reflected her desperation to obtain information about her family. She instructed Truman to “Ask Mr Langston to enquire of my mother why she has not written to me I have wrote three or four times ... Write to Mr Kilgour if he will please to let me know about my other three children for I suppose Mr Loates has forbidden them to write to me for malice and spite I have no other way to hear from them except through him taking it upon himself[.]” “Please to keep up the communication with Mr Langston so that he may not know that I am out of Philadelphia,” Johnson concluded. She signed herself “Your Affectionate Friend,” before asking Truman in a postscript to “please let me know as quick as possible” when he heard back from Langston.<sup>38</sup>

A draft of a letter from Truman to Langston dated October 8, 1860, indicates that he followed Johnson’s instructions. He conveyed the information about potential witnesses in her favor before asking about her mother’s silence. Numerous crossed-out phrases in the draft suggest that Truman struggled to frame the question delicately. He wrote, “Sophia would ~~be obliged~~ like thee ~~would~~ to enquire of why her mother ~~why she~~ has not ~~written any~~ answered to the ~~three or four~~ letter ~~Sophia~~ which she has written.” “[S]he would also like to hear through JM Kilgour regarding her three other children as she has no other way of hearing as to their welfare,” Truman continued. Perhaps worried about testing Langston’s patience, Truman explained, “I hope thee will not be annoyed by my writing so often. Sophia naturally feels anxious and ~~unless I write frequently~~ urges my writing even more frequently than I do[.]”<sup>39</sup>

Langston responded, “I have no way myself of hearing from Sophia’s children at Frederick – When I received your letter I went to Mrs. Wilson, the woman Sophia calls mother – ... said she had received several letters from Sophia but by advice of her daughters, would not answer

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<sup>38</sup> Sophia Johnson to Mr. Truman, 4 October 1860, PAS-HSP.

<sup>39</sup> Jos. M. Truman, Jr. to G.E. Langston, 8 October 1860, PAS-HSP.

them[.]” According to Langston, Wilson and her daughters refused to write because “they were free, and thought it best to have nothing to do with Sophia’s matters, as it might get them into trouble[.]”<sup>40</sup> This three-way exchange between Johnson, Truman, and Langston demonstrates how a variety of factors conspired to frustrate Johnson’s attempts to contact her family members in Maryland. Johnson suspected that Loates forbade her children from writing to her. Without an ally on the ground in Frederick to assist them, Johnson and her representatives remained in the dark as to their welfare. And Johnson’s mother, Mrs. Wilson, was hesitant to recognize their family relationship by responding to her letters. Johnson aimed to use correspondence as a tool to advance her family’s claim to manumission, but the tenuous boundary between slavery and freedom in Maryland worked against her.<sup>41</sup> White slaveholders surveilled the exchange of information. Even people with legitimate claims to freedom, including Johnson’s mother, were unwilling to jeopardize their situation by writing letters that challenged the authority of slaveholders.

In the same letter, Langston pointed out that national political events threatened to impinge upon the outcome of Johnson’s case. Although Loates, the man who purchased Johnson’s children, had done so in violation of the law, a trial would rest upon the jury’s decision regarding the criminality of his actions. Langston reflected, “I fear that under the present excited feeling of the Public mind, that a jury would decide more leniently than they would have done a month

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<sup>40</sup> George E. Langston to Jos. M. Truman, Jr., 5 December 1860, PAS-HSP.

<sup>41</sup> On slavery and free labor in Maryland see: Barbara Jeanne Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland during the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Max L. Grivno, *Gleanings of Freedom: Free and Slave Labor along the Mason-Dixon Line, 1790-1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011); Jessica Millward, *Finding Charity’s Folk: Enslaved and Free Black Women in Maryland* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2015); Seth Rockman, *Scraping by: Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009); Whitman, *The Price of Freedom*.

ago[.]”<sup>42</sup> He referred to Lincoln’s victory in the recent presidential election and the threats of Southern states of secession. Indeed, South Carolina seceded just two weeks after the date of Langston’s letter. Though Maryland remained with the Union through the Civil War, the state was deeply divided between Northern and Southern loyalties.

What did these events mean for Sophia Johnson and her children? On January 29, 1861, Truman addressed Langston to ask about the progress of the trial of one of Johnson’s sons. He wrote, “I feel a backwardness in addressing thee in view of the present unfortunate state of affairs but as my connection with the case is merely to assist a fellow being in obtaining his rights according to the laws of Maryland I do not think any one could complain about it.”<sup>43</sup> Truman received no reply. He wrote again to both Langston and Kilgour on February 15 after receiving a letter from Johnson. She wrote, “Feeling very anxious about the Trial of my Son Alex I cannot forbear putting you to the trouble to answer me this letter,” and inquired, “I sent you two letter a while ago did you get them, and send them to the South, do you think that the trial will go on.” “Please answer this as soon as possible to relive my anxious mind,” Johnson entreated.<sup>44</sup> Both Johnson and Truman were unsettled by the lack of communication from Maryland in the midst of the secession crisis.

In subsequent months, riots broke out in Baltimore when Northern troops marched through the city to board a train to Washington, D.C. President Lincoln ordered that soldiers should be rerouted through Annapolis to avoid further violence. General Benjamin F. Butler’s army

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<sup>42</sup> George E. Langston to Jos. M. Truman, Jr., 5 December 1860, PAS-HSP.

<sup>43</sup> Joseph M. Truman, Jr. to G.E. Langston, 29 January 1861, PAS-HSP.

<sup>44</sup> Sophia Johnson to Mr Trueman, 6 February 1861, PAS-HSP.



occupied Baltimore in May 1861, and Lincoln authorized the suspension of the writ of *habeas corpus* to hold local officials, ostensibly to prevent them from instigating secession.<sup>45</sup>

Around the same time of these dramatic developments, Joseph M. Truman addressed another letter to Sophia Johnson to reassure her that he had not forgotten her case. He reported that he had written several times to Baltimore but “received no answer I suppose owing to the unsettled times[.]” Truman concluded with weak optimism: “Hoping that something may yet be done (if slavery itself continues) for thy relief[.]”<sup>46</sup> Contrary to his wish, slavery persisted in Maryland until the passage of a state constitutional amendment in late 1864.

The final letter in the sequence, and the last word on the matter that survives in the historical record, came from Johnson. On June 7, 1861, she wrote to Truman, “i Received your kind Letter and Was glad to hear from you and hope that these few Lines may find you Well and in good health[.]” Johnson assured him, “i did not think you had forgotten Elick [her son Alex] in Maryland, that this confusion give me to think, that you could not, do anything in the regard of Elick[.]” Johnson informed Truman, “i have heard that he [Alex] was Sold a Little Ways out in the country But What Ever it is true or Not i don’t Know i have Not receive any Letter From Frederick city since i have heard from you[.]” Although Johnson stated, “i consider i have been done unjustly By in the case,” she also felt powerless in the face of current events. She concluded “that i could not do any good i thought i Would give the case to god, ~~lauler lay~~ lawler Kellgo [Kilgour] said that he was a fraid to bring the case up on account of the secessionist[.]” In

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<sup>45</sup> Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground*, 92–100.

<sup>46</sup> Jos. M. Truman, Jr. to Sophia Johnson, 29 May 1861, PAS-HSP.

closing Johnson wrote, “Please to Ans[wer] this Letter and Let me know if you think Elicks trial Will go on or not[.]”<sup>47</sup>

While it is not clear whether Sophia Johnson ever reunited with her children, the letters offer insight into the challenges presented by the outbreak of war for ordinary African Americans, especially those living in slaveholding border states. Johnson and her children, who were legally free, struggled to have their manumission recognized in a court of law. A case that at first seemed straightforward to both Joseph Truman, as a representative of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, and to George Langston and J.M. Kilgour in Maryland, took on new meaning in the context of Lincoln’s election and the country’s descent into secession and war. Sophia Johnson aimed to use the instrument of correspondence to her advantage—to protect her children and herself by concealing her whereabouts and controlling the flow of information. But she soon discovered that correspondence was an unreliable tool under the current circumstances. Johnson herself was illiterate (or barely literate), so she depended on others to transcribe her words. The varied spelling of her son Alexander’s name across her letters—Alex, Aleck, Alecks, Alicks, Elicks—reflects a process of trial and error among multiple writers. But despite her ingenuity in putting her words to paper, Johnson failed to get the responses she craved from friends and family in Maryland. Her mother refused to take the risk of replying to her letters. And Johnson suspected that her children were prevented from writing to her by their new owner.

Johnson relied on conventional tools and tropes of letter writing to convey her requests and achieve the results she desired. She deployed polite language in her letters to Truman, even while she also made clear demands and gave him frank instructions. Johnson’s attempt to secure

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<sup>47</sup> The spelling, grammar, and penmanship indicates that this letter was written by a different hand than previous letters signed by Johnson. Sophia Johnson to Friend [Joseph M. Truman, Jr.], 7 June 1861, PAS-HSP.

Truman's loyalty and accountability through correspondence succeeded. Truman conscientiously relayed her questions to Langston without revealing that she was no longer resident in Philadelphia. And he often copied lengthy passages from Langston's letters verbatim in his responses to Johnson. In short, Sophia Johnson used elements of language, tone, content, and composition effectively to advance her claim as a person worthy of assistance and in possession of a legitimate right to freedom. Though, as far as we know, Sophia's son's trial never came to pass, Johnson used correspondence to demonstrate her trustworthiness. This was not enough, however, to prevent her case from collapsing under the pressure of sectional tensions, secession, and the impending Civil War.

#### **A “queer, mixed up state of things:” Abolition in Wartime**

Abolitionists labored to make sense of the intensifying political conflict over slavery. The events of the day reverberated through their correspondence. They used letters to record their initial responses to secession and the outbreak of war, to predict future developments, and to determine their role in these events. Abolitionists' correspondence reveals how they understood the sectional crisis, and the act of writing offered an outlet through which they could process the mixed emotions they experienced.

Opponents of slavery took competing views, sometimes simultaneously, on the appropriate place for their movement in the events unfolding around them. Some advocated for a restrained approach. In January 1861, Quaker abolitionist John Needles addressed James Miller McKim from Baltimore. He cautioned, “I hope in view of the difficult times now with the south I could wish our northern friends would be quiet & hold no more Abolition meetings until things get more settled for they can do no good but may do evil I think our Cause will gain strength by a

sesation from action.”<sup>48</sup> William Lloyd Garrison took a similar stance in a letter he wrote in April 1861, just a week after the first shots rang out over Fort Sumter. He wrote, “Now that civil war has begun, and a whirlwind of violence and excitement is to sweep through the country ... it is for the abolitionists to ‘stand still, and see the salvation of God,’ rather than to attempt to add anything to the general commotion.”<sup>49</sup>

Garrison’s language reflects how many abolitionists saw the war as an almost inevitable culmination of their moral campaign; a divine rebirth through which the nation would be torn apart in order to be perfected. While Garrison’s tone was optimistic, others were fearful of what the “whirlwind of violence” might bring. They turned to letters to express their concerns and to attempt to comprehend the prospect of mass bloodshed in the name of their cause. In December 1860 Angelina Grimké Weld wrote to her son predicting that the dissolution of the Union would hasten the end of slavery. Even so, she forecast, “Things look very dark & gloomy & as I have given up all hope of abolition except thro’ blood & insurrection, I feel willing it should come in my day for the longer it is put off, the worse it will be.”<sup>50</sup> A few weeks later, Weld addressed her son again on his birthday, reflecting that they were “now I fear on the brink of a terrible Revolution in our beloved country.”<sup>51</sup> Angelina’s sister Sarah Grimké took a similar, though more hopeful, attitude in a letter she wrote in March of 1862. She confessed to a friend, “I feel as if I had passed through such a baptism of blood with the slave, that I can look beyond all the horrors of the present conflict & behold the deliverance of the captive.”<sup>52</sup> In a letter written the

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<sup>48</sup> John Needles to James Miller McKim, 10 January 1861, May Anti-Slavery Manuscripts, RMC.

<sup>49</sup> William Lloyd Garrison to Oliver Johnson, 19 April 1861, Garrison Family Papers, Sophia Smith Collection.

<sup>50</sup> Angelina Grimké Weld to Theodore Grimké Weld, 12 December [1860], Weld-Grimké Papers, WCL.

<sup>51</sup> Angelina Grimké Weld to Theodore Grimké Weld, 3 January 1861, Weld-Grimké Papers, WCL.

<sup>52</sup> Sarah Grimké to Catherine Brooks Yale, 15 March 1862, Weld-Grimké Papers, WCL.

day after Fort Sumter, another abolitionist told his wife, “I can think of nothing but the awful conflict going on at Charleston ... the indelible stain of blood on the hand & brain of the nation & worst of all on its heart.”<sup>53</sup> As these letters indicate, opponents of slavery, who traditionally favored forms of nonviolent protest, were troubled by the violence war would bring. They expressed fears for the moral consequences of bloodshed in their correspondence.

Others, however, were more concerned by the notion that the war would not go far enough to guarantee emancipation. One man told Theodore Dwight Weld in a February 1861 letter, “I am more afraid of some miserable concession, miscalled compromise, than of death, war, or damnation – for it is all these with dishonor attached[.]” He asked, “Must we be content to cover this deadly cancer (that eats the vitals of Liberty) with a court plaster, as though it were a beauty spot on the cheek of woman[?]”<sup>54</sup> And while some felt that the Union was in good hands with Lincoln as president—Susan B. Anthony commented about his first inaugural speech, “he shows some considerable back bone in his first utterance”—others found him wanting when it came to his antislavery principles.<sup>55</sup> Erasmus Darwin Hudson, a New York abolitionist, wrote to his son in 1862, “Things look rather dubious ... The Prest acts strangely—“the rail splitter’ astride of the fence—halting between two opinions” about slavery. Despite his concerns, however, Hudson had faith that “this nation is getting a terrible threshing – north as well as south and they equally

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<sup>53</sup> J. Peter Lesley to Susan Inches Lesley, 13 April 1861, Ames Family Historical Collection, Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University (Hereafter AFC).

<sup>54</sup> William Morris Davis to Theodore Dwight Weld, 7 February 1861, Weld-Grimké Papers, WCL.

<sup>55</sup> Susan B. Anthony to Gerrit Smith, 8 March 1861, Gerrit Smith Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Bird Library, Syracuse University.

deserve it. ... What the end is to be I cannot divine- only one thing is sure- slavery will be ended[.]”<sup>56</sup>

An 1862 letter written by Anna M.C. Barnes, of the Rochester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society, to the Montrose Ladies Anti-Slavery Association in England captures how abolitionists balanced competing opinions about the war and its consequences, using letters to articulate their views. Barnes thanked the Montrose women for a recent donation before offering some reflections on the current state of affairs in the United States. She wrote, “After years of labor when there seemed but a very distant hope of our efforts being crowned with any assurance of a speedy termination of slavery we have to rejoice in the midst of a terrible civil war that the end for which we have hoped, and prayed and labored, is beginning to show itself.” Barnes continued, “All through the North the anti slavery feeling is growing to hold up the hands of our President and sustain Congress in its acts be they holy and to restrain it & force it into others....” In a single sentence, she mixed hopeful language and prayer with an endorsement of force as an effective means of advancing the cause. Such an acknowledgment shows how many abolitionists came to weave the war, as a violent conflict over slavery, into their narratives of progress towards the goal of emancipation.

Towards the end of her letter, Barnes also noted logistical developments in the antislavery movement. “The change in the condition of the country has made the helping of fugitives to Canada needless,” she reported, but her society was now at work aiding freedpeople in Missouri and Kansas who “cry to us for help for clothing food & the means of education[.]”<sup>57</sup> Barnes

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<sup>56</sup> Erasmus Darwin Hudson to E. Darwin Hudson, Jr., 5 August 1862, Erasmus Darwin Hudson Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

<sup>57</sup> Anna M. C. Barnes to Montrose Ladies Anti-Slavery Association, 26 April 1862, Rochester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society Papers, WCL.

expressed gratitude to the English women for their donations, hope for the future, and the continued need for action all in the space of a few lines.

