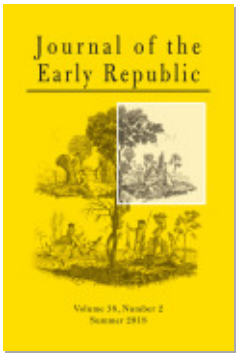
Counterfeit Kin: Kidnappers of Color, the Reverse Underground Railroad, and the Origins of Practical Abolition



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Journal of the Early Republic, Volume 38, Number 2, Summer 2018, pp. 199-230 (Article)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press

Counterfeit Kin

Kidnappers of Color, the Reverse Underground Railroad, and the Origins of Practical Abolition

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Sam Scomp rose early. He was a runaway from a slave plantation in New Jersey and had been sleeping rough at different spots in Philadelphia for the last few nights. Probably hungry and surely stiff, Scomp set out toward the docks at the end of Market Street. His plan was to try to earn enough money to buy breakfast by helping ships' crews cart barrels and boxes from their holds into town. Just fifteen years old, Scomp was young and strong, but he did not have his own wagon or wheelbarrow and barely knew anyone. So it must have seemed like a blessing when a mixed-race man walked up to Scomp to offer him work unloading a shipment of "Peaches, Oranges, Water Melons &c" from a small sloop at anchor out by the Navy Yard. The pay was twenty-five cents, and they could use a wagon already waiting for them at the ship.[1]

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1. "Kidnapping," *African Observer: A Monthly Journal, Containing Essays and Documents* 1, no. 2 (1827), 38; Isaac Harvey, Aug. 9, 1825, Diary, 1820–1856, Isaac Harvey Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. In addition to the primary sources cited here, this account of Scomp's August 1825 abduction is reconstructed from the following secondary sources: John Henderson, Joseph Watson, Job Brown, Thomas Bradford Junr., R. L. Kennon, Joshua Boucher, H. V. Somerville, and Eric Ledell Smith, "Rescuing African American Kidnapping Victims in Philadelphia as Documented in the Joseph Watson Papers at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 129, no. 3 (2005), 317–45; Julie Winch, "Philadelphia and the Other Under-

Journal of the Early Republic, 38 (Summer 2018)

Scomp was typically on his guard around strangers, especially white people, but the prospect of easy money for light work for another person of color had disarmed him. Besides, his new employer, who said his name was John Smith, was easygoing and charming, and the pair chatted easily as they walked down Front Street, leaving the city behind them. Anyone who came upon them that morning might have assumed that Scomp and Smith were long-time friends, or cousins, or half-brothers out for some sort of dawn lark. At the Navy Yard, they boarded a little rowboat crewed by a white man about twice Scomp's age. The man, who told him that his name was Joseph Johnson, then rowed his two passengers out to a sloop at anchor in the middle of the river, ushering them down the stairs into the *Little John*'s cabin to "take a drink" before setting to work.[2]

Scomp had barely made it down the steps when Johnson shoved him to the floor and knotted the boy's hands with rope. When Scomp howled for help, Johnson drew a "large Spanish knife" from his belt, thrust the blade close to the teenager's face and "threatened to cut his throat if he resisted or made a noise." John Smith, the mixed-raced man who had baited Scomp and brought him here, now tied the boy's feet, before taking the rowboat back to shore and disappearing in the direction of the city. Johnson then hustled Scomp from the cabin and pushed him into its adjacent hold, a hold that held no fruit, only ballast. There, he chained the boy's legs to a pump before returning to deck and closing the hatch behind him.[3]

The kidnapping of Sam Scomp from the streets of Philadelphia on August 10, 1825, was one of thousands of abductions of free African Americans from northern towns and cities in the early republic, almost all of them perpetrated for the purposes of smuggling that person southward for sale as a slave. This human trafficking network—of infamous repute in its day, though since largely forgotten—had colonial origins but grew rapidly in the first decades of the nineteenth century after the Jefferson administration outlawed the further importation of slaves from overseas. In the years following the 1808 ban, the resale price of enslaved

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ground Railroad," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 111, no. 1 (1987), 3–25.

2. "Kidnapping," *African Observer,* 39.

3. Ibid., 39–40.

black laborers already living in the United States quickly skyrocketed, topping $600 per person in Natchez and New Orleans by 1820. In the midst of this country's first great cotton boom, these market forces created strong incentives for unscrupulous white entrepreneurs like Joseph Johnson and his mixed-race associate John Smith to snatch free-born black children as well as fugitive slaves like Sam Scomp from Philadelphia, New York City, and elsewhere, and then sell them to incurious planters setting up in the new Gulf states carved from the territory acquired by the Louisiana Purchase. Johnson and his biracial ring of subordinates comprised one of the most vicious and ambitious gangs of grifters, kidnappers, and human traffickers in an era in which the liberty of people of color in the so-called "free North" was under constant attack.[4]

This essay shines a spotlight on this Reverse Underground Railroad, a term I use advisedly, keenly aware of important differences between the experiences of freedom-seekers exiting slavery and free persons enslaved and trafficked into it. Yet, the two migrations were in other ways comparable. Both trafficking networks were loosely organized, sporadic, ad hoc, and essentially opportunistic. Each made use of an ever-changing roster of trusted allies to conceal black migrants in private homes, warehouses, stables, barns, cellars, and attics, and in various smaller outbuildings all hidden in plain sight. Participants in both networks relied on false documents, fake identities, and disguise, and undertook considerable legal and physical risk to travel undetected and undisturbed over vast distances. It is also the case that African Americans occupied front-line positions in both trafficking networks, more so than has commonly been acknowledged. Lastly, both networks were the subjects of much discussion in the early decades of the nineteenth century, even before contemporaries coined the phrase "Underground Railroad" in the early 1830s.[5]

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4. Carol Wilson, *Freedom at Risk: The Kidnapping of Free Blacks in America, 1780–1865* (Lexington, KY, 1994). On the legal domestic slave trade, see Steven Deyle, *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life* (Oxford, UK, 2006).

5. William J. Switala, *The Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania* (Mechanicsburg, PA, 2001), 11–13; John Michael Vlach, "Above Ground on the Underground Railroad: Places of Flight and Refuge," in *Passages to Freedom: The Underground Railroad in History and Myth,* ed. David W. Blight (Washington, DC, 2001), 109, 112; Keith P. Griffler, *Front Line of Freedom: African Americans and the Forging of the Underground Railroad in the Ohio Valley* (Lexington, KY,

While the Reverse Underground Railroad deserves extensive scrutiny, this present study is narrowly conceived and focuses its attention upon the previously unexamined roles of black and mixed-race operatives such as John Smith. It explores the distinctive abilities and modus operandi of these "colored kidnappers," as well as their likely motivations. To better understand their life choices, it triangulates their behavior not only against that of confidence men and counterfeiters working in the shadows of the emerging capitalist economy in this period, but also in relationship to that of the many African-descended men and women in the long history of American slavery whose actions thwarted other black people's dreams of liberty.[6]

The essay's final section interrogates the distinctive ways in which free black families, neighborhoods, and communities responded to the kidnappers of color in their midst. Many black urban dwellers took extraordinary pains to publicly denounce, promptly apprehend, and violently punish by extralegal means the "treacherous creatures" who abducted their friends, neighbors, and family members. In doing so, people of color living in mid-Atlantic towns and cities in the four decades after 1808 began to assert that racial solidarity was a foundational precondition for black life in freedom. Equally importantly, they elaborated a new form of direct antislavery action, an early and formative species of the sort of "practical abolition" activities that we typically associate with the aftermath of the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850.[7]

John Smith worked for Joseph Johnson, the ringleader of arguably the most successful kidnapping gang in American history. For much of the 1810s and 1820s, members of Johnson's network acted with near impunity, orchestrating the abduction of scores of free black people from

2004), xi; Larry Gara, *The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad* (Lexington, KY, 1961), 18. Writing in 1987, historian Julie Winch was the first to draw the comparison between the trade in kidnapped free black people and the Underground Railroad. Winch, "Other Underground Railroad."

6. "Colored Kidnappers," *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, June 9, 1827.

7. David Walker, *David Walker's Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World,* ed. Peter P. Hinks (University Park, PA, 2000), 24; Graham Russell Gao Hodges, *David Ruggles: A Radical Black Abolitionist and the Underground Railroad in New York City* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2010), 6.

