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Richard Bell

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ABSTRACT
The abduction of free African-Americans from cities like Philadelphia and the wholly illegal traffic of such people into the Deep South to be sold as slaves provided exceptional opportunities for women to participate directly in the American interstate slave trade as kidnappers, warehouse managers, and coffle co-captains. The activities of the Cannon-Johnson ring, active in the 1820s, demonstrate how Delaware’s Patty Cannon and other female traffickers leveraged familial relations with male conductors and station agents on this reverse Underground Railroad in order to secure their own passage through an otherwise treacherous and decidedly homo-social world.

Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852) and the many proslavery novels published in partial rebuttal to it throughout the 1850s did much to establish the stereotype of interstate slave traders in the antebellum imagination. In the hands of authors such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Mary Henderson Eastman, Charles Jacobs Peterson, and John W. Page, these itinerant human traffickers were ‘Southern Shylocks’ whose outcast characters combined the worst aspects of several other stock male personas popular in nineteenth-century genre fiction: the unscrupulous horse-trader, the ruthless card-sharp, the artful gambler, and the garrulous but dissembling politician. Depicted as a coarse, oily, and ill-bred man, the southern slave trader possessed, in one particularly cartoonish contemporary rendering, ‘a cross-looking phiz, a whiskey-tinctured nose, cold hard-looking eyes, a dirty tobacco-stained mouth, and shabby dress’.1

The fact that the subject of this caricature was universally understood to be male has long gone unexamined. In much of the recent surge of scholarship surrounding the interstate slave trade – a massive forced migration of more than a million black people from the Mid-Atlantic to the new cotton-producing states of the Deep South in the decades between 1780 and 1860 – women are either entirely absent from the cast of historical actors directly engaged in the trade,
or confined to marginal roles within the ‘vast secondary workforce’ of auxiliary personnel involved in the washing, clothing, nursing, and feeding of enslaved persons awaiting sale.²

As a result, there is much we still don’t know about the roles of women and of familial ties among the commercial networks that comprised the interstate slave trade between the American Revolution and the Civil War. For example, we have not yet seen a longitudinal study that examines the connective and additive functions played by women in multi-generational slave trading dynasties like the Slatter and Woolfolk families, both of Maryland, the Hagan family of South Carolina, and Franklin & Armfield, the giant trading firm brought into being by the 1831 marriage of John Armfield to the niece of Isaac Franklin. In this respect, scholars of the domestic slave trade within the United States have fallen behind scholars of transatlantic slavery who have long since completed investigations of the role of black, white, and mixed-race women such as Mae Aurelia Correia, Na Rosa, Dona Leonor de Carvalho Fonseca, Betsy Heard, Elizabeth Skelton, and Mary Faber in Atlantic slaving operations.³

Only recently have a new generation of historians of the American interstate slave trade such as Stephanie Jones-Rogers and Alexandra Finley begun to identify southern white women as buyers and sellers of slaves, as auctioneers and speculators, as creditors and financiers of sales brokered by others, and as owners and co-owners of slave pens in places like Baltimore, Richmond, and New Orleans. This essay seeks to contribute to this emerging literature on gender and slave-trading in the nineteenth-century United States by recovering the work performed by a number of women, both white and black, associated with the Cannon-Johnson kidnapping ring during the 1820s. It argues that the abduction of free African-Americans from cities like Philadelphia and the wholly illegal traffic of such people into the Deep South to be sold as slaves provided exceptional opportunities for women to participate directly – as kidnappers, but also as warehouse managers, and coffle co-captains – in a particularly grotesque variant of a trading system that was fast becoming ‘the great jugular vein’ of the southern economy. In addition, this essay analyzes the gulf between the lived experience of one female trafficker, Delaware’s Patty Cannon, and the sensational depiction of her life in a true-crime pamphlet published in 1841, 12 years after her death, in order to highlight the significance of familial ties among male and female members of this gang. Finally, this essay asserts that Cannon and the other female traffickers identified here leveraged kinship relations with male conductors and station agents on this reverse Underground Railroad in order to secure their own passage through an otherwise treacherous and decidedly homo-social world.⁴
Kidnapper

The common perception that all kidnappers were white men provided the cover that allowed black women to engage in precisely this work. While free black communities in cities like Baltimore and Philadelphia kept look-out for ‘Georgia-men’, even forming makeshift neighborhood watch organizations known as vigilance committees, their profiles of these bogeymen were typically gendered male. Likewise, most African-Americans were loath to suspect that members of their own racially-identified political community might ever betray them by conspiring with white-led kidnapping collectives.5

