

Escaping Slavery by Sea in Antebellum America: A Labor History

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Abstract: This article explores a relatively neglected topic in the histories of slavery and abolitionism in the antebellum United States: how enslaved people escaped by sea and more specifically how the waterfront was a zone of struggle over slavery from roughly 1820 to 1865. The article treats four main themes: ships, trade, and port cities within the rise of Atlantic capitalism; life and work on the waterfront; efforts to control the docks from above; and the routes and destinations devised by escapees and their allies. Sailors, dockworkers, artisans, porters, market women, and seagoing fugitives cooperated and conspired in an alternative “public sphere,” using connections within the maritime working class to unleash a powerful though little understood force of abolitionism from below.

Keywords: History from below; abolitionism; labor; slavery; fugitives; waterfront.

JIM MATTHEWS came to the waterfront of Charleston, South Carolina, in December 1837, looking for a ship. His first two efforts to escape slavery had resulted in recapture and vicious floggings that left thick, lasting scars on his back. He now stood at the stevedore’s stand on the waterfront, hoping for work. Having grown up in Four Holes, a swampy region about thirty miles upcountry, he did not know much about how things worked on the waterfront. A dock boss came along and asked, Jim recalled, “if I wanted work. I told him yes.” Off he went in a gang of workers to stow bales of cotton aboard a vessel in port. At mid-day the stevedores retired to a local cookhouse for a meal. Jim had no money so he followed the gang but then slipped away and returned to the ship, where he met the ship’s steward on deck. The white man proved to be friendly and gave him something to eat.¹

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1 This and the next two paragraphs are based on [James Matthews], “Recollections of Slavery by a Runaway Slave (1838),” first published in the *Advocate of Freedom* (Brunswick, Maine) August 2, 1838, then the *Emancipator*, August 23, 1838, and most recently in ASHTON, Susanna, ed. **I Belong to South Carolina: South Carolina Slave Narratives**. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2010, p. 49-82. See also ASHTON, Susanna. Re-Collecting Jim. **Commonplace: The Journal of Early American Life**, n. 15, 2014.

As Jim returned to the vessel to work later in the week, he “saw something shining on the ground” amid the dockside bales of cotton. He did not know what it was but he nonetheless stooped down, picked it up, looked it over, and put it in his pocket. That night a waterfront guard came aboard the vessel on which Jim and others were working and yelled to the boss, “Holloo, have you got any run-away n-----s here?” The head stevedore protected both himself and his fellow worker: “no, -- no runaways in this lot.” The guard then asked to see everyone’s badge, a license the city required of each working stevedore in order to prevent exactly what Jim was doing: working his way aboard a ship for the purpose of escape. Jim watched nervously as one dockworker after another displayed his badge to the guard. When the officer came to him, Jim reached into his pocket with a trembling hand and pulled out the shiny thing he had found on the dock. The guard looked at it, nodded, and moved on. Had Jim not found that lost badge, he would have been taken directly to the “Sugar House,” a dungeon-like place for runaways where he had already spent three months of literal torture. Runaways needed luck.

Jim kept meeting with the steward who one day “asked me what I would give him to carry me to the free country,” meaning Boston, where the vessel was bound. Jim had no money but bravely answered, “Two months wages.” The question was a test to see how much Jim wanted to escape. The steward said he could help him but would not take any money for it. He told him to come back late at night. When Jim returned the steward led him down into the hold of the vessel and told him to crawl into a narrow space between bales of cotton and stay there. The next morning the vessel hoisted sails for Boston. The steward brought Jim food and drink every night and after a long four weeks welcomed him to a “free country.” Waiting until the entire crew had disembarked, he took Jim ashore and pointed him toward the “colored sailor’s boarding house.” On his way, Jim met a Black man, probably a seaman, who asked, said Jim, “if I was a sailor.” Jim was tired, weak, and unsteady on his feet, but he still had a sense of humor. “I told him not much of one, but that I had just come from a ship.” The man looked him over closely and noticed that his ragged clothes were covered by pills and wisps of cotton. He immediately saw that he was a runaway and said simply, “I understand it all.” The man took Jim to the boarding house and the next day escorted him to a local abolitionist “who gave me some warm clothes.” Jim ended up moving further north, working as a laborer in Hallowell, Maine, where another abolitionist took down his story of escape and published it in August 1838.

The story of Jim Matthews is not uncommon in the long annals of slave resistance across the Americas. Thousands of enslaved people emancipated themselves by escaping slavery by sea. Yet this kind of dramatic tale has been rarely told by historians. Why? Part of the reason is that the metaphor “underground railroad” has pointed us in the wrong direction, limiting the vast majority of historical investigations to the landed routes by which self-emancipated people traveled northward even though the way to freedom included not only an underground railway, but another we might call an “overseas freeway.” Reinforcing this limitation is a deep, largely uninspected terracentric bias – the unconscious tendency to think that history happens

only on land and that the oceans and seas of the world are historical voids. A third limitation flows from the previous two: historians have neglected maritime sources even though large-scale historical processes such as the formation of class, race, and culture have happened on the decks of deep-sea sailing vessels. Following the pioneering work of N.A.T. Hall on the Caribbean, David S. Cecelski on North Carolina, Cassandra L. Newby-Alexander on Virginia, and Timothy D. Walker and his fellow contributors in a wide-ranging collection of essays entitled *Sailing to Freedom*, this article argues that ports, riverine systems, and the Atlantic were crucial sites in the struggle against slavery.²

The dominant image of the runaway in American popular culture derives from a woodcut that appeared in many nineteenth-century newspaper advertisements: a man or woman, simply dressed and usually barefoot, walks on land, carrying a bundle or a sack over his or her shoulder. This representation implies that absconding was an individual act and indeed this has become the prevailing scholarly judgment: running away was an individualistic response to enslavement, often contrasted with the much less common collective resistance of insurrection. Both the implication and interpretation are wrong. Not only was running away commonly undertaken collectively, the process of escape was itself fundamentally social, requiring collaboration and alliance even for someone who tried to go it “alone.” Lateral social cooperation and connections, especially along the docks, were critical to running away.