Philadelphia, Baltimore, and the Delmarva Peninsula. They warehoused their human cargo in Johnson's isolated Delaware farmhouse, locking them in its garret rooms or sometimes chaining them to trees before eventually delivering them to waiting vessels ready to sail southward. Their victims, who were typically males younger than twenty, were destined for sale on backcountry roads in the interior of Alabama or Mississippi, usually to aspiring but hardscrabble cotton farmers whose marginal status belies the popular image of rich planters in grand, white-columned mansions at the center of vast and thriving southern estates.[8]

John Smith's role was on the front end, out on the streets. In Philadelphia he hunted for one likely lad at a time, delivering each one to Johnson's waiting sloop before returning to town to look for the next. In June 1825, he had baited and decoyed no less than a dozen children by these means in the space of just a few days. Returning to the city that August, Smith was under instructions to stock the *Little John* with as many black children as he could find. Sam Scomp had not been his first mark. In fact, there were two other boys shackled in the ship's cargo hold already, ten-year-old Enos Tilghman and eight-year-old Alexander Manlove. Both of them had been stuck in Johnson's floating dungeon since the day before; like Scomp, each had fallen for Smith's promises to earn quarters unloading fruit that did not exist. By midnight, two more boys had appeared, a ten-year-old named Cornelius Sinclair and a six-year-old sweep named Joe. When Smith had approached Sinclair earlier in the day, he had at first refused this stranger's unsolicited offer of work. But for some reason, he had let Smith keep talking and had eventually agreed to follow him to a back alley. There Smith had overpowered him, fixing "a black sticking plaster" across the boy's mouth before half-dragging and half-marching him in the direction of the Navy Yard.[9]

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8. The gang's operations have been treated by several historians, both professional and amateur. The best starting point is Bernard John Medairy, Jr., *The Notorious Patty Cannon and Her Gang of Kidnappers on the Eastern Shore: Kidnappers, Robbers and Murderers* (Towson, MD, 1995).

9. "Kidnapping," *African Observer,* 39–40; "More Kidnapping," *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, Feb. 24, 1827; "Kidnapping," *African Observer: A Monthly Journal, Containing Essays and Documents* 1, no. 5 (1827), 139. Coincidentally, Joe the sweep's full name was Joseph Johnson, the same name as one of his kidnappers. For the sake of clarity, I have chosen to refer to the black child simply as "Joe."

As these five abductions attest, John Smith was remarkably adept at this work. He was also highly experienced and was known by multiple aliases over the years, including James Morris and Spencer Francis. His real name, however, was John Purnell. Born free around 1800, Purnell had grown up on Maryland's Eastern Shore. He had apprenticed as a shoemaker, but kidnapping was the family business. His father, Jacob, a former slave, had conducted a series of abductions in Baltimore in the 1810s and early 1820s and built a small real estate empire in and around Snow Hill, Maryland, using the proceeds. When Jacob died in 1824—he "cut his throat from ear to ear" rather than surrender to an armed posse of white residents trying to apprehend him—his son simply took over the operation. John Purnell came to the attention of Joseph Johnson soon afterward, who sent him to Philadelphia in the summer of 1825 "to decoy [all] the ignorant and unsuspecting children" he could find. To do so, Purnell prowled around the docks at the end of Market Street looking for boys naive enough to accept "the usual bait of a quarter of a dollar, to help bring up peaches, melons, &c. from a boat" anchored just outside of town.[10]

John Purnell was not the only person of color in Joseph Johnson's employ. In fact, in an era in which mid-Atlantic labor markets were bitterly racially divided, Johnson's gang drew notice for the degree of racial "amalgamation" in its ranks. In 1821, Thomas King Carroll, a prominent Maryland lawmaker, told his six-year-old daughter that free blacks living near them on the Eastern Shore were at risk of seizure by "wicked people, white and black" working for Joseph Johnson and his mother-in-law (Martha) Patty Cannon. Other local residents said much the same. Giving evidence to the Mayor of Philadelphia in the wake of Sam Scomp's disappearance, a witness from Concord, Delaware, worried that Johnson would soon strike again and "will have as usual some Blacks to assist and Decoy etc."[11]

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10. [Untitled], *New York National Advocate*, Apr. 1, 1824, 2; "Kidnapping," *Niles' Weekly Register* (Baltimore), Apr. 10, 1824; "Kidnapping," *African Observer*, 1, no. 5 (1827), 139; "The Kidnapper," *Eastern Argus* (Portland, ME), June 26, 1827; Smith, "Rescuing African American Kidnapping Victims," 323.

11. Sydney Greenbie and Marjorie Barstow Greenbie, *Anna Ella Carroll and Abraham Lincoln: A Biography* (Tampa, FL, 1952), 23–24; Jesse Green to Joseph Watson, Mar. 12, 1827, Folder 15, Document 178, Joseph Watson Papers (hereafter JWP), Historical Society of Pennsylvania; Medairy, *The Notorious Patty Cannon*, 155. I am grateful to Shane White for the comparison to northern labor

In addition to John Purnell, Johnson and Cannon employed at least three other persons of color. Among them was Henry Carr, a black man who kept an oyster shop on South Street in Philadelphia. Carr and Purnell sometimes worked together, vouching for each other's identities and intentions as they spun yarns that could ensnare young black visitors to Carr's shop. At other times, Carr worked directly with Johnson, luring boys to the latter's waiting sloop independently of Purnell and collecting hefty cash rewards for his trouble. "I want you to fetch me one or two more by 12 o'clock, and I expect to sail before day," one of these boys heard Johnson say to Carr on one occasion. This was at nine in the evening.[12]

Another African American accomplice was Cyrus James, a free black man who had grown up in the household of Patty Cannon, Johnson's mother-in-law. James turned state's evidence against Cannon in 1829, and in the course of his testimony recounted several jobs he had carried out for his old mistress during a decade or more of service. Among them was a mission into Worcester County, Maryland, to entice away an enslaved man. The slave in question was married to a free black woman and was the father of her seven children. James made the man's acquaintance, gained his trust, and provided him with forged freedom papers that he and his family might use to start new lives in New Jersey. The man and his wife were elated and accepted James's offer to collect their family in a carriage and carry them out of state. But the carriage soon swerved off course and made an unscheduled stop at Cannon's Seaford-area homestead. There, Cyrus James offloaded his newest victims and turned all nine of them over to other gang members to be shipped south and sold.[13]

Significantly, not all the kidnappers of color in the pay of Johnson and Cannon were male. In early September 1824, a seventeen-year-old orphan and odd-jobber named Isaiah Sadler was called to Callowhill Street in Philadelphia to attend to a sick child. There he met a "yellow woman who called herself Tilly James." This woman—who was likely a

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markets. On "amalgamation" as a term of art for racial integration in this period, see Shane White, "Freedom's First Con: African Americans and Changing Notes in Antebellum New York City," *Journal of the Early Republic* 34 (Fall 2014), 385–409, esp. 405.

12. Undated newspaper clipping, Folder 17, Document 274A, JWP.

13. Medairy, *The Notorious Patty Cannon*, 132, 181–82.

close relative of Cyrus James—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 sixty-acre farm that she said her uncle owned. Her uncle would feed Sadler and clothe him, she promised, and would give the boy five dollars a month in return for light work. Sadler apparently liked what he heard, and the next morning Tilly James led him to Wilmington, Delaware, and then on to Joseph Johnson's house downstate. There, to Sadler's horror and surprise, James handed him over to two strong men who tied the boy 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 Johnson's property, following the stars in the night sky back the way the he had come.[14]

The Cannon–Johnson ring was one of several dozen kidnapping crews active in the mid-Atlantic in the early nineteenth century, and black operatives labored in many of them. Surviving newspapers, activist organization minutes, legal records, and the occasional victim memoir make clear that kidnappers of color stalked every significant free black community. As Leslie M. Harris, Lois E. Horton, and Graham Hodges have shown, New York was a particularly popular hunting ground, especially after the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 stimulated the city's maritime connections with the Deep South. In October 1835, for instance, David Ruggles told an African American audience in Manhattan to be on the lookout for three black men employed by one of the city's infamous "kidnapping clubs." According to Ruggles, one of these men, John Wallace of Staten Island, had recently tried to lure a young black girl named Eliza Drummings onto a ship tied up in New York harbor with a bevy of romantic promises. She had refused, but not before Wallace had robbed her and fled.[15]

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14. J. Williams, Daniel Mason, and Gallaudette Oliver to Joseph Watson, Sept. 5, 1824, Folder 8, Document 475, JWP; Deposition of Isaiah Sadler before Joseph Watson, Sept. 13, 1824, Folder 8, Document 476, JWP.

15. Hodges, *David Ruggles*, 87–88; Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626–1863* (Chicago, 2003), 208–209; Lois E. Horton, "Kidnapping and Resistance: Antislavery Direct Action in the 1850s," in *Passages to Freedom*, ed. Blight, 156. See also David N. Gellman, *Emancipating New York: The Politics of Slavery and Freedom, 1777–1827* (Baton Rouge, LA, 2006), 47, 67, 108, 179, 186, 204–205.