Exploiting these gendered and racialized expectations, the Cannon-Johnson ring partnered with several black or mixed race women to lure away credulous African-American children from their Philadelphia homes in the early 1820s. The rationale was obvious yet powerful. A black child was more likely to trust an adult of the same race – or at least, to give that person the benefit of the doubt – than to believe the tall tales of a white stranger. Black youths were less likely to regard with suspicion unsolicited offers of work, food, or shelter when they issued from the lips of people who looked and sounded like their mothers, aunties and grandmothers. And if white city dwellers happened to witness a child’s forcible abduction, bystanders might assume that they were simply watching an obstreperous child receive discipline from a parent or family relation.6

One such counterfeit kin was a mixed-race woman who targeted orphans with promises of integrating them into her own idyllic family. In a deposition dated September 13, 1824, a 17-year-old orphan named Isaiah Sadler gave evidence that he had been called to Callowhill Street in Philadelphia to attend to a sick child some months earlier. There he had met a ‘yellow woman who called herself Tilly James’. This woman asked Sadler if he was tired of waiting hand and foot on other people and invited him to come to live in the country with her on a 60-acre farm that she said her uncle owned. Her uncle would feed Sadler and clothe him, James promised, and would give the boy five dollars a month in return for light work. Sadler liked what he heard, and the next morning Tilly James led him to Wilmington and then on to a house kept by a woman named Patty Cannon on the Eastern Shore. There, to Sadler’s horror and surprise, James handed over the boy to two strong men who tied him to a tree, clamped him in irons, and prepared to transport him south to Natchez to be sold as a slave. Miraculously, Sadler managed to escape hours later, using the handle of a spoon to jimmy the locks that restrained him. He fled the property, following the stars in the night sky back to the city.7

Sadler’s brief testimony does not illuminate Tilly James’ particular motives. But it seems safe to assume that she and the several other black women who participated in child trafficking in mid-Atlantic port cities in this period likely had few other compelling economic alternatives. Several factors – a shortage of jobs,
cyclical unemployment, competition from European immigrants, shoddy educational opportunities, and rising racial intolerance in Philadelphia and places like it – created the context in which an unemployed woman might muffle her conscience and take on a job like this. Indeed, although most free black women did not, of course, resort to kidnapping to support themselves and their families, the economic issues they faced were acute and pressing. After all, Philadelphia’s free black community was composed largely of fugitive or manumitted ex-slaves who had journeyed there with nothing but the shirts on their backs. Huddled together in shanty-town neighborhoods on the south side of the city, black and mixed-race women had to compete for low-paying, low-skill jobs as domestics, or as laundresses, seamstresses, or cooks and there was not enough work to go around.8

Their lack of prospects likely informed decisions by Tilly James and other black and mixed-race women to take on ready and well-paying work as frontline operatives in regional kidnapping syndicates. Most of these female operatives were never caught or held to account, but the paper trail left by those few who did have brushes with the law makes clear that the financial incentives involved were sufficient to risk arrest and possible conviction – as well as the obvious opprobrium if they were ever informally identified. Indeed, when Mary Brya and Ann Brown, two African-American women, were arrested near Philadelphia in 1818 ‘on a charge of selling, or attempting to sell, a negro man and woman’, they admitted that ‘they have been engaged in this kind of traffic for several years’. The same longevity characterized the predations of three Baltimore women, Rachel Jones and Fanny Parraway, both of whom were mixed-race, and Nanny, ‘an old black woman who lives on Fell’s Point’. According to an 1821 newspaper report, all three women had long been ‘in the habit of kidnapping other colored people, and selling them’ to unscrupulous interstate traders such as Patty Cannon’s husband, Jesse.9

Most observers struggled to come to terms with the existence of such race traitors. John Russwurm, the African-American editor of New York’s Freedom’s Journal, spoke of these women’s affront in familial terms, decrying black kidnappers of both sexes as ‘traitors to liberty – to their kindred’. So too did David Walker, the African-American author of the famous 1829 Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World, who denounced them as snakes who profit from ‘the blood and tears of their more miserable brethren, whom they scandalously [deliver] into the hands of our natural enemies!!!!!!!’ Significantly, antislavery activists, both white and black, reserved their most acid commentary for female kidnappers like Tilly James, Rachel Jones and Fanny Parraway. In 1821, the editor of the Baltimore Patriot described the latter pair as ‘monsters’ while a short item in Benjamin Lundy’s Genius of Universal Emancipation six years later, in 1827, characterized a ‘colored woman’ awaiting trial ‘on a charge of kidnapping another woman and selling her to one of the blood merchants for the southern markets’ as a nothing less than a ‘she-monster’.10
Gang leader