This article is a preliminary report on work in progress, focusing on docks and ships as places of work, cooperation, discipline, policing, and subversion – in short, as a zone of struggle and an infrastructure of escape. The nexus of labor among fugitive, dockworker, and sailor exemplified in the story of Jim Matthews is at its heart. The larger project explores the history of dockside struggles against slavery within the history of Atlantic capitalism from 1820 to 1865, focusing on nine ports: Baltimore, Maryland; Norfolk, Virginia; Wilmington, North Carolina; Charleston, South Carolina; and Savannah, Georgia; as well as receiving ports Philadelphia, New York, Boston, and New Bedford, Massachusetts. This article lays out the conceptual foundation of the project by surveying four topics: the political economy of capitalism in the port cities; the experience of life and work on the waterfront; efforts from above to control ships, docks, sailors, dockworkers, and fugitives; and the primary routes to freedom from below.³

2 HALL, N. A. T. Maritime Maroons: ‘Grand Marronage’ from the Danish West Indies. *William and Mary Quarterly*, v. 42, n. 4, p. 476-498, 1985; CECELSKI, David S. *The Waterman’s Song: Slavery and Freedom in Maritime North Carolina*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001; NEWBY-ALEXANDER, Cassandra L. *Virginia Waterways and the Underground Railroad*. Charleston, SC: History Press, 2017; WALKER, Timothy D. ed., *Sailing to Freedom: Maritime Dimensions of the Underground Railroad*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2021.

3 This article is part of a larger project entitled “Freedom Ship: Escaping Slavery by Sea in Atlantic Antebellum America,” forthcoming from Viking-Penguin in 2023. I concentrate on coastal Atlantic ports and not on the ports of the Great Lakes, the Gulf of Mexico, or the Mississippi River. My thinking on the project owes much to the outstanding work of OLSAVSKY, Jesse. “**Fire and Sword will Affect More Good**”: **Runaways, Vigilance Committees, and the Rise of Revolutionary Abolitionism, 1835-1860**. PhD dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 2019.

Port Cities, Trade, and Capitalism

NORTH AMERICAN port cities had different origins, chronologies, and geographies and yet they rapidly developed common characteristics based on their relationship to the rapidly expanding system of global capitalism. All were linchpins connecting their local hinterlands to the growing world market; all were essential to the production and worldwide circulation of commodities. Port cities were dynamic centers of “articulation” where direct producers inland (slaves, farmers, artisans) were linked to laborers in the port (dockers and porters), who were, in turn, connected to workers aboard ships and, after the voyage, to other port city workers and finally to consumers in the metropolises and broader markets. Ports were always Janus-faced – inward-looking toward productive hinterlands and outward-looking toward the world market. They supplied critical links of labor in global commodity chains. Global capitalism was a differentiated set of subsystems articulated into new and highly profitable regimes of labor and accumulation.⁴

Gary B. Nash taught us long ago that port cities have been crucibles of class formation and dynamic sites for the development of capitalism. The two went hand in bloody hand as the rulers of Europe and the Americas organized and disciplined workers to produce and transport commodities for the world market. Although the types and combination of waterfront workers varied over space and time, all ports had an occupational structure in which half or more of the population worked in trade or the defense of trade, for example in the transportation of commodities to and from ships, shipbuilding and repair, and the building of infrastructure, the docks and roads instrumental to commerce. All ports featured a motley proletariat, a mix of multi-ethnic, often international men, women, and children, skilled and unskilled, waged and unwaged. African American workers enslaved and free were central to all American ports north and south. Port workers did not always produce commodities but they did produce value by moving commodities through space and time. They occupied a strategic position in the accumulation of capital on a global scale.⁵

Escaping slavery by sea between 1820 and 1865 took place within what has been described as the “golden age” of American maritime trade, when “canal fever” expanded inland waterway commerce as coastal and oceanic shipping grew in new and dynamic ways. Slavery boomed and expanded across the American south, manufacturing prospered in the north, and the United States acquired vast new territories to become a continental empire. This was the era of the “Second Slavery,” a distinctive material and temporal regime in which slave

4 PRICE, Jacob. Economic Function and the Growth of American Port Towns in the Eighteenth Century. **Perspectives in American History**, v. 8, p. 121-186, 1974; KNIGHT, Franklin W. and LISS, Peggy K. eds. **Atlantic Port Cities: Economy, Culture, and Society in the Atlantic World, 1650-1850**. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991; REDIKER, Marcus. Reflections on the Motley Crew as Port City Proletariat. **International Review of Social History**, v. 64, n. 27, p. 255-262, 2019.

5 NASH, Gary B. **The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution**. Cambridge, MA, 1979; CAMPLING, Liam and COLÁS, Alejandro. **Capitalism and the Sea: The Maritime Factor in the Making of the Modern World**. London: Verso, forthcoming 2021.

commodity production intertwined with industrialization to drive global capitalist development. The expansion of production for domestic and international markets by both free and unfree labor in this era in turn generated a “transportation revolution.” Technological innovation fueled the expansion of shipping as steamboats multiplied on rivers and canals and trains crisscrossed the country. The completion of the Erie Canal in 1825 made New York the country’s biggest maritime portal in the world.⁶

Port cities grew at a dazzling pace as workers constructed maritime infrastructure alongside one waterway after another. Port authorities expanded docks, improved harbors, and built warehouses. Merchants and captains hired thousands of dockers and sailors, Black and white, to move the commodities being traded and shipped. The waterfront division of labor grew more complex. Shipyards in Philadelphia, New York, Boston, and Norfolk boomed, producing more and ever larger vessels. In 1820 American shipbuilders turned out 557 vessels with a carrying capacity of 51,394 tons. In 1855 the number of vessels had increased almost fourfold (to 2,027) and the amount of tonnage by a factor of eleven (583,450). The size of the average vessel produced in American shipyards grew from 93 tons in 1820 to 288 tons in 1850. The bulk of the workers and vessels were employed in the coastal trade, the volume of which during the 1850s exceeded the combined total of transport on canals and railroads combined. The maritime sector played a leading role in this dynamic phase of American capitalist development.