The only jurisdiction more popular with kidnappers of color was Philadelphia. With its large free black population and vibrant and open street culture, southeastern Pennsylvania was the site of hundreds of abductions in the first half of the nineteenth century, many of them committed by men and women of African descent. In 1815, for instance, two young African American brothers, Peter and Levin Still, aged about six and eight, playing outside their home on the banks of the Delaware River accepted a ride to church from "a tall dark man, with black and glossy hair." They never arrived. Three years later, Philadelphia Judge Richard Rush sentenced an African American man named William Young to pay a fine of "three hundred pounds and three years at hard labor" for kidnapping two black men and a little black girl and selling them on to "merciless Task-Masters[s]" in Georgia and the West Indies. The following year, 1819, a black man "decoyed another man of colour" from the city's streets. "It is said he knocked him up at the dead of night," *Relf's Philadelphia Gazette* reported, "pretending that he wanted him to go and pray with a sick friend!—The man is since missing."[16]

No one dark and fit, no one who might conceivably fetch a price as a slave in the South, was ever truly safe from these predators. A handful of free blacks even conspired with white kidnappers to abduct members of their own families. In January 1825, for example, authorities in Philadelphia arrested Absalom Cork on suspicion of having spirited away two free people of color, one of whom was his own cousin. Not even spousal and parental relationships were sacrosanct. In 1808, Delaware authorities issued a warrant for the arrest of Caesar Rhoads, a free black man suspected of conspiring with a member of the Cannon–Johnson gang to abduct Hester Craig and her two children, all of whom were legally free. Rhoads was the father of one of Craig's kidnapped children and, according to one informant's testimony, was motivated by the prospect of no longer having to pay court-ordered monthly child support.[17]

16. Peter Still, *The Kidnapped and the Ransomed: The Narrative of Peter and Vina Still after Forty Years of Slavery* (Philadelphia, 1970), 27; "Kidnapping," *Relf's Philadelphia Gazette*, Oct. 2, 1818; "A Serious Affray," *Relf's Philadelphia Gazette*, Sept. 23, 1819.

17. Minute Book of the Acting Committee, 1810–1822, Reel 5, Jan. 6, 1825, Papers of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, 1748–1979 (hereafter PAS), Historical Society of Pennsylvania; Medairy, *The Notorious Patty Cannon*, 20–22. See also "To the People of Color," *Baltimore Patriot & Mercantile Advertiser*, Aug. 13, 1821. At trial in April 1809, a judge convicted Rhoads, fined him $30, and

While Cork and Rhoads were likely one-time opportunists, John Purnell, Henry Carr, and many other black and mixed-race kidnappers were dispassionate professionals. Most were men who spent years in the trade, though Tilly James was hardly the only woman of color "in the business of inveigling negroes into the meshes of [her] net." When Pennsylvania authorities arrested Mary Brya and Ann Brown "on a charge of selling, or attempting to sell" a parcel of freeborn young people into slavery in 1818, the two black women admitted that "they have been engaged in this kind of traffic for several years." The same longevity characterized the careers 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 interstate traffickers, including Patty Cannon's husband, Jesse.[18]

In the decades before the passage of Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 partially undermined their business model, "blackbirders" like Mary Brya and John Purnell prowled the major population centers of the mid-Atlantic almost daily, a fact upon which many contemporaries remarked. "To enumerate all the horrid and aggravating instances of men-stealing, which are known to have occurred," Jesse Torrey, a physician from Philadelphia, wrote in 1817, "would require a heavy volume. In many cases, whole families of free coloured people have been attacked in the night, beaten nearly to death with clubs, gagged and bound, and dragged into

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ordered him to be sold at auction as a slave on a seven-year fixed term. For a description of a white man—a "monster in human shape" according to one anti-slavery activist—courting and marrying mixed-race women for the purpose of selling them into slavery, see Jesse Torrey, *A Portraiture of Slavery in the United States, Proposing National Measures for the Education and Gradual Emancipation of the Slaves, Without Impairing the Legal Privileges of the Possessor: And a Project of Colonial Asylum for Free People of Color Including Memoirs of Facts on the Interior Traffic in Slaves, and on Kidnapping* (Philadelphia, 1817), 57.

18. "Patty Cannon," *Baltimore Patriot*, May 22, 1829; "Female Kidnappers!!!" *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia), June 1, 1818; "To the People of Color," *Baltimore Patriot & Mercantile Advertiser*, Aug. 13, 1821. On the role of women on the Reverse Underground Railroad, see Richard Bell, "'Thence to Patty Cannon's': Gender, Family, and the Reverse Underground Railroad," *Slavery & Abolition* 37, no. 4 (2016), 661–79.

distant and hopeless captivity and slavery, leaving no traces behind, except the blood from their wounds."[19]

Free African Americans and fugitives from slavery alike lived in imminent danger of seizure and enslavement in the early republic. Yet because of the furtive nature of this human-trafficking business, it is impossible to know precisely how prevalent these abductions were. The Reverse Underground Railroad was certainly dwarfed by the scale of the legal domestic slave trade between the Revolution and the Civil War, a coerced migration that delivered more than a million men, women, and children from the Upper South to the Gulf Coast between 1790 and 1860. But it was likely of broadly comparable size and scope to its namesake, the Underground Railroad, the loosely organized process by which fugitives from slavery escaped to northern states, or Canada, or to points south and west. Estimates for Underground Railroad activity between 1800 and 1864 typically hover in the tens of thousands; for comparison, David Ruggles once estimated that as many as 3,000 free black people, many of them children, had been spirited away from New York City alone in just the first six years of the 1830s. While Ruggles surely exaggerated, it is nonetheless clear that fear of kidnapping was ubiquitous in urban centers in this period, so universal in fact that it served as a foundational marker of black identity north of slavery. It haunted African American neighborhoods, a constant and existential reminder of the limits of black freedom in post-revolutionary America.[20]

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19. Torrey, *Portraiture of Slavery,* 56. For similar commentary, see *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Fifteenth American Convention for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery and Improving the Condition of the African Race Assembled at Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1817), 13.

20. Switala, *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania*, 13; Gara, *Liberty Line*, 36. "Blackbirders," a term used here as a generic, refers to the name of a kidnapping gang that terrorized the New York City's Five Points neighborhood in 1820s. Eric Foner, *Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad* (New York, 2015), 51. For more evidence of the activities of kidnappers of color in this period, see "Kidnapping—in City Court," *Baltimore Patriot and Mercantile Advertiser,* June 22, 1822; "Internatl Slave Trade," *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, Oct. 1821, "Kidnapping," Jan. 21, 1826, "Kidnapping," Jan. 28, 1826; Leonard Black, *The Life and Sufferings of Leonard Black: A Fugitive from Slavery* (New Bedford, MA, 1847), 24–26; Winfield H. Collins, *The Domestic Slave Trade of the Southern States* (New York, 1904), 91–92; Smith, "Rescuing African American Kidnapping Victims," 323; Hodges, *David Ruggles*, 88. Lois Horton and

The long careers of many kidnappers of color testify to the obvious advantages their race provided them in this line of work. As a mixed-race man, John Purnell's greatest professional asset was his appearance. In mid-Atlantic cities like Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York, black parents regularly pleaded with their children to be on the lookout for white "Georgia-men" and to stay away from corrupt white constables. But most people of color were loath to suspect someone who looked like Purnell of conspiring with white-led kidnapping collectives. That blind spot cost many black and mixed-race children their freedom.

The best way to understand how John Purnell, Tilly James, and other traffickers of color operated is to think of them as con artists. As Karen Halttunen and Stephen Mihm have demonstrated, grifters of all stripes stalked the United States in this period, especially in fast-growing urban areas that suddenly seemed to be swimming with strangers. Shane White has described the antebellum decades, in particular, as "the golden age of the con." Criminal capitalists engaged in every possible variety of caper, but the fundamentals of the confidence trick were always the same. The work required cunning and ego in equal measure along with a gift for performance. As David W. Maurer explained almost eighty years ago, a successful con artist "must be able to make anyone like him, confide in him, trust him. . . . He must also be able to look a mark over and make rapid, accurate estimates of the mark's . . . susceptibility to the principle of confidence games, and the best methods of playing him."[21]

Graham Hodges have each suggested that kidnapping activity intensified each time the United States opened a new territory to slave labor, and each time the price of cotton or slaves in the Deep South spiked. Horton, "Kidnapping and Resistance," 151–52; Hodges, *David Ruggles*, 87.