The same gendered outrage saturates The Narrative and Confessions of Lucretia P. Cannon, a lurid true-crime pamphlet published in New York that purports to tell the life story of Patty Cannon, the most famous female kidnapper and slave trader of them all. Published by Erastus Barclay but likely authored by a Delaware Whig named Thomas Clayton who had been involved in prosecuting members of the gang 20 years earlier, this 1841 pamphlet depicted an utterly unrestrained ‘female fiend’. In Clayton’s hands, ‘Lucretia’ – the pseudonym itself a riff on Lucretia Chapman, a Pennsylvania housewife who had famously poisoned her husband in 1831 – asserts herself as a dangerously independent rebel against all sexual and familial conventions.11

The Narrative and Confessions is structured around the deaths of the two men in Lucretia Cannon’s life. The first is of her father, J.P. Hanly, whose alienation from an aristocratic family in Yorkshire propels him to migrate to Canada, to marry a conniving woman far below his station, to begin a career smuggling sundries ‘between Montreal and Plattsburgh, New York’, and to take to drink. Animated by fear of ‘detection and exposure’, Hanly’s intemperance and paranoia leads him to murder an old friend who discovers the family’s illicit source of income, by slashing at him with an ax, ‘nearly burying it to the socket, splitting his head in a most shocking manner’. When Hanly is caught and executed for this barbarous crime, ‘his family as may be supposed was thrown into the utmost confusion’. To support her dependents, his widow turns the family’s home in St. John’s into a tavern-cum-brothel and then sets about manipulating a number of respectable men into marrying her several daughters, ‘although they were every one of them prostitutes of the most common character’.12

One visitor to the family home in this period was Alonzo Cannon, an implausibly conceived Delaware wheelwright ‘possessed [sic] also of considerable money’. Sixteen-year-old Lucretia – described by Clayton as attractive, big-boned, garrulous, and utterly two-faced – claims him as her husband and the newly-weds depart for Delaware to set up house near the banks of the Nanticoke River. Alonzo’s marriage to Lucretia lasts just three years before he succumbs to ‘the effects of slow poison, which she had administered to him’. Her motives, Clayton writes, were the very inverse of the ‘high toned moral feeling and the true dignity, self respect, and refinement which should govern the female sex’. Depicted in this sensational piece of genre writing as the final enabling event in Lucretia’s slide toward notoriety, Alonzo’s death liberates this ‘selfish’ and ‘sensual’ woman to do as she pleases. Butchery and robbery would now quickly become the hallmarks of Clayton’s widow-warrior: ‘there was no crime too great, no deed too cruel, for her to engage in to accomplish any object of her design’.13

The central paragraphs of this 24-page pamphlet lasciviously describe Lucretia Cannon’s chosen outlet for these apparently ungovernable appetites. Following her
mother’s example, Cannon, now widowed, turns her Eastern Shore home into a tavern that soon becomes a favorite speakeasy for slave traders doing business with the owners of nearby tobacco and wheat plantations. Plying them with alcohol and inquiring conversation, Clayton’s protagonist begins to supplement her legal income by robbing and murdering her most moneyed and unguarded visitors. This bloody business continues for years and in time expands to include direct participation in kidnapping and slave trading. After recruiting ‘a gang of ruffians who were perfectly obedient to her will’, Lucretia Cannon succeeds in establishing a crime ring whose members lure away free black people from the streets of Philadelphia, ship them to the tavern, and then onward in coffles to buyers in Alabama and Mississippi.¹⁴

Clayton leaves no doubt as to Lucretia Cannon’s leadership of this expanding circle of criminals. ‘Of this gang she was always the master spirit and the deviser of ways and means’, he wrote. Indeed it was Lucretia herself who once dressed ‘in men’s attire’ in order to stage a murderous ambush of two highway travelers who had recently departed her tavern. Likewise, when a five-year-old black child confined to the tavern’s cellar began screaming one day, it was Lucretia who silenced him by ‘tearing the clothes from off the poor victim of her wrath, beating it at the same time in a most dreadful manner’ and then holding its heels to ‘a hot fire, and thus [scorching] the child to death’. As if to underline her gender defiance, the pamphlet’s publisher, Erastus Barclay, paid for engravings of these gory, gothic episodes; one, a cross-dressing inversion of female domesticity; the other, a perversion of a mother’s care for a crying child (Figures 1 and 2).¹⁵