Since every commodity chain was necessarily a chain of human labor, every trade route was a potential route for a runaway, which is to say, hinterlands for commodities were more or less identical to the hinterlands for escaping slavery by sea. The regional trade that flowed into Norfolk made that port, in the words of historian Tommy Lee Bogger, “a magnet for runaways from some distance, the piedmont of Virginia to northeastern North Carolina.” The same was true for Charleston, as Jim Matthews showed, and for Savannah, to which Charles Ball traveled eighty miles over land in 1830 to escape by sea. Port cities were transit points for people escaping slavery over hundreds of square miles inland. Cooperative labor had both sanctioned and subversive dimensions.⁷

Life and Work on the Waterfront

EARLY NINETEENTH-CENTURY port cities were bustling, noisy, rowdy places – not for the faint of heart. The several blocks closest to the water hummed with activity as sailors brought

6 This paragraph and the next draw upon ROLAND, Alex W.; BOLSTER, Jeffrey and KEYSSAR, Alexander. **The Way of the Ship: America’s Maritime History Reenvisioned, 1600-2000**. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2008, p. 130, 145, 158, 171, 172, 174. See also TOMICH, Dale. The Second Slavery and World Capitalism: A Perspective for Historical Inquiry. **International Review of Social History**, v. 63, n. 3, p. 477-501, 2018.

7 BOGGER, Tommy L. **Free Blacks in Norfolk, Virginia, 1790-1860**. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1997, p. 21-22, 167; BALL, Charles. **Slavery in the United States: A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball**. New York: John S. Taylor, 1837.

ships to anchor and then labored with dockers, porters, carters, and draymen to unload and transport their valuable cargo. Maritime craftsmen buzzed around the ships, making repairs and preparing vessels for the next passage. Saws whirred, mallets pounded, wooden cart wheels creaked and groaned. Shipwrights barked orders to their journeymen, apprentices, and laborers about the sawing, hauling, and hammering of planks of timber. Market women screeched their wares, selling food to sailors who arrived in port half-starved but flush with wages, which they carried into the taverns and grog shops. Black dockworkers sang slowly to each other, to control the pace of work, as they loaded and stowed bales of cotton:

Lift him up and carry him along
Fire Maringo, fire away!
Put him down where he belong
Fire Maringo, fire away!
Ease him down and let him lay,
Fire Maringo, fire away!
Screw him in and there he'll stay.
Fire Maringo, fire away!
Stow him in his hole below,
Fire Maringo, fire away!
Say he must and then he'll go.
Fire Maringo, fire away!

The work was hard, physical, and dangerous. In a time when most ports had limited technology (tackle, hoists, and derricks), raw human strength was essential to moving commodities, whether massive timber or 450-lb. bales of cotton. Hernias and back injuries were common among “wharf hands,” as was maiming or death by body-crushing heavy cargo. Patrick Snead, who escaped to Canada, had worked on the docks of Savannah: “I had to work hard, lifting heavy bales of goods. This lifting caused me to wear a truss some time before I left.”⁸

Almost all historians who have studied runaways have noted the allure of cities. Fugitives craved anonymity. Enslaved people who “stole themselves” by running away committed a serious crime against property and could expect bloody punishment if captured. Sparsely populated rural areas and small towns always bred suspicion about strangers, and all white people were encouraged by financial reward to report, arrest, and return suspected runaways. The port’s waterfront, by contrast, was the most multi-ethnic place in the world in the nineteenth century, full of locally unknown people who drifted in and out of town. As Steve Higginson and Tony Wailey wrote in *Edgy Cities*, the very word “port” derives from the Latin *portus*, which means both harbor and haven, a place of relative freedom in contrast to the slavery of the countryside. Cities by the sea have been “places of comers and goers, dodgers and drifters, grafters and grifters and anyone who prefers the cool welcoming fugitive night.” Runaways

8 DREW, Benjamin. **A North-Side View of Slavery: The Refugee, or the Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada, Related by Themselves, with an Account of the History and Condition of the Colored Population of Upper Canada.** Boston, 1856, p. 100. The lyrics to “Fire Maringo” were recorded by sailor Charles Nordhoff and quoted by Michael D. Thompson in his excellent book, **Working on Dock of the Bay: Labor and Enterprise in an Antebellum Southern Port.** Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2015, p. 20.

also saw the possibility of blending into densely populated Black urban communities, where they might not only avoid detection but receive vital assistance.⁹

A second attraction was the availability of work on the waterfront. Any runaway with a skill, in carpentry, metal-working, or anything else with a maritime connection, found work easily. Even more important – and more applicable to the vast majority of runaways – was the availability of vast numbers of unskilled laboring jobs. Finding work on the waterfront was a big step toward successful escape, as anyone could see simply by surveying the forest of ship masts near the docks. Michael D. Thompson, the historian of Charleston’s waterfront, writes that dockside labor “was an ideal halfway house on a runaway’s road to freedom.”¹⁰

What were the spaces of cooperation in the port city that might lead to escape? The main one was where people labored, on ship or shore. The various labor processes of the waterfront, whether building ships or moving cargo, required the cooperation of many hands, free and enslaved. Fugitives met those who could help them on the docks and aboard the ship, as the case of Jim Matthews demonstrated, and in places beyond the straining ears of municipal authorities. Black workers in Charleston, for example, had considerable autonomy on the job, as white stevedores complained in 1859: 40-60 enslaved dockworkers might occupy the same large ship as it was being loaded or unloaded, often “without any White Person among them.”¹¹