21. White, "Freedom's First Con," 400, 402–409; David W. Maurer, *The Big Con: The Story of the Confidence Man and the Confidence Game* (Indianapolis, IN, 1940), 147–48, 171; Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830–1870* (New Haven, CT, 1982), 1–32; Stephen Mihm, *A Nation of Counterfeiters: Capitalists, Con Men, and the Making of the United States* (Cambridge, MA, 2007), 92. For a more broadly conceived account of the fluidity and instability of this thriving "counterfeit economy" and the role of petty entrepreneurs therein, see *Capitalism by Gaslight: Illuminating the Economy of Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Brian P. Luskey

The oldest trick in the con artist's book was to project the illusion of shared identity and common cause. As Michael LeBlanc has argued, "The victim [of a con game] lowers his defenses if the person before him appears to be like himself (same social group) [or] to be harmless." Perceptions of racial essentialism and ethnic solidarity could be easily exploited to achieve this sort of bait-and-switch, as Brendan P. O'Malley made clear in a recent examination of the emigrant runners who mobbed arriving steerage passengers in New York City in the 1840s and 1850s. Irish and German runners made a point of using their native tongues to proffer too-good-to-be-true lodging deals to arriving migrants from their homelands. By doing so they managed to convince scores of their own former countrymen to follow them to boarding houses where crooked landlords could charge them exorbitant rents and hold hostage their luggage until they paid up.[22]

Kidnappers of color did much the same sort of thing, profiting handsomely from their victims' misplaced confidence in their own social intelligence. John Purnell, Henry Carr, and Tilly James made their livelihoods by exploiting anyone foolish enough to assume that their dark skin and dark eyes rendered them trustworthy allies. Trading on false claims of authenticity, they spat out lies for a living and were highly skilled in what one contemporary critic described as the "arts of dissimulation." They were well aware that boys like Sam Scomp were more likely to trust an adult of the same race—or at least, to give that person the benefit of the doubt—than they were to believe the tall tales of a white stranger. Black children were also less likely to question unsolicited offers of work, food, or shelter when they issued from the lips of people who looked and sounded like their uncles and aunts. In addition, if white bystanders happened to witness a black youth's forcible abduction by someone like Purnell, Carr, or James, these witnesses might

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and Wendy A. Woloson (Philadelphia, 2015), especially the essays by Will B. Mackintosh, Brendan P. O'Malley, Corey Goettsch, and Craig B. Hollander. On the first use of the term "confidence man," see Johannes Dietrich Bergmann, "The Original Confidence Man," *American Quarterly* 21 (Autumn 1969), 560–77.

22. Michael LeBlanc, "The Color of Confidence: Racial Con Games and the Logic of Gold," *Cultural Critique* 73 (2009), 1–46, quotation on 3; Brendan P. O'Malley, "Lickspittles and Land Sharks: The Immigrant Exploitation Business in Antebellum New York," in *Capitalism by Gaslight*, ed. Luskey and Woloson, 99.

assume that they were simply watching an obstreperous child receive necessary discipline from a parent or family relation.[23]

For these reasons, it is not hard to understand why white gang bosses like Joseph Johnson and Patty Cannon availed themselves of the services of black or mixed-race accomplices. Without men and women like Tilly James, Henry Carr, and John Purnell to serve as decoys to lure victims to isolated locations where they could be quickly confined and overpowered, the chances were substantially higher that an attempted abduction might draw excessive attention from bystanders or family members, or that white kidnappers might have to resort to physical violence to subdue their prey. When that happened things could quickly get out of hand, and those operatives sometimes had to cut their losses and run. On May 22, 1822, for instance, *Relf's Philadelphia Gazette* reported that one such white "scoundrel [had] attempted to carry off a small negro girl on Sunday evening. [But] before he had time to secure her, she alarmed him by her cries and he fled."[24]

Hiring black and mixed-race agents to execute these dangerous stings thus made good business sense. Recruitment must have been difficult, but money talked and John Purnell, Tilly James, and others like them likely did this work for the income it brought them, selling out street kids for enough cash to pay their bills and stifle their scruples. If caught, they usually pleaded poverty rather than outright greed as their excuse, though in private they were more candid. Believing he was speaking in confidence to a friend, John Purnell once bragged that he could earn "from fifty to an hundred dollars in a Week" hustling children like Scomp aboard schooners like the *Little John*, a massive payday compared to the money Purnell might hope to make as a sawyer or stevedore.[25]

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23. *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Eighth Convention of Delegates From the Abolition Societies Established in Different Parts of the United States . . .* (Philadelphia, 1803), 11. On questions of authenticity among northern free black populations, see Patrick Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2002), 120–24, 140–41.

24. "Look Out," *Relf's Philadelphia Gazette,* May 22, 1822.

25. Job Brown to Joseph Watson, July 5, 1826, Folder 12, Document 72, JWP; Humanitas, *Reflections Upon Slavery: With Recent Evidence of Its Inhumanity Occasioned by the Melancholy Death of Romain, a French Negro* (Philadelphia, 1803), 25; "Kidnapping," *Relf's Philadelphia Gazette,* Oct. 2, 1818. Other testimony suggested that Joseph Johnson paid front-line operatives like John Purnell

That such sums could overcome the pull of conscience and fellow feeling among a much put-upon minority population reminds us that black and mixed-race accomplices likely had few other compelling economic alternatives. Several factors—a shortage of jobs, cyclical unemployment, competition from European immigrants, shoddy educational opportunities, and rising "negrophobia" in many northern states—had created a context in which a hard-up shoemaker, a struggling oysterman, or an unemployed old woman might take on even the most despicable jobs. Indeed, although most free people of color did not, of course, resort to kidnapping to support themselves and their families, the economic issues they faced were acute and pressing. After all, most free black communities north of Virginia were composed largely of fugitive or manumitted ex-slaves, many of whom had arrived there with little more than the shirts on their backs. Huddled together in shantytown neighborhoods in cities like Philadelphia and New York, black and mixed-race people had to compete for low-paying, low-skill jobs as domestics, laundresses, waiters, or hod-carriers, and there was never enough work to go around.[26]

The more difficult it became to find honorable employment, the more that hard-up people of color had to hustle. In Philadelphia, for instance,

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$25 per child. Anne Farrow, Joel Lang, and Jenifer Frank, *Complicity: How the North Promoted, Prolonged, and Profited From Slavery* (New York, 2005), 149. On the banality of these kinds of evils, see Maurer, *Big Con*, 179; White, "Freedom's First Con," 402; Craig B. Hollander, "Underground on the High Seas: Commerce, Character, and Complicity in the Illegal Slave Trade," in *Capitalism by Gaslight,* ed. Luskey and Woloson, 132.

26. *The Present State and Condition of the Free People of Color, of the City of Philadelphia and Adjoining Districts, as Exhibited by the Report of a Committee of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery etc.* (Philadelphia, 1838), 9, 18–19. In 1830, 61 percent of Philadelphia's almost 15,000 free blacks lived concentrated in just four of its fifteen wards, with the poorest folks clustered in a ghetto of narrow courts, lofts, garrets, cellars, blind alleys, and rough taverns. Erica Armstrong Dunbar, *A Fragile Freedom: African American Women and Emancipation in the Antebellum City* (New Haven, CT, 2008), 4; Sam Bass Warner, Jr. *The Private City: Philadelphia in Three Periods of Its Growth* (Philadelphia, 1968), 126–27. For New York City, see Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery*, 72–133; Graham Russell Hodges, *Root and Branch: African Americans in New York & East Jersey, 1613–1863* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1999), 187–226; Shane White, *Somewhat More Independent: The End of Slavery in New York City, 1770–1810* (Athens, GA, 1991), 150–84.

the underground economy grew quickly in the 1810s and 1820s as black-owned basement grogshops and tippling houses multiplied. The city's alleys and backstreets hummed with the sale of illicit liquor, goods, and sex. As more and more men and women turned to petty crime as a survival strategy, the free black crime rate began to soar. Indeed, the waves of newspaper reports describing house-breakings, muggings, thefts, and other crimes of opportunity committed by Philadelphia's free black residents correlated closely with the cycles of bust and boom and bust in the economy as a whole, and notably with the extended depression that gripped the larger region between 1816 and 1823. "Vice walks erect in every street," the white Sabbath School teacher John Milton Gordon declared in June 1826 after a visit to one of Philadelphia's predominately African American precincts.[27]

No matter the extent of the underground economy, kidnapping a fellow human being with the intention of selling that person into slavery was, of course, a rare and extraordinarily vicious response to urban poverty. And it carried obvious risks for blacks as well as whites. Toughening earlier statuary deterrents, the Pennsylvania legislature passed "An Act to Prevent Kidnapping" in 1820, which instituted fines for those convicted of not less than $500 and imprisonment with hard labor for not less than seven years. Several traffickers of color were subsequently arrested under the terms of this law, including Henry Carr, though he beat the charges and fled out of state. Another was John Purnell, who received a sentence of forty-two years of hard labor in penitentiary confinement after Scomp and three of the other boys he had abducted in the summer of 1825 escaped and gave damning testimony against him. The risks that attended this line of work were thus clearly considerable. While kidnappers of color likely evaded legal justice more readily than did white front-line operatives who lacked the same demographic camouflage, they were by no means untouchable.[28]

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27. John Milton Gordon, Journal, June 14, 1826, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia. For examples of property crimes committed by people of color, see for instance "Robbers," *Relf's Philadelphia Gazette*, Aug. 1, 1805; [untitled], Dec. 3, 1806; "Street Robberies," Nov. 24, 1821; [untitled], Feb. 11, 1822; "Daring Outrage," Feb. 14, 1822; "A Most Daring Robbery," Feb. 18, 1822; [untitled], May 3, 1828.