It took ‘a party of about a dozen men’ hired by a local sheriff to secure Lucretia Cannon’s eventual arrest. Of course ‘she resisted desperately’, in keeping with a character Clayton described as by turns ‘bold, revengeful, courageous, cunning,
and determined in the objects of her pursuits’. Her capture serves to liberate the ‘twenty-one negroes confined in her house awaiting their transportation south’, and triggers a narrative climax replete with a death sentence, a full confession to a Catholic priest, and a suicide by poison that first brings on a series of manic fits that require ‘three men . . . to keep her on a bed’. When the poison finally finishes its fatal work, Clayton’s authorial voice broke in to offer a page or two of didactic warnings to young female readers (and their parents) that the ‘tenderness’ of their sex must not be sacrificed in the name of domestic independence. ‘She who should have made her faithful arm a pillow for the head of her husband’, Clayton wrote, instead ‘conspired to raise it against his domestic peace, his life!’ Indeed Clayton judged his protagonist’s criminal career as gang leader, kidnapper, and serial killer to be ‘doubly shocking, and atrocious’ because such acts were ‘committed by one of the female sex, which sex have always been esteemed, as having a higher regard for virtue and a far greater aversion to acts of barbarity, even in the most abandoned of the sex, than is generally found in men of the same class’.16

The fig-leaves provided by such moralizing remarks should not obscure the simple fact that Clayton and Barclay wrote and published this 1841 pamphlet for entertainment and for profit. Priced and marketed to attract both working- and middle-class readers in a fast-growing market for cheap, mass-produced literary ephemera, the Narrative and Confessions aims to engross, to thrill, and to scandalize, and conforms neatly to the emerging conventions of the true crime genre. The pamphlet also establishes the ‘female fiend’ subgenre, a collection of antebellum literary themes and tropes centered upon the criminal transgressions of an intemperate and promiscuous female protagonist whose first crime is typically the desertion or murder of a husband or lover.17

Since its publication in New York in 1841, the Narrative and Confessions has enjoyed an extraordinary afterlife. A sensational life story neatly packaged in a concise and graphically-illustrated single volume, the pamphlet has become the single most commonly-consulted documentary source utilized by a growing body of journalists, novelists, antiquarians, amateur historians, and folklorists interested in the life of Patty Cannon, the flesh-and-blood woman on whom Lucretia Cannon was based. Over the past century and a half, the pamphlet has inspired no less than three full-length novels, several plays, and a veritable flood of features in local and national newspapers and magazines that have together propelled curious visitors to the Eastern Shore to go in search of Cannon’s tavern and its reputed dungeon, to conjure ghost stories about her, and to demand scientific investigations into a skull long housed in the Dover Public Library that some believe to be hers. By such means, the pamphlet’s legacy has been to impute to Patty Cannon a series of character traits – fierce independence, intemperance, gender-subversion, and an indiscriminate appetite for murder and atrocity – that more properly belong, as we shall now see, solely to her fictional counterpart.18
Warehouse manager

On its first page, Clayton and Barclay’s pamphlet promises that ‘our readers may rely upon the accounts as being correct, as they have been gathered from the most authentic sources’. Despite such claims of veracity, the Narrative and Confessions has, at best, only a loose relationship with the truth and its misconceptions have perhaps permanently distorted a proper appreciation of Patty Cannon’s role in the kidnapping and slave trading ring that she has since been credited as leading. Indeed, Clayton conjured up even Lucretia Cannon’s most basic biographical details. A cache of land and court records from the period reveal that Patty Cannon was actually likely born in Delaware, not in England or in Canada; that her marriage to her husband lasted for about 30 years, not three; that her husband’s name was Jesse, not Alonzo; that Jesse died sometime between 1822 and 1826 and that Patty likely did not murder him; that her real name was Martha and that no one in her lifetime seems to have called her Lucretia; that she was in her 60s when finally captured in 1829, not a ‘swash-buckling’ young Amazonian who could ‘lift three hundred pounds of grain to her shoulder’; that she was charged with murder in 1829, but was never tried or convicted and certainly never confessed; and that while she did die in jail in Georgetown, Delaware, old age was perhaps the most likely cause of her death.19

More significantly for our purposes, the Narrative and Confessions elevates Cannon’s position within the syndicate to the level of gang leader and mastermind, a status unsupported by any documentary evidence. On the contrary, legal records suggest that her male relations – her husband, Jesse Cannon; her daughter’s first husband, Henry Brereton; her daughter’s second husband, Joseph Johnson; and her daughter’s brother-in-law, Ebenezer Johnson – were the most visible and active members of this kidnapping ring. In fact, while Patty Cannon was never arrested or convicted of participating in the reverse Underground Railroad (her arrest in 1829 stemmed from the discovery of human remains on her property), judges found each of these four men guilty of abduction at one time or other, and punished them with fines or with time in the pillory for their actions.20

