Fight in the Delaware Bay; Crossing the Bay in a Batteau. In June 1860, a party of six fugitives (four men and two women) fled from Worcester County, Maryland, to a point near Cape May lighthouse in New Jersey. En route near the Delaware shore, they drove off five white men in a boat who tried to apprehend them. Illustration in William Still, *The Underground Rail Road: A Record of Facts, Authentic Letters, Narratives, &c.* (Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, 1872); image from Digital Collections, General Research Division, The New York Public Library, https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47df-79d2-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99.

SAILING TO FREEDOM

MARITIME DIMENSIONS OF THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

EDITED BY
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University of Massachusetts Press
AMHERST AND BOSTON

INTRODUCTION

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This volume of curated essays focuses exclusively on the maritime dimension of the Underground Railroad, as antebellum pathways to freedom for enslaved African Americans have collectively become known.[1] The contributors examine and contextualize the experiences of many enslaved persons in the United States who, prior to the Civil War, fled to freedom by sea and of the people who facilitated those escapes. Maritime escape episodes figure prominently in the majority of published North American fugitive slave accounts written before 1865: of 103 extant pre-Emancipation slave narratives, more than 70 percent recount the use of oceangoing vessels as a means of fleeing slavery.[2] Similarly, in William Still's classic, widely read account of his activities as an Underground Railroad "Station Master" in Philadelphia during the mid-nineteenth century, many of the most striking engravings that accompany the text illustrate dramatic descriptions of waterborne, maritime escapes.[3] Clearly, the sea should rightly constitute a central component of the full Underground Railroad story. But the topic remains surprisingly understudied. Maritime fugitives have drawn minimal attention in the historiography of the field, and the specific nautical circumstances of their flight garner little discussion in classrooms when the Underground Railroad is taught.[4]

To date, public scholarship, academic research, and pedagogical materials examining the Underground Railroad have focused almost exclusively on inland, landlocked regions of the United States. Such publications highlight and prioritize persons who used overland routes and interior river crossings, often

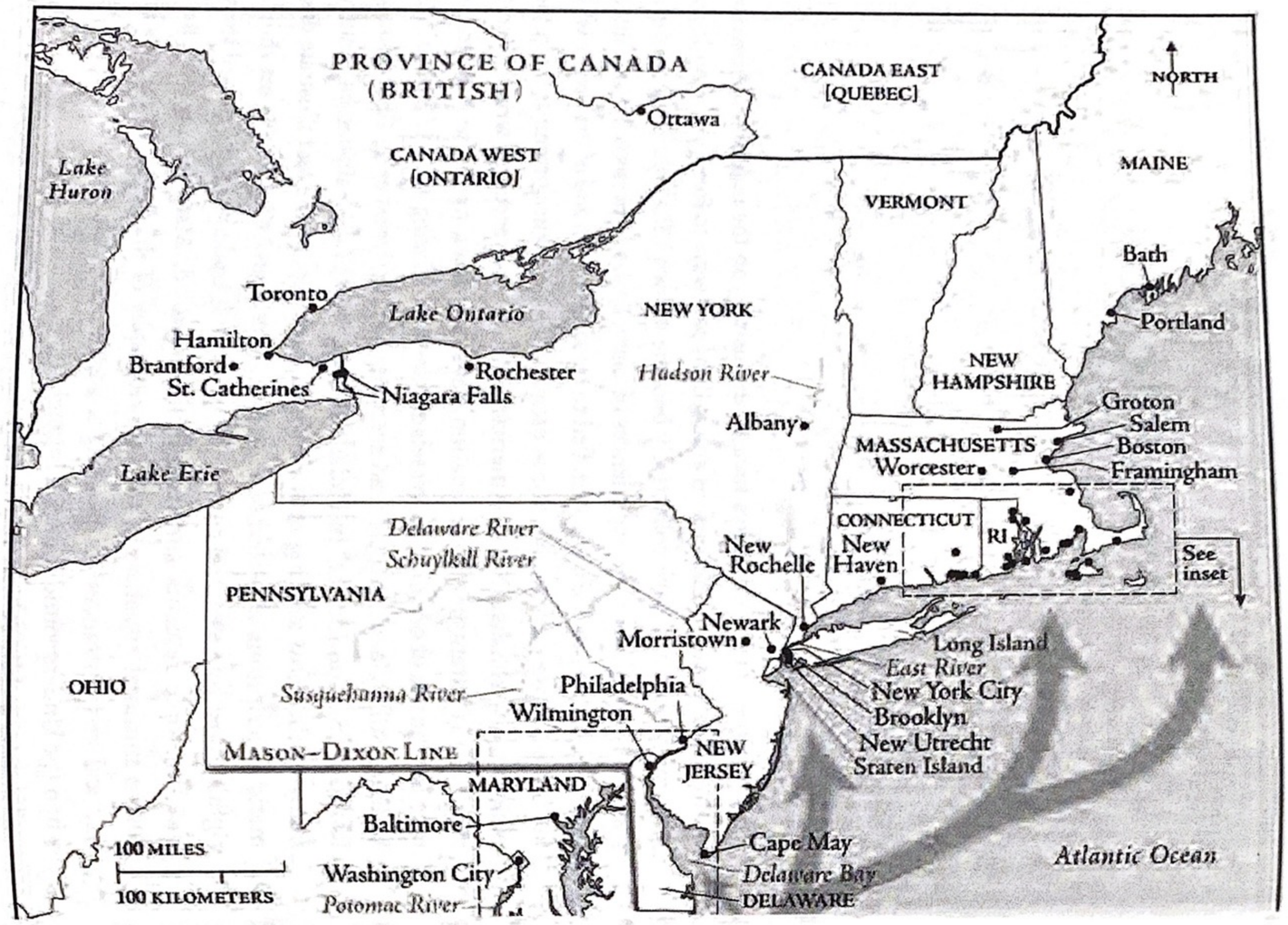

FIGURE 1. Principal Underground Railroad Route Maps, Overland and Seaborne, with an Emphasis on Ports, Inlets, and Waterways of the Maritime Underground Railroad. Maps by Kate Blackmer.

traveling clandestinely by night, as they sought to escape enslavement in the Antebellum South. However, recent academic historiography and public history research for museum exhibitions amply demonstrate that, because of the myriad practical difficulties consequent to being a northbound African American fugitive fleeing through hostile slaveholding territory, where vigilante patrols for escapees were an ever-present danger, successful escapes overland almost never originated in the Deep South.[5] In fact, prominent Underground Railroad historian Fergus M. Bordewich states flatly, "Escape by land from the Deep South was close to impossible."[6] Instead, the extant scholarship shows that the overwhelming majority of successful overland escapes were relatively short journeys that began in slave states (Virginia, Maryland, Kentucky, Missouri) sharing a border with a free state (Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa).[7]

What has been largely overlooked, however, is the great number of enslaved persons who made their way to freedom by using coastal water routes (and sometimes inland waterways), mainly along the Atlantic seaboard but also by fleeing southward from regions adjacent to the Gulf of Mexico. Because most historians of the Underground Railroad typically have not cultivated a maritime dimension to their research, they have generally neglected this essential component of the Underground Railroad, leaving the sea out of the various means employed to convey enslaved persons to the northern free states and Canada. Such neglect is deeply unfortunate; the absence of a detailed assessment and understanding of the maritime dimension of the Underground Railroad distorts the broader historical picture and hinders the formation of a more-accurate and -comprehensive knowledge of how this secretive, decentralized "system" operated. A revision of the traditional land-bound view of the Underground Railroad is therefore long overdue. This volume is intended to address this lacuna.

Research undertaken and presented for a series of "Landmarks in American History" workshops was sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities and realized through the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth. The series, titled "Sailing to Freedom: New Bedford and the Underground Railroad" and running from 2011–2015, demonstrated that a far larger number of fugitives than previously supposed actually escaped bondage by sea—especially those fleeing from coastal areas in the far South, where the employment of slaves in diverse maritime industries was ubiquitous. (The far South was any slave region that lay beyond a relatively close journey by foot to the permeable border zones where slave states lay adjacent to free states.) Enslaved laborers worked as shipyard artisans, quayside stevedores and longshoremen, river boatmen

and ferrymen, coastwise cargo-vessel crewmen, and estuary or near-coastal fishermen, among many other occupations connected to the water. Such work allowed enslaved persons to develop expert seafaring skills and knowledge in myriad areas: handling watercraft; gaining a detailed knowledge of coastal geography and hydrography (currents, tides, channels, navigation hazards); and establishing direct or indirect contacts with ocean-going ships' crews from northern free states. Equally valuable was their ready access to vessels heading out to sea. For enslaved persons in the southern Virginia and Maryland tidewater areas, the Carolina Low Country, and the Georgia and Florida seaboard, or along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico, escape by water was the logical option and, in reality, the only viable way to achieve an exit from their enslaved circumstances.

The new scholarship presented in this volume convincingly establishes that a markedly high proportion of successful escapes from the slaveholding South to sanctuary in the North were achieved using coastal seaways rather than overland routes. It is tempting to argue deductively that, given the circumstantial evidence, potentially even the majority of North American escapes from enslavement may have been accomplished by sea, but absent a definitive body of statistical data that would allow for a comparison between overland and waterborne escapes, this point is nearly impossible to prove. Still, of the known and documented fugitives who made successful escapes from the far South, almost all their escapes were achieved by sea.