28. *Acts of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Passed at a Session Which Was Begun and Held at the Borough of Harrisburg, on Tuesday, The Seventh Day of December, in the Year of Our Lord One Thousand Eight Hun-*

Recovering the existence and ingenuity of black and mixed-race traffickers in the early republic is, of course, fraught work. However, histories of race slavery in America wedded to a binary understanding of the color line have too often grossly oversimplified the complexities of the African and African American experience by obscuring the many wedges driven between people of African descent. "Historians, usually more interested in relations between black and white, have often found a unity of purpose among blacks that stretches the bounds of credulity," argued Shane White in 1991. Each time historians reflexively invoke the "slippery idea of a black 'community,'" White continued, our scholarship effectively "[masks] the extent to which blacks argued, fought, and struggled among themselves." To study the frequency with which black and mixed-raced collaborators engaged in abductions and renditions of other African-descend people is thus to engage in a revisionist corrective. Yet the risks and rewards that accrued to these kidnappers of color were neither as singular nor as specific as one might assume.[29]

Consider the transatlantic slave trade. For centuries, black and mixed-raced men and women performed central roles in this massive coerced migration from Africa to the Americas. By now, even many high-schoolers are well aware that African kings, nobles, and merchants were the major suppliers of slaves to Europeans, and that many of these elites were themselves slave owners of long standing. What is less commonly

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dred and Nineteen, and of the Independence of the United States of America, the Forty-Fourth. Harrisburg, 1820 (Harrisburg, PA, 1820), 104–106; Smith, "Rescuing African American Kidnapping Victims," *323*; "A Kidnapper," *Niles' Weekly Register* (Baltimore), June 23, 1827. Undated newspaper clipping, Folder 17, Document 274A, JWP. John Purnell died in the Walnut Street Prison on Mar. 26, 1833. In Baltimore, records from the Maryland State Prison show admissions for convicted kidnappers every year between 1816 and 1823—twenty-one people in all. William Crawford, *Report on the Penitentiaries of the United States* (Montclair, NJ, 1969), 99 (appendices). On kidnapping and criminal justice in Baltimore, see Ralph Clayton, *Cash for Blood: The Baltimore to New Orleans Domestic Slave Trade* (Bowie, MD, 2002), 40–41.

29. White, *Somewhat More Independent*, 182. By way of example, Eugene Genovese has argued that "in slavery, blacks protected each other much more readily than they undermined or betrayed each other." Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1976), 622.

understood, however, is that in many cases this was as much a survival strategy as it was a cold-blooded economic decision. As Paul E. Lovejoy and David Richardson have argued, in a continent increasingly consumed by the ravages of the transatlantic trade the single best way to avoid ever being enslaved was to be a stakeholder in that very traffic. The same held true for the raiders and guards who captured and transported prisoners from the African interior to the forts at the coast, the black canoemen who skillfully paddled supplies and slaves out to the ships, the money-men—known as gold-takers—who brokered the deals and provided the specie, and the peddlers who sold fresh provisions to the ships' crews. Like John Purnell, Tilly James, and other black and mixed-race operatives in kidnapping collaboratives in the early United States, all made choices that ensured they were essential personnel who could not be sacrificed as slaves.[30]

We can perceive the same resigned rationale in the decisions of many black and mixed-race men to work as crew members upon slave ships, both before and after Britain and the United States outlawed transatlantic trading in the early 1800s. As Erik J. Hofstee has explained, crew members of color (some of them free, the rest enslaved) likely comprised about one in ten of all mariners on slaving voyages and performed myriad roles including those of steward, cook, mate, ship's boy, or linguist. In return for steady income, plentiful rations, and the relatively equal treatment they received from white captains and fellow seamen, free black slavers took jobs that required their full participation in the brutal regimes of suppression that characterized the Middle Passage, and they were no less likely to discipline and do violence to their ship's enslaved cargo than any other crew member.[31]

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30. Paul E. Lovejoy and David Richardson, "Anglo–Efik Relations and Protection Against Illegal Enslavement at Old Calabar, 1740–1807," in *Fighting the Slave Trade: West African Strategies*, ed. Sylviane A. Diouf (Athens, OH, 2003), 101–20. On West Africans' participation in the transatlantic slave trade, see for instance Randy J. Sparks, *Where the Negroes Are Masters: An African Port in the Era of the Slave Trade* (Cambridge, MA, 2014); Mariana P. Candido, *An African Slaving Port and the Atlantic World: Benguela and Its Hinterland* (New York, 2013); Anne C. Bailey, *African Voices of the Atlantic Slave Trade: Beyond the Silence and the Shame* (Boston, 2005), 57–94.

31. Erik J. Hofstee, "The Great Divide: Aspects of the Social History of the Middle Passage in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade," PhD diss., Michigan State University, 2001, 131–33, 159–68. Herbert Klein has argued that the proportions

Further echoes of the activities of kidnappers of color are discernible on plantations across mainland America and the Caribbean. Much has been written about the existence of black masters and black overseers, of course. Less has so far been said about the several slaves who collaborated with their white owners to try to thwart armed uprisings and escapes in Antigua (1736), New York (1741), South Carolina (1739, 1822), Jamaica (1760), Virginia (1800), and the Lower Mississippi Valley (1791, 1795, 1805, 1811, and 1812). Of course, these informants did not collaborate casually. In an unpublished study of this phenomenon, Adam Rothman has demonstrated that enslaved people offered up information only if their own survival was in jeopardy or if their owners dangled the prospect of reward or manumission in front of them. For instance, after defeating German Coast slave rebels in 1811, the owners of one of four black informers petitioned the Louisiana legislature to allow them to free a mixed-race man named Bazile. They did so, they wrote, "in consideration of his . . . courageous resistance . . . [to] those brigands" who had plotted to kill every white slave owner in New Orleans.[32]

The argument here is that the self-serving behavior of kidnappers of color in the early United States can be profitably understood as a manifestation of a much longer and larger campaign by white slave owners and traders to create divisions between and suspicions among people of color. Those efforts were both pernicious and pervasive. Whether or not a rebellion was in the offing, there were black men and women on almost

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of black or mixed-race crew members, both slave and free, was much higher on slaving voyages to Brazil between 1795 and 1811. Herbert S. Klein, *The Middle Passage: Comparative Studies in the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Princeton, NJ, 1978), 58–59.

32. These collaboration episodes are documented in Adam Rothman, "'Servile Deceit' and the Limits of Slave Resistance in the United States," unpublished paper, Southern Historical Association Annual Meeting, Nov. 2004, 10. I am grateful to Rothman for sharing this essay with me. For a thoughtful study of this phenomenon as it unfolded during the 1736 Antigua Slave Plot, see Jason T. Sharples, "Hearing Whispers, Casting Shadows: Jailhouse Conversation and the Production of Knowledge during the Antigua Slave Conspiracy Investigation of 1736," in *Buried Lives: Incarcerated in Early America,* ed. Michele Lise Tarter and Richard Bell (Athens, GA, 2012), 35–59. On black slave owners, see for instance Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), 29–46.

every southern plantation (and apparently in almost every northern urban community) who could be persuaded to cooperate if the price was right. Rothman has compiled testimony on that point from all manner of former slaves, among them William Wells Brown, Charles Ball, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Jacobs. In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), the latter described an enslaved woman named Jenny as "one of those base characters that would have jumped to betray a suffering fellow being for the sake of thirty pieces of silver."[33]

Slave catchers knew the power of such bribes better than anyone and frequently offered rewards to people of color in return for tips that could help them recapture runaway slaves. In his history of the Underground Railroad in post-revolutionary Chester County, Pennsylvania, Robert Smedley described the fate of Henry Harris, a fugitive from southern slavery who made the mistake of confiding his identity to a "a colored man who professed to tell fortunes." For ten dollars, the man promised to put a spell on Harris's former owner if Harris "would tell his master's name, his own name when in slavery, and where he came from." Harris eagerly complied, but it later became clear that the fortune-teller had used this information to contact Harris's out-of-state owner to try to sell him out. Within days, Harris had been apprehended and sold on to a new master in Mississippi. For "not *thirty,* but *ten* pieces of silver," Smedley lamented, Harris "had been betrayed by this colored Judas."[34]

In the decades before the terms of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 rendered such rewards redundant, cash bounties inspired all too many free black men and women to collaborate with slave catchers. Lydia Maria Child once described the case of Thomas Cooper, a fugitive from a Maryland master who took refuge in Philadelphia in 1800. In the years afterward, Cooper built a new life in his adopted home, marrying "a worthy, industrious woman with whom he lived happily." Figuring that his former owner was no longer pursuing him, Cooper eventually "confided his story to a colored man, who, for the sake of reward, informed his master where he was to be found." Cooper's erstwhile owner rushed to Philadelphia to recapture him. John Russwurm told a similar story.