Barnes's letter offers insight into the ongoing issues of wartime manumission and freedmen's aid that came to define the progress of the Civil War and abolitionists' position in the conflict. Almost as soon as the war began, slaves started fleeing to Union lines in attempts to claim their freedom. General Benjamin F. Butler, the commander of Fort Monroe in Virginia, made the controversial decision in late May 1861 to classify slaves who escaped to his lines as "contraband of war:" enemy resources that would not be returned to their masters. Instead, Butler fed them and put able-bodied persons to work in support of the Union.<sup>58</sup> Soon thereafter, General John C. Frémont declared martial law in Missouri. As part of his proclamation, Frémont ordered all slaves of disloyal owners in the state to be free. President Lincoln instructed Frémont to rescind the order and relieved him of his command, alarmed by the prospect of losing the tentative support of slaveholders in the border states. Nevertheless, the idea lived on, and Lincoln himself eventually endorsed it when he drafted the emancipation proclamation.<sup>59</sup> Nothing could stop the tide of thousands of formerly enslaved refugees who continued to cross Union lines. Butler and Frémont's decisions and the debates that followed are examples of how slaves themselves drove wartime policies of emancipation. Slaves voted with their feet by deserting their masters and pursuing the possibility of freedom.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, the fugitive slaves, who

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<sup>58</sup> Butler's policy was endorsed by Congress in the First Confiscation Act of July 1861. The act did not explicitly declare slaves free but nullified owners' claims to their labor. Ira Berlin et al., eds., *Free at Last: A Documentary History of Slavery, Freedom, and the Civil War* (New York: The New Press, 1992), 8–11; Ira Berlin et al., eds., *Freedom, a Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861–1867*, ser. 1, v. 1, *The Destruction of Slavery* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 15–16.

<sup>59</sup> Berlin et al., *Free at Last*, 46; Berlin et al., *The Destruction of Slavery*, 16–17.

<sup>60</sup> Stephanie McCurry points out that slaves who could not run away, especially women, were able to disrupt the institution of slavery in other ways. Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), 218–262.

were known colloquially as “contrabands,” captured the Northern imagination and moved public opinion in favor of emancipation.<sup>61</sup>

The complicated place of “contrabands” in Northern popular imagination is captured by portrayals of former slaves in written and visual accounts of the war, including on stationary supplies. Images of “contrabands” were featured on patriotic envelope that circulated in the North during the Civil War.<sup>62</sup> These portrayals mixed support for wartime emancipation with racist depictions of former slaves. Most of the envelopes, which were collectible items, depicted patriotic symbols like the flag and phrases supporting the cause of Union, but some had more overtly political content. In the example below, the figure on the horse is General Butler. The label “Volunteer Miners and Sappers” refers to the employment of freedpeople in military labor, and “F.F.V.” stands for the “First Families of Virginia.” The overall tone of the envelope’s depiction was not overtly hostile. Nevertheless, the bottom caption employed racist dialect to assert that the men were good only for “digging trenches.” These features point to the pervasive racism directed at former slaves from within the Union ranks and among the Northern public.

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On the question of the role of slaves in driving emancipation see: Barbara J. Fields, “Who Freed the Slaves,” in Geoffrey Ward, ed., *The Civil War: An Illustrated History* (New York: Knopf, 1998); James M. McPherson, “Who Freed the Slaves,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 139, no. 1 (March 1995), 1-10.

<sup>61</sup> For a discussion of the term “contraband” and historians’ use of it see: Kate Masur, “‘A Rare Phenomenon of Philological Vegetation’: The Word ‘Contraband’ and the Meanings of Emancipation in the United States,” *The Journal of American History* 93, no. 4 (2007): 1050–84; Chandra Manning, *Troubled Refuge: Struggling for Freedom in the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016), 24–25; Thavolia Glymph, “This Species of Property: Female Slave Contrabands in the Civil War,” in Edward D.C. Campbell, Jr. and Kym S. Rice, eds., *A Woman’s War: Southern Women, Civil War, and the Confederate Legacy* (Richmond: The Museum of the Confederacy and Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 58; Thavolia Glymph, “Refugee Camp at Helena Arkansas, 1863,” in J. Matthew Gallman and Gary Gallagher, eds., *Lens of War: Exploring Iconic Photographs of the Civil War* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2015), 136-140.

<sup>62</sup> On African Americans depicted on Civil War patriotic envelopes, see Steven R. Boyd, *Patriotic Envelopes of the Civil War: The Iconography of Union and Confederate Covers* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010), 103-116.





Figure 5: Patriotic Envelope depicting “Contraband of War,” ca. 1861, U.S. Civil War Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University

Northern abolitionists reacted to the influx of former slaves to Union lines and adjusted the course of their campaign to focus on freedmen’s aid. They immediately recognized the potential for the actions of slaves to shape the outcome of the war, particularly when it came to agitating for a federal policy of universal emancipation. On May 28, 1861, just a day after Butler’s order at Fort Monroe, a Washington, D.C., woman, Gulielma Breed, wrote to her friend and former colleague, Emily Howland, to express the “hope that those hundred slaves at Monroe may be declared ‘contraband’” because “twill be the signal for such a stampede--!”<sup>63</sup> Referring to Frémont’s proclamation in a letter to Gerrit Smith, William Lloyd Garrison asked, “Is it not ‘the beginning to the end,’ and is not the end near?” signing his letter, “Yours, to break every

<sup>63</sup> Gulielma Breed to Emily Howland, 28 May 1861, Emily Howland Papers, RMC.

yoke.”<sup>64</sup> Even while the long-term implications of the military decisions remained unclear, abolitionists were alert to the promises of such developments in their letters.

Antislavery organizations quickly worked to put plans into place to provide assistance to former-slave refugees. As in previous phases of the movement, much of the organization for fundraising and gathering supplies was conducted through correspondence. The Pennsylvania Abolition Society aimed to help freedpeople who gathered in refugee camps in and around Washington, D.C., by assisting them to gain passage northwards and placing them in gainful appointment in Philadelphia and surrounding areas. William Still, a black abolitionist who had years of experience managing the mobility and placement of fugitive slaves as the chief agent for the Underground Railroad in Philadelphia, became the PAS’s employment agent.<sup>65</sup> In a March 1862 letter, Still requested the support of the PAS after having received multiple requests from prospective employers, officials in Washington, and former slaves seeking work. Still instructed the PAS officers to, “Please read the two enclosed letters which I received last Saturday[.]” He recounted that, “The same day two personal applications were made for similar purposes. Yesterday one or two others applied, & a Contraband in the bargain. Today likewise, calls have been made, and I will enclose to you a letter from Washington which will speak for itself.”<sup>66</sup>

By April, the PAS had followed Still’s advice and undertook formal efforts to assist freedpeople coming from Washington to Philadelphia by helping them find homes and

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<sup>64</sup> William Lloyd Garrison to Gerrit Smith, 5 September 1861, Gerrit Smith Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Bird Library, Syracuse University.

<sup>65</sup> It is not clear from the correspondence whether William Still was paid for his work as the employment agent. Still proposed a salary of eight dollars per month in March 1862, but in September he noted that he was working hard and receiving no pay for his services. See William Still to Joseph M. Truman, Esq., 13 March 1862; William Still to Joseph M. Truman, Jr., 15 September 1862, PAS-HSP.

<sup>66</sup> William Still to Dellwyn Parrish, Esq., 11 March 1862, PAS-HSP.

employment. As Still indicated, they relied on the exchange of letters to gather information and manage these attempts. Joseph M. Truman, Jr., the chairman of the PAS's employment committee, reported, "We are endeavoring (through correspondence) to ascertain the probability of others being sent on, with a view to have ... situations procured for them in advance."<sup>67</sup> In May, Still reported a high demand for refugees by local employers, but few freedpeople were actually entering the city.<sup>68</sup> In June, officials in Washington wrote to Philadelphia describing how the situation there was escalating. The presidents of the Freedmen's Relief Association in Washington reported to the PAS that the refugee population was growing rapidly. They lamented, "It is disastrous to the 'contrabands' and a loss to the community to have them remaining in idleness here when there is such a demand for labor in the free states. But 'How are they to get there?' is a question to be answered by wiser heads than mine." The Washington men urged the necessity of transporting "these poor friends of ours" to the free states, "where they may find health, work, suitable training and encouragement."<sup>69</sup> Meanwhile, the PAS kept up a broad correspondence throughout the Northeast, seeking to establish connections through which they could place former slaves in stable situations. But by September, both Washington and Philadelphia were overwhelmed by the material demands placed on them by growing populations of freedpeople. On September 15, William Still wrote a letter to Joseph M. Truman in which he catalogued the individuals (he counted at least fifteen) who had applied to him for assistance within the span of just half of one day.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Joseph M. Truman, Jr. to Wm J Fuller, A.M. Green, J.A. Williams, 4 April 1862, PAS-HSP.

<sup>68</sup> William Still, to Educational Committee of the Abolition Society, 8 May 1862, PAS-HSP.

<sup>69</sup> Hannibal Hamlin and W.H. Channing to the Freedman's Relief Association, Philadelphia, and Dr. Furness [copy], 6 June 1862, PAS-HSP.

<sup>70</sup> William Still to Joseph M. Truman, Jr., 15 September 1862, PAS-HSP.

As Still and the PAS discovered, the plan of transporting large populations of former slaves from the South and dispersing them throughout the free states presented insurmountable logistical obstacles. Although they had an efficient correspondence infrastructure in place to communicate information, transporting people proved to be much more difficult. In addition to shortages of funds and difficulties obtaining suitable conveyances, Washington officials encountered substantial resistance among freedpeople to the prospect of losing control over their own mobility and being separated from family members. These elements of uncertainty were reminiscent of the system of bondage from which they had just escaped. Given these factors, a more popular and effective plan, which was taken up by antislavery organizations and sympathizers throughout the North, was that of gathering and sending supplies, especially clothing and books, to refugee encampments. Alongside the deployment of material went the enlistment of personnel, including numbers of women, as agents to travel to the camps, manage the distribution of donations, and work as teachers.

Where people went, letters returned. Historians have recognized the influence of first-hand impressions for fixing the horrors of slavery in the minds of Northern troops who traveled South for the first time. Furthermore, some scholars have examined the significance of soldiers' letters for bringing the war—and slavery—home to friends and family far from the battlefield.<sup>71</sup> Letter writing offered a space for narration and reflection that enabled soldiers to connect the daily

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<sup>71</sup> See for example: Christopher Hager, *I Remain Yours: Common Lives in Civil War Letters* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2018); Chandra Manning, *What This Cruel War Was over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007); James M. McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); David M. Henkin, *The Postal Age the Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 119–147; Bell Irvin Wiley, *The Life of Billy Yank: The Common Soldier of the Union*, Updated ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008).

challenges and dangers they faced to a larger cause, one that increasingly placed slavery at the center of the war and envisioned emancipation as the desired outcome.

In their letters, soldiers often commented on slaves who entered Union lines seeking safety and freedom. They reflected on how these encounters shaped their understandings of the meaning of the war and how their sense of the conflict differed from that of their correspondents at home. For instance, in a June 1862 letter, J.W. Bartlett, a soldier from Lynn, Massachusetts, described the Union occupation of New Orleans to Emma Buffum, the daughter of abolitionist James Buffum. Bartlett reflected, “I’ve often tho’t of th. Last sermon I preached at yr place ... wh. astonished & offended yr good people so much! – ‘That I sh’d insult the intelligence of N.Eng. people by tell’g them they didn’t know what they were fighting for!’ It was a pity; & all the more so, that it was true.”<sup>72</sup> Bartlett explained that since the army had arrived in New Orleans, “an almost innumerable company of fugitive slaves have come to us for protection.” While “at first of course, we took them all in, men, women & children,” the army was soon overwhelmed by their numbers, and “we had to close the lines against them, cd admit no more[.]” Bartlett described how eventually, General Benjamin Butler, the commanding officer in the city, ordered the expulsion of “all female contrabands” from their lines.<sup>73</sup> Bartlett walked the city streets during the “sad Exodus.” He recounted the cries of the women in his letter to Buffum:

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<sup>72</sup> Bartlett used the word “sermon” in a figurative sense.

<sup>73</sup> Butler’s order targeted women not just because of the sheer numbers of fugitives in the city tested army resources, but also because he was aiming to eradicate prostitution. Bartlett alluded to the sexual violence that occurred between Union soldiers and freedwomen in his letter: “Some of [the women], I think however, had no difficulty in finding protectors- were even laid-hold of before they’d gotten out of sight! But there too eager fellows were charged upon (without orders!) by our guards & driven back, but not killed, as they shd have been, & I suppose got ‘their own’ when they had gone a little farther away!” J.W. Barnett to Emma Buffum, 26 June 1862, Garrison Family Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

On Butler’s occupation of New Orleans and his relationship to “secesh women,” see Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 104-116. On women in contraband camps see Glymph, “This Species of Property,” 55-71.

“‘Oh what shall I do?’ ‘I have nowhere to go – I shall be whipped to death if I go home’ – ‘I am go’g right back home & be killed’ – ‘I wish I’d never come, oh dear, what shall I do?’” Bartlett concluded, “Well, maybe I ought to have kept away ... it was an expensive affair in several ways,” admitting, “I came out, first, with my purse lighter by some doll[ar]s – secondly, (may be I sh’dn’t be ashamed to confess,) with the loss of a tear or two, & finally, since that affair, the old quest[ion] ‘What are we fight’g for?’ has more frequently & emphatically suggested itself to my mind.” Bartlett resented Butler’s attempts to curry favor with the local Confederate population when “really there is no good feel’g here to be retained nor lost, except am’g the negros & poor classes....”<sup>74</sup>

Bartlett expressed a mixture of emotions in his letter. He was shocked by the desperate conditions of the former slaves and Butler’s unwillingness to shelter them but felt helpless himself to offer aid beyond the few dollars in his purse. He pointed out the ignorance of his New England relations, but he, too, was troubled by the question of “What are we fight’g for?” Though he was torn, Bartlett used correspondence to convey his thoughts. He felt an obligation to communicate the troubling episodes he witnessed even though he was powerless to remedy them.

Encountering freedpeople—in person and through writing and exchanging letters—caused abolitionists think about the war in new ways. Abolitionists who did not travel among former slaves were fascinated and eager to gather information about what was happening on the ground.<sup>75</sup> Letters could be an effective tool for generating sympathy and funds, but, like Bartlett,

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<sup>74</sup> J.W. Barnett to Emma Buffum, 26 June 1862, Garrison Family Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

<sup>75</sup> Chandra Manning makes a similar observation. See Manning, *Troubled Refuge*, 23.

those who lived and worked in freedmen's camps often struggled to express what they experienced in writing. Abolitionists expressed a mixture of hope and dismay at the situations they encountered. Former slaves faced devastating poverty, and the military lacked sufficient resources to address the problem. The money, clothing, and supplies collected by antislavery and freedmen's aid organizations felt inconsequential when workers confronted the enormity of the circumstances. At the same time, however, writers from freedmen's camps and villages recorded sparks of hope in the dignity and optimism expressed by the former slaves they met. Although they were often frustrated by the inability of their letters to capture a realistic portrait of the scenes surrounding them, abolitionists living among freedpeople felt compelled to bear witness, to the best of their ability, to the historic process of emancipation. On one hand, aid workers feared that the Northern public would lose interest in assisting former slaves once the drama of the war faded, and on the other hand, they were both exhilarated and overwhelmed by the people, events, and conditions they encountered. They used letters to rally support for the perseverance of their work on behalf of freedpeople while also turning to their correspondence to articulate and process their thoughts, feelings, and reactions.

In 1862, the Rochester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society sent its corresponding secretary, Julia A. Wilbur, to Alexandria, Virginia, where she served as the organization's agent for freedmen's relief and education.<sup>76</sup> Besides her daily work distributing supplies and acting as a liaison between the former slaves and government officials, Wilbur kept up a steady correspondence with the RLASS's new secretary, Anna M.C. Barnes. The primary motivation behind her letters was to apprise members of the society and other interested parties of the progress of her work.

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<sup>76</sup> For a biography of Julia Wilbur, see Paula Whitacre, *A Civil Life in an Uncivil Time: Julia Wilbur's Struggle for Purpose* (Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books, an imprint of the University of Nebraska Press, 2017).