Unfortunately, there is no way to conclusively quantify clandestine, illegal Underground Railroad activity or to reliably count the precise numbers of fugitive escapees by land or by sea.[8] Even so, the research contained in this book establishes definitively that escape by sea must be seen as a significant, indispensable component of the Underground Railroad story. Moreover, this analysis demonstrates that waterborne travel provided the only practical method of escape to a free territory from the coastal far South, because escape by long-distance overland routes would have been in most cases impractical: too slow, too dangerous, too logistically complicated, and therefore unsustainable.[9] By contrast, sailing to freedom was relatively simple and less hazardous. Once the fugitive was aboard a northbound vessel, escape by sea was direct; traveling by ship, whether powered by wind or steam, proceeded far more quickly and with much less effort than undertaking any terrestrial journey of comparable distance.[10]

This maritime fugitive dynamic was not only present but prominent in all slaveholding regions along the U.S. Eastern Seaboard. Consider, for example,

the perspective of historian Kate Clifford Larson, a specialist on Harriet Tubman and a contributing scholar of the "Sailing to Freedom" NEH workshops in 2015. Regarding her examination of Underground Railroad activity in and unassisted escapes from one distinct coastal district of antebellum Maryland along the Eastern Shore of Chesapeake Bay, Larson writes:

> It is very clear that escapes from anywhere along a water route—not just ports themselves, but rivers, streams, marshes—vastly outnumbered escapes from as little as ten miles away from any shoreline. This doesn't mean that people were grabbing canoes and small sailboats and sailing away, but rather, they were clearly getting information and making connections that would be valuable for escape. The plantations, homes, small farms, and businesses along the roads that linked villages and towns that hugged the Choptank River (which empties into the Chesapeake), for instance, witnessed hundreds of escapes over the 30-year period before the Civil War. Further inland—10 to 20 miles inland—you see just a few dozen escapes over that period.[11]

Although not all those hundreds of escaped slaves from along the Choptank River absconded by water—some few fled overland northward to freedom in adjacent Pennsylvania—most did. That being the case, Larson then wondered why historians have not seen "similar [elevated] escape rates from interior [slaveholding] communities?" Scholars of the Underground Railroad, she says, can provide a more nuanced understanding by "exposing the broader and more inclusive resources that maritime communities and workers could offer an escapee—those resources included more than just a vessel, but vital information and connections."[12]

Providing a more nuanced understanding is precisely what this volume aims to do. By highlighting the people involved in waterborne escapes, telling their little-known stories, and describing the less understood means by which the nautical side of the Underground Railroad functioned, this work hopes to reshape the overall scholarly view of it, to assemble a more accurate, more comprehensive, and better informed perspective. Taken together, these essays will address an important gap in the scholarly literature of the Underground Railroad and serve to reorient the traditional interpretive framework of scholarship on the topic, broadening it to include little-considered seaborne routes used by fugitives from enslavement in the South prior to the American Civil War.

The primary goal of this book, then, is to build a more authentic and precise description of how two distinct historical spheres—American slavery and maritime experience—intersected, while establishing conclusively through

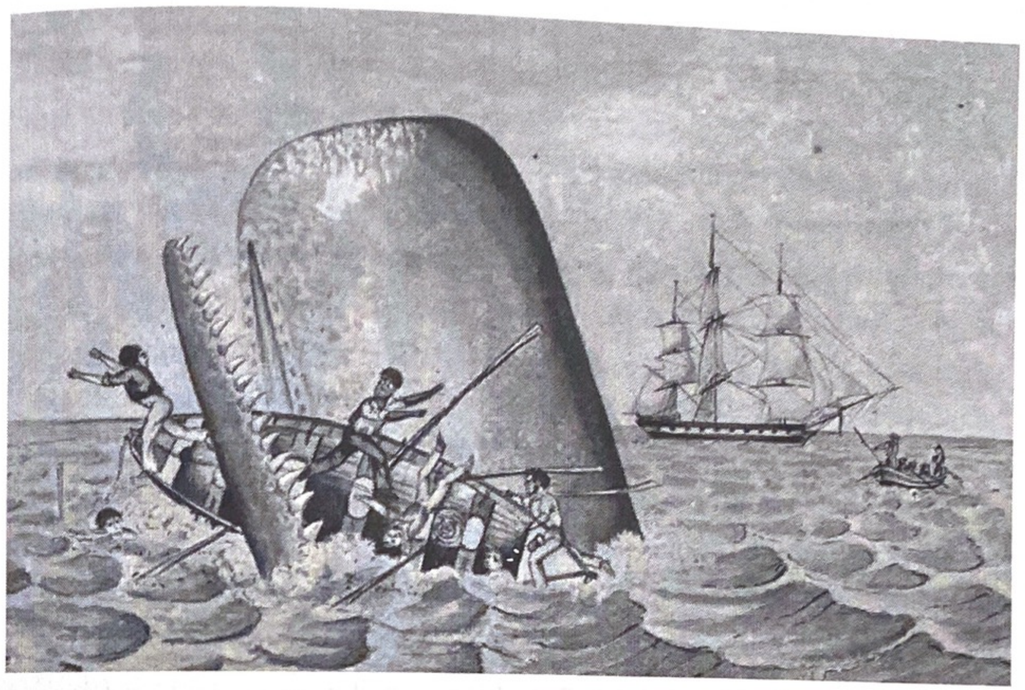

FIGURE 2. A Sperm Whale Crushing a Whaleboat during a Hunt and Tossing the Boat's Multiracial Crew into the Pacific Ocean. Fugitives from slavery often served on long whaling voyages to evade capture and re-enslavement. (Detail from illustration by anonymous whaleman, ca. 1830s, courtesy, New Bedford Whaling Museum, Massachusetts.)

documented cases that enslaved people frequently used waterborne means to escape to freedom. A parallel aim, however, is to reinforce the idea that maritime escapes could be and often were effected without any assistance from individuals who saw themselves as deliberate Underground Railroad operatives. In the nineteenth century, after all, there was little in the way of an organized network to assist would-be freedom seekers in the far South of the United States. The Underground Railroad, according to the prevailing scholarly conception based on available evidence, seems to have functioned as an organized, albeit a loose, network mainly in free northern states.[13] Though assisted seaborne escapes from the southern states certainly happened, as indicated in several of the incidents described in the following pages, far more frequently such acts of escape were impulsive and unplanned. Any assistance provided to fugitives was the result of chance meetings, often with persons who were in no way connected to any organized resistance to slavery.

An important question that this volume asks, therefore, is to what extent are maritime escapes rightfully referred to as part of the Underground Railroad, as the term is commonly understood and used by historians? According to the evidence collected in this collection, many maritime escapes were achieved

without organized, premeditated outside help of the kind typically provided by Underground Railroad operatives. To be sure, some of the escapes by sea recounted here did require extensive planning, with multiple persons involved; a handful of these episodes are well known to historians.[14] But many other escapes were spontaneous, opportunistic, and entirely self-directed by enslaved persons using only their own maritime knowledge, skills, and resources. Such incidents happened quietly, surreptitiously, with the ingenuity and personal agency of the successful fugitive remaining largely unknown, except for tantalizing hints available in runaway slave advertisements in newspapers or until the freedom seekers themselves told their stories publicly once they were long out of danger of recapture.

Consequently, one of the contentions of this book is that, by taking ship from coastal regions far south of the Mason-Dixon line and following the Gulf Stream offshore to northern free ports, enslaved individuals in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries usually bypassed entirely much of the terrestrial infrastructure of the Underground Railroad. Their experiences rightly comprise part of the Underground Railroad story but typically entailed sailing directly to a free territory and engaging with its personnel, resources, and strategies only once safely arrived in a northern port of refuge. These fugitives escaped slave states by sea, without confronting most of the impediments and potential dangers consequent to a protracted journey along an overland escape route. Thus, seaborne escapes were potentially faster, safer, and more efficient than attempting to run away from enslavement overland. This dimension of Underground Railroad operations would have been readily apparent to anyone living near the Atlantic or Gulf coast of the southern United States during the antebellum period—but to modern readers in the twenty-first century, this dimension isn't at all obvious, in part because we have largely forgotten the centrality of the sea to early American economic and social life. The following essays reframe the Underground Railroad story, placing the sea back in its proper place as an essential stage and backdrop for this history.

The team of scholars who contributed to this publishing project—an interdisciplinary mix of experts at varying stages of their careers—was assembled deliberately to cover key geographic regions along the Eastern Seaboard. These authors have researched and written extensively about slavery and abolitionism, the Underground Railroad, port communities, and coastal areas such as New York, New Bedford, the Chesapeake Bay, and the Carolina Low Country,

and the intersection of maritime industries with the African American experience during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In their chapters, they have asked penetrating questions to create an interpretive framework that will allow casual readers and Underground Railroad scholars alike to draw distinctions between the typical characteristics of fugitives who escaped from slavery by land and those who fled by sea, and to compare their experiences. Such questions include, for example: What is the profile of a typical seaborne fugitive in terms of gender, age, occupation, skills, and marriage status? What strategies and methods did freedom seekers use to acquire a boat or to get aboard a northbound ship? What personal skills did the they carry with them—particularly maritime-related skills that may have helped in making good their escape or that helped the fugitive to find work and survive after reaching a wage-based economy in a free state? How did maritime communities in the South react to, respond to, accommodate, or try to thwart escapes via water? Insofar as available data and evidence have allowed, the featured authors have tried to answer these and other related questions.

Together, the ten essays that make up this volume create a mosaic describing the nautical routes and waterborne methods that allowed so many freedom seekers to accomplish their liberation from enslavement. The text is primarily aimed at scholars and teachers of the Underground Railroad or the experience of slavery in the United States, including museum and public history professionals. However, the structure and focus of the text makes it suitable for classroom use by undergraduate and graduate students as well as by advanced secondary school students and interested general readers.