Black-owned grog shops and “low tipping houses” – ubiquitous in port cities – were places of cooperation that brought fierce and frequent condemnation from above. These establishments offered liquor, gambling, dancing, and singing to waterfront workers and often served as bases for sex-workers. They were also depots in the second economy, where appropriated goods were bought and sold. A Charleston newspaper denounced the “filthy little grogeries, where the most debased and abject of our black and white population assemble to drink and gamble” and to engage in “obscene language and drunken orgies.” Another notorious space in Charleston was Mitchell’s Alley, which ran from East Bay Street to Bedon’s Alley, two blocks from the wharves. Eight feet wide at one end and only five feet wide at the other, it was too narrow for carts or carriages and too dark for genteel pedestrians. It was, rather, a night-time meeting place for “negroes and disorderly white persons,” who planned “the escape of negroes who have been detected in Stealing from the wharves,” dockworkers who had appropriated “loose cotton” or coal on the waterfront. On ships and docks and in cellar speak-easies subversive news and information circulated on what Julius Scott has called “the common wind” – in an alternative “public sphere” of communication among mobile maritime workers.¹²

Smaller spaces of freedom were traditional watercraft such as lighters, flatboats, ferries, skiffs, periaugers, punts, rafts, galleys, pilot boats, cutters, or sloops, with their crews of mostly African American seafarers who labored under little white supervision. Vessels in service of

9 HIGGINSON, Steve and WAILEY, Tony. **Edgy Cities**. Liverpool, 2006.

10 Thompson. **Working on the Dock of the Bay**, p. 76.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 71.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 88-89, 13; SCOTT, Julius. **The Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution**. New York: Verso, 2018.

port-city commerce, in sum, ranged from the smallest canoe to the largest steamship. Any and all could carry men, women, and children northward to freedom. Frederick Douglass called the vessels of the maritime circuit “freedom’s swift-winged angels.”¹³

Free Black communities in all ports were crucial to designs of escape, at both the point of origin and destination. Steven Hahn has suggested that free urban African Americans in this era constituted a kind of “maroon” community – a “renegade” social and political formation that organized its own self-defense in a hostile world dominated by slave-owners. Free people of color in all ports defended themselves against slave-catchers, kidnappers, and white mobs as they inspired, attracted, and protected fugitives. Their local organization of self-defense – what maritime runaway Harriet Jacobs called “impromptu vigilance committees” – would be a foundation for building larger abolitionist Vigilance Committees after 1835. These urban “maroons” frequently lived near the waterfront and worked in maritime industries. Their labor and its setting put them in a strategic position to find and help those seeking to escape by sea.¹⁴

No small number of these free people of color living in seaports had been maritime maroons themselves. When Harriet Jacobs arrived in Philadelphia and New York from the small port of Edenton, North Carolina, she found in both places a community of people she knew from her hometown, most of them likely having escaped by the same route she had traveled. On the docks of New York Frederick Bailey ran into a Maryland sailor he knew as “Allender’s Jake,” a recent runaway who had taken the new name William Dixon. (Bailey would soon follow his example and take the name Frederick Douglass.) In New Bedford several hundred of the town’s 1,000 free Blacks were fugitives, most of whom arrived by sea.¹⁵

The free Black community of Norfolk, like such communities in every Southern port, took in, fed, and sheltered runaways until a would-be stowaway could find a safe ship. This could take time. Clarissa Davis was concealed and fed in Norfolk for 75 days until a steward took her aboard a ship bound for Philadelphia. Susan Brooks spent four months in hiding; Winny Patty and her daughter, five months; Maria Joiner, eight months. A secretive women’s organization called the “United Order of Tents” dated from the 1840s, carrying messages to and from fugitives designing to escape. Annetta M. Lane gave her “prized coral necklace” to a ship captain to take a penniless family aboard his ship, saying “Take this and let them go free.”¹⁶

13 CECELSKI. *Waterman’s Song*, p. 213-220; DOUGLASS, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*. Boston, 1845, p. 76.

14 HAHN, Steven. *Slaves at Large: The Emancipation Process and the Terrain of African American Politics*. In: *The Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009, p. 1-53; JACOBS, Harriet. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*. Boston, 1861, p. 287; NEWBY-ALEXANDER. *Virginia Waterways*, p. 39.

15 JACOBS. *Incidents*, p. 244, 251; DOUGLASS, Frederick. *Life and times of Frederick Douglass*. 1883, rev. 1892, p. 202-204; GROVER, Kathryn. *The Fugitive’s Gibraltar: Escaping Slaves and Abolitionism in New Bedford, Massachusetts*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001.

16 BOGGER. *Free Blacks in Norfolk*, p. 166-167. Preliminary research suggests that women made up roughly twenty per cent of runaways by both land and sea.

Fell's Point in Baltimore was a classic waterfront neighborhood – and another magnet for runaways. Ships, brigs, schooners, and sloops, along with smaller craft such as fishing and oyster boats, anchored in the deep water of the Patapsco River near the local shipyards, docks, taverns, coffee houses, and grogshops. Fell's Point hosted all maritime industries: artisans made sails, rope, blocks, tackles, and pumps. Carpenters, caulkers, and riggers worked in the shipyards and on the vessels that almost always needed repair before the next voyage. Stevedores Black and white loaded and unloaded hundreds of ships, carrying cargo to and from spacious warehouses. The city's dockers included Tom Tubman, brother-in-law of Harriet, who sheltered her and others on the run. Porters, draymen, and carters transported commodities around town. Thousands of multi-ethnic sailors from around the world came and went with the Atlantic tides; one of them was Harriet Tubman's other brother-in-law, Evans Tubman. Several members of the 15,000-strong free Black community were active in the early 1830s in the National Convention of Free People of Color, which encouraged their members "to participate in the anti-slavery movement by shielding escaped slaves and organizing for more overt political actions."¹⁷

Baltimore demonstrated its potential as a breeding-ground of resistance in the life of Frederick Douglass. Born on the maritime Eastern Shore, he grew up in Baltimore and went on to become perhaps the greatest abolitionist of the nineteenth century. At age twelve Douglass helped two Irish sailors unload a cargo of stone from a scow. They expressed sympathy for his plight as a slave and encouraged him to seek new friends and a better life in the north. He resolved from that moment that he would run away, but first he wanted to learn how to write. That he learned in Durgin and Bailey's ship-yard, where he saw shipwrights put letters on timber using "oker" (red chalk) to indicate where it should go on the vessel, starboard or larboard, fore or aft. He later became a caulker, at a time when one of Baltimore's first trade unions, the Black Caulker Association, was being formed on the waterfront. Douglass dressed as a man of the sea to escape bondage, using a Protection Certificate that belonged to a Black sailor named Stanley. As he himself explained, his knowledge of the waterfront was a key to his successful escape in 1838.¹⁸