Kidnapping, it seems, was a family business. Yet the Narrative and Confessions expunges this familial context. Clayton name-checks Joseph Johnson – whom contemporaries most frequently identified as the cartel’s central figure – just once and does not provide any clue that he was Cannon’s son-in-law. Clayton also elides reference to Jacob and Isaac Cannon, second cousins of Patty’s husband Jesse. In the 1820s, the Cannon brothers were among the largest slaveholders on the Eastern Shore, and their business interests dominated the central peninsula’s economy. They ran a lucrative ferry operation on the Nanticoke River, but made their reputation making high-interest loans to hard-up farmers and storekeepers in Seaford and nearby Bridgeville. As a
result, there was no love lost for them locally. In fact, when the two brothers died within a month of each other in 1843 – one had been shot to death on the ferry by a disgruntled debtor – Seaford’s Methodist minister, William Morgan, described their legacy in his journal as follows:

> After fifty years, Cheating, Oppressing, and distressing, Sel[l]ing, and taking every thing they could lay hold of[,] There they ly in the grave, unlamented, and unmourned for, by any except a few flatterers. One for his oppression and cruelty, was shot in cold blood, and died as a beast. The other was permitted to die on his bed. But money was his god … Their whole lives [have] been one tissue of corruption, fraud, and oppression.

While the Cannon brothers had lived, their patronage and protection had likely extended – either directly or indirectly – to Jesse and Patty Cannon and to their sons-in-law Henry Brereton and Joseph Johnson. Having such powerful benefactors in the family likely insured that no local resident dared turn witness against any member of this criminal network, at least not so long as Jacob and Isaac held the deed to their farm or to their line of credit.21

Within the syndicate, Patty Cannon’s role was likely quite different to that depicted in the *Narrative and Confessions*. While the pamphlet portrays her as free-wheeling bandit queen – ‘The Queen of Kidnappers’ in the locution of a feature writer for the *Baltimore Sun* in 1930 – it was the men in her family who traveled most extensively and most frequently in service of their slave-trading interests. By contrast, Patty Cannon’s role was circumscribed and centered upon the small world of the tavern she owned and operated on the outskirts of Seaford. High-risk front-line operations were conducted by male kin like Joseph Johnson or by independent contractors such as Tilly James. Only once they had kidnapped free blacks and smuggled them by ship out of Philadelphia or Baltimore did Cannon herself play any direct role in the gang’s operations. ‘Thence to Patty Cannon’s’, wrote Lydia Smith, describing her own experience of abduction and trafficking from Philadelphia to the Eastern Shore in 1825. Smith and other victims of the ring’s predations typically remained at Cannon’s tavern (or Joseph Johnson’s nearby house at Johnson’s Crossroads) for a week or more until a schooner could be readied to take them across the Chesapeake Bay to the Virginia or Carolina coast to begin a long, trudging convoy towards the Cotton Kingdom. Patty Cannon never accompanied them, instead remaining behind to manage the tavern, which was surely her primary source of income.22

This pattern of pseudo-domestic immobility likely helped to protect Patty Cannon from prosecution. Contemporary newspaper accounts, diaries, and correspondence written by others on the peninsula, and records produced by regional anti-slavery societies, make plain that Patty Cannon’s membership of this kidnapping network was widely known during her lifetime. Yet she remained largely insulated from law enforcement agencies’ various attempts
to disrupt and destroy that organization’s operations. The tavern’s location in rural Delaware sequestered Cannon beyond the reach of activist mayors, high constables, and prosecutors in other jurisdictions such as Philadelphia where Tilly James, Henry Brereton, and the Johnson brothers regularly did business.\textsuperscript{23}

Her race and gender also likely helped insulate Cannon from conviction for kidnapping. In the 1820s, legal officials were generally reluctant to subject women to the same punishments for kidnapping and slave trading as men. For instance, when the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania brought a case against ‘Sarah Howell alias Mary Anderson’ for kidnapping in 1821, her defense attorney persuaded the judge to set aside the jury’s guilty verdict. Likewise, when a Court of Quarter Sessions found Rachel Scott guilty of ‘aiding and assisting to kidnap Sarah Fisher’ in May 1826, the Governor of Delaware intervened to pardon her. Indeed, although Patty Cannon and her daughter Mary Johnson (the wife of Joseph Johnson) were included among a list of six gang members in a set of indictments for kidnapping in 1821, the charges against the two women were soon dropped. ‘The state is unwilling to prosecute the above Indictment against the said Martha Cannon and Mary Johnson’, the clerk reported in a terse docket entry. No surprise, then, that a comprehensive survey of the inmates of eight major prisons in Pennsylvania, New York, Maryland, Delaware, and Virginia authored by William Crawford in 1835 found not a single female kidnapper serving time behind bars.\textsuperscript{24}