The volume is organized geographically, with the focus of each succeeding chapter proceeding from south to north along the Atlantic Seaboard from the Carolinas to New England. The analysis thus follows the coastwise route of untold numbers of enslaved persons who sought freedom aboard northbound vessels following the Gulf Stream toward sanctuary in states and territories where human bondage was illegal. Each chapter covers a different coastal location or region wherein extensive waterborne Underground Railroad activity took place. The exceptions are the general conceptual opening chapter and the closing tenth chapter, which describes emerging digital tools that will open new pathways of research on this subject.

Because this project was first conceived as an examination of coastal waterborne escape routes northward toward the ports and abolitionist communities of northern free states, it focuses principally on the U.S. Atlantic Seaboard, thereby leaving out southern Florida, the Gulf of Mexico coast, and New

Orleans, all important slaveholding regions with strong and varied connections to the sea. Clearly, enslaved persons in these areas sought and achieved freedom through seaborne means as well, fleeing by boat or ship. Our hope is that the present volume will stimulate new scholarship to explore these southward seaborne conduits of escape from the United States, and so further expand our understanding of the operation and geographic dimensions of the saltwater Underground Railroad.

Timothy D. Walker's essay opens the volume with a consideration of some practical and methodological issues surrounding the maritime Underground Railroad—issues that motivated him to undertake a study of this critical central theme. Walker offers a brief review of the scant historiography on the subject, then sketches a number of maritime Underground Railroad episodes as examples to contextualize the rest of the book, laying the groundwork to introduce and set up the essays that follow.

In chapter two, Michael D. Thompson provides an incisive examination of waterfront labor, coastal commerce, and the varied means of escaping enslavement by sea from Charleston, South Carolina. Thompson, a historian at the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga, shows how many runaway slaves had deliberately sought waterfront work in the Charleston seaport, which presented them with opportunities for embarking on northbound vessels. The port provided an ideal bridge on the road to freedom.

Next, David S. Cecelski's chapter focuses on the Carolina Low Country, where local African American watermen, sometimes free but usually held in bondage, provided the labor that merchants and planters depended on to guide their vessels and land valuable cargo. Cecelski shows that enslaved dock workers, fishermen, and transport boatmen were ubiquitous in the coastal areas of the Carolinas, but they also steered fugitives toward freedom along furtive maritime routes that endured throughout the slavery era. His meticulous research provides valuable insights about practical means frequently used to escape enslavement by sea through the Carolina coasts and wetlands.

In chapter four, Cassandra Newby-Alexander, director of the Joseph Jenkins Roberts Center for the Study of the African Diaspora at Norfolk State University in Virginia, describes the maritime Underground Railroad as it functioned in the neighboring ports of Hampton Roads and Norfolk, Virginia, and the surrounding hinterland. The entire region of Hampton Roads served as the gateway and starting point for incalculable numbers of enslaved Blacks who made their way by sea to freedom in the North.

Chapter five by Cheryl Janifer LaRoche of the University of Maryland, discusses the strategies that enslaved persons employed to escape bondage through Baltimore Harbor, the Chesapeake Bay, and other key maritime locales in Maryland. Significant as a border area just across the Mason-Dixon line from free territory, Maryland nevertheless saw exceptional numbers of fugitives use waterborne means to flee their intolerable circumstances.

Mirelle Luecke, whose recent doctorate in Atlantic history from the University of Pittsburgh focuses on maritime labor in New York City, provides in the sixth chapter a detailed consideration of the metropolitan harbor and waterfront, which served as a transitional port for fugitive Blacks. For many freedom seekers recently departed from lives of bondage in the southern states, New York represented a "gateway to freedom," a waypoint *en route* to other more secure destinations farther north. Maritime networks that assisted and protected such fugitives are the subject of her contribution to this volume.

Chapter seven is authored by Elysa Engelman, the director of exhibits for the Mystic Seaport Museum. She uses her experience as a public historian and museum professional in an innovative approach to analyzing research material for our volume. In her contribution, she sets about explaining how smaller shipbuilding towns such as Mystic, Connecticut, and whaling ports such as nearby Stonington and New London also proved to be destinations for fugitives escaping to the northern free states. Engelman's analysis focuses particular attention on the case of one local abolitionist shipbuilding family, the Greenmans of Mystic, and considers their complicated role in a community where abolition was not a cause favored by a majority of elites.

Independent scholar Kathryn Grover has worked on fugitive slave documentation in Massachusetts for over two decades. Her chapter eight synthesizes and expands the corpus of her research to examine the formal and informal ties between abolitionists who assisted fugitives in Boston and New Bedford and on Cape Cod and the islands of Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket. In so doing, her contribution explores the critical role that free African American communities in these places played in sheltering, supporting, and otherwise aiding fugitives from slavery.

In chapter nine, Len Travers of the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth, asks to what extent did New Bedford actually encourage and develop Black participation in maritime work. His incisive analysis of the New Bedford city directory for 1838 (the year of Frederick Douglass's escape and arrival) provides readers with detailed, nuanced data, and fresh insights concerning the size of

this port town's community of color, where they lived, and how they supported themselves mainly in waterfront trades or services in support of the whaling industry.

The tenth and final chapter describes opportunities for new research using digitized primary-source documentation collected in a cutting-edge online resource: the *Freedom on the Move* (FOTM) project database being compiled at Cornell University. Cornell doctoral candidate Megan Jeffreys introduces the database and guides the reader through it, demonstrating its utility for scholarly Underground Railroad investigation and providing some preliminary observations about how this tool can help historians understand the seaborne escape methods that enslaved peoples used to seek freedom.

This innovative book addresses an important gap in the scholarly literature and understanding of the Underground Railroad. Collectively, these *Sailing to Freedom* essays provide a fresh approach that will reframe the salient interpretive model of Underground Railroad scholarship, recasting it to be more inclusive and incorporating the historically indispensable seaborne routes and strategies that fugitives from enslavement employed during the antebellum era.

NOTES

1. *Underground Railroad* is a term of contested meaning and some imprecision. In this volume, it is meant broadly and collectively to include all the formal and informal means, methods, strategies, and tactics by which enslaved African Americans escaped their circumstances and achieved freedom prior to 1865. Its first appearance in common usage dates to the period 1839–1842. See Eric Foner, *Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2015), 6.
2. Survey of authors represented in the University of North Carolina's "North American Slave Narratives," Documenting the American South, https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/. I am grateful to Professor Jonathan Schroeder of the University of Warwick for this reference.
3. William Still, *The Underground Rail Road: A Record of Facts, Authentic Letters, Narratives, etc.* (Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, 1872).
4. This despite the fact that the earliest systematic and widely known learned work on the Underground Railroad acknowledged manifold instances of escape by sea and plotted coastal maritime routes on an iconic, often-reproduced map of Underground Railroad networks that accompanied the volume. See William H. Siebert, *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: MacMillan, 1898), 81–82, 144–45.

5. Foner, *Gateway to Freedom*, 5; Fergus Bordewich, *Bound for Canaan: The Underground Railroad and the War for the Soul of America* (New York: Amistad, 2005), 109–10; 271–72.
6. Bordewich, *Bound for Canaan*, 271.
7. Ibid., 115.
8. The ongoing scholarly discussion on the difficulty of obtaining quantitative Underground Railroad data and the ultimate unknowability of escape numbers is alluded to by Spencer Crew in his foreword to *Passages to Freedom: The Underground Railroad in History and Memory*, ed. David W. Blight (New York: Harper Collins/Smithsonian Books, 2004), *x*.
9. Though, to be sure, this dynamic leaves aside the estimated fifty thousand annual runaways who fled their enslaved circumstances *within* the South during the late antebellum period. These fugitives were usually recaptured and rarely achieved freedom. See John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 282.
10. Bordewich, *Bound for Canaan*, 272.
11. Kate Clifford Larson, email to the author, 18 August 2015. See her *Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman, Portrait of an American Hero* (New York: Random House, 2004).
12. Larson, 18 August 2015.
13. Bordewich, *Bound for Canaan*, 197, 307–9.
14. The protracted seven-year escape effort of Harriet Ann Jacobs provides a good example. See Jean Fagan Yellin, ed., et al., "September 1810—November 1843: Slavery and Resistance," pt. 1 of *Harriet Jacobs Family Papers,* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 1:1–51.

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SAILING TO FREEDOM

Maritime Dimensions of the Underground Railroad

TIMOTHY D. WALKER

> No sooner, indeed, does a vessel, known to be from the North, anchor in any of these waters [in the Chesapeake Bay]—and the slaves are pretty adroit at ascertaining from what state a vessel comes—than she is boarded, if she remains any length of time, and especially overnight, by more or less of them, in hopes of obtaining a passage in her to a land of freedom.
>
> —Captain Daniel Drayton, *Personal Memoir of Daniel Drayton*

ISSUES AND CONCEPTS

Given the strong popular interest in and scholarly activity focused on the history of slavery in the United States, including the means by which desperate enslaved individuals escaped bondage, what explains the surprising dearth of historiographical material written on the maritime dimensions of the Underground Railroad? A brief review of the available scholarly literature focused on this volume's research theme will provide some context for our project and its intended goal: to challenge and reshape the salient perception that the Underground Railroad was primarily a terrestrial undertaking. This view dominates the extant Underground Railroad historiography. Only a handful of academic works stand out for their treatment of the nautical means freedom seekers used. Not surprisingly, several of the authors noted below are contributors, either directly or indirectly, to the research presented in this volume.

Jeffrey Bolster's award-winning study, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* published in 1997, is an early example of this line of inquiry. His book raises incisive questions and provides useful insights about how escaped slaves and free Black mariners came to serve in large numbers aboard U.S. merchant and naval vessels, especially those sailing from northern states prior to the Civil War. Chapter five in particular, titled "Possibilities for Freedom," discusses how coastal maritime activities provided a portal for escape to enslaved African Americans.[1] The present inquiry into the maritime dimensions of the Underground Railroad proceeds directly from Bolster's groundbreaking scholarship.