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33. Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Written by Herself*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin (Cambridge, MA, 1987), 154; Rothman, "Limits of Slave Resistance," 5.

34. R. C. Smedley, *History of the Underground Railroad in Chester and the Neighboring Counties of Pennsylvania* (Lancaster, PA, 1883), 96.

Writing in 1828, Russwurm reported to readers of *Freedom's Journal* that a refugee from slavery who had only recently taken asylum in New York City had since been "carried back into bondage" when a "a certain coloured man (we believe still in this city,) did betray him by writing to his Master."[35]

In both such cases, black opportunists reached out to white strangers to alert them to the whereabouts of their lost property. But in several other instances, people of color established enduring, multi-year partnerships with professional slave catchers. In 1802, for example, Joseph Ennels arrived in Philadelphia from Maryland in pursuit of several runaways whose legal titles he had recently purchased for pennies on the dollar (a practice known as "buying them running"). According to Isaac Hopper's account of Ennels' activities, he brought with him "a free mulatto man, who called himself David, alias Sam, to assist." The pair soon collared William Bachelor, a sixty-year-old free-born black resident, and dragged him before a city magistrate in hopes of having him certified as a wanted runaway. David's role at the hearing was to tell the necessary lies to secure the alderman's signature on the papers Ennels needed to remove Bachelor out of state. Using his alias, David swore under oath "that he knew the man they had arrested . . . perfectly well; that he (Sam) had at one time been overseer of a company of slaves, and that the man then before the magistrate was one of them." David "told his tale with much confidence." So much so that the magistrate promptly granted Ennels the certificate, all the while ignoring Bachelor's "pathetic declarations that he was a free man."[36]

David, alias Sam, was one among a generation of professional black decoys who worked with white slavers of one species or another. While

35. Lydia Maria (Francis) Child, *Isaac T. Hopper: A True Life* (Boston, 1853), 56; "Self Interest," *Freedom's Journal*, Nov. 7, 1828. For another instance of a slave catcher bribing a free person of color, see "From the Delaware Watchman. Extract of a Letter from Philadelphia Dated June 6," *New York Spectator*, June 20, 1823. I am grateful to Shane White for directing my attention to this source.

36. Daniel E. Meaders, comp., *Kidnappers in Philadelphia: Isaac Hopper's Tales of Oppression, 1780–1843* (New York, 1994), 121–25. When Isaac Hopper learned of this deceit, he attempted to prosecute David, alias Sam, for perjury, "but he took care to keep out of the way, and left the city, and I never heard of his being there afterwards." Meaders, *Isaac Hopper's Tales of Oppression,* 122.

most, like John Purnell and Henry Carr, were legally free persons who targeted other non-slaves, a handful of enslaved people acted as professional kidnappers and slave stealers in these years. The best documented of them is Madison Henderson, an enslaved man who was hanged in St. Louis in 1841 for burglary, arson, and murder. (See Figure 1.) Buried in the pages of his lengthy confession to those crimes is an account of the four years Henderson spent during the mid-1820s stealing slaves for his master, a black-market dealer who traveled to plantations across the Upper South posing as a legitimate slave trader. "It was my duty," Henderson explained, "to coax off, and harbor negroes: in other words, to aid in stealing them." To do so, Henderson had to convince the enslaved men and women he met that he and his master had actually come to rescue them:

> [I] generally accomplished [this] by representing my master as from a free state, generally from Philadelphia, and that his purpose in getting them to run off was to set them free; that he would take them to Canada, or some other place out of the reach of their masters. To the men I represented that they would become rich and own plenty of property—to the women and girls, I held out the prospect of marrying rich white men, and of living in style and splendor. In these offices, I believe I became quite an adept, and, with the aid of my master, seldom failed in our purposes.

Despite his own slave status, Henderson was a willing accomplice in the mold of Cyrus James. In fact, Henderson later bragged to his confessor about the "good deal of courage and skill" that his work required and took care to describe the several perks of his job. His master, Henderson recalled, always supplied him "with money enough to pay for my gratifications" and also encouraged him to take "all the liberties I desired with the girls . . . except my master's favorites."[37]

37. Madison Henderson, *Trials and Confessions of Madison Henderson, Alias Blanchard, Alfred Amos Warrick, James W. Seward, and Charles Brown, Murderers of Jesse Baker and Jacob Weaver, as Given by Themselves; and a Likeness of Each, Taken in Jail Shortly after Their Arrest* (St. Louis, MO, 1841), 14, 16. See also Timothy F. Reilly, "Slave Stealing in the Early Domestic Trade as Revealed by a Loyal Manservant," *Louisiana History* 55, no. 1 (2014), 5–39. On one occasion, Henderson and his master agreed that the work was dangerous and that "if they caught us we would have to go to the penitentiary for life or be hung, and

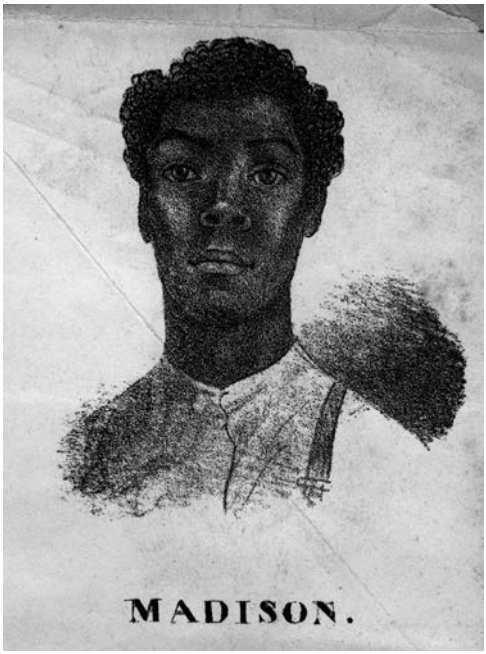

Figure 1: A charcoal sketch made while Madison Henderson awaited his execution for burglary, arson, and murder, shows the former slave stealer at age thirty-two. *Trial and Confessions of Madison Henderson, alias Blanchard, Alfred Amos Warrick, James W. Seward, and Charles Brown, Murderers of Jesse Baker and Jacob Weaver, as Given by Themselves; and a Likeness of Each, Taken in Jail Shortly after Their Arrest.* St. Louis, MO: Chambers & Knapp, 1841. Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society.

For almost four years, this pair pillaged plantations in Maryland and Virginia, delivering the enslaved people they deceived to fortified slave pens in Fredericksburg or Richmond before finally shipping them south to New Orleans for sale. Evidently, then, black collaborators were a common presence in all manner of scenarios involving abduction and rendition in American slavery. The differences between slave-stealing, slave-catching, and the kidnapping of free blacks were certainly legally significant and did much to determine the reaction of white contemporaries. But to the perpetrators such distinctions were largely immaterial.

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that no amount of money would save us." But both men found it hard to move on. Henderson, *Confessions*, 17–18.