\textbf{Coffle co-captain}

The reluctance to prosecute women who participated in the reverse Underground Railroad makes it difficult to properly assess their number and the nature of their illegal and clandestine work. Nowhere are such source biases more apparent than in the case of Sally Johnson (née Shehee), the spouse of Joseph Johnson’s brother, Ebenezer. This husband and wife team led a coffle of five kidnapped black boys and two black women on an ill-fated journey from Patty Cannon’s Delaware tavern to Mississippi in the fall of 1825. While most of the resulting legal sources focus exclusively on Ebenezer’s role in this coerced migration, an account provided to the Mayor of Philadelphia by Samuel Scomp, a 15-year-old survivor of that ordeal, nevertheless makes clear that this couple worked together for the best part of four months to transport their captives 1200 miles to market in the Cotton Kingdom. On the schooner that carried them across the Chesapeake Bay, Scomp recalled, Sally and Ebenezer Johnson ‘were passengers on board, and helped to work the vessel’. Once on dry land in Virginia, the couple made the three older boys and the two adult women trudge ahead of them on foot and in chains, trailed by a wagon of provisions driven by the two youngest boys, which was in turn ‘followed by Ebenezer and his wife in the gig’.\textsuperscript{25}
Evidently, then, Sally Johnson and her husband were co-fled co-captains, though they did not perform identical work. According to Samuel Scomp’s later testimony, it was Ebenezer who brokered the sale of one of the boys to a buyer in Tuscaloosa, entrusting Sally with supervision of their six other chattels while he made the deal, and only informing her of the ‘400 dollar’ payment he had negotiated after the fact. Likewise, it was Ebenezer who whipped to death the youngest boy, a six year old sweep, who had been complaining of lame limbs and frostbitten toes ever since they had crossed into Alabama, knocking the child down ‘with the but end of his wagon whip, stamp[ing] him and knock[ing] his head against the wagon tire’. The boy expired two hours later. ‘Mrs. Johnson was in the wagon when he died’, Samuel Scomp later recalled.26

Sally Johnson was not always so far removed from the daily business of managing the correction and care of these co-fled captives. While it was Ebenezer who exercised the whip and the paddle, Sally was well aware that she and her husband had a mutual need to impose their will and assert their authority over their seven captives, and she readily endorsed her husband’s fearsome regime of violence and nervous terror in hopes of preserving their shared mission. Samuel Scomp remembered hearing ‘Johnson’s wife declare that it did her good to see him beat the boys’. Indeed, Sally Johnson likely engaged in disciplinary tactics of her own, using a skill-set one might reluctantly describe as maternal to console, pacify, and cheer the distraught young people in her charge and reassure them that the life that awaited them in the Deep South ‘was not as bad as they had heard’.27

Kinship and complementarity, then, were essential to Sally Johnson’s experience in the trade. Indeed, it is hard to imagine an unmarried woman piercing this otherwise homo-social world of itinerant slave traffickers. Examining personal relations among legal slave traders, Steven Deyle, Walter Johnson, and Edward E. Baptist have each recovered a community of men who were thick as thieves, who cleaved together for security and camaraderie in a period when interstate slave trading occupied a decidedly liminal status in mainstream southern society. Gender and sexuality were essential components of this group’s identity. The boasting, drinking, cursing, and gambling of these ‘one-eyed men’ signaled the elaboration of a ‘hyper-masculine’ and ‘relentlessly sexualized’ sub-culture that not only prized self-confidence and bravado but also authorized the systematic rape and sexual exploitation of ‘fancy maids’ in their custody. Scolding white womenfolk were not welcome in their circle.28

Only in the illegal slave trade – a closed community in which fear of detection, exposure, and prosecution put a premium on trust, inter-dependence, and familial ties – could women like Sally Johnson ever negotiate a place for themselves as essential personnel in these interstate commercial networks. This was a dubious privilege to be sure, as female traffickers likely experienced the same buffeting mix of stress, exhaustion, sleeplessness, and homesickness of which a male contemporary, a trader named Obediah Fields, complained in his letters home to his
wife from the trail. What’s more, as Sally Johnson’s declaration in favor of the regular exercise of the whip implies, female traffickers were also keenly aware that they were no less likely than their male counterparts to suffer violence at the hands of those they kidnapped and traded. Every coffle’s keepers probably slept with one eye open, and the Johnsons were not alone in making conspicuous display of the pistols, dirks, and whips they carried in their belts. It was not always enough. Typically outnumbered by 5 or 10–1, captors of both legally and illegally trafficked souls were sometimes overpowered by their human cargoes. In 1834, for example, a coffle of Maryland slaves succeeded in cutting the throats of the two Georgia men transporting them south, hacking open the head of one man with an axe and relieving the butchered bodies of $3000 in cash before disappearing into the night.29