She was accountable to them on two levels: first, she depended on the society to pay her salary, and secondly, her words prompted donors to contribute money, clothing, and other supplies that were essential to the success of the venture. The RLASS regularly published Wilbur's letters in their annual reports. In these reports, Wilbur gave an account of the year's work while tugging at the heartstrings of readers to secure future donations.

In April 1863, Julia Griffiths Crofts, a British abolitionist who was a founding member of the RLASS and assistant to Frederick Douglass in publishing his newspaper, addressed Anna Barnes regarding Wilbur's work in Alexandria. Crofts had returned to her home in England in 1855, but she remained involved in the RLASS from afar. She told Barnes, "I hope & trust that Julia Wilbur is a suitable missionary & teacher for the poor oppressed creatures to whom you have sent her." Crofts hinted at what she meant by "suitable" when she wrote, "I do not know how it is, but so it is, that people pay so much more attention to a written letter than to any appeal in print – You would be astonished at some of the inquiries made of me, even now as to what, I suppose are Miss Wilbur's duties at Alex: &c."<sup>77</sup> In other words, Crofts emphasized the need for Wilbur not only to perform the work expected of her but also to describe it in writing in a compelling way—through handwritten letters—that could be circulated to appeal to potential donors as far afield as England.

It is clear from Wilbur's correspondence, however, that she struggled to strike the appropriate tone. The first letter she wrote to Barnes, shortly after she arrived in Washington, spanned fourteen tightly-cramped pages. Wilbur began, "Unless I commence now to report

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<sup>77</sup> Julia Griffiths Crofts to Anna M.C. Barnes, 3 April 1863, Rochester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society Papers, WCL. On Julia Griffiths Crofts see: Janet Douglas, "A Cherished Friendship: Julia Griffiths Crofts and Frederick Douglass," *Slavery & Abolition* 33, no. 2 (June 1, 2012): 265–74. On the formation of the Rochester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society see: Nancy A. Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change: Rochester, New York, 1822-1872* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984).



progress, I fear I can never tell thee all, for material accumulates so fast that it will soon become unmanageable.” After beginning to describe the conditions in Washington, she exclaimed, “oh! dear, I can’t convey to thy mind any idea of them, so much wretchedness I never saw gathered together before[.]” As she got further into her description, she interrupted herself, “I wish to tell thee a thousand things in about a minute,” before continuing. Despite her frustration with her inability to portray the desperate and impoverished conditions of the people she encountered, Wilbur remained hopeful. She recounted the words of a former slave woman who was taking care of orphaned children. When Wilbur asked her “‘if she was any worse off than she was before she came here?’ she said ‘no & if I was worse off here I should be better satisfied here.’” After filling pages with further anecdotes, Wilbur wrote, “I must stop, for every room & every tent contained materials for a history,” though she continued her letter for several more sheets.<sup>78</sup>

Wilbur performed the task of keeping up regular communication with the RLASS admirably. She wrote long letters at least once per month. Her letters offered sketches of daily life in the camps in Washington and Alexandria. She balanced descriptions of her work with poignant anecdotes from her observations of and conversations with individuals in the camps. Wilbur often focused on the strained relationships between the freedpeople and the officials, mostly white men, who oversaw them. Wilbur and her co-workers, including Harriet Jacobs, the well-known fugitive abolitionist who joined her in Alexandria in January 1863, acted as mediators between the former slaves and white authority figures. As Wilbur put it, “The more I am respected by persons in authority, the more I shall be respected by these people, & the more good

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<sup>78</sup> Julia Wilbur to Anna M.C. Barnes, 24 October [1862], Rochester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society Papers, WCL.

I can do for them.”<sup>79</sup> Wilbur strongly believed that she performed her work better than the men currently in power over the camps. Though she was horrified by the spectacles of disease, poverty, and death she encountered on a daily basis, it was the racism and neglect perpetuated by the men in charge of the refugees that truly disgusted her.

Three weeks after sending her first letter to Barnes, Wilbur wrote from Alexandria complaining, “not a letter have I had yet!” She confessed, “I am having a crying spell, when I get over it I shall probably feel better.” Wilbur denied being homesick, but she admitted to feeling overwhelmed by the task at hand. She turned to her letter as a source of comfort. Wilbur revealed something of her feelings when she began an account of her day with the parenthetical aside: “(I despair of making any body understand the queer, mixed up state of things that exists here, slavery has poisoned every thing, from the top to the bottom of society, its evils are felt from center to circumference.)” She was particularly troubled by the treatment of women in the camp. About the freedwomen Wilbur lamented, “They have little self-respect or womanly feeling, & men treat them accordingly, oh! that these poor creatures sh[ould] be where there are none but white men to care for them & minister to their most delicate necessities, I was sick. I was disgusted.” Though she admitted to being “discouraged for a while,” Wilbur now felt that her duty was imperative. She asserted, “My delicacy, my fastidiousness must be laid aside if I come in contact with these.”<sup>80</sup>

The following day, Wilbur experienced a dramatic change of mood after receiving letters from Barnes and from her family. She wrote back promptly to explain, “I wrote thee yesterday,

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<sup>79</sup> Julia Wilbur to Anna M.C. Barnes, 15 December [1862], Rochester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society Papers, WCL.

<sup>80</sup> Julia Wilbur to Anna M.C. Barnes, 12 November 1862, Rochester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society Papers, WCL.

& wrote just as I was feeling then, I feel better today & had I waited until today I might have written differently.” Wilbur revised the criticisms she voiced in the previous letter. She wrote, “I would not for a moment do any injustice to those gentlemen who are laboring here among the Contrabands, I think they are doing a great deal of good, & I should exceedingly regret to have a word go from me to counteract or lessen any good influence they may exert. So please let what I said in relation to them pass as though it had not been said.” However, Wilbur clarified, “I don’t wish to recall what I said in relation to the effect & necessity of woman’s presence among these people, nor has any thing happened to lessen my abhorrence of the coarse familiarity with w. white men (perhaps unconsciously) treat the colored women.” Above all, Wilbur felt lonely. She told Barnes, “I am the only white woman who goes among the colored people or tries to do any thing for these Contrabands. Does thee wonder that I feel alone in a large sense of the word.” Even so, Wilbur vowed to “work quietly as I can” under the scrutiny of “hundreds of secesh eyes.”<sup>81</sup>

Wilbur continued to be troubled by feelings of powerlessness in the face of devastating poverty, racist officials, and the misguided charity of allies at home. In one letter, she recounted the experience of opening a box sent from Philadelphia that she hoped would be filled with warm clothes but instead contained books and shoes. “What an absurdity to send books now to these people, shivering & half naked,” she scoffed.<sup>82</sup> In another letter, Wilbur enclosed a draft of an appeal to donors in Britain and Ireland. She reflected on the process of drafting the manuscript: “They wish me to get all the information I can & write to them. I dread doing this for I cannot do it as it ought to be done, I cant get much reliable information & affairs are at such loose ends

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<sup>81</sup> Julia Wilbur to Anna M.C. Barnes, 12 November 1862, Rochester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society Papers, WCL.

<sup>82</sup> Julia Wilbur to Anna M.C. Barnes, 25 November 1862, Rochester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society Papers, WCL.

here that I can't explain them to anybody intelligibly." Wilbur confessed, "What I have written today does not suit me, it may not be what thee wants at all, & thee may improve it as much as thee chooses."<sup>83</sup>

Over time, Wilbur gained confidence in her work, and when Harriet Jacobs arrived in January 1863, Wilbur was pleased to work alongside her. But she was outraged by the demands placed on them by Northern donors who asked them to keep meticulous accounts of every item they distributed. Fed up, Wilbur explained their simple strategy for distributing donations: "as far as we can we satisfy ourselves that persons are needy & deserving before we give them any thing, & then give what is adapted to their wants if we have it."<sup>84</sup> Jacobs and Wilbur also resisted the racism of male authorities in Alexandria. In one instance, Wilbur recounted how she and Jacobs stood up to a doctor who wanted to place all the orphans in the camp in the smallpox house.<sup>85</sup> In another letter, she described a recent battle with a male colleague. Wilbur wrote, "Mrs. J. is not in the least afraid of him, & I am so glad she is there. Perhaps it is best that I am away now, for if I should get too mad I might get into a fight with the Rev. Albert Gladwin."<sup>86</sup>

Although Wilbur meant to use her letters to drum up support for the cause of freedmen's aid, her frustrations with her work and a sense of futility frequently crept into her correspondence. She was duty-bound to bear witness to events in Alexandria, but she was unable to convey the

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<sup>83</sup> Julia Wilbur to Anna M.C. Barnes, 26 November [1862], Rochester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society Papers, WCL.

<sup>84</sup> Julia Wilbur to Anna M.C. Barnes, [15-17 January 1863], Rochester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society Papers, WCL.

<sup>85</sup> Julia Wilbur to Anna M.C. Barnes, 10 March 1863, Rochester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society Papers, WCL.

<sup>86</sup> Julia Wilbur to Anna M.C. Barnes, 8 August 1863, Rochester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society Papers, WCL.

On Harriet Jacobs in Alexandria with Julia Wilbur, see Jean Fagan Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs: A Life* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2004), 163–173. My interpretation of Wilbur's letters differs slightly from Yellin, who suggests that Wilbur was initially critical of Jacobs before they united over their resistance to Albert Gladwin and other male officials.

magnitude of day-to-day challenges and sorrows. Writing letters offered an imperfect but necessary outlet for Wilbur to express her feelings when her daily labors demanded that she subdue her emotions and press onwards. Wilbur was not a soldier like J.W. Bartlett, but they shared similar frustrations, knowing that their Northern correspondents could hardly comprehend what they witnessed. Furthermore, they were both unable themselves to wrap their minds around the greater purpose or prospect of success driving their work.

### **“I see dark spots still in the great cloud....” Emancipation and the End of War**

As a federally-backed policy of emancipation took shape in the later years of the war, abolitionists became increasingly focused on what came afterwards. Freedmen’s aid and education were a priority for the long term. Individuals like Julia Wilbur and Harriet Jacobs successfully drew attention to the plight of former slaves, who had claimed their freedom but lacked basic necessities and permanent homes. While abolitionists rejoiced at the shifts in Northern public opinion towards support for policies of military emancipation, they were also aware of the practical and ideological obstacles for sustaining momentum towards guaranteeing freedom and rights for former slaves. As abolitionist Peter Lesley wrote in November 1864, “I am in favor of an entirely despotic arrangement of these critical affairs. Liberty must be dragged ashore by her long tresses, and shall revive by and by at the fireside.”<sup>87</sup> In another letter he composed about a month later, Lesley expressed an anxiety that was widespread among abolitionists in artful terms: “I fear the fire will go out in the grate before the roast is done.”<sup>88</sup> Opponents of slavery continued to rely on letters to process the events unfolding around them: to

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<sup>87</sup> J. Peter Lesley to “My Dear Henderson,” 6 November 1864, AFC.

<sup>88</sup> J. Peter Lesley to [Benjamin S.] Lyman, 19 December 1864, AFC.

express hope tempered by skepticism, to seek further information, and to plan for a future without slavery.

Abolitionists perceived decisive steps towards achieving the goal of emancipation, but they were not certain that the federal government would go far enough. When President Lincoln issued his preliminary emancipation proclamation in September 1862, Peter Lesley expressed his skepticism in a letter to his wife. He wrote, “The President has made a sort of a proclamation. But what lawyer can realise an idea of the centuries?” Lesley resented that the proclamation failed to address slavery in the border states and asked, “Do we live on the top side, or the bottom side of the world?”<sup>89</sup> Lesley’s aunt, who read the letter to his wife, disagreed with his assessment. She told him, “I do not expect any such great movement to be effectually made in a day ... to know that government is upon the right track, & has put itself in a position to go forward is a gain we could not have believed but a short time since.”<sup>90</sup>

Lincoln issued the final emancipation proclamation on January 1, 1863, in which he removed provisions for compensation of loyal slaveholders and colonization of former slaves. These changes were satisfactory to Lesley, who opined in a letter written January 2,

Today we read the President’s immortal edict. Yesterday he pronounced three millions of slaves – free. I can scarcely credit it, that I have lived to see the day, which I have longed for, since I was twelve years old. The Republic comes forth like a queen newly arrayed for a fresh dispensation of her grace. Can anything be more like the bursting out of sunshine through a storm, – or the glorious breaking of the day over mountain and shore? I am twice the man I was two days ago – for I need no longer blush to own myself a republican citizen of the United States.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> J. Peter Lesley to Susan Inches Lesley, 23 September 1862, AFC.

<sup>90</sup> Catherine Robbins to J. Peter Lesley, 27 September 1862, AFC.

<sup>91</sup> J. Peter Lesley to Mr. Blackwell, 2 January [1863], J. Peter Lesley Papers, American Philosophical Society.

Lesley used his letters to consider the implications of Lincoln's two proclamations and to debate them with family and friends. Correspondence provided an opportunity for Lesley to alternately mourn and rejoice at the direction of the nation and to record his private thoughts and reflections on matters of great political significance.

Despite Lesley's praise, the legal impact of the emancipation proclamation was limited. Lincoln exempted areas where slavery existed that were under Union control, and the proclamation did not apply to the loyal border slave states that had never seceded. Even so, most abolitionists saw it as significant progress towards achieving universal emancipation. Indeed, the emancipation proclamation transformed the Union Army into a force of liberation. Wherever the Union army gained ground on Confederate soil, slaves stood ready to claim their freedom. Furthermore, the proclamation authorized the enlistment of black soldiers, who took particular pride in their roles as liberators.

In addition to military personnel, some of the primary witnesses to how emancipation unfolded on the ground were abolitionists. Opponents of slavery mobilized for freedmen's aid and education. Aid workers and teachers followed the lead of people like Julia Wilbur and used correspondence to report on and process their experiences. They responded to an enormous hunger for information about former slaves among Northerners. This hunger increased as emancipation proceeded. People were especially eager to hear about the experiences of teachers engaged in freedmen's education. Letters reporting on the condition of freedpeople became an established genre unto themselves. As Garrison observed in the columns of *The Liberator*, "epistolary correspondence" was an object of considerable fascination during wartime.

A letter from George E. Baker to Joseph M. Truman of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, written from Washington shortly after Lincoln's issued the final emancipation proclamation,

encapsulates the significance of correspondence to shaping abolitionists' efforts in the later part of the war and during Reconstruction. Baker wrote, "It is of the greatest importance that the experiment of emancipation here, should be successful, as it promises to be. It will however require all the efforts and self sacrifice of its few friends, comparatively, to make it so." He explained, "The prejudice still existing in Washington against the race is only less surprising than the prevailing apathy and indifference. Government has acted nobly but the people are far behind it in this city as they are in the Free States, generally."<sup>92</sup> In other words, the promise of emancipation was great, but "apathy and indifference" were countervailing forces that threatened to limit its outcome for effecting a true revolution. Abolitionists used letters—gripping firsthand accounts of people and events on the ground—to communicate ongoing needs and sustain interest in their activism.

In some cases, letters had a clearly intended didactic purpose. In April 1864, Lizzie MacLaurin, a teacher working in Norfolk, Virginia, composed a letter to the "Bethany Scholars" at a school for free black children in Philadelphia. She began, "I promised some of your kind Teachers that I would write to you and tell you something about the contrabands... I assure you that I have seen some things that have made my heart rejoice & again I have seen enough to make me real heart sick." MacLaurin described the impoverished living conditions among the former slaves and recounted her experiences teaching in the Sunday school. She emphasized the eagerness to learn of the children she encountered and compared them favorably with the Bethany pupils. "I told them about your school and they seemed very much interested. I asked them if they could tell me why it was that the colored children at the North did not try so hard to learn as they were. A little girl said "Misse I guess its cause deys always been learnen,"

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<sup>92</sup> George E. Baker to Joseph M. Truman, Jr. 3 March 1863, PAS-HSP.