Norfolk was smaller than Baltimore in both general population and the size of its African American community, but it was perhaps even more active as an entrepot for runaways. Both free Blacks and enslaved people worked as dockers, sailors, porters, and ship carpenters; some labored in the US Navy shipbuilding yard and aboard naval vessels. Others toiled out of the same port as fishermen, oystermen, and ferrymen. Women hucksters sold their wares along the waterfront. Residing from Water Street near the docks north to Queen Street in "dilapidated buildings, lofts, basements, sheds" or in Cow Bay in "a labyrinth of alley-ways," free Blacks provided "a haven for runaways." Just beyond the city limit, away from the waterfront

17 PHILLIPS, Christopher. **Freedom's Port: The African American Community of Baltimore, 1790-1860.** Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997, p. 14, 15, 17, 18, 27, 110, 111, 132, 174, 195, 229, 231.

18 BLIGHT, David. **Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom.** New York: Simon and Schuster, 2019.

watchmen, stood a “disorderly house of ill fame resorted to by idle and dissolute persons both white men and negroes for the purpose of gambling and drinking.” Seafaring workers Black and white met, drank, and exchanged stolen property in “a negro dancing house.”¹⁹

Amid deteriorating working conditions and after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850, free Black workers on the Norfolk waterfront intensified the freedom struggle. In 1851 they fought in the streets over the attempted arrest of a free Black sailor from the USS *Susquehanna*. Between 1850 and 1856 they waged war by fire, setting ablaze forty-eight establishments, many of them waterfront targets such as Thomas Johnson’s boat shop, a barge lying at Town Point, and warehouses on Newton’s Wharf and India Wharf. Meantime efforts to abscond by sea increased, including mass escapes of fifteen and twenty-one people on the schooner of Captain James Fountain, who worked with the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee.²⁰

Charleston presented another variation of the port city because a majority of the city’s residents were Black and almost half were enslaved. Located at the confluence of the Ashley, Cooper, and Wando Rivers, the city had 42,000 residents in 1850: 20,000 whites, 19,500 slaves and 3,500 free people of color. Even though Charleston was in relative economic and demographic decline compared to the ports of the more dynamic lower south cotton region, it remained an important site for commerce. More than 1,700 vessels sailed into its harbor in the year 1842 alone, many of them as part of the regular packet service to and from New York established in the early 1820s. Around the same time cotton and rice were sent in greater quantities to New York before being transshipped to Europe. Every departing vessel presented a runaway an opportunity for escape.

Discipline and Control

AGAINST THESE autonomous spaces and activities of cooperation and freedom, the ruling classes of the South exerted all their violent might. Their property and increasingly their entire way of life were at stake in the battle over maritime runaways. They created a complex system of surveillance, discipline, and policing designed to prevent escape and preserve the social order based on slavery. Part of their challenge was the relative independence of port-city workers, including those who were formally enslaved. Many such workers hired out their labor a year at a time and thereby escaped the close oversight of their owners. Planters outside Charleston worried about sending their bondsmen anywhere near the “free blacks and low and worthless white people” in port, from whom they would get “ideas of insubordination and of emancipation.”²¹

19 BOGGER. **Free Blacks in Norfolk**, p. 121-123, 134-135.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 156, 165, 199-202; STILL, William. **The Underground Railroad: A Record of Facts, Authentic Narrative, Letters, &c., Narrating the Hardships, Hair-breadth Escapes and Death Struggles of the Slaves in their efforts of Freedom**. Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, 1872, p. 172-175. Fountain has long been misidentified as “Albert” or “Alfred.”

21 John Jonah Murrell to the South Carolina House of Representatives, 1829, in SCHWEININGER, Loren ed. **The**

By 1830 all southern states had passed laws against runaways, many of them targeting sea-going fugitives. Most such laws went back to the colonial period, originally to seventeenth-century Virginia. The U.S. Constitution had an infamous “fugitive slave clause” by which any person “held to service or labour in one state” must, on escape and recapture, be “delivered up” to “the party to whom such service or labour may be due.” This was a polite way of saying that runaways must be returned to their enslavers. The federal government passed two laws in 1793, creating special punishments for those who assisted runaways. The criminalization of solidarity or mutual aid was always a priority and this was often accomplished by the drawing of racial lines. The Fugitive Slave Act passed in 1850 testified to the prevalence and power of repeated escapes as the slow burn of resistance heated the impulse toward Civil War. Several states had laws specifically designed to prevent escape by sea, promising severe punishment to ship captains who allowed fugitives aboard their vessels.²²

Laws against runaways created a foundation of white supremacy by empowering all white citizens to stop, question, and ultimately arrest any suspicious person of African descent, rewarding their actions through public and private funds. Frederick Douglass noted this reality as he and four others planned to escape Maryland’s Eastern Shore by canoe in 1836. Taking off by sea offered better cover than a landed route, on which anyone with a white face, Douglass explained, “could stop us, and subject us to examination.” On the water, they would encounter fewer white people as they pretended to be fishermen. The search for runaways not only deputized the white population, it also created the pass system, the dreaded “slave patrol,” another foundation of power, and the interstate police called “slave-catchers” and “bounty hunters.”²³

Port authorities policed the waterfront using both federal and state law as well as local regulation. Charleston’s rulers, for example, organized a heavy police presence along the docks through the local constabulary, the paramilitary City Guard, and a night watch whose members went from ship to ship, as Jim Matthews discovered, looking for runaways. All masters of stevedores were required to purchase a badge to work on the docks or aboard vessels in port. Port authorities as well as individual masters were also known to send slaves aboard vessels to test whether a captain or crew member would be willing to take aboard a stowaway.