In theory at least, Sally Johnson was also vulnerable to prosecution under the same anti-kidnapping statutes as her husband. In practice, however, legal authorities from Pennsylvania to Mississippi largely ignored Samuel Scomp’s testimony regarding her role in his 1825 abduction and forced migration, choosing instead to concentrate on an ultimately unsuccessful operation to apprehend her husband and coffle co-captain, the ‘infamous kidnapper’ Ebenezer Johnson. While the governors of five states later issued warrants for the arrest of Ebenezer and four other male members of the Cannon-Johnson ring following Scomp’s deposition, Sally Johnson’s name never appeared on a warrant or an indictment, a function perhaps of her legal status as a feme covert.30

Conclusion

The Cannon-Johnson ring was by far the most active and well-known of the many shadowy cartels which comprised the reverse Underground Railroad. For that reason it is also the best documented. Assuming that the gang’s internal structure and modus operandi were broadly similar to those of its lesser rivals, it should now be clear that women were important actors in the elaboration of this repellent traffic, a criminal enterprise that grew in scope and sophistication between the American Revolution and the Civil War. Drawn into this secretive business by marriage or by other newly-formed dynastic relations with active male traffickers, Sally Johnson, Mary Johnson, and Patty Cannon each performed essential work as custodians and coffle co-captains in this kidnapping syndicate and also provided the sinews of trust and familial reciprocity that bound Henry Brereton, Ebenezer Johnson, Joseph Johnson, Jesse Cannon (and even his cousins, Isaac and Jacob Cannon) to one another. Those familial ties among in-law outlaws – analogous to the multi-generational dynasties that were beginning to populate the upper echelons of the legal interstate slave trade in this period – provided entrée to and safe transit through a violent, sexually rapacious, and unrelentingly homo-social world of men from which they would likely otherwise have been excluded.31
The many women associated with the Cannon-Johnson ring— including Rachel Jones, Fanny Parraway, and Tilly James, the syndicate’s black and mixed-race female contractors—confounded contemporary stereotypes about slave traders and kidnappers. Their abhorrent activities not only helped to elaborate a traffic that in turn contributed to the development of capitalism in antebellum America, but also challenged emerging claims that male slaveholders’ female relations suffered from ‘a lack of business knowledge’, a deficiency sufficient to keep them—by choice and by necessity—separated from the hardest edges of the slave trading economy. In truth, such women were as central to the illegal traffic in slaves as female activists such as Harriet Tubman, Lydia Maria Child, Maria Stewart, and Harriet Beecher Stowe would be in the emerging campaign to prevent such abductions, halt the spread of slavery into new territories, or destroy it altogether.32

Notes


5. For a rare ‘warning to people of color’ regarding the presence of black female kidnappers among them, see *Baltimore Patriot & Mercantile Advertiser*, Aug. 13, 1821.


7. J. Williams, Daniel Mason, and Gallaudette Oliver to Joseph Watson, Sept. 5, 1824, folder 8, document 475, Joseph Watson Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA [hereafter cited as JWP]; Deposition of Isaiah Sadler before Joseph Watson, Sept. 13, 1824, folder 8, document 476, JWP. Tilly James may have been a relation of the free black carpenter William James who lived in the rear of a building at 172 Pine Street in 1838 or of Peter James, a caulker living on Lombard Street below 8th Street around the same time. *Register of trades of the colored people in the city of Philadelphia and districts* (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Gunn, 1838).


11. Narrative and Confessions of Lucretia P. Cannon Who Was Tried, Convicted, and Sentenced to Be Hung at Georgetown, Delaware, with Two of Her Acquaintances Containing An Account of Some of the Most Horrible and Shocking Murders and Daring Robberies Ever Committed by One of the Female Sex (New York: Printed for the Publishers, 1841); Dawn Keetley, ‘Victim and Victimizer: Female Fiends and Unease Over Marriage in Antebellum Sensational Fiction’, American Quarterly 51, no. 2 (1999): 344–84. The pen name of the pamphlet’s anonymous author was Clinton Jackson. Barclay’s authors often wrote under pseudonyms. On John Clayton’s likely authorship, see Carole Marks, Moses and the Monster and Miss Anne (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 38, 143–4; Bernard John Medairy, The Notorious Patty Cannon (Towson, MD: B. Medairy, 1995), 184–5, 189. On Lucretia Chapman’s 1832 trial, which was widely reported in eastern newspapers, see Linda Wolfe, The Murder of Dr. Chapman: The Legendary Trials of Lucretia Chapman and Her Lover (New York: HarperCollins, 2004). Some scholars argue that Lucretia Cannon was (re)named for Lucretia Borgia, the legendary Renaissance-era Italian noblewoman and poisoner, though such a reference may have not have resonated with many of the pamphlet’s likely readers.