Recalling the presence of "colored informants" in Chester County, Pennsylvania, where her grandparents lived in the 1850s, Pauli Murray noted that these parasites "cared little whether their victim was a fugitive, a freedman, or a free-born person. They got their share of a reward or cuts of the profits in either case."[38]

Fugitives, freedmen, and free-born black people seeking to defend themselves against human traffickers had limited options. They, of course, brought numerous kidnapping cases to the attention of local anti-slavery societies and pleaded with them for legal and financial assistance. The New York Manumission Society (NYMS) and the Pennsylvania Abolition Society (PAS) responded as best they could. In Philadelphia, for instance, the PAS began to systematically compare the names of all the men, women, and children apprehended as fugitives within city limits against published manumission records and launched legal proceedings to try to extricate those they found to have been wrongfully detained. In addition, in 1816, PAS officers set up a separate Committee on Kidnapping to handle the growing caseload, and in 1821 they began recording the names of missing persons like Sam Scomp on a master list.[39]

Free people of color also urged these otherwise quite moderate, lawyerly organizations to sponsor longer-term policy solutions that could assert a moral boundary between free North and slave South. While the NYMS did not respond adequately to this pressure, the lobbying efforts of black Philadelphians and their PAS allies were sufficient to pressure

38. Pauli Murray, *Proud Shoes: The Story of An American Family* (New York, 1956), 97.

39. Wilson, *Freedom at Risk*, 87–95; Horton, "Kidnapping and Resistance," 152–53; Edward Raymond Turner, *The Negro in Pennsylvania: Slavery–Servitude–Freedom, 1639–1861* (New York, 1969), 211–12; Minute Book, 1800–1824, Reel 1, June 27, 1816, Apr. 30, 1821, PAS. Established to provide aid to former Caribbean slaves who faced deportation and re-enslavement, the PAS only began to handle domestic kidnapping cases in the mid-1790s. Edward Needles, *An Historical Memoir of the Pennsylvania Society, for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery; The Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage, and for Improving the Conditions of the African Race* (Philadelphia, 1848), 24; Richard S. Newman, "The Pennsylvania Abolition Society and the Struggle of Racial Justice," in *Anti-slavery and Abolition in Philadelphia: Emancipation and the Long Struggle for Racial Justice in the City of Brotherly Love*, ed. Richard Newman and James Mueller (Baton Rouge, LA, 2011), 130.

Pennsylvania legislators "to increase the penalties and forfeitures, for the crime of man-stealing" in 1820, and to do so again in 1826.[40]

Happy endings to kidnapping cases, however, remained few and far between. The legal complexities of pursuing predators like John Purnell across state lines ensured that successful rescues remained a rarity. PAS officers soon discovered that they required almost bottomless funds to support their investigators and to pay sheriffs' fees, registration charges, postage, and travel expenses. With their resources stretched thin, PAS officers found themselves forced to close the book on dozens of unsolved kidnappings, sometimes noting ruefully that "justice cannot be done." The parents, spouses, friends, and neighbors of these vanished persons found no such closure. Their sorrow was sharp and piercing, and it never went away. "PARENTS! FATHERS! MOTHERS! You know how to feel for those who have children," Stephen Dredden, the father of two kidnapped black youngsters wailed in the pages of *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser* in 1817. "Although I am black, I have a heart like you, and they have pierced it thro' with sorrow—they have stolen my children!"[41]

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40. Pennsylvania General Assembly, *Journal of the Senate of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Which Commenced at Lancaster, the Third Day of December, in the Year of Our Lord, One Thousand Eight Hundred and Eleven, and of the Independence of the United States of America the Thirty-Sixth* (Lancaster, PA, 1812), 109, 186, 214–15; Newman, "Struggle for Racial Justice," 122, 131; Matthew Mason, *Slavery and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2006), 140–41; Andrew K. Diemer, *The Politics of Black Citizenship: Free African Americans in the Mid-Atlantic Borderland, 1817–1863* (Athens, GA, 2016), 1–4, 51–57. On the hidden transcripts associated with black lobbying efforts, see Samantha Seeley, "The Politics of Protection in the Early Republic," unpublished paper, Human Trafficking in Early America Conference, Apr. 24, 2015, 9–10. At the behest of the PAS, the American Convention of Abolition Societies articulated a concomitant commitment to anti-kidnapping work in the early 1820s. American Convention for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, *Minutes of the Seventeenth Session of the American Convention for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, and Improving the Condition of the African Race, Convened at Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1821), 29.

41. Unknown to Daniel Mifflin, Dec. 16, 1810, unknown reel no., PAS; "Kidnapping!!" *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia), July 24, 1817; Minute Book, 1800–1824, Reel 1, Mar. 29, 1821, PAS; Richard S. Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic*

For these reasons, members of embattled African American communities across the mid-Atlantic learned that the best and most immediate way to try to thwart kidnappers, both white and black, was to take matters into their own hands. In the four decades before 1850, they did so with unceasing energy and impressive ingenuity—and with far greater frequency and ferocity than has previously been acknowledged—developing neighborhood-based strategies that combined education with both vigilance and violence. Families formed the first line of defense. Husbands and wives nagged each other endlessly to carry their freedom papers at all times and beseeched their children to stay in large groups when out on their own, to read body language, to steer clear of certain streets, to be wary of promises too good to be true, and to trust no one except family.[42]

Out in the world, African American neighbors looked out for the safety of one another's children as best they could, forming de facto neighborhood-watch networks that shared information and intelligence quickly and efficiently. The bravest among them also made a habit of challenging strangers they saw in the streets who possessed "the gallows look" of kidnappers, while others hurried playing children inside whenever they sensed danger. If an unfamiliar person tried to wrestle them to the ground or shove a gag in their mouths and cart them away, people of color instinctively fought back, biting, kicking, shouting, and yelling to try to stop them. When one young woman's would-be captor leaned in to blindfold her in Baltimore in 1817 she "seized his cheek with her

(Chapel Hill, NC, 2002), 69; Wilson, *Freedom at Risk*, 94, 102. It cost $18.67 to cover the various costs associated with returning Peter Reuben Frances Johnson to freedom after his 1811 kidnapping. Likewise, in March 1825, the PAS reimbursed an ally in Lancaster, PA, $19.75 for expenses he had incurred traveling the 130 miles to Maryland to obtain "the release of Sarah Hope, a free woman of Colour who had been kidnapped and was in Gaol in Maryland." Minute Book, 1800–1824, Reel no. 1, Aug. 8, 1811, PAS; Minute Book, 1825–1847, Reel no. 2, Mar. 31, 1825, PAS.

42. Carol Wilson, "Active Vigilance Is the Price of Liberty: Black Self-Defense against Fugitive Slave Recapture and Kidnapping of Free Blacks," in *Antislavery Violence: Sectional, Racial, and Cultural Conflict in Antebellum America*, ed. John R. McKivigan and Stanley Harrold (Knoxville, TN, 1999), 108–27. These conversations between black parents and their children are analogous to "the talk," the chat that modern parents of color have with their sons about dealing with the police. I am grateful to Emily Clark for suggesting this comparison.

teeth, and tore a piece of it entirely off," causing the man to scream and curse, though he did not let her go.[43]

Free black people meted out the most determined and decisive responses when confronted by kidnappers of color. In 1819, *Relf's Philadelphia Gazette* reported that it was only with "great difficulty and peril" that city constables had been able to extricate "a black man charged with having decoyed another man of colour" from a crowd of "assembled blacks" consumed with "violent indignation." This intervention was exceptional. More often than not, the local constabulary arrived too late to prevent persons of color from exacting their own measures of justice against kidnappers of African descent. In June 1825, for example, just two months before Sam Scomp vanished, black residents of York, Pennsylvania, got word that living amongst them were two "traitorous brethren" suspected of entrapping fugitive former slaves. Unable to locate one of the men, a crew of "between 20 and 25" black townspeople surrounded the other man's house and then battered it with stones and missiles until they burst its windows and broke the door. "Finding that his house would not answer as a castle," the black kidnapper inside was forced to surrender, at which point this band of outraged parents and neighbors "stripped and tied him, and gave him one of the most severe lashings ever laid on the back of [a] man."[44]

Many more accounts of African American vigilantism against kidnappers of color appeared in newspapers and ex-slave narratives published before 1850. One of the most dramatic such episodes occurred in Buffalo, New York, in 1836 following the arrival there of Bacon Tate, an infamous slave catcher. Tate was in search of more than twenty fugitives from Nashville-area plantations. He quickly succeeded in locating and

43. "Kidnapping," *Baltimore Patriot*, July 25, 1817; "Kidnappers," *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia), June 9, 1818; Torrey, *Portraiture of Slavery,* 48. For other examples of black communities in the Mid-Atlantic fighting back against kidnappers with a dose of vigilante justice, see Meaders, *Isaac Hopper's Tales of Oppression,* 21, 310; Smedley, *Underground Railroad in Chester*, 29; "Summary Justice," *Niles' Weekly Register* (Baltimore), Jan. 9, 1819.