Northern seamen arriving in southern ports posed a special problem for slaveowners because these workers, so essential to their profits, were not subject to the same controls as local residents. Their “master” was their captain, usually from a northern state. The problem

Southern Debate over Slavery, Volume 1: Petitions to Southern legislatures, 1778-1864. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001, p. 106.

22 DELBANCO, Andrew. **The War before the War: Fugitive Slaves and the Struggle for America’s Soul of from the American Revolution to the Civil War**. New York: Penguin Press, 2018.

23 DOUGLASS, Narrative, p. 86; CAMPBELL, Stanley W. **The Slave Catchers: Enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, 1850-1860**. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968; HADDEN, Sally E. **Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas**. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001.

was compounded by sailors of African descent who made up as much as twenty per cent of Atlantic crews in the early nineteenth century. Some were maritime runaways themselves.

South Carolina's rulers led the way in criminalizing waterfront solidarity by passing the first Negro Seaman Act in 1822, after a broad-based conspiracy led by former sailor Denmark Vesey had rocked Charleston. This act required that Black sailors be removed from incoming vessels and held in quarantine until their day of departure. New acts were passed by other states in the wake of the revolutionary pamphlet *David Walker's Appeal* (1829), which was smuggled into southern ports by sailors Black and white. Every southern state that bordered the Atlantic Ocean or the Gulf of Mexico followed South Carolina's lead and passed their own "Negro Seamen Act": Georgia (1829); North Carolina (1830); Florida (1832); Alabama (1837); Mississippi (1842); Louisiana (1842); and Texas (1856). Under the auspices of the Negro Seamen Acts Southern authorities arrested an estimated 20,000 Black sailors.²⁴

The creativity of policing the waterfront and the resistance thereto was revealed in an encounter in Wilmington, North Carolina, in 1857. Runaways Abraham Galloway and Richard Eden found a captain who "very well understood his business" and was willing to stow them away amid a cargo of "tar, rosin, and spirits of turpentine," commodities of the port's hinterland economy. Runaways had become such a problem, the slave-holders of Wilmington had enacted a law requiring all northward-bound vessels to be fumigated, or smoked, to force illicit passengers from their hiding places coughing, choking, and gasping for air. Galloway and Eden responded with what abolitionist William Still later called "inventive genius," fashioning large "silk oil cloth shrouds" to slip over their heads and draw tight at the waist. They also carried with them wet towels to hold to their nostrils. They snuck aboard the ship, "determined to struggle against death for liberty," and they got lucky. For some unknown reason port officials did not fumigate their vessel: "the law was not carried into effect in this instance." But the fugitives had a different problem: their prolonged exposure to turpentine caused a serious suffusion of blood through the skin, weakening both men. Still and his colleagues in the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee begged Galloway and Eden for one of their silk shrouds as a souvenir. They then got "an artist to take the photograph of one of them; which keepsakes have been valued very highly."²⁵

Virginia and South Carolina created another kind of policing – a network of inspectors – between 1839 and 1841 after three Black sailors carried a fugitive from Virginia to freedom in New York. Virginia Lieutenant Governor Henry L. Hopkins demanded that New York Governor William Henry Seward return the sailors for trial, but the latter refused, then retaliated in 1840 by helping to pass legislation guaranteeing jury trials and legal representation for recaptured runaways. The controversy would be covered by newspapers from Massachusetts to Louisiana.²⁶

24 THOMPSON. *Working on the Dock of the Bay*, p. 64-71, 80; SCHOEPPNER, Michael A. *Moral Contagion: Black Atlantic Sailors, Citizenship, and Diplomacy in Antebellum America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

25 STILL. *Underground Railroad*, p. 155-158.

26 VALONE, Stephen J. William Henry Seward, the Virginia Controversy, and the Anti-Slavery Movement, 1839-

South Carolina came to the defense of Virginia slaveowners in 1841 by passing an act aimed to prevent escapes on packet ships sailing from Charleston to New York. The law appointed inspectors empowered to fine and jail captains and to impound their ships, offering rewards to anyone who might inform about a ship leaving port without a certificate. Repeated successful escapes had forced the hands of the South Carolina ruling class to enact new regulatory legislation. Their efforts failed as runaways continued to escape Charleston by sea.²⁷

Virginia legislators found themselves facing a new challenge from below in the 1850s, after dozens of fugitives hid away on steamboats that now regularly plied the seas from Richmond and Norfolk to Philadelphia. “A Bill Providing Additional Protection for the Slave Property of Citizens of this Commonwealth” (1856) expanded the network of inspectors who would search departing vessels and provide a certificate to all that passed muster. The law also allowed counties located on Chesapeake Bay to enact a “fugitive slave tax” to be used to support a “police patrol” for the recapture of runaways. The act created a “chief inspector” at Norfolk who would preside over a team of officers, police, and spies and at the same time keep track of all pilots, their vessels, and their crew members, not least because many pilots were African American and presumed to be sympathetic to fugitives.²⁸

The Virginia act commanded the attention of abolitionists, especially the Vigilance Committees of Philadelphia and Boston. In response to the act a militant New England mariner named Austin Bearse built a small, fast vessel called the *Wild Pigeon* to make piratical attacks against the Virginia pilot boats, rescue the fugitives who had been seized, and sail them to freedom in Boston. Bearse eventually gave up on this John Brown-like direct action because Boston’s “coasting captains would not join me in the enterprise.” He sold the *Wild Pigeon* and returned the money that had been advanced by the Boston Vigilance Committee. But like the ocean itself the sea-based struggle for freedom rolled on evermore.²⁹

Routes and Destinations

ANY ENSLAVED person who boarded an outward-bound vessel disappeared immediately and completely from the gaze and grasp of the slaveowner and local authorities, whose mechanisms of social control upheld the Slave Power throughout the South. Anyone who could find a “safe ship” (the equivalent of a “safe house” on the landed routes) could literally step off the terrain of slavery into the free space of a vessel and, days or weeks later,

1841. **Afro-Americans in New York Life & History**, v. 31, n. 1, p. 65-80, 2007.