In 2001, Kathryn Grover's assiduous, comprehensive research resulted in *The Fugitive's Gibraltar: Escaping Slaves and Abolitionism in New Bedford, Massachusetts*. Her fine-grained work demonstrates clearly that, in America's principal whaling port, the large Black community was replete with people who had likely been born into slavery, had escaped the South by sea, and who had ample reason to sign on to whaling voyages that would keep them away from slave-catching bounty hunters for years at a time. Also appearing in 2001 was David Cecelski's *The Waterman's Song: Slavery and Freedom in Maritime North Carolina*. Beautifully written, this book highlights the ubiquity of maritime coastal slave labor in the antebellum South, which in turn afforded slaves with necessary training and opportunities to facilitate waterborne flight.[2]

Historian Jane Landers touches on the theme of maritime escape in passing in her chapter titled "Southern Passage: The Forgotten Route to Freedom in Florida," published in 2004 as part of the collected volume, *Passages to Freedom*, edited by David Blight. In 2005, Harvey Amani Whitfield published *From American Slaves to Nova Scotian Subjects: The Case of the Black Refugees, 1813–1840* (Pearson/Prentice Hall), an adroit study of those who had fled slavery in the United States to the protection offered by British forces during the War of 1812 and were subsequently transported by the Royal Navy as freed people to maritime Canada.[3]

Fergus Bordewich's excellent comprehensive volume, *Bound for Canaan: The Underground Railroad and the War for the Soul of America*, also came out in 2005. Bordewich repeatedly mentions fugitive slaves' frequent recourse to coastal shipping as a means to reach the North, describing seaborne escape episodes throughout his text. He even devotes a brief chapter, "The Saltwater Underground," to maritime dimensions of the Underground Railroad, but his work does not recognize the overall magnitude or relative historic importance of such waterborne fugitive activity; his focus remains squarely on the conventional narrative of terrestrial Underground Railroad routes. The following

year, Cassandra Pybus published her fine volume, *Epic Journeys of Freedom: Runaway Slaves of the American Revolution and Their Global Quest for Liberty*, which chronicles enslaved peoples who fled from their American owners to seek freedom with the British and describes the challenges they faced as they subsequently dispersed throughout the British maritime empire, pursuing lives as free women and men of color in social contexts where legal slavery continued to be the norm.[4]

Though historical attention to waterborne flight southward toward the Caribbean Sea has been especially scant, the theme was picked up in one groundbreaking study from 2013. Echoing Bordewich, historians Irvin D. S. Winsboro and Joe Knetsch employ in their article published in *The Journal of Southern History* the term "southern Saltwater Railroad" to refer to fugitive routes from the United States into the Bahamas—but it could also accurately describe nautical pathways to jurisdictions in Mexico, Haiti, and other Caribbean islands where laborers held in bondage could find sanctuary during the nineteenth century. Winsboro and Knetsch point out that, in 1825, when the British Colonial Office declared that any U.S. slave "who reaches British ground" would be declared "free," the ruling immediately liberated approximately three hundred runaway bondspeople who had fled to the Bahamas.[5]

This policy caused great diplomatic tension between the United States and Britain, never more so than when, in 1841, just two years after the well-known uprising on the schooner *Amistad*, another shipboard rebellion on the American brig *Creole* led to 128 enslaved people gaining their freedom in the Bahamas. Although this incident—the most successful revolt and liberation of enslaved people in U.S. history—made headlines at the time, the *Creole* slave mutiny at sea is barely known today. The *Creole* was transporting 135 enslaved people from Richmond and Hampton Roads, Virginia, to be sold in the slave markets of New Orleans, Louisiana. On 7 November 1841, as the *Creole* approached the Bahamas, 19 enslaved persons, reportedly led by a man named Madison Washington, who had been re-enslaved after living in freedom in Canada, rose up against the crew and successfully took control of the vessel. Two days later, the mutineers brought the *Creole* into Nassau Harbor. Because slavery had been outlawed in all British colonies in 1833, the Bahamian colonial authorities considered the majority of the enslaved people on the ship to be free. The outraged U.S. consul, however, demanded that those involved in overtaking the ship be arrested and charged with mutiny. Despite the U.S. government's remonstrances, the British Admiralty Court in Nassau ordered on 16 April 1842 that the surviving 17 mutineers be released and declared free men.[6]

In 2015, Eric Foner published *Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad*, which describes the central role that New York City played as an Underground Railroad waypoint. While not the book's primary focus, much of Foner's narrative revolves around clandestine maritime activity in the port and along the city's waterfront; his index lists dozens of instances of seaborn escape from enslavement. Finally, the most recent work in this vein, Cassandra Newby-Alexander's *Virginia Waterways and the Underground Railroad* appearing in 2017, narrates and documents the multiple ways that resourceful enslaved people used their access to Virginia's waterways to escape bondage and achieve freedom. Here at last is a work of scholarship wholly and explicitly focused on the central nautical aspect that characterized so much Underground Railroad activity along the eastern seaboard.[7]

In addition, an ambitious online research project currently underway promises to shed new light on seaborne escapes from enslavement. Historian and researcher Edward Baptist of Cornell University heads the "Freedom on the Move" project (FOTM), which aims to compile all North American runaway slave advertisements from regional newspapers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries into one master digital research tool. Such notices—classified advertisements placed by owners seeking to recover escaped slaves—have never before been systematically and comprehensively collected. Project researchers are compiling the advertisements collaboratively and entering them into a searchable online database. The project will integrate existing runaway-slave advertisement projects and allow archivists and researchers nationwide to add advertisements and search terms.[8] According to the Library of Congress, between 1730 and 1865, an estimated two hundred thousand fugitive slave notices appeared in U.S. newspapers; as of January 2020, just over 10 percent of these are available via the FOTM website.[9] Because such advertisements often provide details from owners about the means slaves used to escape, the project will provide significant new data regarding maritime strategies used to seek liberation. Moreover, initial analysis of the FOTM database undertaken for this volume indicates that, once a full reckoning of these newspaper notices is possible, cases of waterborne escape may figure as prominently in the historic record as overland escapes.[10]

Why has the historiography of the Underground Railroad, so rich in studies of overland escape routes, overlooked the broad maritime dimension of strategies employed by freedom seekers to escape bondage? One explanation is that, in recent decades, few scholars who investigate fugitives from slavery in North

America are trained in the perspectives, methodologies, and skills of maritime history.[11] The influence of the sea on historical events on land has become neglected as a field of scholarly inquiry, rarely figuring in terrestrial historical causality.[12] But this neglect is in turn part of a larger contemporary misconception about the past: most people alive today, particularly those who live inland and experience no direct contact with seaborne trades, have no real concept of how important water transport was to daily life in the United States of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Once railroads and motor vehicle traffic reshaped settlement and transportation patterns, people forgot how vital the sea and waterborne commerce were to the fabric of everyday life in the United States prior to the early decades of the twentieth century.

Quite simply, coastwise shipping along the Eastern Seaboard dominated the American economy until the late 1800s. Almost all personal and business travel of more than a relatively few miles and virtually all shipping of heavy goods were conducted predominantly by water, because watercraft offered by far the fastest, cheapest, and most efficient means of transport. Coastal schooners, sloops, and brigs were the workhorses of this internal trade, in which slave-produced raw materials such as cotton and molasses were shipped northward to New England and New York factories, and northern industrial manufactured goods were shipped south. These items included finished cotton cloth, iron and steel tools, agricultural machinery, as well as third-rate salted fish used as a cheap food for enslaved populations.

For much of the pre–Civil War era, travel along the North American Atlantic Coast, where the great majority of the U.S. population resided, was made particularly difficult by the numerous unbridged rivers that cut the coastline.[13] As a telling example, Frederick Douglass's escape from Baltimore, Maryland, to New York City in 1838, though conducted along an "overland" route of less than two hundred miles, nevertheless entailed three river or estuary crossings by ferry and a steamboat passage between Wilmington, Delaware, and Philadelphia.[14]

The few American roads at the time—mostly rudimentary and vulnerable to seasonal rains—linked coastal ports to regional hinterland communities and industries but did not tie together distant and disparate regions north and south. So coastwise navigation on innumerable small merchant vessels

> provided a service that was at once more comfortable, safer, and cheaper than travel by land. Moreover, these vessels brought publications from other colonies and distributed European news from whichever American port had received it first from overseas. In the end, one cannot measure the importance to ordinary seaboard inhabitants of this connection to American coastal communities beyond their immediate neighbors. . . .[15]

The ubiquity of the maritime industry and therefore of maritime work, performed universally in the southern states by chattel laborers, whether as on-board seagoing crew, ferrymen and pilots, coastal and river watermen, or on the working waterfronts of port towns, provided many enslaved people with abundant opportunities for escape—opportunities that persons held in bondage in the hinterland and interior simply did not have. For example, William Grimes, "self-emancipated" in 1814, stowed away aboard the Boston sloop *Casket*, bound from Savannah, Georgia, to New York, with the assistance of the vessel's sympathetic crew of New Englanders, one of whom even helped him to buy provisions for the trip in town before departure. He revealed details about seizing this fortunate opportunity in an account of his seaborne escape published in 1855:

> I went . . . to assist in loading her. I soon got acquainted with some of these Yankee sailors, and they appeared to be quite pleased with me. Her cargo chiefly consisted of cotton in bales. After filling her hold, they were obliged to lash a great number of bales on deck. The sailors, growing more and more attached to me, they proposed to me to leave, in the centre of the cotton bales on deck, a hole or place sufficiently large for me to stow away in, with my necessary provisions. Whether they then had any idea of my coming away with them or not, I cannot say; but this I can say safely, a place was left, and I occupied it during the passage, and by that means made my escape.[16]