MacLaurin recalled.<sup>93</sup> MacLaurin's observations, and her use of dialect, reveal more about her racist assumptions than they do about the experiences of her students. Even so, her letter provides an example of how the transmission of information and observations about former slaves was meant to be instructive on multiple levels. Such letters made implicit arguments about the need for freedpeople to be properly educated in order to become upstanding citizens.<sup>94</sup>

Peter Lesley described his interest in reading the correspondence of abolitionists working among freedpeople in a letter he wrote to a British friend in February 1863. Lesley told him, "I read nothing but newspapers, and private letters from my friends among the contrabands at Port Royal and Craney Island. I wish I could enclose the last recd from two lovely New England girls surrounded by 5,000 poor women on Craney Island, -- their laughable descriptions of manners, -- their heartsickening descriptions of wholesale misery and want." He mused, "God knows how this vast experiment is to succeed. ... Never was anything more utterly spontaneous, unsolicited, unexpected, unwelcome, uncomfortable, threatening & overwhelming."<sup>95</sup> Later that year, Peter Lesley's wife, Susan, recounted an evening spent at a friend's house during which the chief entertainment occurred when "Lizzie [Ware] took out her case of Port Royal letters, & read to us, till far into the night, Harriet & Charley's Journal of the last year." Susan Lesley exclaimed, "What a contrast to your London letters, this life among the Freedmen at St Helena & Coffin's Point, & how interesting both!"<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Lizzie MacLaurin to Bethany Scholars, 4 April 1864, PAS-HSP.

<sup>94</sup> See Chapter Seven.

<sup>95</sup> J. Peter Lesley to Thomas E. Blackwell, 10 February 1863, J. Peter Lesley Papers, American Philosophical Society.

<sup>96</sup> Susan Inches Lesley to J. Peter Lesley, 5 November 1863, AFC.

Husband and wife related similar experiences of being caught up in the drama of emancipation in South Carolina as it was related in the correspondence of friends and acquaintances. They were unable to observe the events firsthand, but they bore witness from afar as an audience to the stories and anecdotes recorded in letters. Peter Lesley trivialized some of the descriptions as “laughable,” revealing his own underlying racism and that of his white correspondents. These responses reflected broader tensions in the antislavery movement. As Frederick Douglass remarked in an 1865 letter, “I have my doubts about these Freedmen’s Societies. ... The negro needs justice more than pity, Liberty more than old cloths, rights more than training to enjoy them. Once given him equality before the law and special association for his benefit may cease.”<sup>97</sup> Nevertheless, the Lesleys felt a human connection to the people and places they read about in the letters that implicated them in the process of emancipation.

Free black Americans experienced the Civil War and emancipation differently than most white abolitionists like Lesleys. Mary Walker, the fugitive slave woman who had been living with the Lesley family for over a decade, followed the lead of her friends, including Harriet Jacobs, to travel to the South to work for the cause of freedmen’s aid and education.<sup>98</sup> Like their white counterparts, African American aid workers and teachers relied on letters to process their thoughts and experiences, but their correspondence sheds a distinctive light on the situation at hand. Julia Wilbur alluded to this disparity of experience in her letters describing her work alongside Harriet Jacobs, who faced abuses from white colleagues as well as Confederate

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<sup>97</sup> Frederick Douglass to James Miller McKim, 2 May 1865, May Anti-Slavery Manuscripts, RMC.

<sup>98</sup> See Catherine Robbins to Susan Lesley, 14 April 1864; Catherine Robbins to Susan Lesley, 21 April 1864, AFC.

sympathizers in Alexandria.<sup>99</sup> Although Mary Walker's correspondence from the time she spent in the South Carolina Sea Islands does not survive, the Lesleys reported receiving regular communications from her, and statements in Susan Lesley's letters suggest that she confronted racism among her colleagues during her time there.<sup>100</sup>

Sojourner Truth's letters provide a compelling illustration of how black abolitionists responded to racism in their wartime work. Truth came to Washington to work for freedmen's aid in 1864.<sup>101</sup> Truth was illiterate, but throughout her life she developed inventive strategies to circumvent this personal constraint.<sup>102</sup> She often dictated letters to her friends, who faithfully recorded her words. In an early letter from Washington, Truth described the pleasure she took from her work to her daughter Diana. "[T]hey are all delighted to hear me talk. I think I am doing good. I am needed here," she wrote. According to Truth, the freedpeople "say they are treated worse or as bad as when they were in slavery When I told them they were free one old woman clung around my neck and amost chocked me she was so glad." Truth also boasted to her daughter that she had met with President Lincoln for three hours, and "I calculate to go and see [him] again[.]"<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> See for example Julia Wilbur to Anna M.C. Barnes, 8 August 1863, Rochester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society Papers, WCL. See also Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs*, 163-173.

<sup>100</sup> See for example Susan Inches Lesley to Catherine Robbins, 3 August [1864], AFC.

<sup>101</sup> On Truth in Washington see Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 209-219.

<sup>102</sup> Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996); Nell Irvin Painter, "Representing Truth: Sojourner Truth's Knowing and Becoming Known," *The Journal of American History* 81, no. 2 (1994): 461-92.

<sup>103</sup> Sojourner Truth to Diana Truth, 3 November 1864, Post Family Papers, Department of Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation, River Campus Libraries, University of Rochester.

Amy K. Post, a Quaker abolitionist in Rochester, New York, and a friend of Truth, told a another friend in March 1865, “The things she has accomplished in that and Alexandria, for the freed people is truly wonderful, and the most curious of all is the appointment of Sojourner as a teacher, receiving ten dollars a month for her instruction, when she scarcely knows a letter, but her teaching is in housekeeping at freedmens Village....”<sup>104</sup>

All was not smooth sailing for Truth, however. In October 1865, she wrote to Post regarding a disturbing incident on a street car in Washington. She informed Post that although her experiences had overall been positive, “I see dark spots still in the great cloud that leads us by day, and occasional angry flashes in the pillar of fire that guides through this long dark night.” When waiting for a streetcar with a friend and fellow aid worker, Josephine Griffing, the conductor drove off without letting her board. According to Truth, the car “dragged me a number of yards before [Griffing] succeeded in stoping them.” Griffing reported the conductor to the president of the city railway, and the man was fired. Truth concluded, “It is hard for the old slaveholding spirit to die. But die it must.”<sup>105</sup>

Truth had long been active in the antislavery movement, and she was acutely aware of the power of narrative and representation in achieving its goals. Though she was illiterate, she understood the power of telling her own story, and she relied on trusted friends to get her message across in her correspondence.

**Conclusion: “This ought to be a time of mutual gladness...”**

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<sup>104</sup> Amy K. Post to Esther Titus, 28 March 1865, Post Family Papers, Department of Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation, River Campus Libraries, University of Rochester.

<sup>105</sup> Sojourner Truth to Amy K. Post, 1 October 1865, Post Family Papers, Department of Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation, River Campus Libraries, University of Rochester. Letter transcribed by Laura Smith Haviland. On Truth and the Washington streetcars, see Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 210-211.

During the early months of 1865, after Congress passed the Thirteenth Amendment that formally abolished slavery and the war drew to a close, abolitionists once again questioned the future of their movement. Internal divisions plagued the American Anti-Slavery Society as William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips debated whether the organization should continue after the goal of emancipation was achieved. Garrison, exhausted by decades at the helm of the movement, was ready to retire, give his support to the federal government, and allow radical reform to be taken up by new hands. Meanwhile, Phillips argued that the AASS's objectives would not be fulfilled without meaningful civil and political rights for freedpeople. Mary Grew, a leader of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, lamented these divisions in an April 1865 letter. She wrote, "Alas! that it should be so, after our years of toil & struggle. This ought to be a time of mutual gladness, and thanksgiving, & fraternal congratulation; and, of course, of kind forbearance of differences in opinion. It is useless to ask why is it not so. The faults of abolitionists are the faults of all earnest, strong, reformers."<sup>106</sup> In the end, Phillips's contingent won out, and he led the AASS until its final dissolution in 1870. During these remaining years, abolitionists turned their attention to new issues including the guarantee of civil rights, suffrage, and land for former slaves, as well as the question of women's suffrage.

Despite these ongoing internal debates, however, the gravity of the movement had shifted definitively southward, towards the freedpeople trying to make new lives for themselves outside of slavery. The material demands of freedmen's aid continued, and the infrastructure of education targeting former slaves developed. In the post-war era, some of the most dedicated activists were women who saw education as the best path forward for freedpeople to lay claim to

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<sup>106</sup> Mary Grew to Samuel Joseph May, 28 April 1865, Garrison Family Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

civil, political, and economic rights. These women continued to use letters to record their labors and advertise their cause to Northern donors. Like wartime aid workers, they often felt overwhelmed and exhausted by the enormity of the task they faced. Reconstruction brought a new set of challenges—one woman despaired in 1866, “I am sick & tired of the way the reconstruction of the southern states is going on – Freedmen are in many cases – anything but free – in fact more slaves then they ever were before[.]”<sup>107</sup> Yet abolitionists also perceived a ray of hope in the idea that a direct line could be drawn between the ability to express oneself in writing and the right to citizenship.

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<sup>107</sup> Unsigned to Emily Howland, 11 February 1866, Emily Howland Papers, RMC.

## **Chapter Seven**

### **Penmanship as Citizenship: Literacy, Letter Writing, and Politics in the Reconstruction South**

The “Freedmen’s Writing Book” (Figures 6 and 7, below) was a copybook used by former slaves to practice penmanship. Workbooks like this one, printed in the North, were distributed in freedmen’s schools in the South during Reconstruction.<sup>1</sup> This example was printed in Boston in 1865. The front cover features an image of a freedman holding up the United States flag. The man is respectably dressed in an outfit reminiscent of a military uniform, and he is flanked by books, a globe, and other accoutrements of learning. An eagle flies above the banner at the top of the page. On the back cover, there is more patriotic imagery including a portrait of Abraham Lincoln and more American flags and eagles.

The inside cover of the book offers detailed instructions about how to use it in a classroom. It instructs teachers to seek out another pamphlet on “the philosophy of penmanship,” and offers practical instructions for assembling and running a disciplined class. These instructions present criticism as a key task for the teacher, encouraging them to phrase their directions to the students as questions to teach students how to judge their own work. Further instructions outline “Essential Points in ‘Execution’” including posture, pen-holding, and hand movement. Students should “Sit erect,” and “Hold the pen between the first two fingers slightly bent and the thumb, -- the latter must be bent out sideways and the end brought up to be about opposite to the first joint of the forefinger.” Teachers should “See that the letters are made by movement of the fingers forward and back, and not by motion of the whole hand.” Each page of the workbook itself is

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<sup>1</sup> I have not been able to determine how commonly copybooks like this one, specifically targeting freedpeople, were used in Southern classrooms. This example is the only one I have been able to find preserved in archives, and the only penmanship copybooks I have found referenced in secondary sources are the same as those used in Northern common schools. See Louise L. Stevenson, *The Victorian Homefront: American Thought and Culture, 1860-1880* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1991), 78, 86; Tamara Plakins Thornton, *Handwriting in America: A Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

inscribed with an aphorism; for example, “A rolling stone gets no moss.” Beneath these printed models, rendered in the Spencerian style of script popular in the mid-nineteenth century, are a series of blank lines meant for students to copy the phrases to practice their handwriting.<sup>2</sup> Copying these lines simultaneously taught a lesson in penmanship and in morals.<sup>3</sup>



Figure 6: Freedmen’s Writing Book, recto, Boston: Crosby & Ainsworth, 1865. From the Columbia Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

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<sup>2</sup> “The Freedmen’s Writing Book,” (Boston: Crosby & Ainsworth), 1865, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University. On the history of Spencerian Script see Thornton, *Handwriting in America*, 47-55, 62-63.

<sup>3</sup> These phrases, and the association between penmanship and morality, were not unique to the education of black students in the South in this time period. Northern white pupils copied similar phrases in their own penmanship books. Stevenson, *The Victorian Homefront*, 86.





Figure 7: Freedmen's Writing Book, verso, Boston: Crosby & Ainsworth, 1865. From the Columbia Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

As an ephemeral artifact of daily life, few items like this one are preserved in archives, enhancing its value for historians seeking to understand the experiences of freedpeople during Reconstruction.<sup>4</sup> What lessons was this workbook teaching its users? What does it show about the relationship between white Northerners and Southern freedpeople? And how were freedpeople able to use the tools of literacy to assert themselves as part of the post-emancipation United States? The copybook offers evidence of the process by which many freedpeople learned the practical skills of reading and writing during Reconstruction, and it also reveals the

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<sup>4</sup> This particular workbook was saved by the publisher and collector George Arthur Plimpton, who had a special interest in collecting handwriting manuals spanning the middle ages to the nineteenth century.

expectations held by white Northerners that such lessons should incorporate instruction in bodily discipline as well as patriotism, civilization, and good citizenship. During the first years of Reconstruction, literacy education was an especially contested realm of politics that encapsulated the hopes, fears, and animosities different groups of Americans had for the post-emancipation nation. This chapter reads between the lines of the workbook, examining it in the broader context of freedpeople's education, to show how learning the skill of handwriting was understood by teachers and pupils alike as an assertion of political power.

The second part of the chapter examines more explicit political statements in letters written by Northern abolitionist women during Reconstruction. These letters reveal how the antislavery movement culminated in an assertion of a radically inclusive definition of national politics that portrayed former slaves as equal citizens. Prior to the Civil War and Reconstruction, enslaved people were geographically cut off from Northern abolitionism and were generally unable to partake in the circulation of antislavery ideas, arguments, and texts. After emancipation, however, they asserted a claim to participate in national political discussions, sometimes allying with abolitionists whose pens were experienced at mobilizing support for their cause and in other instances putting pen to paper themselves. The female abolitionists who worked among freedpeople used letters as a space in which they formulated a vision for national politics that came to shape the major debates of the Reconstruction era. Although this vision was only partially and inadequately realized in the end, these letters demonstrate how freedpeople and their Northern abolitionist allies seized upon the malleable borders of federal authority in the aftermath of the Civil War to argue for the incorporation of former slaves as equal members of the national body politic.

## **“sacred signs and symbols of freedom:” Penmanship and Power in the Post-Emancipation South**

The imagery and language of the “Freedmen’s Writing Book” offers a glimpse into the hopes, limitations, and contradictions of the immediate post-emancipation era. With the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment in December 1865, the fate of slavery in the United States was finally sealed. Even then, however, freedpeople struggled to claim privileges of freedom that were yet denied to them, especially the ability to own and cultivate land of their own. While the former slaves’ agenda had coincided with that of the Union regime during the war, with the defeat of the Confederacy the expectations of the two groups almost immediately diverged. Former slaves held no illusions that the Thirteenth Amendment would protect or enforce the freedoms they envisioned for themselves. Their experiences during the war had clearly demonstrated that these visions clashed not only with those of their former owners, but also with Northern emissaries including military officials, Treasury Department agents, and civilians hoping to amass fortunes in the South by growing cotton on plantations based on wage labor. Freedpeople did not stand aside as these parties engaged in a power struggle to determine who would control their labor. Instead, they used the allies and resources available to them to add their own claims to the political debate.<sup>5</sup>

In March of 1865, Congress established the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (the Freedmen’s Bureau). The Bureau was experimental, understaffed, and ill-equipped to tackle its many imperatives including establishing schools, providing aid to the poor and elderly,

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<sup>5</sup> In centering the actions of freedpeople in emancipation and Reconstruction, I draw on a long historiographical tradition. Major works include: Ira Berlin, et al., *Freedom, a Documentary History of Emancipation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York: The Free Press, 1992, c. 1935); Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988); Leon Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

settling disputes, and seeking fair legal treatment for former slaves and white Unionists. In operation from 1865 through 1870, there were fewer than one thousand agents spread throughout the South. Freedmen's Bureau agents had mixed relationships with former slaves, especially with respect to implementing policies of free labor, but they made great strides in some areas, including education.