27 **Resolutions of the legislature of South Carolina, touching the controversy between New York and Virginia, and a late law of that state on the same subject by South Carolina General Assembly**. Annapolis, MD, 1842; THOMPSON. **Working on the Dock of the Bay**, p. 83.

28 A Bill Providing Additional Protection for the Slave A Property of Citizens of this Commonwealth, 1856, reprinted in STILL. **Underground Railroad**, p. 292-296.

29 BEARSE, Austin. **Reminiscences of Fugitive Slave Law Days in Boston**. Boston: Warren Richardson, 1880, 34.

disembark onto hallowed ground where slavery had been abolished. Runaways by sea escaped slavery and its violent supports: dogs, chains, whips, and slave patrols, all of which haunted them step by fearful step as they made their way northward over land. Although the dangers of recapture remained all too real in northern ports, escape by sea was by far the safest route toward freedom.

There were three main ways to sail to freedom. The first was based on practical considerations of need, opportunity, and skill. Arriving in southern port cities sailors routinely jumped ship, leaving their captains short of working bodies. Seamen often ran away from their ships as enslaved people seeking freedom ran toward them. Chronic desertion, coupled with the sailor's frequent poor health, created a steady need for labor among ship captains, who sometimes cared little where their new workers came from. Captains who made recurring voyages to a particular southern port might fear arrest or loss of business, but the historical record shows that a lot of northern captains took runaways aboard anyway.

A significant number of enslaved people possessed skills they could exchange for their liberty. Some had been "used to the sea." Others could offer to work as a carpenter or cooper aboard a ship. Aware of such skills and their value, slaveowners never failed to note in their newspaper advertisements a runaway's ability to do maritime work. Joe Cowan, a young man "about 24 years of age," fled bondage in Wilmington, North Carolina, in December 1843. According to his enslaver, the key to his running away lay in his work history: Joe "has been accustomed to work on board vessels, and about the docks." He would without a doubt seek out "some seaport town, where he will make an effort to get off on board some vessel." Dozens of newspaper advertisements across the south repeated stories of escape more or less identical to Joe's. African Americans who had labored on the waterfront and "knew the ropes" of a ship, often signed on and literally worked their way to freedom in a northern port.³⁰

Not all captains who took runaways aboard as workers were abolitionists, but some ship masters were deeply committed to the anti-slavery cause, willing to break the law and risk severe consequences. Several went to prison for their efforts. Captain Jonathan Walker became a hero to abolitionists and a villain to slaveowners in 1844 when he helped seven people escape slavery by sea in Pensacola, Florida. He fell sick on the freedom voyage, was captured, and returned to Pensacola, where he was tried in federal court, convicted, imprisoned, and publicly branded on his right hand with "S.S" for "slave stealer." Enslaved people and other abolitionists inverted the meaning of his punishment, claiming that the letters actually stood for "slave savior." Captain James Fountain carried dozens of people out of slavery in Virginia to various eastern ports, many of them on a regular packet service to Philadelphia or New York City. Yet in Fountain's case, and in several others, a commitment to abolitionism did not erase the profit motive. Some ship captains, especially in the 1850s, charged runaways for passage to northern city, while some did not. Captains like Walker

30 *Wilmington Chronicle*, April 3, 1844.

and Fountain played a significant part in the networks of escape by sea. This was maritime abolitionism from above.³¹

The most common way to get aboard a ship came “from below” as the fugitive found a member of the crew who would smuggle him or her aboard as Jim Matthews and a ship steward had done in Charleston in 1837. Negro Seamen Acts across the south acknowledged this cooperation and sought to eradicate it. John Andrew Jackson was working on the Charleston docks when he decided to ask the Black cook of a Boston-bound vessel if he would help him stow away. Just released from jail under the Negro Seamen Act, the cook agreed to do so, then grew fearful and said no. He finally found a middle ground, promising not to betray the fugitive if he snuck aboard, which Jackson did. During the voyage the runaway discovered that he had not brought enough water and was forced by thirst to abandon his hiding place below deck. The captain was furious and promised to place him aboard the next vessel they passed heading toward Charleston. Luckily for Jackson no such vessel sailed by. By the time they reached port the captain’s view had softened. He hid Jackson from the pilot who came aboard and let him go ashore to freedom. The “Black cook” was a crucial figure in escapes from below.³²

A third common means of escape was for fugitives to find a small craft of some kind – a boat, a raft, a bateau, or a canoe – and row their way to freedom. This approach was especially common around Chesapeake Bay. In the spring of 1860 four men and two women peered across Delaware Bay toward the New Jersey shore and decided to cross the water to freedom. None of them had much maritime experience but that did not deter them: going by water, they decided, was their best bet. They pooled their modest monies and bought a bateau, a light, narrow, flat-bottomed boat, propelled by sweeps or poles, commonly used on rivers or close by the coast. They pushed off one evening at 10:00 pm, planning to row twenty miles to Cape May, New Jersey. They had not gone far when they were attacked by five white men in a boat, one of whom seized the chain of their vessel and claimed it as his own. The runaways swore they would fight to the death to protect their freedom and a furious battle broke out. One white man broke an oar over the head of a fugitive. A fellow runaway responded in kind, laying out one of the white men flat in the bottom of his boat. Shocked that the fugitives fought back, the white men retreated in panic, firing a parting load of shot into the runaway bateau, wounding all four men but none seriously. Emboldened by their victory they “rowed with a greater will than ever” and took refuge on a small uninhabited island near the Jersey shore. Yet they soon grew

31 CLAVIN, Matthew J. **Aiming for Pensacola: Fugitive Slaves on the Atlantic and Southern Frontiers**. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015, ch. 5. According to the censuses of 1850 and 1860, the Virginia Penitentiary held 27 people (18 white, 9 Black or mulatto) for helping enslaved people escape to freedom. See NEWBY-ALEXANDER. **Virginia Waterways**, p. 65-66, 118-119 and Third Ward, Richmond City, Henrico, Virginia, United States Census, 1850 and 1860.