44. "A Serious Affray," *Relf's Philadelphia Gazette*, Sept. 23, 1819; "York, June 21. A Riot," June 24, 1825. In the 1820s York was home to the second largest free black community in Pennsylvania.

apprehending one family of runaways, the Stanfords, after following up on tips provided to him by a maidservant at the hotel at which he was staying, "a profligate colored woman . . . as unprincipled as himself." Tate's midnight seizure of the Stanford family triggered a blistering response from the city's free black and ex-slave population, who chased Tate's men and lay siege to their hideout. After liberating the Stanfords, this posse then turned its wrath upon "the woman who had betrayed them." According to one participant, William Wells Brown, "it was as much as some of us could do to keep the others from lynching her on the spot." Every black voice but one now hurled down curses on the woman. Brown recalled that:

> nothing attracted my attention at the time more than the look of Mrs. Stanford at the betrayer, as she sat before her. She did not say a word to her, but her countenance told the feelings of her inmost soul, and we could but think, that had she spoken to her, she would have said, 'May the world deny thee a shelter! earth a home! the dust a grave! the sun his light! and Heaven her God!'

As the city of Buffalo descended into a full-blown race riot, black leaders tried to decide what to do with the female informant now in their custody. "Some were in favor of hanging her, others for burning her, but a majority were for taking her to the Niagara River, tying a fifty-six pound weight to her, and throwing her in." Only after three full days of argument and deliberation did Brown convince his companions to release her instead.[45]

Acts of vigilantism by free people of color against transgressing members of their own racial community occurred repeatedly in the years before 1850 and seemed to grow ever more organized and ambitious over time as African Americans' faith in the criminal justice system grew ever more tenuous. In the 1840s William Parker, an ex-slave living in Chester County, Pennsylvania, took part in multiple extralegal actions against black kidnappers and informers. On one occasion, Parker personally identified a black neighbor named Allen Williams as the person who had given up the whereabouts of a pair of fugitive slaves to a white

45. William Wells Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown, An American Slave. Written by Himself* (London, 1850), 110–23. I am grateful to Adam Rothman for directing me to this source.

trafficker. Parker then gathered a hunting party of neighbors at his house who together "resolved that [Williams] should die." Knocking at his door to ask for a glass of water, Parker caught Williams off-guard and grabbed him "by the throat, to prevent his giving the alarm." The other men present then fell upon their prey, beating him savagely "until we thought we heard some one coming, which caused us to flee. If we had not been interrupted, death would have been his fate."[46]

William Parker displayed the same murderous sense of justice a few months later when he discovered the identity of "a colored man who was in the habit of decoying fugitives fresh from bondage" and then summoning their masters to recapture them. One night, Parker and five other ex-slaves went to the man's barn, "took two bundles of wheat-straw, and fastening them under the eaves with wisps, applied a lighted match to each." The barn was ablaze within seconds and the fire soon spread to their target's house. Parker and his accomplices then took up position outside the back door "with rifles ready" and only missed their chance to shoot the man in cold blood when he burst out of another door on the opposite side of the building and ran toward a neighbor's home "as if the spirit of his evil deeds was after him."[47]

The purpose of African American vigilantism against kidnappers and informants of color was threefold: It was punitive, preventative, and performative. It was punitive because it allowed free black civilians to ensure that those they held culpable faced quick, decisive, and usually violent reprisals for committing atrocities to which legal authorities might otherwise fail to properly respond. It was preventative in the sense that Parker and other avengers of color likely intended these very public acts of community justice to deter similar offenses. And it was performative because each new act of collective retribution allowed black and mixed-race participants to publicly demonstrate their own continuing loyalty to their family, friends, and neighbors. In this latter sense, vigilante actions against kidnappers and informants of color were important rituals of identity proclamation, visible signs that members of these preyed-upon communities would not abide such betrayals and that they regarded racial solidarity as a core principle of black life in freedom.

46. William Parker, "The Freedman's Story," *Atlantic Monthly* 17 (Feb. 1866), 165; Lucy Maddox, *The Parker Sisters: A Border Kidnapping* (Philadelphia, 2016), 69.

47. Parker, "The Freedman's Story," 166.

Hence William Wells Brown's reference to "lynching . . . on the spot" the black serving woman who had sold out the Stanford family. In the decades before the Civil War, most Americans regarded lynching as an informal method of collective social control, a spectacular means by which a group could punish one of its own members for transgression. This was clearly William Parker's understanding. As he later explained to readers of *The Atlantic Monthly*, he regarded Allen Williams's decision to turn over fugitives to slave catchers as a violation of community trust that had required a decisive collective response:

> Lynch law is a code familiar to the colored people of the Slave States. It is of so diabolical a character as to be without justification, except when enforced by men of pure motives, and then only in extreme cases, as when the unpunished party has it in his power to barter away the lives and liberties of those whose confidence he possesses. . . . Ourselves, our wives, our little ones, were insecure, and all we had was liable to seizure. We felt that something must be done, for some one must be in our midst with whom the slaveholders had communication.

Seeking to publicly justify his decision to form a posse to attack Williams, Parker here characterized the extremity of his neighbor's affront in language that juxtaposed the sanctity of the free black family with the rapaciousness of the slave market.[48]

Many other free black commentators expressed their own outrage more concisely, using a remarkably consistent set of words and images to describe kidnappers and informants of color. Rendering these villains as "traitorous brethren" and labeling individuals as "our betrayer" and "this colored Judas," African American authors interpreted collaborations with white slavers as particularly pernicious desecrations of a social compact that equated the black race with the black family. John Russwurm, editor of New York's *Freedom's Journal*, rattled with rage as he struggled to find the words to characterize men and women he regarded as "traitors to liberty—to their kindred." So too did David Walker, author of the famous 1829 *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*, who denounced kidnappers of color not only as "treacherous creatures" but also as snakes who profit from "the blood and tears of

48. Brown, *Narrative*, 116; Parker, "The Freedman's Story," 165.

their more miserable brethren, whom they scandalously [deliver] into the hands of our *natural enemies*!!!!!!"[49]

Whether in deed or in word, free people of color like William Parker, William Wells Brown, John Russwurm, and David Walker found solidarity and a small degree of solace in their united opposition to kidnappers and informants of African descent. By condemning and acting against these "race traitors," they asserted a binding relationship between African American identity and the cause of antislavery in the early republic. In their emerging reckoning, to be black or mixed-race was to be unalterably opposed to kidnapping and enslavement, and anyone who failed to live by this ever-more-potent code of honor could expect to face violent, possibly fatal comeuppance. Thus, while it is undeniably the case that the daily predations of kidnappers of color destabilized and demoralized free black communities across New York, Pennsylvania, and the rest of the mid-Atlantic, their ravages also served a positive purpose within this gathered diaspora. Responding to the critically important questions of loyalty, authenticity, and kinship raised by the divisive mendacity of Allen Williams, John Purnell, and others like them provided a point of focus for community solidarity, organization, and political action, as well as for leadership development—as exemplified in the subsequent careers not only of William Parker and William Wells Brown but also of New York's David Ruggles.[50]

The passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 drastically reduced the practical obstacles standing in the way of white human traffickers, thus eroding the business case for hiring African-descended accomplices

49. "York, June 21. A Riot," *Relf's Philadelphia Gazette*, June 24, 1825; Brown, *Narrative*, 116; Smedley, *Underground Railroad in Chester*, 29; "Self Interest," *Freedom's Journal*, Nov. 7, 1828; Walker, *Appeal*, 24–25. For similar language used by other black authors, see Murray, *Proud Shoes*, 97; Charles Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains, or, The Life of an American Slave* (New York, 1858), 380. For echoes of this outrage among the black community's white allies, see "Kidnapping," *Relf's Philadelphia Gazette,* Oct. 2, 1818; "Colored Kidnappers," *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, June 9, 1827.

50. Rael, *Black Identity*, 14. One example of Ruggles' radicalization was his 1836 attempt to liberate two black captives from a Portuguese slave trafficker's ship at berth in New York Harbor. Hodges, *David Ruggles*, 87–98.

thereafter. In the forty years prior to 1850, however, black and mixed-raced collaborators engaged in kidnapping work on a significant scale and their predations on the populations they targeted had important repercussions for the antislavery movement. Free black residents of northern towns and cities reacted with early and unrestrained energy to stop kidnappers of color in their tracks, using mob violence and lynch law readily and repeatedly to try to defend personal liberty. Such direct, physical, and violent confrontations with agents of the Slave Power were still quite uncommon in these decades and surely mark an early point of origin for later "practical abolition" efforts. Indeed, while historians have tended to focus on the eighty or so well-publicized rescues and rescue attempts made by free black militants in the wake of the Fugitive Slave Law, the evidence presented here suggests that a broadly comparable number occurred in the four decades prior to 1850, most in response to kidnappers as opposed to slave catchers, and many in response to kidnappers of color in particular.[51]

51. Hodges, *David Ruggles*, 6. For a rare instance of a black accomplice active after 1850, see Stanley W. Campbell, *The Slave Catchers: Enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, 1850–1860* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1968), 134.