By the mid-nineteenth century, fleeing enslavement in the South by being secreted on a northbound ship had been commonplace for decades. For their part, southern slaveholders and civil authorities were well aware of the danger that seaports and commercial shipping represented to their property, as a means by which fugitive slaves often slipped away to freedom. So great was their concern that, beginning in the early 1800s, municipal and state lawmakers in the South enacted a series of regulations to limit interaction between northern free Black mariners and enslaved waterfront workers. Southern authorities in Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia passed statutes requiring northern sailors of color to either remain aboard ship or be confined on land while their vessels were in port.[17] Further, to staunch this inexorable flow of absconding human property, by the 1850s lawmakers in several southern states passed statutes requiring a systematic search for stowaway slaves before any northbound vessel could clear harbor. Southern port officers regularly contracted agents to fumigate ships as they prepared to get underway, using a noxious mixture of pitch, tar, vinegar, and brimstone (sulfur) to drive any would-be fugitives from their hiding places below decks. For example, in late 1854, the Florida legislature passed An Act to Prevent the Abduction and Escape of Slaves from this State,

which created an officer of inspection and fumigation charged with locating slaves attempting to escape aboard northbound vessels.[18]

Such measures were only partially effective. Ingenuity and determination overcame adversity, and seaborne escapes to destinations in northern port towns continued unabated. In the earliest systematic scholarly work on the Underground Railroad, published at the end of the nineteenth century, author William H. Siebert compiled hundreds of firsthand accounts through correspondence with witnesses and operators who had engaged in clandestine assistance of fugitives. Siebert wrote: "The advantages of escape by boat were early discerned by slaves living near the coast or along inland rivers. Vessels engaged in our coastwise trade became more or less involved in transporting fugitives from Southern ports to Northern soil."[19] He went on to describe, with documented examples, how small trading vessels, returning from their voyages to Virginia, landed slaves on the New England coast. An Underground Railroad station keeper of Valley Falls, Rhode Island, reported to Siebert: "'Slaves in Virginia would secure passage either secretly or with the consent of the captains, in small trading vessels, at Norfolk or Portsmouth, and thus be brought into some port in New England.' . . . The reporter gives several instances coming with her knowledge of fugitives that escaped from Virginia to Massachusetts as stowaways on vessels."[20]

Clearly, such seaborne escapes were neither isolated incidents nor in any way considered unusual. In another telling instance, Thomas H. Jones, born a slave in North Carolina in 1806, described in his published narrative how he worked for years as a stevedore or longshoreman, loading and unloading vessels in Wilmington harbor. In 1849, he bribed a steward on the cargo brig *Bell*, bound for New York, paying $8.00 (well over a week's wages for a laborer at the time) to be hidden in the vessel's hold. Discovered by the captain while underway and fearing re-enslavement, Jones made a dramatic escape when the *Bell* arrived in New York Harbor; using a hastily assembled raft of boards for flotation, he attempted to swim a mile to shore. Pursued by the *Bell's* chief mate, who noticed his absence, Jones was providentially rescued by some boatmen with abolitionist sentiments who happened to be passing by.[21] In yet another remarkable case early in the Civil War, a seasoned waterman, Dempsey Hill, about thirty years old and a slave since birth, took advantage of the turmoil in Beaufort, North Carolina, caused by the Union blockade and advancing northern forces. One night in autumn 1861, Hill deliberately broke into the Beaufort Customs House to steal nautical charts detailing the complex and hazardous coastal waterways of the region, hiding them in the city cemetery. A few nights later, he and four enslaved companions, all experienced boatmen, stole a pilot vessel and escaped, delivering the valuable charts to the blockading Union naval

squadron anchored "down the bay" near a passage through the Outer Banks. When Hill and his friends told the officers aboard the Union warships that they "wanted to become sailors and freemen," they were immediately mustered in as able seamen.[22] Hill served throughout the war, after which he worked as a crewman aboard coastal trading vessels before settling in Wareham, Massachusetts, where he became well known and highly regarded as the captain of a Buzzards Bay fishing and pleasure craft.[23]

Northern naval blockading operations during the Civil War occasioned many such waterborne escapes, yet they are rarely discussed as part of the broader Underground Railroad story. For example, in a well-known photograph of the crew of the USS *Monitor*, the Union's first ironclad naval vessel, the African American crewman sitting in the foreground is Josiah "Siah" Hulett Carter, a former slave who had escaped directly to that warship in a stolen boat. On the night of 16 May 1862, the USS *Monitor* rode at anchor in the James River off City Point, Virginia. Around midnight, twenty-two-year-old Siah, having just escaped from the Shirley Plantation of Charles City County, approached the

FIGURE 3. Josiah "Siah" Hulett Carter, *front right*, with the USS *Monitor* crew. Carter joined the ship on 19 May 1862. He had escaped enslavement in Virginia days before and fled down the James River in a stolen boat, sailing directly to the famed Union ironclad warship. Photograph, "James River, Va. Sailors on Deck of U.S.S. Monitor; Cookstove at Left" by James F. Gibson, Civil War Photographs, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., LC-DIG-cwpb-00306.

ship in his purloined skiff. The startled crewmen on watch first challenged, then shot at him before realizing he was "contraband"—a runaway slave. Siah's owner, Colonel Hill Carter, had tried to frighten his slaves so they would not attempt to flee to blockading Union vessels; the Yankees, he said, would carry them out to sea and throw them overboard to drown. Though terrified, Siah rowed alongside the *Monitor,* seeking sanctuary, work, and a passage to freedom. By 19 May 1862, Siah Hulett Carter had officially signed on for a three-year enlistment as a member of the warship's crew. Carter survived the *Monitor*'s sinking off Cape Hatteras on 31 December 1862 and afterward served in the Union Navy for the duration of the war; he was honorably discharged on 19 May 1865.[24]

Even as early as the final quarter of the eighteenth century, escape by sea was a common strategy for enslaved persons in the southern coastal United States—so common, in fact, that in northern ports such as New Bedford, Massachusetts, local newspapers developed a standardized text that ship captains published as a legal notice whenever such an event occurred. Consider, for example, the following classified advertisement that appeared as a boxed text published in the *Medley or New Bedford Marine Journal* on 20 April 1797:

> Public Notice! To all whom it may concern, Know Ye, THAT I William Taber, commander of the sloop *Union*, sailed from *York River*, in *Virginia*, on or about the 28th of March last, bound to this Port [New Bedford]—That on the day after sailing, I discovered a NEGRO on board said sloop, who had concealed himself unbeknown to me.—It appearing inconsistent for me to return, the wind being ahead, I proceeded on my voyage, and landed him in this Port.—He calls himself JAMES, is about 27 years old, and says he belongs to Mr. Shacleford, a Planter, in *Kings* [*sic*] and *Queen's County, Virginia*. Any person claiming him, will know by this information where he is—For which purpose it is made public in this manner, and every legal method has been taken to prevent the Owner losing the property, in my power.—WILLIAM TABER. New Bedford[25]

Such notices appeared regularly in newspapers published in seaports along the New England coast and maintained precise language that varied little from one region to the next. The principal variation was in the details reported: name of the captain; name and type of vessel; point of departure; date; and so on. Printers even used a purpose-made illustration that appeared alongside these texts. It was a small stylized image of a running African male figure dressed in stereotyped "native" clothing (a kind of loose skirt) and carrying a spear or staff, with a capital "R" signifying "runaway" emblazoned on his chest.

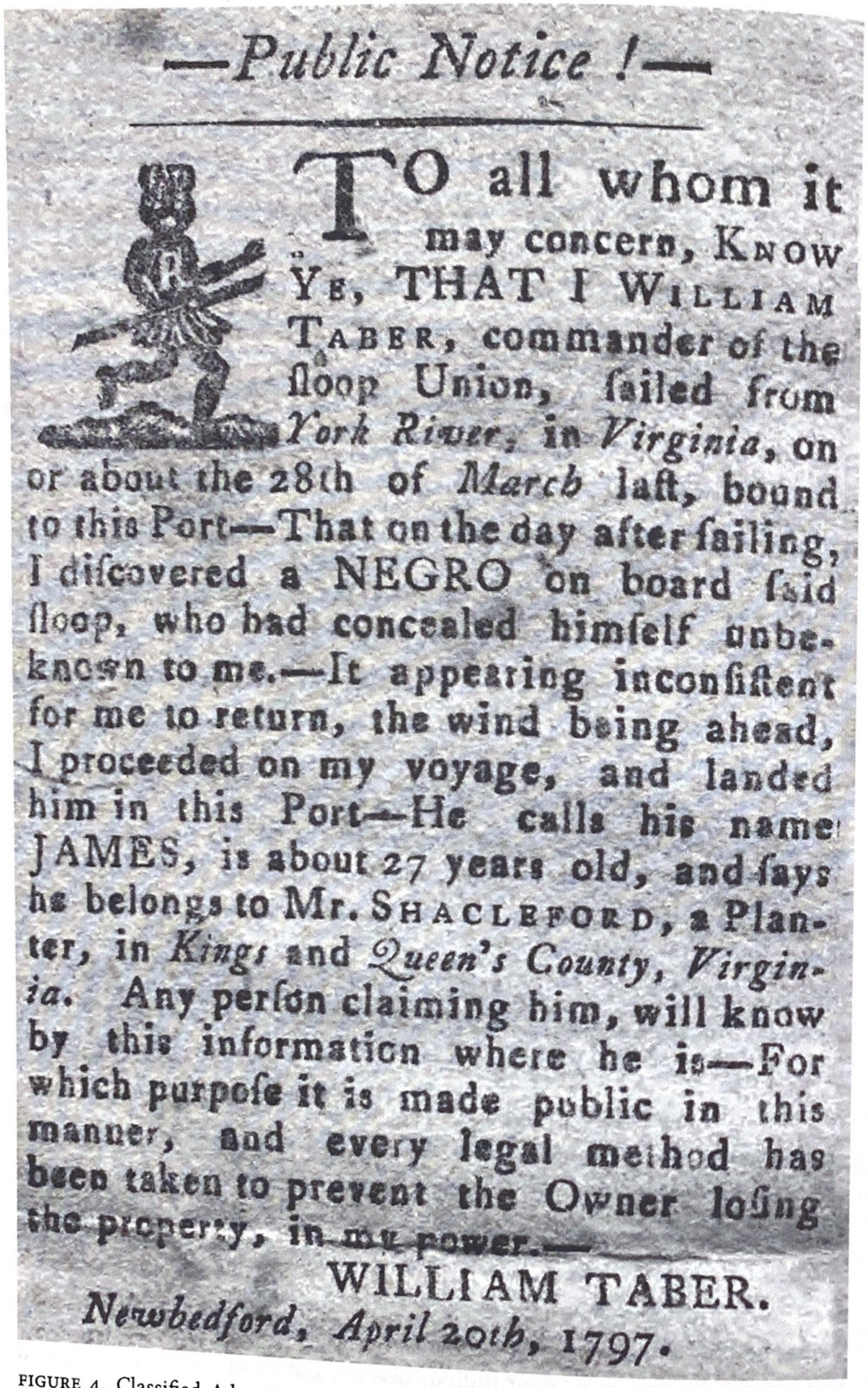
By federal law—the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793—knowingly aiding or harboring someone fleeing legal bondage was a crime punishable by an exceptionally large fine of up to five hundred dollars and a prison term of not more than a