32 JACKSON, John Andrew. **The Experience of a Slave in South Carolina**. London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1862, p. 25-28.

disoriented, did not know where to go, and passed the night “in gloom.” The next morning, they walked a mile along the shore and encountered the friendly captain of an oyster boat, who gave them directions to Philadelphia and even offered to escort them there “if they would pay him for his services.” They gave him the rest of their money and sailed safely with him to the City of Brotherly Love.³³

For decades escaping slavery by sea was a more or less autonomous activity from below, especially in the port of origin. Enslaved people had to figure out how to abscond on their own, and they alone bore the extreme dangers. Moreover, large-scale escape by sea was already under way well before abolitionists began to organize what came to be called the “Underground Railroad” in the late 1830s. A writer who called himself “Civis” published a letter in the *Norfolk Herald* in 1827 complaining about the many Black sailors who assisted runaways to escape Norfolk by sea to Philadelphia. “It cannot be doubted,” he wrote of these mariners of color, “they give the means of support and concealment to such of their acquaintances as apply to them.” The writer recommended that Norfolk merchants boycott northern vessels that employed Black sailors, but of course the requirements of commerce made this impossible.³⁴

If most runaways left from Maryland and Virginia because of their proximity to the “free states,” they arrived by sea mostly in Philadelphia and New York because of the structure of trade, especially once regularly scheduled shipping, some of it by steamboats, was established from Southern ports to these two fast-growing cities. The state of New York finally abolished slavery on July 4, 1827, which increased its appeal to runaways. Both New York and Philadelphia also had large free Black communities, anchored along the waterfront, who received, fed, sheltered, and protected fugitives. But both also had a legion of slave-catchers and kidnappers who read the runaway ads, scoured the waterfront, swept up both runaway and free people of color, pretended that all were fugitives, and returned to southern slavery. New York merchants, businessmen, government officials, and police either assisted them or turned a blind eye because the city’s prosperity owed so much to trade with the slave south. African Americans and other abolitionists called this unholy alliance the “New York Kidnapping Club” and fought back against it. In November 1835 they formed a new, more militant kind of abolitionist organization called the “Committee of Vigilance for the Protection of the People of Color.” This was a decisive development in the history of escape by sea and, as Jesse Olsavsky has shown, in the larger history of the anti-slavery movement. War broke out on New York’s docks, at the northern end of the circuit of escape; organizational innovation from below was one of its effects.³⁵

33 STILL. *Underground Railroad*, p. 555-557.

34 *Norfolk Herald*, September 29, 1827, quoted in Bogger, 167. Cassandra Newby-Alexander shows that Norfolk had a “local autonomous underground network”; see *Virginia Waterways*, p. 54.

35 OLSAVSKY. “Fire and Sword will Affect More Good”; HARRIS, Leslie M. *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003; WELLS, Jonathan Daniel. *The Kidnapping Club: Wall Street, Slavery, and Resistance on the Eve of the Civil War*. New York:

The militant new committee had a maritime origin as personified by its main founder and leading activist, David Ruggles. Born into a free Black family in coastal Connecticut, Ruggles went to sea as a youth. According to his biographer Graham Hodges, “Seafaring exposed Ruggles to militant black abolitionism”; he learned “the mechanics, dangers, and successes of ocean-borne fugitives” from sailors. He left the sea but maintained his connections to waterfront workers. He got tips from sailors and dockers and hopped from ship to anchored ship to find enslaved people to emancipate and stowaways he might help toward freedom. He bravely published the names of “man-stealers” as well as local “traitors” who worked with them. He had ship captains arrested. He fought off kidnappers who tried to capture and sell him into slavery. In 1838 a sailor brought to him a young, hungry runaway who would soon rename himself Frederick Douglass. The fugitive told him that he was a caulker from Baltimore, whereupon Ruggles advised him to dodge the slave-catchers in New York and travel on to the free Black community in New Bedford, Massachusetts, the whaling capital and “fugitive’s Gibraltar” of North America, where his labor would be in demand.³⁶

The success and publicity arising from the struggles Ruggles and his comrades waged along the waterfront in New York, along with the continued arrivals of many new runaways in port, helped to spur abolitionists to found Vigilance Committees in Philadelphia (1837) and Boston (1841) to provide mutual aid. When a new fugitive turned up, committee members usually placed that person in the home of a member of the free Black community. This move threw off slave-catchers, who would often be beaten and chased away; it also acknowledged that free Black communities were the bedrock of the committee. The formation of the Vigilance Committees raised the struggles of maritime runaways to a new level of organized solidarity. What would soon come to be known as the Underground Railroad had its origins on the waterfront.

To conclude: the cooperation of waterfront workers was organized by capitalists as a foundation of production and profit. But that cooperation, once initiated, took forms that capitalists did not expect or desire, which is to say, workers translated cooperation into projects of their own – work stoppages, strikes, sabotage (struggles over the pace of work), and escaping exploitation through mobility. Absconding from slavery by sea was one such project. The common experience of work could translate into solidarity, but of course in many instances it did not or could not because law and ideology criminalized cooperation among fugitives, dockers and sailors. The years 1830-1865 were a time of rising racial tension on the waterfront as poor European (especially Irish) immigrants took jobs from free and enslaved Black workers – as Frederick Douglass discovered. Yet the horizontal relations of the waterfront could neither

Bold Type Books, 2020.

36 HODGES, Graham Russell Gao. **David Ruggles: A Radical Black Abolitionist and the Underground Railroad in New York City**. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010; FONER, Eric. **Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad**. New York: Norton, 2015, p. 74. As it happened the racism of New Bedford’s white caulkers prevented Douglass from exercising his skill; see DOUGLASS. **Narrative of the Life**, p. 116.

be fully policed nor controlled. The cooperation of workers for their own ends transformed structure into agency, or better yet what C.L.R. James and George Rawick called “working-class self-activity.”³⁷

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37 JAMES, C.L.R. **Notes on Dialectics: Hegel, Marx, Lenin**. London: Alison and Busby, 1980; RAWICK, George. Working Class Self-Activity. **Radical America**, v. 3, n. 2, p. 23-31, 1969.