12. Narrative and Confessions, 6, 7, 9.

13. Ibid., 10, 11.


15. Ibid., 12, 16. Both illustrations appear on the opening pages of the pamphlet.

16. Ibid., 21, 11, 22, 24, 5.

17. Keetley, ‘Victim and Victimizer’. A second, lightly-revised edition appeared in 1842, but the pamphlet was not reprinted again until 1900. The Narrative and Confessions did however, become a template for many of Barclay’s subsequent true crime stories, many of which featured extraordinary female protagonists engaged in gender-subversive behavior such as cross-dressing and spousal murder. Among them is the Life and Confession of Ann Walters (1850), a largely verbatim reprinting of Lucretia Cannon’s exploits albeit under a changed name. On the affordability of the Narrative and Confessions, the likely social status of its readers, and advances in mass production and distribution in this era, see Thomas M. McDade, ‘Lurid Literature of the Last Century: The Publications of E. E. Barclay’, Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography 80, no. 4 (1956): 452–64; Ronald Zboray, ‘Antebellum Reading and the Ironies of Technological Innovation’, American Quarterly 40, no. 1 (1988), 65–


19. *Narrative and Confessions*, 5; Anthony Higgins, ‘Maryland’s Queen of Kidnappers: Patty Cannon’s Name Struck Terror to the Hearts of Free Negroes’, *Baltimore Sun Magazine*, Nov. 9, 1930; John H. K. Shannahan, *Tales of Old Maryland: History and Romance on the Eastern Shore of Maryland* (Baltimore: Meyer & Thalheimer, 1907), 74. Hal Roth also notes that while a newspaper account from the end of her life found that this old woman ‘looks more like a man than a woman’, there is no contemporary evidence of cross-dressing. Indeed it appears that Patty Cannon was not present at the attack on the visitors at the crossroads at which the 1841 pamphlet depicts Lucretia Cannon disguising herself as a man. *Niles Weekly Register*, April 15, 1829; Roth, For the likely source of the 1841’s pamphlet’s misinformation, see *Daily National Intelligencer*, May 27, 1837.


Survey and Plotting in 1799 to the Completion of the Delaware Railroad in 1856 (Seaford, DE: Sussex Printing, 1961), 9–29; Gabrielle M. Lanier, *The Delaware Valley in the Early Republic: Architecture, Landscape, and Regional Identity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 70–100. For contemporary recognition that Joseph Johnson was the gang’s most visible member, see *Niles Weekly Register*, April 25, 1829. By 1816, Jacob and Isaac controlled about five percent of the taxable wealth in their corner of Sussex county, owned about $40,000-worth of land, dozens of slaves, and more than 30 business and rental properties. For the Cannon family tree, see Robert Wilson, *The Massie/Massey and Related Families* (Taftsville VT: Robert E. Wilson, 2002); George V. Massey, comp., *James Cannon of Nanticoke and Descendants Including the Allied Families of Cordry, Adams, Hooper, Obier and Ward* (n.p., 1948).


23. For contemporary recognition of Martha ‘Patty’ Cannon as a member of the syndicate, see *Niles Weekly Register*, April 25, 1829; *Delaware Gazette and American Watchman*, May 19, 1829; *Niles Weekly Register*, May 23, 1829; Sydney Greenbie and Marjorie Greenbie, *Anna Ella Carroll and Abraham Lincoln* (Tampa, FL: University of Tampa Press, 1952), 23.


25. ‘Narrative of Samuel Scomp’, *African Observer*, May 1827, 39–41. On Mrs. Johnson’s first name, see Roth, *Now This Is the Truth*, 132; Roth, *Monster’s Handsome Face*, 223. Little else is known about her background, thought according to Joseph Watson, ‘The wife of Ebenezer is said to have respectable relatives in Maryland’. Joseph Watson to John W. Hamilton and John Henderson, March 10, 1826, folder 17, document 275, JWP. It is not clear whether Sally Johnson’s fall 1825 expedition was her only experience as a coflle co-captain, though it seems clear that she and Ebenezer remained in Delaware while other gang members coflled Peter Hook and a dozen others southwards two months earlier, in July 1825. *Democratic Press*, Jan. 25, 1827.

31. Here I extend and complicate Tadman’s claim that kinship ties were a ‘common route’ by which individuals entered the slave trading business. Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves*, 208–9. Significantly, Mary Brya and Ann Brown, the two ‘female kidnappers’ arrested near Philadelphia in 1818 were both married to male traffickers who had escaped apprehension and who ‘are now in the vicinity of Lancaster, endeavoring to decoy some runaways and bring them to Delaware for sale’. *Poulson’s American Daily Advertiser*, June 1, 1818.

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Notes on contributor

Richard Bell is Associate Professor in the Department of History, University of Maryland, 2114A Key Hall, College Park, MD, 20742, USA. Email: rjbell@umd.edu