year.[26] So, following the passage of the act of 1793, masters of vessels who arrived in northern ports with fugitive slaves on board found it legally prudent to post public notices in newspapers stating the circumstances by which an escaped slave had come to be discovered aboard their vessel, that they had done everything in their power not to aid and abet the runaway, and to publicly report the fugitive's last known location. Captains typically took out these advertisements over three successive weeks in a weekly publication.

These advertisements served several purposes. Taken at face value, such legal notices were meant simply to alert a slave's owner regarding the last known whereabouts of valuable human property. However, reading between the lines, a knowing reader may understand that this type of public notice was printed to provide legal cover to the captain and crew of any vessel that had, knowingly or unknowingly, transported a fugitive from his or her place of enslavement. One may even suspect that the practical circumstances of the publication and dissemination of such notices—many newspapers came out only weekly—actually provided an advantage to fugitive slaves: it gave them valuable time for onward travel to get beyond the reach of masters bent on recovering their "self-emancipated" property and of the federal law that supported them.

It is striking that the text of this advertisement provided no concrete information about the identity, legal status, or whereabouts of the person in question. The fugitive was described in neutral terms—a "negro" only, neither slave nor free—implicitly suspected but not confirmed to be a fugitive from enslavement. The ad's primary purpose, from the perspective of the sloop *Union*'s owners and commander, was to absolve the captain and crew of the vessel of any criminal liability for having transported a likely fugitive slave—to establish and circulate a narrative that created a kind of plausible deniability that would protect the captain and his vessel from legal repercussions. The reader must take the captain at his word that this lone man, "James," had stowed away aboard his vessel without his knowledge and that sailing conditions did not allow the vessel to return to port in Virginia and deliver a possible freedom seeker to his owner.

Regional newspapers circulated with merchant vessels up and down the Atlantic Seaboard, and southern slave-owners read them avidly to seek news of their missing property.[27] The stated goal of such advertisements was to inform owners of the location of their human chattels, but by the time news reached the owners in the South, the fugitives could have been anywhere. According to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793, it became the responsibility of the state or territory where escaped slaves were discovered to arrest and secure known fugitives. However, owing to the vague language of the law, the fugitive effectively


—Public Notice!—

TO all whom it may concern, KNOW YE, THAT I WILLIAM TABER, commander of the sloop Union, sailed from *York River*, in *Virginia*, on or about the 28th of *March* last, bound to this Port—That on the day after sailing, I discovered a NEGRO on board said sloop, who had concealed himself unbeknown to me.—It appearing inconsistent for me to return, the wind being ahead, I proceeded on my voyage, and landed him in this Port—He calls his name JAMES, is about 27 years old, and says he belongs to Mr. SHACLEFORD, a Planter, in *Kings* and *Queen's County*, *Virginia*. Any person claiming him, will know by this information where he is—For which purpose it is made public in this manner, and every legal method has been taken to prevent the Owner losing the property, in my power.—

WILLIAM TABER.

Newbedford, April 20th, 1797.

FIGURE 4. Classified Advertisement Placed by Captain William Taber in the *Medley or New Bedford Marine Journal*, 20 April 1797. The item gives legal notice of the whereabouts of a suspected fugitive slave who had arrived in New Bedford, Massachusetts, aboard the sloop *Union* in the previous month. Ad, courtesy, New Bedford Whaling Museum, Massachusetts.

became a free person if, after six months following arrest, he or she remained unclaimed by the legal owner or the owner's agent.[28]

Left unstated was that, once the fugitive came into port, his or her movements were not controlled or impeded in any way. As interpreted in Massachusetts after 1783, even before the passage of explicit federal runaway slave legislation, the state's law did not compel authorities to arrest and detain suspected fugitives.[29] Instead, Massachusetts jurisprudence, which at the time also covered all the ports down east along the Maine coast, held that a ship's principal officer had fulfilled his duty under the law once he had served public notice of what had transpired aboard his vessel without his consent. The larger lesson here is that events like these happened with such frequency in the late eighteenth century (not just in Massachusetts but in other northern free states, as well) that standard legal language and iconography evolved in the public press to report the circumstances in a way calculated to benefit all parties involved or implicated in a seaborne escape from enslavement.

NEW BEDFORD: A PORT TOWN WINDOW ON THE MARITIME UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

No northern maritime community exemplifies the multiple themes embodied in this volume better than does the whaling port of New Bedford, Massachusetts. The story of the Underground Railroad comprises a series of epic narratives detailing individual sacrifices and acts of heroism by many people of diverse ethnic backgrounds who attempted to escape enslavement or who sought to help enslaved people gain their freedom. Because whaling was typically an industry dominated by antislavery-minded Quakers, New Bedford became a hotbed for abolitionism in the antebellum North. For runaway slaves from south of the Mason-Dixon line, New Bedford was known as a safe haven. The port town was a beacon of hope at the end of the Underground Railroad, where southern slave catchers in pursuit of fugitives and the sizeable bounties on their heads received a distinctly hostile reception. As a northern port city closely linked by commercial water routes to the Deep South, New Bedford provides the historian a prime microcosm in which to explore and understand the maritime dimension of the Underground Railroad.

New Bedford became a vitally important station in this clandestine network for a number of reasons. Foremost among them were its population of dedicated Quakers and free African Americans for whom slavery was a moral outrage and the vitality, heterogeneity, and resourcefulness of its maritime community. Although seafaring was considered a "contemptible occupation" for white men,

it was "an occupation of opportunity for slaves and recent freedmen," as Jeffrey Bolster writes in *Black Jacks*.[30] New Bedford was one hub in an extensive coastal seaborne trading system that exchanged goods in southern ports and the West Indies. Sympathetic New England ship captains and crewmen assisted fugitives by stowing them away amid bales of trade goods and other cargo until they reached a northern port and eventual sanctuary in places such as New Bedford, Boston, or Canada. Indeed, escaping slaves termed New Bedford "the Fugitive's Gibraltar" in admiration of the lengths to which its residents would go to safeguard them.[31] Thus, the town became not so much a stop *along* the Underground Railroad; rather, it was a *terminus*—a community where ex-slaves knew they could settle and prosper. By 1853, nearly 9 percent of New Bedford's residents were African American, the highest percentage of any city in the antebellum northern United States. Moreover, in 1855, according to the Massachusetts state census taken that year, nearly 43 percent of New Bedford's African American population admitted to having been born in the southern United States. That statistic indicated an extraordinary migration pattern for Blacks from a region of the country where slavery was legal (and the overwhelming majority of Black people were enslaved) to a specific northern city where slavery was emphatically held to be intolerable.[32] Such statistics strongly support the view, as historian Kathryn Grover notes, "that a considerable number of fugitives lived in New Bedford, before and especially after the Fugitive Slave Act" of 1850.[33]

Even in the 1830s and 1840s, New Bedford was a primary hub of abolitionist activity; sympathetic residents founded the New Bedford Anti-Slavery Society in the fall of 1833. "The town was antislavery from the start, being full of Quakers . . . and the people were all Abolitionists before William Lloyd Garrison began his wonderful work," wrote journalist Charles T. Congdon.[34] In *The Underground Railroad in Massachusetts* published in 1936, author Wilbur Siebert credits residents of New Bedford early on with "befriending the runaway . . . in a manner often employed later by Underground operators."[35]

Quaker owners of whale-ships usually welcomed runaways as much for practical as moral reasons. Freedmen often made good sailors, and "self-emancipated" men might seek convenient employment on a whaling voyage, knowing that their multiyear absences at sea would confound bounty hunters sent to haul them back into involuntary servitude. After the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, New Bedford's citizens, such as prominent shipowners Rodney French, William C. Taber, and the Rotch and Rodman families, protected runaway slaves even though aiding and abetting fugitives was an illegal activity that placed all the involved participants in danger of punishment by fine, imprisonment, or re-enslavement.