Working with organizations like the American Freedmen's Union Commission, the American Missionary Association, and many state and local freedman's aid societies, the Freedmen's Bureau collected and distributed clothing to former slaves and established schools to teach the basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic. Northern white and black women traveled to the South to serve as teachers for these schools. Teachers struggled to meet the enormous demand of freedpeople for education, and some of them ended up training former slaves to become teachers themselves. Students of all ages flocked to the schools, and white Northerners were consistently astonished by their thirst for knowledge. For freedpeople, this quest for literacy and education was less surprising. Under slavery, many states made it illegal to teach slaves how to read and write. These policies taught many slaves a clear lesson about the value of literacy for exercising personal freedoms.<sup>6</sup> In his autobiography, Frederick Douglass described how his mistress in Baltimore, who had begun teaching him how to read, changed her mind after her husband forbade her from continuing to do so. Douglass recalled:

In faithful compliance with this advice, the good lady had not only ceased to instruct me, herself, but had set her face as a flint against my learning to read by any means. ... In ceasing to instruct me, she must begin to justify herself *to* herself; and, once consenting to take sides in such a debate, she was riveted to her position. ... She finally became even more violent in her opposition to my learning to read, than was her husband himself. ... Nothing appeared to make my poor mistress—after her turning toward the downward path—more angry, than

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<sup>6</sup> See James D. Anderson, *Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 5-7.

seeing me, seated in some nook or corner, quietly reading a book or a newspaper. ... All this, however was entirely too *late*. The first, and never to be retraced, step had been taken. In teaching me the alphabet, in the days of her simplicity and kindness, my mistress had given me the “*inch*,” and now, no ordinary precaution could prevent me from taking the “*ell*.”<sup>7</sup>

Douglass described how he would ask his young white playmates to help him with his lessons, trading bread as a “tuition fee.” He narrated the process of his self-education and the threat it posed to his ability to accept his status as a slave. He wrote, “The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest slavery, and my enslavers. ... Once awakened by the silver trump of knowledge, my spirit was roused to eternal wakefulness. Liberty! The inestimable birthright of every man, had, for me, converted every object into an asserter of this great right.”<sup>8</sup>

In this passage, Douglass traced a clear path between literacy and liberty and between education and self-empowerment. The conditions of education within freedmen’s schools tell a less straightforward story, but still one that leaves room for former slaves’ assertions of personal dignity and claims echoing Douglass’s own demand for the “inestimable birthright of every man.” While ex-slaves saw education as an essential expression of their freedom, their former owners resisted every step of the way, fearing the consequences of widespread literacy for their goal of perpetuating a coercive agricultural labor system.<sup>9</sup> The Freedmen’s Bureau and other Northern agents stood between these two interests. Generally, white Northerners were supportive of freedpeople’s eagerness to educate themselves, and they worked with limited resources to build a common school system with a curriculum that closely resembled that taught to students in New England. This educational system was not merely an imposed imitation of Northern

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<sup>7</sup> Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York and Auburn: Miller, Orton, & Mulligan, 1855), 151-155.

<sup>8</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 159-160.

<sup>9</sup> Anderson, *Education of Blacks in the South*, 20-25.

schooling practices, but it reflected the demands of black Southerners for a curriculum that provided access to the tools of the classical liberal tradition that corresponded to contemporary social and political power.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, however, the Freedmen's Bureau had an interest in imposing a free labor ideology on former slaves, encouraging them to continue working on plantations for wages rather than seeking landownership and subsistence farming. And some white Northern teachers, especially those associated with the American Missionary Association, put a racist spin on lessons to validate the continued subordination of former slaves.<sup>11</sup> All of these interpretations of freedpeople's education drew a connection between education and citizenship training, but during Reconstruction the question remained open as to which version would prevail.

The mid-nineteenth century United States saw an enormous change in the rates and materials of literacy. Literacy rates grew rapidly over the first half of the century with the institution of common schools throughout the Northeast and Midwest, corresponding to a democratization of basic education. Whereas in the colonial era, degrees of literacy marked one's social and professional position, by the mid-nineteenth century, literacy was considered to be a shared right and necessity of daily life. Population growth drove westward expansion, and transportation innovations such as the construction of canals and railroads facilitated the spread of people and information over greater distances at faster rates. Together, these factors facilitated

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<sup>10</sup> Anderson, *Education of Blacks in the South*, 28-30.

<sup>11</sup> Anderson, *Education of Blacks in the South*, 30; Ronald E. Butchart, *Northern Schools, Southern Blacks, and Reconstruction: Freedmen's Education, 1862-1875* (Westport, CT.: Greenwood Press, 1980), 136-151; Ronald E. Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People: Teaching, Learning, and the Struggle for Black Freedom, 1861-1876*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 124-125; Jessica Enoch, *Refiguring Rhetorical Education: Women Teaching African, Native American, and Chicano/a Students, 1865-1911*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 33-35; Carolyn L. Karcher, *First Woman in the Republic: A Cultural Biography of Lydia Maria Child* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 502-504.

improvements to the postal network while also creating an enormous demand for rapid, cheap communication.

An increasingly mobile population meant that family members and friends were scattered across the United States and beyond, but affordable postage and efficient mail service enabled them to sustain close relationships over long distances. A new set of epistolary conventions, expectations, and tropes evolved to suit these new circumstances. Letter-writers approximated the intimacy of face-to-face conversation by including references to their physicality, such as by using the phrase, “I take my pen in hand,” or the custom of enclosing a lock of hair. The privacy of the post and the sanctity of the sealed envelope reinforced the sense that correspondence could recreate the private conversations individuals might have had were they not separated.<sup>12</sup> By the mid-nineteenth century, a widely literate population exchanged hundreds of thousands of letters on a daily basis, as well as an enormous volume of newspapers and other printed matter. The growth of literacy went along with the democratization of the exchange of information, and as the North sought to remake the South in its own image after the Civil War, literacy seemed like a natural place to inculcate democratic values.

Handwriting instruction served a particularly significant purpose in this period of rapidly expanding literacy and communication. Industrialization changed the material components of writing. Steel pens replaced quills, and mass-produced printed copybooks replaced individual penmanship instructors.<sup>13</sup> Even paper itself changed, as large-scale factory-made paper

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<sup>12</sup> For further discussion of postal developments and letter-writing conventions, see Chapter Two. See also, William Merrill Decker, *Epistolary Practices: Letter Writing in America Before Telecommunications* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1998), 37-56; David Henkin, *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2006); Ronald J. Zboray, *A Fictive People: Antebellum Economic Development and the American Reading Public*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), Ch. 8.

<sup>13</sup> Thornton, *Handwriting in America*, 46.

composed of wood pulp replaced rag paper produced by hand in smaller mills.<sup>14</sup> Material changes laid the groundwork for the standardization of handwriting instruction exemplified by the rise of Spencerian Script in the late 1840s. Invented by Platt Rogers Spencer, a writing master in Ohio, this style of penmanship achieved dominance in education at every level by the 1860s. Spencer emphasized handwriting as an active, conscious process of mental uplift. Physical and mental discipline went hand-in-hand, and both served to cultivate an upstanding moral character.<sup>15</sup> By the time of Reconstruction, Northern schoolchildren were already immersed in this method of instruction, and former slaves were perceived as equally auspicious pupils in which to instill the values of moral integrity and self-control. In short, handwriting instruction was inseparable from politics. It was a widely-shared assumption that an education in penmanship was also an education in the values of good citizenship in a democratic society.

The imagery and language of “The Freedmen’s Writing Book” evoke the aims of white Northern educators to teach former slaves not only the basic skill of penmanship but also to instruct them in national values of patriotism and American citizenship. The covers of the book are loaded with patriotic symbols—eagles, flags, and Lincoln’s portrait—in addition to emblems of education—books, a globe. The images visually instructed former slaves to whom they owed their allegiance for their freedom and for the education they received. The aphoristic sentences for copying as well as the strict instructions on writing posture, position, and movement instilled physical, intellectual, and moral discipline according to nineteenth-century educational

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<sup>14</sup> A.J. Valente, “Changes in Print Paper During the 19th Century,” Proceedings of the Charleston Library Conference, (2010), 209-214.

<sup>15</sup> Thornton, *Handwriting in America*, 47-55.



standards. In this instance, a lesson in penmanship was quite explicitly and intentionally staged as an exercise in American citizenship, a message that was not overlooked by its pupils.

At the same time that this copybook imagined its students as novice citizens who must be instructed in basic tenets of American civilization, it also gestured towards their potential power as legitimate political actors. Unlike many other contemporary visual representations of freedmen and women, the man portrayed on the cover of the copy book is not conveyed as a racist caricature.<sup>16</sup> He stands tall, is dressed respectably, and staunchly bears the American flag. He is unarmed, although his dress suggests that of a Union army uniform. Many black men used military service during Reconstruction as an effective basis for making claims for their entitlement to civil and political rights. Military service was not an option generally available to black women, although they drew upon the sacrifices of their husbands, sons, and brothers to make similar claims.<sup>17</sup> Notably, women are absent from the imagery of the copybook, although girls and women attended freedmen's schools in large numbers alongside boys and men.

The connection between military service, citizenship, and the act of writing was a particularly captivating one for Northern audiences. For example, Catherine Brooks Yale described a letter she received from a young man who was working to organize schools for freedpeople to her friend Sarah Grimké. Yale recalled, "He gave a most pathetic and graphic description of the meek gratitude of the men in his school who in the uniform of soldiers sit and trace with their hard labor-calloused fingers the letters and words in their primers as if they were

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<sup>16</sup> Butchart, *Northern Schools, Southern Blacks, and Reconstruction*, 143.

<sup>17</sup> On black women see Ira Berlin et al., *Slaves No More: Three Essays on Emancipation and the Civil War* (Cambridge, UK: University Press, 1992), 227-229. Stephanie McCurry makes a similar argument regarding white Confederate soldiers' wives in *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), Ch. 4, 133-177.

sacred signs and symbols of freedom.”<sup>18</sup> The tone of Yale’s letter is ambiguous. She described the soldiers as “pathetic” and “meek,” yet the scene she portrayed was a hopeful one.

The language of the writing book emphasizes physical discipline and moral uprightness. In doing so, it is no different from the language of similar copybooks used by white students in Northern common schools. Nevertheless, it is a curious document that both resembles and differs from other surviving freedmen’s educational material. The most well-known sources that specifically targeted freedpeople were the *Freedmen’s Readers* produced by the American Tract Society (ATS). Like “The Freedmen’s Writing Book,” the ATS readers presented physical and moral discipline as key educational principles. The *Freedmen’s Readers* were marked by conservative evangelical Protestantism and blatantly racist paternalism. One ATS penmanship exercise asked students to copy the phrase: “I am free. I am no more a slave. But what is it to be free? Can I do anything I like both good and bad? No: I am free to be a good and noble man, and not an idle, bad, worthless fellow. This is what it means to be free.”<sup>19</sup> ATS materials presented lessons that instructed former slaves to know their place in society and not expect to be treated as equals. The ATS readers not only assumed that former slaves, like children across the United States, lacked the tools and training necessary to participate in American democracy, but they deliberately instructed them to be pious, obedient, well-behaved, and complacent in their acceptance of a subordinate position in society.<sup>20</sup> In contrast, the “Freedmen’s Writing Book”

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<sup>18</sup> Catherine Brooks Yale to Sarah Grimké, 27 January 1867, Weld-Grimké Papers, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>19</sup> This exercise appeared in the ATS’s monthly publication, *The Freedman*. “I am Free,” *Freedman*, Apr. 1865, 15. Cited in Enoch, *Refiguring Rhetorical Education*, 44.

<sup>20</sup> Slavery, its relation to the Civil War, and African Americans more generally were written out of school books entirely by the 1880s. See Stevenson, *The Victorian Homefront*, 93-95, 97-100.

On the racist content of ATS *Freedmen’s Readers* see: Butchart, *Northern Schools, Southern Blacks, and Reconstruction*, 136-151; Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People*, 124-125; Enoch, *Refiguring Rhetorical Education*, 33-35; Karcher, *First Woman in the Republic*, 502-504.

relied on more generic aphoristic phrases for copying like “The truth needs no ornament,” that, by contemporary standards, were equally applicable to shaping the character of white and black children throughout the country.

The patronizing tone of the ATS lessons was not accepted unquestioningly by its audience, nor was it embraced by all white Northerners. In 1865, the prominent abolitionist and writer Lydia Maria Child published *The Freedmen’s Book*, which posed a direct challenge to the ATS’s messages of unquestioning obedience and natural hierarchy. Earlier that year, Child addressed a letter to her friend, Susan Lesley, in which she described her process of working on *The Freedmen’s Book*. She told her, “I have been exceedingly busy ... making a book for the Freedmen. It appeared to me that a book adapted to their needs and capacities might do a good deal of good at this time. I shall put it at a price merely to cover paper, printing, and binding.” Later in the same letter, Child discussed her “absorbing interest” in “the Suffrage Question.” She drew a direct link between her work on the book and this political issue. Child wrote, “I have never been in favor of universal unqualified suffrage; but just as the country is now situated, I see but two roads before us; one to the suffrage of the colored people, the other to ruin.” She argued, “now we have but one choice. We must either grant suffrage to the negroes, or submit to have the slaveholders saddle us and ride us to \_\_\_\_\_ the father of their peculiar institution.” Child concluded, “That I think we shall not do.”<sup>21</sup>

Child addressed her book directly “To the Freedmen,” and gave them a directive: “I have prepared this book expressly for you, in the hope that those of you who can read will read it aloud to others, and that all of you will derive fresh strength and courage from this true record of

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<sup>21</sup> Lydia Maria Child to Susan Inches Lesley, 28 August 1865, Ames Family Historical Collection, Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University.

what colored men have accomplished, under great disadvantages.”<sup>22</sup> Rather than imposing instruction from the outside, Child strove to put the means of education in the hands of former slaves so they could seek empowerment on their own terms.<sup>23</sup> The contents of *The Freedmen’s Book* consist of essays by Child and other abolitionists as well as writings by African American men and women including Frederick Douglass, Phyllis Wheatley, Harriet Jacobs, and “Mingo, a slave,” who wrote a poem on a prison wall. Child included a wide range of perspectives, all related to the history of slavery and the contemporary situation of emancipation. Rather than telling her audience what to think, *The Freedmen’s Book* invited former slaves to participate in a political dialogue.

Falling ideologically somewhere between the ATS’s *Freedmen’s Readers* and Child’s *The Freedmen’s Book*, “The Freedmen’s Writing Book” employed a national language of instruction in the moral and intellectual values of citizenship. Its imagery portrayed freedmen as dignified and patriotic upholders of American values. This copybook shows that for freedpeople, literacy and politics were inseparable. It did not advocate openly for revolutionary social change, but it also did not actively exclude African Americans from claiming equal political, civil, or even economic rights. In seeking to instill discipline and restraint in the minds and bodies of former slaves as they learned to write, white Northerners implicitly recognized the potential for freedpeople to use their literacy—to literally take pen in hand—to shape the new national political system.

### **“they are all learning nicely to read and write and cipher:” Abolitionist Women and Freedmen’s Education**

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<sup>22</sup> Lydia Maria Child, *The Freedmen’s Book* (Boston: Ticknor & Fields, 1865).

<sup>23</sup> Enoch, *Refiguring Rhetorical Education*, 31; Karcher, *First Woman in the Republic*, 503-504.

The ideological battle over freedmen's education had significant consequences for former slaves and their abolitionist allies. In addition to the circulation of instructional texts and workbooks that were printed in the North and sent to the South, Northern volunteers, mostly women, traveled to the South to serve as teachers in freedmen's schools. Abolitionist teachers felt mixture of hope and dismay as they set to work during the early years of Reconstruction, and they communicated these feelings in their correspondence. In a letter she wrote on June 18, 1865 to her friend Emily Howland shortly after leaving the Elmira Water Cure with her companion, Sallie Holley, the abolitionist Caroline F. Putnam gestured toward the path these three women would take in carrying the abolitionist crusade into Reconstruction by confronting a new set of challenges. Putnam lamented the impoverished conditions of freedpeople and the indifference of the Northern public to their suffering. "It will be amazing if after all our sufferings & sacrifices, the nation can still go on with a hard heart oppressing & cruelly wronging, these devoted friends, who have waited so patiently & trustingly, for the glad day of Liberty to dawn on them," she reflected.<sup>24</sup>

Just two months after the surrender of the Confederate Army, the battle for the meaning freedom was already being waged. Putnam's correspondent, Emily Howland, was in Alexandria, Virginia at the time, having worked for the past three years in freedmen's camps near Washington, D.C. Howland was familiar with the bitter suffering and poverty that Putnam described, which pervaded the daily lives of the people living in the camps. While the sentiments of sympathy Putnam offered in this passage of her letter bordered on being maudlin, she made a more radical statement a few sentences later. She expressed her hopes that freedmen would soon

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<sup>24</sup> Caroline F. Putnam to Emily Howland, 18 June 1865, Emily Howland Papers, Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University (hereafter RMC).

gain suffrage rights, which she declared a “righteous measure & safe policy.” Putnam concluded with the wish that “we may have the delight to talk with you on the things we love so soon – or at least a letter immediately,” alluding to the abolition and women’s rights views shared by herself, Holley, and Howland.<sup>25</sup> Physically separated, but united by their shared political beliefs, they worked out their future plans in their correspondence.

Historians have emphasized the central role that Northern teachers played in establishing a schooling infrastructure that built upon the efforts of former slaves to educate themselves. They have also exposed the ambivalent relationship many white Northern teachers had to their pupils and questioned how much credit should be attributed to these individuals in genuinely advocating for the best interests of the freedpeople. These teachers were often inexperienced and ill-equipped to deal with the dismal material conditions of ex-slaves’ communities. They fell back on racist ideology to explain the poverty of their pupils as evidence of moral shortcomings, drawing upon on notion that black people of all ages were lazy, simple, and childlike.

Recent scholarship on Reconstruction emphasizes that the Freedmen’s Bureau and other Northern education organizations did not start from scratch. They relied on the efforts and community connections of freedpeople who were deeply invested in shaping the education system to suit their needs and demands. Former slaves were not just eager recipients of Northern philanthropy. They created and shaped the educational system from the ground up, using grassroots community networks and resourcefulness to navigate the complicated social and political dynamics of the post-war South. Furthermore, Northern free black women also travelled to the South in large numbers to serve as teachers, and they are now recognized as essential

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<sup>25</sup> Caroline F. Putnam to Emily Howland, 18 June 1865, Emily Howland Papers, RMC.

figures who were often more sensitive to the situations of the students and their families than their white counterparts.<sup>26</sup>

In spite of these developments in the historiography on freedmen's education, scholars have paid surprisingly little attention to the connections of certain Northern teachers to abolition.<sup>27</sup> While most white teachers did not have strong connections to the antislavery movement, nor did they espouse radical political ideas in the classroom, there were a number of white and black women whose activism bridged pre-war abolitionism and post-war freedmen's education. The letters they wrote to one another, to their families, and to other abolitionists demonstrate that they saw a clear connection between their work teaching freedpeople and their longstanding commitment to emancipation and equal rights. These women used their letters to assert this connection and to marshal support for their efforts from their longstanding Northern allies, arguing that the abolitionist campaign was not over.

Abolitionist politics infused freedpeople's classrooms. Sallie, who was a teacher working in a freedmen's school near Washington, D.C., clearly articulated the ties between her current work and her past antislavery labor when she remarked, "I say where is the sense in barking all our lives against slavery & then when they are free, Love Social comfort & personal ease to[o] well to give them directions as to course." She proclaimed, "Beautiful Freeman they'll make without help. I say rabid abolitionists particularly are duty bound to teach them to read & write any how

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<sup>26</sup> Historiography of freedpeople's education includes: Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South*; Butchart, *Northern Schools, Southern Blacks, and Reconstruction*; Butchart, *Schooling the Freedpeople*; Robert Charles Morris, *Reading, 'riting, and Reconstruction: The Education of Freedmen in the South, 1861-1870* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); James M. McPherson, *The Struggle for Equality: Abolitionists and the Negro in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), Ch. 7, 17; Donald G. Nieman, ed., *African Americans and Education in the South, 1865-1900* (New York: Garland, 1994); Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

<sup>27</sup> An exception being Carol Faulkner, *Women's Radical Reconstruction: The Freedmen's Aid Movement* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

fit them for Freedom.<sup>28</sup> In the same letter, Sallie enclosed a letter written by one of her pupils, Mary Tibbs, her “first effort on paper,” as opposed to on slate. Tibbs informed her correspondent that “Miss Sallie has taught them A Freedom Song ... and they are all learning nicely to read and write and cipher.”<sup>29</sup> While Tibbs’s letter has no overtly political content, the ability to put pen to paper in such a composition was in itself an assertion of personal dignity and entitlement to rights as a fellow American.

Arlington Va  
No 29th 1865

Dear Miss Emily

I thought I would write to you a bout what a nice school we have and how I am learning. Miss Sallie is trying to teach us all she can. and we have sixty four scholars every day except bad weather and then we have a good many. Miss Sallie has taught them to sing A Freedom Song and the Prisoners Hope. I wish you could only hear them sing it. They all like it very much and I do too. and they are all learning nicely to read and write and cipher. I hope when you come to see us a gain you will stay longer and see us in our school. I hope Miss Sallie will stay with us for we like her. I am well and hope you are. Aunt Betsey sends her love Aunt Elsie and all of them wants to see you. Please give my love to Elizabeth Faskins and to Rebecca and tell them I am well and learning all I can and hope they try to learn. Please give my love to Hannah Robt and Martha. I am tired now so good bye from your af loving Scholar Mary Tibbs Camp Todd

Figure 8: Letter from Mary Tibbs to Emily Howland, 29 November 1865, Emily Howland Papers, Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University.

<sup>28</sup> Sallie to Emily Howland, 26 November 1865, Emily Howland Papers, RMC. [Not Sallie Holley.]

<sup>29</sup> Sallie to Emily Howland, 26 November 1865, Emily Howland Papers, RMC.



Reconstruction was a period of enormous uncertainty and transition for the antislavery movement. While most abolitionists had quickly come to support the Union war effort and the actions of the federal government in enacting military emancipation measures during the war, once the fighting stopped, they took different paths in their involvement in Reconstruction. Wartime Reconstruction had already shown that there was a long road ahead to incorporate former slaves into the national body politic. Many abolitionists in the North debated their proper role in the political battle to come. They questioned the new mainstream politics dominated by the Republican Party, and they foresaw with great clarity the challenges to come in achieving civil, political, and economic equality for former slaves and free black people throughout the United States. After the passage of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, most abolitionists placed their faith in the federal government to enforce civil and political rights. Still, those who were involved directly with freedmen's aid efforts knew that the continued poverty of former slaves made the Constitutional amendments alone an ineffective solution to the legacy of slavery.<sup>30</sup>

Female abolitionists were especially likely to take a path of direct action rather than indirect advocacy in contributing to Reconstruction. During and after the war, abolitionist women flocked to the South alongside more conservative opponents of slavery to teach in freedmen's schools.<sup>31</sup> They confronted the opportunities and challenges of putting principles of freedom and

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<sup>30</sup> On abolitionists during Reconstruction, see for example: Faulkner, *Women's Radical Reconstruction*; McPherson, *The Struggle for Equality*.

<sup>31</sup> By the end of the Civil War, most white Northerners embraced, or at least accepted, emancipation as an aim of the Union cause. Nevertheless, opposition to slavery was never equivalent to advocacy for equal rights for black people, nor did it preclude most white Northerners from being deeply racist in their beliefs and actions. The views most Northern teachers held towards their mission and towards their pupils were representative of the preoccupation of the federal government with restoring order to the South rather than supporting a total social, economic, and political revolution.

equality into practice, and some succeeded in establishing longstanding school systems for African American children. These women relied upon letters as a central feature of carrying out their plans on both a practical and intellectual level. Abolitionists' epistolary campaign to unite the nation in opposition to slavery did not end with emancipation. In some ways, the stakes were higher than before. Abolitionist women who worked in the South among the former slaves had to convince even the most reliable Northern allies that their work must continue until civil, political, and economic equality was achieved for the freedpeople.

Three such women were Sallie Holley, Caroline F. Putnam, and Emily Howland. They all hailed from central New York, chose not to marry, and built careers as educators, and all three were committed to the causes of abolition and women's rights throughout their lives. Sallie Holley, the most prominent of the three, was born in 1818 in Canandaigua, New York. Her father, Myron Holley was active in the antislavery movement until his death in 1841. Sallie quickly absorbed his views and surpassed him in her commitment to the radical causes of abolition and women's rights. Holley served briefly as a schoolteacher in Rochester, New York, but she left the field to attend Oberlin College in 1847, where her true induction into the antislavery movement began. She was especially inspired by Abby Kelley Foster, the famously outspoken abolitionist feminist, who lectured at an Ohio antislavery meeting in 1850. By the time Holley graduated in 1851, she had distinguished herself sufficiently in her political commitments to be hired as an agent for the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS). Holley traveled through the North giving lectures on behalf of the AASS, and she wrote dispatches for newspapers including *The Liberator* and the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Faulkner, *Women's Radical Reconstruction*, 36-37.

While at Oberlin, Sallie Holley met Caroline F. Putnam, a fellow student who had radical views in common and therefore also shared her outsider status, even at the reform-minded college. When Holley was named an AASS agent, Putnam also became an agent and served as her traveling companion. The two women formed a lifelong relationship, and they lived together for most of the next forty-two years, until Holley's death in 1893. They campaigned together as AASS agents for the abolition of slavery and for the attainment of equal rights for all Americans, from 1851 until 1868. Holley quickly attained celebrity as a popular writer and lecturer, although she repeatedly expressed discomfort with her public position and reputation in her personal letters. For example, in an August 1865 letter to Emily Howland, Holley described her feelings of distress with respect to her public career. She reflected, "I think I can never forget, the sudden, intense, and overwhelming emotion, I experienced on seeing my name for the first time in a public newspaper. It seemed to me that every drop of blood in my body, and every feeling of my soul rose up in 'terrible rebellion'." When she became an antislavery lecturer, Holley remembered, "the hardest part was, having my name so public. ... It is the publicity that has always been very trying to me."<sup>33</sup>

Holley lectured at a time when most people felt that it was a major breach of propriety for women to speak publicly, especially to promiscuous audiences of both men and women. She faced intense scrutiny and harsh criticism for her actions. Yet Holley also felt that "the Cause" was worthy of "the sacrifice," and she attracted large crowds wherever she spoke, perhaps motivated by curiosity as much as by their political commitments.<sup>34</sup> Caroline Putnam stood by Holley in a less visible capacity, offering her emotional support, managerial skills, and political

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<sup>33</sup> Sallie Holley to Emily Howland, 27 August 1865, Emily Howland Papers, RMC.

<sup>34</sup> Sallie Holley to Emily Howland, 27 August 1865, Emily Howland Papers, RMC.

collaboration. She aided Holley in composing her lectures, and she also wrote for antislavery newspapers to report on their progress.<sup>35</sup>

Emily Howland, a friend of both Putnam and Holley, was born in Sherwood, New York in 1827. Like the others, Howland became invested in the causes of abolition and women's rights during her youth and education. Her family had antislavery roots in their Quaker faith, and her father attended meetings of the AASS and harbored fugitive slaves in his home during the 1840s and 50s. Emily was educated by a radical abolitionist teacher, and she frequently attended antislavery lectures in her young adulthood. Her correspondence demonstrates that she was also involved in aiding fugitives, organizing the collection of clothing to send to New York City and Canada.<sup>36</sup> Howland took a particular interest in the education of black children, which she pursued when she took a position at a school for free black girls in Washington, D.C. during the absence of the schoolmistress, Myrtilla Miner, in October 1857. During her time there, she made personal and professional connections with her students and with school administrators that she relied on later in her career. She clashed with the school's paternalistic approach to educating black students, however, and her relationship with Miner soured. Howland continued to correspond with her students after she returned to the North, and she encouraged them to use letters to state their political views. For example, Howland saved a draft of a letter that one of her former students, Emma V. Brown, wrote to a politician in 1859, in which she castigated him for supporting colonization over abolition. Brown announced, "I am opposed to all Colonizing and when I become thoroughly dedicated (as I most earnestly desire to be) [I] mean to teach the

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<sup>35</sup> Faulkner, *Women's Radical Reconstruction*, 37-38. For further biographical information see Katherine L. Herbig, "Friends for Freedom: The Lives and Careers of Sallie Holley and Caroline Putnam" (PhD Diss., Claremont Graduate School, 1977).

<sup>36</sup> See Chapter Five; William Harned to Emily Howland, 16 October 1850; Henry Ince to Emily Howland, 26 October 1852, Emily Howland Papers, RMC.

colored people that it is their duty to remain in America. Is it not their birthplace? Are they not Americans as truly as white men[?]"<sup>37</sup> Brown went on to study at Oberlin and became a prominent teacher in Washington, D.C.<sup>38</sup>

Emily Howland's acquaintance with Sallie Holley began when she briefly attended a school in Philadelphia run by Mary Grew and Margaret Burleigh, who were both abolitionists and feminists, around 1845. She met several other female abolitionists there, including Holley, but the two did not become close friends until about a decade later, when Howland, Holley, and Caroline Putnam all found themselves in Philadelphia.<sup>39</sup> By 1857, the women wrote to one another on a regular basis and considered each other close friends and allies in the causes of abolitionism and women's rights. In July of that year, Holley wrote to Howland to offer her encouragement as she prepared to begin work at the Miner school in Washington. Holley told her, "Like a true and faithful brother knight, my pulse beat with yours, as the hour of action draws on apace," alluding to her sense that Howland's teaching mission paralleled her own work as an antislavery lecturer.<sup>40</sup>

Holley's prediction that Howland was embarking on a career in reform was a prescient one. During the Civil War, while Holley and Putnam took a brief break from their travels and lecturing, Howland worked in a freedmen's camp in Arlington, Virginia. She became passionate about freedpeople's education, and she drew upon her family's substantial financial resources to provide former slaves material relief. Howland also used the money to establish schools. During

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<sup>37</sup> Emma V. Brown to Mr. [?], 8 April 1859, Emily Howland Papers, RMC, Cornell University.

<sup>38</sup> Faulkner, *Women's Radical Reconstruction*, 141-143.

<sup>39</sup> Judith Colucci Breault, *The World of Emily Howland: Odyssey of a Humanitarian* (Milbrae, CA: Les Femmes Publisher, 1976), 13, 20-23.

<sup>40</sup> Sallie Holley to Emily Howland, 22 July 1857, Emily Howland Papers, RMC.

and after the war, Holley pressed Howland to write articles for the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* detailing her work with the freedpeople to drum up support and donations. Howland, however, was always reluctant to take on a more public role. In a letter in January of 1866 she told Holley, “I can do a good many things but it does seem to me that these do not include writing or speaking in public, else it would seem possible to me to do them.”<sup>41</sup> Instead, she relied on Holley and Putnam to publicize the contents of her letters for her.

After the war came to a close, Howland pursued her goals of freedmen’s relief and education further, convincing her father to purchase four hundred acres of land in Heathsville, Virginia. She invited freedpeople to settle on the land, where they would pay rent until they were able to purchase their plots, and she set to work on opening a school that would serve this new community. The school opened in 1867, and it quickly met with success. Caroline Putnam described Howland’s achievements in letters to Sallie Holley in November 1868: “E. walks among these people like a divinity;” “E. is as happy as a queen, ruling & guiding with sure, strong power & wise thought the future of Virginia. She has wonderful genius & love for the people & work. ... She is resting to her heart’s dearest wish, in this school-life.”<sup>42</sup> In another letter, Putnam revealed some of the hardships Howland faced. She wrote, “E. has denied herself joyfully every comfort of living, smoked her eyes out, been eaten alive with bugs & fleas, & ticks ... renouncing home, houses, & lands, & the possessions of ordinary ambition....”<sup>43</sup>

In spite of her commitment to her school, Howland had to leave the South to care for her ailing parents in New York just a few years after it opened. Although she had never married in

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<sup>41</sup> Emily Howland to Sallie Holley, 23 January 1866, Emily Howland Papers, RMC.

<sup>42</sup> Caroline F. Putnam to Sallie Holley, 8 November [1868], 17 November [1868], Caroline F. Putnam Papers, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan (hereafter WCL).