In September 1838, with the help of Underground Railroad agents, Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey, who had been born into slavery in Maryland, escaped to New York and then to New Bedford with his wife, Anna, who was a free woman. Dressed as a mariner to allay suspicions, he traveled overland and by sea and carried an official seaman's protection certificate borrowed from a free Black sailor.[36] Taking the last name Douglass to escape detection, Frederick found work as a day laborer on the New Bedford docks. The town's people of color, he recalled, were "much more spirited than I had supposed they would be," with a "determination to protect each other from the blood-thirsty kidnapper [bounty hunters who sought fugitive slaves], at all hazards."[37] Douglass and his family made New Bedford their home for seven years.

In addition to the employment opportunities in the whaling, fishing, and maritime-support trades that drew fugitive African Americans to New Bedford, booming textile mills later brought untold numbers of immigrants from Ireland, French-speaking Canada, Portugal and even the South Pacific, transforming the town into one of the most cosmopolitan places in the United States. Contemporaries saw this community as a wonder, a model of social diversity and racial harmony in an America North and South generally hostile to foreign immigrants of any race or ethnicity. In 1858, local scion Daniel Ricketson, a friend of Henry David Thoreau, observed in his *History of New Bedford* that "owing to the influence of the anti-slavery principles of the Society of Friends, there is but little prejudice against color, and a general willingness and desire that the colored population may enjoy equal rights and privileges with themselves."[38] During the Civil War, New Bedford was a recruiting site for the celebrated African American Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Infantry Regiment. Many local residents—often fugitive ex-slaves, including some with seagoing experience—joined the ranks to fight for slave emancipation. One volunteer, Sgt. William H. Carney, who had been born a slave in 1840 in the port of Norfolk, Virginia, and had escaped to New Bedford most likely by ship, became the nation's first Black soldier to earn the Congressional Medal of Honor.[39] Two of Frederick Douglass's sons, Charles and Lewis, served in the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts as well, while a third son, Frederick Jr., worked as a regimental recruiter alongside the Union Army campaigning in Mississippi.[40]

EVADING THE BOUNTY HUNTER: FUGITIVES AT SEA ON WHALING VOYAGES

Once arrived in New Bedford or a nearby whaling port, one expedient option for work open to an escaped male slave was to go to sea as a foremast jack on

whaling voyages to avoid re-enslavement. While one might expect that many instances of such artifice would be well known, in fact there is only a small selection of concretely documented cases of fugitive slaves who signed aboard a whaling vessel as novice "green hands" for a protracted voyage specifically to avoid detection after fleeing slavery. Upon consideration, the reasons for this lack of abundant documentation are clear enough: the practice was illegal; and the men in question were fugitives, technically stolen legal property. Maintaining anonymity and a low profile were in the best interests of everyone involved, whether freedom seeker, ship's master, or shipowners. The use of aliases complicates attempts by modern researchers to compile data on this matter.

Still, oblique and direct references to runaway slaves serving as crew aboard Yankee whaling vessels are not difficult to find. In 1834, a knowledgeable observer gave an insider's account of the disparate origins of the men who made up a typical Massachusetts whaling crew:

> There are often found on the same deck the lingering remnants of the aborigines of this State, in specimens of Gayhead and Mashpee tribes,—the runaway slave,—a renegade tar from the British navy,—the Irish, the Dutch,—the mongrel Portuguese from the Azores, and the natives of the Sandwich Islands, from which the captains make up the complements of crews diminished by accident or disease, or scanty by design.[41]

John Thompson, who was born into slavery in 1812 but who escaped from Maryland by traveling overland to Pennsylvania, provided one of the most detailed accounts of a fugitive who went to sea to avoid arrest by bounty-hunting slave catchers. In his self-published narrative of these events, Thompson recounted how he determined to go to sea after seeing freedom seekers in Philadelphia recaptured and sent back to enslavement in the South. On arriving in New Bedford, he deliberately joined the crew of a whaling vessel, which he identified as the bark *Milwood*, and served as the ship's steward during a lengthy voyage to the Indian Ocean.[42] The *Milwood*'s logbook and crew list show that Thompson shipped under his own name; the voyage lasted two full years, from June 1842 to June 1844.[43]

Other examples of fugitive slaves who are known to have signed as crew aboard New Bedford whaling ships include John S. Jacobs, the brother of Harriet Ann Jacobs. He sailed as a green hand on the whaleship *Frances Henrietta*, beginning a four-year voyage to the Pacific in August 1839[44] and later going aboard the *Draper* on a three-year voyage from 1844–1847.[45] Also George Weston, at age twenty-two, sailed aboard the whaling bark *Ocean* in May 1854, giving peninsular Northampton County, Virginia, as his birthplace, and later

worked as cook on the whaling bark *Edward* (1856–1860), this time claiming falsely to be from Philadelphia when he signed on.[46] Philip Piper was another case. Although he had escaped from Alexandria, Virginia, his shipping papers listed New York City as his home. Piper completed multiple voyages on whalers out of New Bedford, including the ships *Frances Henrietta,* most likely from April 1837–April 1839, and *America* from July 1840–May1842. He gave his age as twenty-one when he signed on with the *America.*[47]

At least two members of the crew of the whaling brig *Rising States*, which sailed from New Bedford in 1837 under the command of African American captain William Cuffe, were likely to have been fugitives trying to evade re-enslavement by going to sea on a long voyage. Green hand "Lisbon" Johnson is described on the vessel's muster roll in terms that identify him as a man of African descent; he gave his age as forty and his place of birth as Bladensborough, Virginia. His thirty-five-year-old shipmate James Roselle, also an African American, stated that his place of birth was Washington, North Carolina, a port on the Pamlico River.[48] While it is possible that each was a free man of color seeking maritime employment for the first time, the circumstances suggest that they had ulterior motives for going aboard a whaler. The wealthy Cuffe family, based a few miles from New Bedford in Westport, Massachusetts, were outspoken abolitionists, and as shipowners during the first half of the nineteenth century, they were notable for shipping whaling and merchant crews composed entirely of men of color.[49] In any event, the *Rising States* left U.S. waters in July 1837; seamen Johnson and Roselle were paid off and discharged that December when the vessel was condemned in the Cape Verde Islands off the northwest coast of continental Africa.[50]

Determining precisely who were in fact fugitive slaves among the many known African American whaling ship crewmen is a task fraught with potential pitfalls for the investigator. Regarding primary-source documentation held by the New Bedford Whaling Museum, Mark Procknik, that institution's head librarian, comments:

> The crew lists that we have in our collections are full with whalers who may have been freed slaves, but . . . locating concrete documentation brings its own set of challenges. For example, the crew list for the maiden whaling voyage of the *Lagoda* included a man named Joseph Wilson, who is listed as having a black complexion and "wooly hair" and hailing from Baltimore. The ship *Martha* of Fairhaven shipped another seaman with "wooly hair" and a black complexion named Charles Flowers [who claimed to be] from Pennsylvania. The ship *Condor* of New Bedford shipped a black-skinned "wooly-haired" seaman named Felix Hutchinson who came from New Orleans. The trick, however, is determining which of these

> African-American whalers, as per the available documentation, were actually [self-emancipated] slaves. It gets even trickier when you factor in the fact that the names provided in the crew lists may not even be their real names. In my opinion, our crew lists are full of freed slaves who shipped onboard whaling voyages.[51]

Corroborating evidence from other contemporary sources indicates that fugitives from slavery frequently set their course toward New Bedford. One of those sources is the work of a well-known African American abolitionist, William Still, who was chairman of the Vigilance Committee of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society prior to the Civil War. Still operated an exceptionally active Underground Railroad safe house near the waterfront in Philadelphia during the mid-1850s. As many as eight hundred fugitive slaves passed through his care; many had arrived in the free state of Pennsylvania by ship via the Philadelphia seaport. Still kept a detailed record of his work, which he published in 1872. Among the many examples of maritime escape that he documented is a report of five men brought to Philadelphia by an anonymous schooner captain from Wilmington, North Carolina, in November 1856. At least one man was bound for New Bedford, where he believed his brother and cousin were then living.[52]

On the topic of gender, recorded incidents of successful maritime escape demonstrate a strong predominance of male fugitives. What explains this gender discrepancy? The practical circumstances of male-dominated waterfront and shipboard labor practices favored escape attempts made by male slaves. In commercial ports, there simply were not many women employed on the docks or in shipyards and virtually none on board vessels. Most women who frequented the waterfront worked in conspicuous service industries as street vendors, tavern workers, and other occupations. Consequently, they were usually well known by local authorities and laborers. The presence of unfamiliar Black women in any of these areas would have been noticeable and suspect, marking them as potential fugitives. Even so, it was not unknown for women and girls to escape enslavement by sea.