<sup>43</sup> Caroline F. Putnam to Sallie Hollie, 21 November [1868], Caroline F. Putnam Papers, WCL.

order to prioritize her career as a reformer, her familial obligations still forced her to return permanently to the North. She visited her school regularly, however, and she oversaw its operations from a distance. Howland continued to be actively involved in causes relating to education and equal rights nationwide throughout the rest of her life.<sup>44</sup>

In 1868, with the encouragement of Emily Howland, Caroline Putnam came to Virginia to establish her own school for freedpeople. Visiting Howland's school, Putnam asked, "Why should hers be ... the solitary case of one young woman, single handed & alone without Society, or support outside of the gifts her own character prompted, working like leaven this wide-spread influence that is felt up as far as Westmoreland County[?]"<sup>45</sup> Howland assisted her in starting the Holley School in Lottsburg, Virginia. The school was named for their mutual friend, and it stood just a few miles from Howland's own school in Heathsville. Putnam echoed Catherine Brooks Yale's observation of black soldiers inscribing letters "as if they were sacred signs and symbols of freedom," when she described one of her initial teaching experiences to Holley.<sup>46</sup> She was transfixed by the powerful spectacle of a group of adults learning to write. Putnam recalled, "Last night thirty men & women came and read & spelled & wrote. It was so curious to teach these simple rudiments to people who knew so much else."<sup>47</sup>

Putnam and Howland both frequently mentioned the eagerness of former slaves to learn while also emphasizing the dignity and natural intelligence of their pupils. They expressed attitudes very different from the American Missionary Association teachers who instructed their

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<sup>44</sup> Faulkner, *Women's Radical Reconstruction*, 102-108. For further biographical information see Breault, *The World of Emily Howland*.

<sup>45</sup> Caroline F. Putnam to Sallie Holley, 21 November [1868], Caroline F. Putnam Papers, WCL.

<sup>46</sup> Catherine Brooks Yale to Sarah Grimké, 27 January 1867, Weld-Grimké Papers, WCL.

<sup>47</sup> Caroline F. Putnam to Sallie Holley, 17 November [1868], Caroline F. Putnam Papers, WCL.

black students to be content with a subordinate position in society and also unlike those who focused on teaching basic moral standards in order to elevate the character of former slaves enough to participate responsibly in a democratic society. These abolitionist women knew that they did not need to teach their students how to be independent thinkers or how to identify the injustices that surrounded them. In teaching them to read and write, they aimed to give them the necessary tools and resources to put their political opinions down on paper.

Putnam soon found that the task she faced was not simple, however. Her letters reveal that she met obstacles and opposition every step of the way. Even the mail was a hotly contested political domain, representing the limits of federal power in the Reconstruction South. In her correspondence with Sallie Holley over several months, Putnam described the battle she waged for equal access to the mail for herself and her community. Not only was much of the transportation infrastructure damaged or destroyed after the war, but Southern postal officers withheld the mail of those they knew to be promoting the interests of former slaves. In Putnam's view, their actions constituted the utmost form of sabotage. She depended on the post for her access to news in the form of publications and correspondence, and she also received monetary donations and supplies from Northern supporters. So she took matters into her own hands. Putnam took an oath as the postmaster for Lottsburg and appointed several local black men as her assistants.<sup>48</sup> Controversy arose when she requisitioned the schoolhouse, which also served as a church, for the third purpose of post office. Even after allaying those concerns, Putnam faced further trouble when, as she recounted, "The mail driver attempted to pass right by with the mail... I told him to stop & leave the mail here or I would report him to Washington! He

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<sup>48</sup> Caroline F. Putnam to Sallie Holley, 16 August 1869, Caroline F. Putnam Papers, WCL.



stopped! But went on afterwards ‘cursing’ that he wouldn’t again....”<sup>49</sup> After this incident, however, it seems that order was restored to the Lottsburg post. Later that month, Putnam reported that she received nine letters from Holley at once.<sup>50</sup>

Putnam was not alone in facing ill treatment by Southern postal officials. Rebecca Primus, a black woman from Hartford, Connecticut, quarreled with a “poor old secesh Postmaster” in Royal Oak, Maryland, where she worked in a freedmen’s school. In a letter to her family, Primus remarked, “It’s all on account of the papers you’ve sent me and which he & his old jebusite wife have taken the liberty to open.” Beyond Confederate antagonism towards a Yankee schoolteacher, Primus faced blatant racism. When a friend, Mr. Thomas, went to retrieve her mail for her, the postal workers told him only that “a bundle of stuff had arrived there that day & produced it unwrapped, saying it came in that manner, & that ‘twas not lawful to send such stuff through the office....” The postmaster charged thirty-three cents of postage for the items and threatened Mr. Thomas with a twenty-dollar fine for trumped-up violations. When asked “how they could have come without any directions whatever,” the postmaster pled ignorance. According to Primus, “He says he’s had more trouble with the d-m niggers papers than with any one’s else.” In the end, she refused to pay the postage and left her mail to languish in the office. Primus concluded, “I do not intend to trouble them with them hereafter.” Instead, she arranged to receive her mail at Easton, Maryland, about eight miles from Royal Oak, where a friend would retrieve it for her. She concluded, “[S]o you see I’m all right and P[ost] M[aster] Lane & his companion are all wrong.”<sup>51</sup> Primus maintained her dignity in the face of postal opposition.

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<sup>49</sup> Caroline F. Putnam to Sallie Holley, 5 September 1869, 8 September 1869, Caroline F. Putnam Papers, WCL.

<sup>50</sup> Caroline F. Putnam to Sallie Holley, 26 September 1869, Caroline F. Putnam Papers, WCL.

<sup>51</sup> Rebecca Primus to Parents & Sister, 1 December 1866, Primus Family Papers, Connecticut Historical Society; Farah Jasmine Griffin, ed., *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends: Letters from Rebecca Primus of Royal*

Caroline Putnam wrote to Sallie Holley regularly to describe the progress of her school and to relay requests for the donation of funds and supplies to support it. Holley edited some of Putnam's seemingly personal letters to her for publication in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, a common practice among abolitionists, many of whom made a living as editors, printers, publishers. Putnam was used to writing letters with a mixture of personal content and political reporting from her time travelling on Holley's lecture trail. Presumably, Putnam gave Holley permission to publish excerpts from her letters from the South, and it is likely that she composed them with a broader public audience in mind. Her letters emphasized the good character of the freedpeople in contrast to the persecution and violence they faced from white Southerners. The fighting might be over, but the war for the hearts, minds, and dollars of the public in dealing with its aftermath continued to be waged in the columns of the *Standard* and other newspapers.

In addition to straightforward reports and demands, Putnam used her letters to give voice to her own political beliefs as well as those of the former slaves she encountered in Virginia. Land reform and suffrage are major themes in her letters, and she repeatedly made the point that freedom alone was not enough to guarantee the rights of former slaves against the continued dominance of white Southerners over land and labor. For example, in August 1869 Putnam told Holley, "There certainly is a bitterer war growing ripe, I believe, in the South, than we have had! ... So long as the Rebels hold the soil they are masters of every thing upon it – people, law, custom, schools, &c."<sup>52</sup> To Putnam and other radicals who shared her views, Northern indifference towards the condition and rights of the freedpeople was their worst enemy in

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*Oak, Maryland, and Addie Brown of Hartford, Connecticut, 1854-1868* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 100, 146-150.

<sup>52</sup> Caroline F. Putnam to Sallie Holley, 25 August 1869, Caroline F. Putnam Papers, WCL.

realizing the lofty ambitions of abolition. In another letter she predicted, “I believe we are going to have a cruel destiny, before Justice for loyalists white or black is done – And all because the nation is indifferent yet to the American, the Republican, the Christian idea of Equal Rights.”<sup>53</sup> As she attempted to mitigate the conditions of poverty and violence former slaves faced on a daily basis, Putnam also pursued an intellectual campaign in her letters to keep the energies of Northern reformers directed towards a platform of equal rights.

Rebecca Primus also discovered the value of her correspondence as a platform for making political arguments and observations. Though she did not publish her letters, her family shared them with other members of the Hartford community.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, Primus composed her letters with a semi-public audience in mind. On one hand, she was cautious of sharing personal intimacies. In an April 1866 letter, Primus voiced some ambivalence about sharing her correspondence. She told her parents and sister, “I can not conceive how it is others aside from my own folks, are so desirous to peruse my letters. I can not think they are so very interesting. I never expected or even thought of any others perusing them.” Primus asked that they select only portions of her letters to read aloud, “for I do not think they always bear inspection.” On the other hand, however, she was empowered by the awareness that she could use her words to rally support for the cause of freedmen’s aid and education. For instance, in an April 1866 letter, Primus stated her support for the Civil Rights Act. The bill had recently been enacted by Congress over President Johnson’s veto, but the news of its success had not yet reached Primus. She expressed her “hope there will be justice, impartial justice, given to the colored people one of these days.” At the same time, Primus saw herself as a role model and an agent of uplift for

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<sup>53</sup> Caroline F. Putnam to Sallie Holley, 26 September 1869, Caroline F. Putnam Papers, WCL.

<sup>54</sup> Griffin, *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends*, 77, 100.

downtrodden African Americans. She warned her audience, “The Bill is excellent I think, only I hope the col[ore]d people will not take the advantage of the privileges it prescribes.”<sup>55</sup>

During her time in Royal Oak, Primus wrote weekly letters to her family, in which she reported on her activities among the freedpeople and offered interpretations of the political events of the day. Primus was a steadfast advocate for equal rights for freedpeople. She used her correspondence to call attention to the ongoing neglect and discrimination she witnessed. In another letter to her parents, she wrote, “I trust something like justice will be given to the black man one of these days, for some are persecuted almost as badly now as in the days of slavery.”<sup>56</sup> Primus remained in Royal Oak until 1869, when the Hartford Freedmen’s Aid Society disbanded and was no longer able to support her work. The school she had helped to found was named the Primus Institute in her honor.<sup>57</sup>

Abolitionist teachers like Caroline Putnam and Rebecca Primus not only expressed their own views on the political situation of Reconstruction, but they also gave voice to the opinions of former slaves. For the first time, the Northern antislavery movement had direct access to the people whose interests they represented, yet it is difficult to trace written exchanges between them in the historical record. For freedpeople, their primary points of contact with the North were agents of the federal government, such as Freedmen’s Bureau agents and military officials, and Northern civilians who traveled to the South for various reasons ranging from aid organizations and teaching to business interests. There are few examples of former slaves writing

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<sup>55</sup> Rebecca Primus to Parents & Sister, 7 April 1866, Primus Family Papers, Connecticut Historical Society; Griffin, *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends*, 117-119.

<sup>56</sup> Rebecca Primus to Parents & Sister, 2 June 1866, Primus Family Papers, Connecticut Historical Society; Griffin, *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends*, 127-129.

<sup>57</sup> Griffin, *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends*, 257.

directly to Northern abolitionists, who, despite the Union's embrace of emancipation, still lacked power in official political channels. Instead, freedpeople turned to the federal government and the military—to Lincoln, to Radical Republicans in Congress like Charles Sumner, to generals and other military officers, and to the Freedmen's Bureau—to address their concerns and demands.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, abolitionist teachers attempted to give voice to the claims of former slaves in their letters. Caroline Putnam, Sallie Holley, Emily Howland, and Rebecca Primus were among the few abolitionists who spent a long time among the freedpeople, and they united with them in their political assertions.

Caroline Putnam often transcribed direct quotations from her students and acquaintances among the former slaves into her letters. For example, in a December 1868 letter, she related a story told to her by a young pupil named Mary Ann Johnson that poignantly captures the tenor of the daily struggles for power in the aftermath of emancipation as well as the dignity with which freedpeople faced them. Putnam recalled, "She told me how Mr. [blank] we used to belong to before the War – told father if he would n't vote for the republicans, he would give him a house. Father said he 'could n't go without voting no-way, & he should have to do without the house then'." Former slave owners continued to wield economic power, which they attempted to use to regain control over the lives and labor of former slaves. Meanwhile, freedpeople drew upon new reserves of power, often, as in this case, referencing the rights granted to them by the federal government and reconstructed Republican state governments, to assert their autonomy. This child's father claimed his right to vote as a defining feature of his independence from his former master. Furthermore, former slaves resisted efforts to undermine their domestic, as well as

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<sup>58</sup> Some of these letters have been compiled by the Freedmen and Southern Society Project. Other examples may be found in the correspondence of Charles Sumner at Harvard's Houghton Library.

political, autonomy. Mary Ann Johnson told Putnam, “When Mr. [blank] asked mother ‘who was the head of the house, would n’t she be, & keep father from voting?’ Mother said Mr. Johnson is head of the house.”<sup>59</sup> Putnam’s letters recorded moments of conflict and claims-making, conveying to her friends and perhaps also to a larger abolitionist audience, the ongoing relevance of their political movement.

In another letter, Putnam quoted Mr. Samuel Blackwell, a freedman, who said, “we are inhibited from our privileges to do what we would like to do” in response to arbitrary rules imposed upon them by white landowners. Former slaves continued to suffer from their lack of economic independence, but they were conscious contributors to the political debates going on around them. Later in the same letter, Putnam relayed a request from Blackwell, who was reading Frederick Douglass’s autobiography. Blackwell “wants him to come down and speak for their cause before May [election month] – says that white people would hear him & he could help them so much!”<sup>60</sup> Putnam said she planned to write to Douglass herself, but she also asked Holley to do so. Even if few Northern abolitionists were communicating directly with freedpeople, Putnam’s letter shows that former slaves were eager to combine forces with members of the antislavery movement if it would help them to achieve the equal civil, political, and economic rights to which they felt entitled.

Sallie Holley joined Putnam at the Holley School in 1870, after the executive committee of the American Anti-Slavery Society decided to disband the organization, having fulfilled the objective of emancipation and achieved the protection of civil rights and black male suffrage

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<sup>59</sup> Caroline F. Putnam to Sallie Holley, 16 December 1868, Caroline F. Putnam Papers, WCL.

<sup>60</sup> Caroline F. Putnam to Sallie Holley, 14 January 1869, Caroline F. Putnam Papers, WCL.

under the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments.<sup>61</sup> Holley rigidly opposed this decision, knowing from the experiences of her colleagues, Putnam and Howland, how destitute most freedpeople remained and how much violent opposition they faced from white Southerners. The three women shared the view that former slaves would struggle to exercise their political and civil rights without achieving economic independence, a goal that was being foreclosed as the federal government already began to withdraw its influence from reconstructed states. While Howland was unable to keep up her residence in Virginia because of domestic obligations in New York, Putnam and Holley remained at the Holley school and became important advocates for Southern black people during and after Reconstruction. Their letters documenting the continued suffering of former slaves and the dramatic need for funding and supplies to sustain schools were published in Northern newspapers through the 1870s.<sup>62</sup> Even after the federal government withdrew direct oversight from the South, Putnam and Holley persevered in their individual advocacy for black Southerners.

In their work for freedpeople's relief and education Howland, Putnam, and Holley were remarkable because they operated independently of freedmen's aid organizations. They resisted the top-down structure and paternalistic attitudes of many of these organizations, whose administration was dominated by Northern white men. The female teachers who performed the labor of organizing and teaching in freedmen's schools had little voice in the structure and decision-making of these organizations. Furthermore, the educational programs of these organizations generally emphasized social stability rather than social change and failed to

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<sup>61</sup> Faulkner, *Women's Radical Reconstruction*, 38-40.

<sup>62</sup> Sallie Holley collected many newspaper clippings of these letters in scrapbooks. See Rudd and Holley Papers, Connecticut Historical Society.

address the structural conditions of economic inequality in which Southern black people lived.<sup>63</sup> These features alienated radical abolitionist women like Holley, Howland, and Putnam who instead struck out on their own, relying on abolitionist social networks to fund and sustain their independent projects. Just as the pre-war antislavery movement was significantly based on the exchange of letters, abolitionists' post-war attempts to rebuild the South according to their vision of a revolutionized social and political system also heavily relied on correspondence.

Holley, Putnam, and Howland's correspondence has not been systematically preserved in archives to the same extent as some of the more prominent figures in the antislavery movement, but a remarkable number of their letters survive in scattered pockets. Their letters demonstrate how these women relied on epistolary connections to found and sustain their education project. They used correspondence to further the cause of attaining equal rights for freedpeople even as formal networks of abolitionism, including the American Anti-Slavery Society, dissolved. Even without a formal organizational infrastructure, female abolitionists like Howland, Holley, and Putnam continued the antislavery crusade on their own terms.

### **Conclusion: "a new dignity"**

The simplest acts of learning to write by hand were weighted with political meaning in the post-emancipation South. In November 1868, Caroline Putnam described turning a corner to discover "a bare-footed lad of 11 – lay by the fence. E[mily] proposed he should write & spell his name – Timothy Carter – and set him a copy in the sand." The women guided him in spelling "Tim-o-thy," which, according to Putnam, was "a new thing as he is known as Tim, and seemed

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<sup>63</sup> Faulkner, *Women's Radical Reconstruction*, 3-6.



delighted with the addition as a new dignity.”<sup>64</sup> As this scene indicates, reading, writing, and the rights of citizenship were inextricably tied up in one another, in the minds of both Northern educators and former slaves. The act of inscribing one’s name in the sand constituted an assertion of personal dignity and legitimacy as a political agent.

Frederick Douglass recounted a similar episode from his enslaved youth in his autobiography. After learning to read, he determined to teach himself to write so that he would be able to compose a pass that would assist him in escaping from his master undetected.

Douglass described how he conducted a covert penmanship course:

With playmates for my teachers, fences and pavements for my copy books, and chalk for my pen and ink, I learned the art of writing. I, however, afterward adopted various methods of improving my hand. ... When my mistress left me in charge of the house, I had a grand time ; I got Master Tommy’s copy books and a pen and ink, and, in the ample spaces between the lines, I wrote other lines, as nearly like his as possible. The process was a tedious one, and I ran the risk of getting a flogging for marring the highly prized copy books of the oldest son.<sup>65</sup>

Throughout his life, Douglass relied on the tools of literacy, oratory, and writing to advance himself and the cause of abolition. He, like many abolitionists, commanded a literary arsenal in the campaign against slavery, and he often described experiences as a slave that taught him formative lessons about the political power of words. These lessons were not lost on the thousands of other enslaved people who sought to educate themselves by clandestine means under slavery and then demanded formal education after they claimed their freedom.

The Reconstruction-era South was an arena for constant political contest between a variety of interests over the position of former slaves in post-emancipation society. Freedmen’s education was a focus of these debates. Examining penmanship instruction gets to the root of how

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<sup>64</sup> Caroline F. Putnam to Sallie Holley, 8 November [1868], Caroline F. Putnam Papers, WCL.

<sup>65</sup> Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 171-172.

nineteenth-century Americans perceived writing by hand as a foundation for participation in a democratic society. Educational materials, such as “The Freedmen’s Writing Book,” provide visual and textual evidence for the possibilities and limitations of penmanship instruction for empowering former slaves as American citizens. While other materials, such as the publications of the American Tract Society, sought to teach ex-slaves to accept a subordinate place in society, the copybook demonstrates that there was a significant demand, among both Northern teachers and their students, for education to serve as advocacy for equal rights for freedpeople.

The abolitionist goal of achieving equality alongside emancipation persevered into the Reconstruction era partly as a result of the contest over freedmen’s education. Abolitionist women, including Rebecca Primus, Sallie Holley, Caroline Putnam, and Emily Howland, were primary agents in keeping this ambition alive in the North, even after the dissolution of the American Anti-Slavery Society in the wake of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. These women traveled and lived in the South, ran freedmen’s schools, and used their letters to voice their own political views and to amplify the voices of freedpeople. Unlike more conservative teachers and administrators, who sought to use education to contain the political potential of freedpeople, abolitionist educators embraced the demands of their students and sought to unite with them in articulating a radically inclusive definition of the national political body that included former slaves on equal terms.

### **Conclusion: “we will remain your affectionate Brother Soldier”**

On August 25<sup>th</sup>, 1864, Annie Davis, a slave woman from Belair, Maryland, addressed a direct appeal to Abraham Lincoln:

Mr. president It is my Desire to be free. to go to see my people on the eastern shore. my mistress wont let me you will please let me know if we are free. and what i can do. I write to you for advice. please send me word this week. or as soon as possible and oblidge.

Annie Davis<sup>1</sup>

Present-day readers may see as naïve Davis’s assumption that President Lincoln himself was responsible for protecting her welfare. How many believe that elected officials of the federal government have their individual interests at heart, let alone that they would address these interests personally, within days of receiving an appeal?<sup>2</sup> But Davis wrote with conviction and dignity. For her, claiming freedom in a letter to the president was a political act. By opening a correspondence with Lincoln, Davis asserted that she was a person worthy of being heard and answered by the president of the United States.

Unlike many of the writers quoted in these pages, Davis did little to embellish her words. She addressed Lincoln respectfully, but without bowing and scraping. She stated her requests clearly and concisely: she wanted to be free, she wanted to reunite with her family, and she wanted information. Davis had doubtless heard of Lincoln’s emancipation proclamation, which had

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<sup>1</sup> Annie Davis to Mr. president, 25 August 1864, Ira Berlin et al., eds., *The Destruction of Slavery, Freedom, a Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867*, ser. 1, v. 1 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 364. I am indebted to Barbara J. Fields for my inspiration by this letter, which she cited in a lecture for her History of the South course. Barbara J. Fields, “The Civil War and Slavery,” (Class lecture, History of the South, Columbia University, New York, NY, 28 March 2013). For discussions of the letter, see also Ira Berlin et al., eds., *Free at Last: A Documentary History of Slavery, Freedom, and the Civil War* (New York: The New Press, 1992), ix-x; Barbara Jeanne Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland during the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 128.

<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that millions of Americans continue write to the president every year, using both postal and digital means. See Jeanne Marie Laskas, “To Obama with Love, Hate, and Desperation,” *New York Times*, 17 January 2017.

taken effect more than eighteen months earlier. But the proclamation did not apply to people held as slaves in Davis's home state of Maryland, which remained loyal to the Union.<sup>3</sup> Davis sought clarification from the author of the proclamation "as soon as possible."

Even in this brief letter, Davis employed conventional language of nineteenth-century correspondence. She wrote, "you will please let me know if we are free," and she closed her letter, "please send me word this week. ... and oblige. Annie Davis." These phrases echo the language of business correspondence and impart an unexpected tone of confidence, given Davis's tenuous social position. They also lent her message an air of urgency. Davis held Lincoln accountable for the ideas posited by the proclamation that were not yet fully realized. Lincoln never answered her letter and probably never read it, but Davis made it clear that she expected a reply.<sup>4</sup>

Written in the midst of the Civil War, Davis's letter signified a shift in slaves' understanding of where authority lay: not in the hands of their masters and mistresses but with the higher power of the federal government. Davis alluded to conflict with the mistress whose authority she sought to circumvent by appealing to Lincoln. Her situation may have been more desperate than the letter lets on. Not only was Davis restricted from traveling to see her family, but her mistress may have inflicted violent punishment in response to her request to leave the household. Ann, a slave in Missouri, wrote in 1864 to warn her husband, who was serving in the Union army, against sending money to her directly, fearing that her master would intercept it. "You do not

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<sup>3</sup> Annie Davis had perhaps also heard of ongoing debates over a proposed amendment to Maryland's state constitution that would abolish slavery. The amendment was eventually put forth to state referendum on November 1, 1864. It passed by only one thousand votes, most of which came from the absentee ballots of Union soldiers from the state. Berlin et al., *Destruction of Slavery*, 340-341; Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground*, 126-130.

<sup>4</sup> Berlin et al., *Free at Last*, ix.

know how bad I am treated,” Ann wrote, “They are treating me worse and worse every day. Our child cries for you. Send me some money as soon as you can for me and my child are almost naked.” In spite of her sense of desperation, Ann ended on a positive note: “Do the best you can and do not fret too much for me it wont be long before I will be free and then all we make will be ours.” She signed the letter, “Your affectionate wife.”<sup>5</sup> Like Annie Davis, Ann mixed urgency with optimism, confident that the thrust of the federal government towards freedom would supersede the authority of her master.

During and after the Civil War, slaves and freedpeople took up pens themselves to claim rights to freedom, citizenship, and economic redress. Their letters affirm a conviction that the federal government was committed to the cause of freedom, even when its actions did not live up to their expectations. When the war opened a space for them to enter the political arena, they seized the opportunity. “In ordinary times,” the editors of the Freedmen and Southern Society Project observe, “lighthouse keepers do not query judges, enlisted men do not direct generals, slaves do not threaten slaveholders, and former slaves do not lecture presidents. ... Only in the upheaval of accustomed routine can the lower orders freely give voice to the assumptions that guide their world as it is and as they wish it to be.”<sup>6</sup> In their actions and in their written opinions and demands, freedpeople asserted their membership in the body politic.

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<sup>5</sup> Ann made clear that she wrote through an amanuensis. In a note on the outside of the letter, James A. Carney instructed her husband to direct letters straight to him to avoid suspicion: “Do not write too often Once a month will be plenty and when you write do not write as though you had recd any letter for if you do your wife will not be so apt to get them. Hogsett [Ann’s master] has forbid her coming to my house so we cannot read them to her privately.” Ann to My Dear Husband, 19 January 1864, Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland, eds., *The Black Military Experience*, Freedom, a Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867, ser. 2 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 686-687.

<sup>6</sup> Berlin et al., *Free at Last*, xi-xiii.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, a diverse assortment of individuals used, manipulated, and subverted the medium and conventions of letters to make political statements and claims in opposition to slavery. In the aftermath of the American Revolution, enslaved people used letters to accelerate the process of gradual emancipation in Northern states, articulating a radical vision of immediate emancipation and equal rights that white opponents of slavery took up in the antebellum era. During the 1830s, a far-flung network of abolitionists emerged, basing their movement on connections made through correspondence across national postal space. They used letters to influence and react to developments in national politics over the course of the mid-nineteenth century. Correspondence was an essential tool of activism throughout this period. Letters offered a sheltered space to articulate radical ideas when abolitionists faced violent opposition in the public realm. Furthermore, letters offered an entrée into politics for people who were typically excluded from the electoral realm, especially women and African Americans. By the time of the Civil War, abolitionists were poised to reshape the nation in a newly democratic political form.

The American Anti-Slavery Society persevered through the first years of Reconstruction with Wendell Phillips at its helm and Frederick Douglass by his side. They waited to dissolve the organization until 1870, after the passage of the final of the three Reconstruction amendments to the Constitution.<sup>7</sup> The Thirteenth Amendment guaranteed the permanent abolition of slavery in 1865. The Fourteenth Amendment, ratified in 1868, defined national citizenship, thereby ensuring that the federal government would protect the equal citizenship rights of freedpeople. It left the door open for states to bar them from voting, however. The Fifteenth Amendment,

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<sup>7</sup> Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 586-589.

ratified in 1870, promised suffrage rights to African American men. This series of pledges was not satisfactory to all, particularly to advocates for women's suffrage, including abolitionist-feminists Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. Nor did it impress abolitionists who demanded that the federal government seize and redistribute Southern land to freedpeople to support their claims to economic independence. Nevertheless, Phillips and Douglass disbanded the Society in 1870.

With the dissolution of the organizational apparatus of abolition, its correspondence infrastructure collapsed. Many Northern abolitionists went on to participate in other radical causes, including women's suffrage and international labor rights. They, and their intellectual descendants, continued to rely on letter writing as an essential tool of political organization and communication. They also used correspondence to preserve their legacy. Leading abolitionists deposited their papers in archives. William Lloyd Garrison's family donated a vast collection of correspondence and documents to the Boston Public Library in the 1890s, intending to make the material accessible to a broad range of the public institution's patrons. Samuel Joseph May gave his large collection of correspondence and publications to Cornell University, encouraged by the university's first president, Andrew Dickson White, who sought to mold a progressive mission for the school. Many abolitionists also relied on their correspondence to write memoirs or published edited volumes of their letters.

As Annie Davis's letter demonstrates, with the advent of the Civil War, it was no longer just Northern abolitionists who made direct political arguments through their correspondence. Former slaveholders who had long understood and feared the power of literacy in the hands of slaves resisted efforts to develop education systems and postal networks that were accessible to freedpeople. This trend accelerated in the era of Jim Crow, when schools for black children

lacked teachers, books, and basic materials. Many children, especially in rural areas, could not attend school at all when they lived on tenant farm plots miles from the nearest school and had to contribute their labor to their families' crops.

The historical record reflects the terms of the political struggle over the education of freedpeople and their descendants. Letters by former slaves preserved in the National Archives are a legacy of Civil War and Reconstruction-era bureaucracies. After 1872, the year in which the Freedmen's Bureau was officially disbanded, the correspondence ends. The ensuing silence does not reflect a sudden apathy among former slaves regarding their political circumstances or a lack of awareness among their Northern allies that emancipation and Reconstruction had failed to live up to their vision of social transformation. Instead, the end point of the archives symbolizes the end of the federal government's alignment with the interests of the freedpeople.<sup>8</sup> Former slaves continued to put pen to paper when they could to make political arguments, demands, and statements, but the conditions that had placed their words at the center of the national political stage faded. The waning of these circumstances—what historians now debate as the failures of Reconstruction—also has made them less visible in the historical record.

The diminishing prospects of Reconstruction are apparent in a letter written by a letter written by Sergeant William White, representing his regiment of black soldiers from Kentucky, to President Andrew Johnson in 1866. White wrote from White Ranch, Texas, near the Mexican border, to protest racist and neglectful treatment. He began his letter by explaining the predicament of his regiment, comparing their loyal service in the Civil War to their “mean” treatment at the hand of white commanding officers. White wrote:

Dear President I have the honer to address the as followes the few remarks I wish to say and to inform you of is this the Condition of our familys in Kentucky

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<sup>8</sup> Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).



and the Condition of our self we Kentuckians are men that Come out in this great and noble cause we did come out like men we have stood up to geather with Comrades and have proved not only to the people but to the world that we have been faithfull and prompt to all dutyes we have fulfilled all posts that we have been put and then as for a Regiment Commander to treat the soldiers so mean as we have been treated I think it out of the question...

White explained that the soldiers' quarters were inadequate and that they "learn by the papers" that they have not been paid the promised sum of three hundred dollars. He wrote:

we are a nation that was poor and had nothing when we came to the service we had neither house nor money no place to put our familys now these poor nation of color have spent the best part of his days in slavery now then what must we do must we turn out to steal to get a start We left our wifes and children no place for them to lay there heads we left them not counted on Eequal footing as the white people they where looked on like dogs and we left them with a willing mind to execute our duty in the army of the United States war to eather make us a nation of people eather in this generation or the next to come.<sup>9</sup>

White concluded his letter, "now Mr President i wish you to ansure this letter and let us know we are to do ... you wil relieve our mind a great deal and we will remain your affectionate Brother Soldier[.]"

Like Annie Davis, White employed letter-writing conventions to make clear demands on the president's attention. He was straightforward and self-assured in presenting his complaints and his expectation that they be remedied promptly. He couched his arguments in polite language, beginning, "I have the honor to address the." Like Davis, he conveyed urgency in his request that Johnson answer his letter and "let us know what we are to do..." More than Davis, however, White articulated his understanding of the meaning of the war, emancipation, and his role in both. He referred to himself and his comrades as members of a "poor nation of color" who exchanged service to the United States for material support and recognition as equals. In closing,

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<sup>9</sup> Sargint Wm. White et al. to Dear President, 3 July 1866, Berlin et al., *Black Military Experience*, 763-764. See also Berlin, *Free at Last*, 538-539.

White deliberately addressed President Johnson as an equal. Perhaps referring to Johnson's prior position as the military governor of Tennessee, White signed himself "your affectionate Brother Soldier." White wrote not as a supplicant but as a brother in arms and held Johnson accountable as such.

White's (probably unanswered) plea for President Johnson and the federal government to enforce the rights of him and his men illustrates the shortcomings of freedom. He unknowingly forecast the incompleteness of a freedom that would continue to leave African Americans "not counted on Equal footing." For the moment, however, White was optimistic that African Americans would become "a nation of people either in this generation or the next to come," His letter illustrates the way former slaves and their allies used letters in attempts to realize a democratic vision for national politics and society. For more than sixty years, through letters, opponents of slavery had set the agenda for the ending of slavery in the United States. At the time when White wrote, they had succeeded in altering the presumed boundaries of the national body politic.

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