For example, another case that William Still documented is that of Mary Millburn, using the alias Louisa F. Jones, who escaped to Philadelphia from Norfolk, Virginia, in May 1858 aboard an express steamship carrying U.S. mail. With the assistance of agents arranged by Still, she boarded the vessel in disguise, wearing "male attire," and avoided detection when state authorities searched the ship before departure.[53] In another instance, Still recounted how a large group of fifteen enslaved men, women, and children were landed at the foot of Philadelphia's Broad Street in the dead of night from an unnamed schooner on the Schuylkill River. They had been spirited away from Norfolk, Virginia, in July

1854 with the full knowledge and cooperation of the vessel's captain, who later assisted with getting the fugitives ashore on League Island in Philadelphia, after a coastal voyage fraught with danger of discovery for the contraband cargo. The schooner successfully endured two separate searches by government officials while *en route*, with terrifying potential consequences—arrest and imprisonment for the crew and re-enslavement for the African Americans.[54]

Subsequent research has identified this vessel as the passenger schooner *City of Richmond*, commanded by a Virginia-based captain named Albert Fountain. He conducted a regular packet service between New York, Norfolk, and Richmond, with occasional stops in Philadelphia and Wilmington, Delaware. Fugitive slaves, male and female, often traveled aboard as clandestine cargo.[55] Perhaps the most-active documented maritime operator involved in conducting fugitives along the saltwater Underground Railroad, however, was a mysterious schooner owner whom William Still refers to in his records only as "a law-breaking captain by the name of B." This sea-going abolitionist sympathizer was responsible for numerous voyages in the 1850s, ferrying dozens of fugitive slaves (and sometimes entire family groups) to sanctuary in Philadelphia in exchange for a hefty fee per illicit passenger.[56]

Only two escaped slaves were ever arrested in Boston and returned to slavery by federal marshals under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Both had arrived in that city by sea as fugitives from the South. Seventeen-year-old Thomas Sims had escaped from Georgia as a stowaway aboard a coastal trading vessel; authorities arrested him in Boston and returned him to his owner in April 1851. Three years later in 1854, twenty-one-year-old Anthony Burns escaped from Richmond, Virginia, and traveled to Boston by boat with the assistance of an empathetic African American mariner. Burns was also captured and returned, despite the efforts of a crowd of abolitionists in Boston, who tried to rescue him from federal custody and spirit him to safety.[57]

Shifting the long-established, terrestrial-dominated historical narrative about the Underground Railroad to include its counterpart maritime dimension is a matter of raising awareness and improving scholarly accuracy. However, the reorientation is also an exercise in doing justice to the memory of Underground Railroad operatives, known and unknown, free and unfree, who risked imprisonment, brutal corporeal punishment, or death in North America's ports and coastal waterways to provide untold numbers of enslaved persons a chance to live in freedom. Their experiences have always been available to researchers,

with archival evidence in abundance, yet their agency has been chronically obscured in the salient narrative by a century or more of historiographic predisposition to privilege the stories of fugitives who traveled by land over those who went by sea. Perhaps the emphasis on overland sojourners resulted from their usually requiring more time and more assistance to flee; they thus had greater contact with formal networks of Underground Railroad operatives, and so left more written and material vestiges of their ordeal. By contrast, those slaves who sailed far offshore, expeditiously over the pathless sea, necessarily left fewer traces of their passing. Their tales, though no less significant, have therefore taken longer to come to the attention of contemporary land-bound scholars.

NOTES

1. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).
2. Kathryn Grover, *The Fugitive's Gibraltar: Escaping Slaves and Abolitionism in New Bedford, Massachusetts* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001); David S. Cecelski, *The Waterman's Song: Slavery and Freedom in Maritime North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).
3. Jane Landers, "Southern Passage: The Forgotten Route to Freedom in Florida," in *Passages to Freedom: The Underground Railroad in History and Memory*, ed. David W. Blight (New York: Harper Collins/Smithsonian Books, 2004), 117–31; Harvey Amani Whitfield published *From American Slaves to Nova Scotian Subjects: The Case of the Black Refugees, 1813–1840* (Toronto: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2005).
4. Fergus Bordewich, *Bound for Canaan: The Underground Railroad and the War for the Soul of America* (New York: Amistad/HarperCollins, 2005), 268–92; Cassandra Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom: Runaway Slaves of the American Revolution and Their Global Quest for Liberty* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006).
5. Irvin D. S. Winsboro and Joe Knetsch, "Florida Slaves, the 'Saltwater Railroad' to the Bahamas, and Anglo-American Diplomacy," in *Journal of Southern History* 79, no. 1 (February 2013): 51–78. They discuss the British Colonial Office's declaration of freedom on p. 56.
6. Walter Johnson, "White Lies: Human Property and Domestic Slavery Aboard the Slave Ship *Creole*," *Atlantic Studies* 5, no. 2 (2008): 237–63; Anita Rupprecht, "'All We Have Done, We Have Done for Freedom': The Creole Slave-Ship Revolt (1841) and the Revolutionary Atlantic," *Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis* 58 (2013): 253–77; Jeffrey R. Kerr-Ritchie, *Rebellious Passage: The Creole Revolt and America's Coastal Slave Trade* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 10–11, 96–98, 103–30, 159–61.
7. Eric Foner, *Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2015); Cassandra Newby-Alexander, *Virginia Waterways and the Underground Railroad* (Charleston, S.C.: The History Press, 2017).

8. "About the Project," Freedom on the Move, CISER Institute, Cornell University, accessed 27 September 2019, https://freedomonthemove.org/#about.
9. Library of Congress, Research Guides, Topics in Chronicling America, "Fugitive Slave Ads," accessed 15 September 2019, https://guides.loc.gov/chronicling-america-fugitive-slave-ads.
10. Correspondence with Megan Jeffreys, 11–12 October 2019. Jeffreys is a doctoral candidate at Cornell University and a researcher with the FOTM project.
11. The recent publications of historian Marcus Rediker, Sowande M. Mustakeem, and Jeffrey R. Kerr-Ritchie are notable exceptions. See Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York: Viking-Penguin, 2007) and *The Amistad Rebellion: An Atlantic Odyssey of Slavery and Freedom* (New York: Viking-Penguin, 2012); Muskateem, *Slavery at Sea: Terror, Sex, and Sickness in the Middle Passage* (Urbana: Unniversity of Illinois Press, 2016); and Kerr-Ritchie, *Rebellious Passage.*
12. A recent shining exception is Nathaniel Philbrick, *In the Hurricane's Eye: The Genius of George Washington and the Victory at Yorktown* (New York: Viking Press, 2018). Philbrick, a competitive sailor, masterfully demonstrates the centrality of nautical concerns—weather, tides, sea power, fleet movements—to General George Washington's strategy in the Yorktown campaign of 1781, his climactic operation during the American Revolutionary War.
13. Benjamin Woods Labaree, William M. Fowler Jr., John B. Hattendorf, Jeffrey J. Safford, Edward W. Sloan, and Andrew W. German, *America and the Sea: A Maritime History* (Mystic, Conn.: Mystic Seaport, 1998), 94–95.
14. Foner, *Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2015), 2.
15. Labaree et al., *America and the Sea*, 94–95.
16. William Grimes, *Life of William Grimes, the Runaway Slave, Brought Down to the Present Time. Written by Himself* (New Haven, Conn: published by the author, 1855), cited in Kathryn Grover, "Fugitive Slave Traffic and the Maritime World of New Bedford" (research paper prepared for New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park, Massachusetts, and the Boston Support Office of the National Park Service, Massachusetts, September 1998), 8.
17. Cecelski, *The Waterman's Song*, 143–48.
18. Florida, *An Act to Prevent the Abduction and Escape of Slaves from this State, Acts and Resolutions of the General Assembly of the State of Florida* (1855), chap. 635, 52–53.
19. William H. Siebert, *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: MacMillan, 1898), 81.
20. Ibid., 144–45.
21. Thomas H. Jones, *The Experience of Thomas H. Jones, Who Was a Slave for Forty-three years* (New Bedford, Mass.: A. Anthony & Sons, 1871), 32, 43–44; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *History of Wages in the United States from Colonial Times to 1928*, rev. of Bulletin No. 499 with suppl., 1929–1933 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1934), 253.

22. Obituary of Captain Dempsey Hill, *New Bedford (Mass.) Evening Standard*, 14 May 1894; and "Many Have Sailed with Him. The Late Capt. Dempsey Hill Was Well Known," *Boston Herald*, 16 May 1894.
23. "Dempsey Hill Has Passed Away," *Boston Herald*, 16 May 1894. I am grateful to Lynda Ames of the Wareham Public Library for this and the above references regarding Dempsey Hill.
24. Keeler to his wife, 19 May 1862, in *Aboard the USS Monitor: 1862; The Letters of Acting Paymaster William Frederick Keeler, U.S. Navy, to His Wife, Anna*, ed. Robert W. Daly (Annapolis, Md.: United States Naval Institute Press, 1964); and John V. Quarstein, Cindy L. Lester, and Diana Martin, *The Monitor Boys: The Crew of the Union's First Ironclad* (Charleston, S.C.: The History Press, 2015), 15, 31, 123, 126–29, 137, 170–71, 200, 252, 270.
25. "Public Notice," *Medley or New Bedford (Mass.) Marine Journal*, 20 April 1797. The notice appeared in two successive editions.
26. *Fugitive Slave Act of 1793*, U.S. Statutes at Large 1 (1793): 302.
27. Labaree et al., *America and the Sea*, 94.
28. The Library of Congress, *A Century of Lawmaking*, 1414.
29. Emily Blanck, "Seventeen Eighty-Three: The Turning Point in the Law of Slavery and Freedom in Massachusetts," in *The New England Quarterly* 75, no. 1 (2002): 24–51; Margot Minardi, *Making Slavery History: Abolitionism and the Politics of Memory in Massachusetts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 15–19.
30. Bolster, *Black Jacks*, 4.
31. F. N. Boney, Richard L. Hume, and Rafia Zafar, eds., *God Made Man, Man Made the Slave: The Autobiography of George Teamoh* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1990), 106, cited in Grover, "Fugitive Slave Traffic," 11.
32. Grover, *The Fugitive's Gibraltar*, 54–60.
33. Grover, *The Fugitive's Gibraltar*, 60; and Grover, "Fugitive Slave Traffic," 5–7.
34. Congdon cited in Grover, *The Fugitive's Gibraltar*, 17.
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53. Ibid., 558–59.
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57. Foner, *Gateway to Freedom*, 148–49.