

Ringling Liberty's Bell: African American Women, Gender, and the Underground Railroad in Philadelphia

Author(s): Ashley Council

Source: *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies*, Vol. 87, No. 3, SPECIAL ISSUE: WOMEN'S AND GENDER HISTORY IN PENNSYLVANIA, PART 1 (Summer 2020), pp. 494-531

Published by: Penn State University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/pennhistory.87.3.0494>

REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/pennhistory.87.3.0494?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Penn State University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies*

JSTOR

RINGING LIBERTY'S BELL

AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN, GENDER, AND THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD IN PHILADELPHIA

Ashley Council
Rutgers University

ABSTRACT: Freedom was the objective for thousands of bondswomen who “bought a ticket” on the Underground Railroad, and for many, the journey culminated in the City of Brotherly Love. An abolitionist center, Philadelphia was a vital terminus on the clandestine network, with nearly 9,000 escapees arriving before 1860, including numerous black women. How did gender inform their flight to and experiences in the city? What were their experiences once they arrived and settled? What contributions did they make to Philadelphia’s Underground enterprise? This article examines fugitive women who seized liberty in Philadelphia and the local women who aided freedom seekers in the era before the Civil War. It uncovers how gender influenced African American women’s experiences and perspectives as dynamic participants in resisting and fleeing enslavement, in one of the most important cities in the fight for abolition.

KEYWORDS: African American women, Underground Railroad, Philadelphia, nineteenth-century history, slavery, freedom

On a crisp day in early March of 1849, enslaver Edward Brodess died at the age of forty-seven on his small farm in Dorchester County, Maryland, instantly igniting fear and turmoil in his slave quarters.¹ Whispers and rumors of relentless creditors and the likelihood of a sale spread like a dark cloud over his bondpeople and the enslaved community in Bucktown, a little village on the Eastern Shore. Soon word would reach the ears of a young woman called “Minty,” better remembered as Harriet Tubman, arguably

doi: 10.5325/pennhistory.87.3.0494

PENNSYLVANIA HISTORY: A JOURNAL OF MID-ATLANTIC STUDIES, VOL. 87, NO. 3, 2020.
Copyright © 2020 The Pennsylvania Historical Association

the most famous and successful conductors on the Underground Railroad. She was devastated, but unsurprised. Enslaved by Brodess, she and her family had long bore the brunt of his ever-increasing debt and callous manner. They endured overwork, imprisonment, and the painful fracturing of their family with the sale of Harriet's three sisters—Linah, Soph, and Mariah Ritty—and Brodess's healthy investment in hiring-out practices. A deeply spiritual woman, Tubman had long prayed that God would change her owner's heart. However, before he expired, Brodess had already begun showing her off to perspective buyers and she started to pray for the Lord to "kill him."² Though guilt-ridden over God's apparent answer to her supplications, Tubman was determined not to be sold away from her loved ones and made to go with a chain-gang down south to the rice and cotton fields. She decided then to flee for her life and immediately began making plans to secure the freedom she had long desired.

Against the wishes of her free husband, John Tubman, and her brothers who feared recapture, Harriet made her escape alone on a cool night in October of the same year. Though her brothers had dragged her back to the farm against her will on a previous attempt they had made together, she knew they were right to be afraid. The old thick, jagged scar on the left side of her head tingling, Tubman was well acquainted with the grave consequences she would undoubtedly face if she were to be caught.³ Yet, resolved that no man would ever take her back to bondage alive, she would have nothing less than liberty or death. Summoning all her strength and craft—including the secret knowledge and connections she made working alongside her father on a Maryland timber gang—she walked out of her cabin with no knowledge of the North, having only heard talk of Philadelphia and its promises of freedom. Traveling largely at night with a keen eye fixed on the North Star and directions from black and white Underground Railroad agents Tubman stopped at each new house she was guided to and finally crossed the Pennsylvania border into freedom. "When I found I had crossed that line," she later recalled, "I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person. There was such a glory over everything; the sun came like gold through the trees, and over the fields, and I felt like I was in Heaven." From there, she would make her way to the "Cradle of Liberty."⁴

While reproductive obligations, maternal ties, and often-close proximity to owners made flight a seemingly impossible choice, many enslaved women—like the remarkable Harriet Tubman—decided to flee from bondage, "buying a ticket" on the Underground Railroad.⁵ For hundreds,

probably thousands, of black women this difficult and dangerous journey culminated at the City of Brotherly Love. They took advantage of the secret intercity, interregional patchwork network of houses, churches, farms, and other locales knitted together by both black and white operatives. This network provided shelter, safety, and transport to runaways seizing freedom. With “Virtue, Liberty, and Independence” as the city’s motto, Philadelphia had long been known as a “meeting ground in the nation’s incessant quest for racial equality, freedom, and liberation,” and home to some of the most significant occurrences in early American history, including the signing of Declaration of Independence in 1776, the ratification of the US Constitution in 1787, and the nation’s first capital in 1790. A bustling city with a great rail center and a port busy with ships from 1830 to 1860, Philadelphia would prove to be a “natural junction” in the covert enterprise aimed at aiding those fleeing from bondage. As the Underground Railroad gained more allies among the free black and white communities, growing numbers of runaways headed toward the city to either to stay or continue their flight further north. A hub of abolitionist activity and home to a the largest free black community in the new United States, Philadelphia would become one of the “great central stations” on the Underground Railroad with thousands of fugitive slaves entering the city over land, rail, and sea routes before 1860.⁶

The majority of freedom seekers who would ride the “freedom train” to Philadelphia could not have been successful without the efforts and support of free and enslaved African American communities and whites in the North and South. Black women existed not only as “cars” on the Underground, but also as facilitators and contributors, providing invaluable aid to fugitives in route to freedom. While Harriet Tubman, for example, finally found liberty in Philadelphia, she discovered it was bittersweet with her loved ones and some many others still locked in bondage. She swore then to journey back home and bring away her family and close friends. Working hard to raise money and accessing an already well-organized Underground Railroad network in Philadelphia and beyond, she was extraordinarily successful. From 1850 to 1860 Harriet made thirteen trips back to Maryland, piloting fifty to sixty enslaved people to freedom and offering thorough instructions to an additional sixty to seventy runaways who would find freedom on their own. Many of her efforts originated in the “City of Brotherly Love.”⁷

With lives marked by courage, savvy, faith, survival, hope, triumph, desperation, disappointment, and loss, surveying black women and their involvement in the Philadelphia’s Underground Railroad network uncovers

their significant participation in a mode of resistance typically associated with men. It also reveals the important role of gender in the shaping of their experiences and perspectives.⁸ Drawing on the numerous female escapes recorded by noted Philadelphia “station master” William Still, as well as newspapers, manuscripts, government documents, and organizational papers, this article examines the gendered experiences of fugitive women who would find refuge in Philadelphia. Also, it will elucidate the role of local women like Harriet Tubman who served as operators and contributors on the clandestine network, aiding in the ferrying of runaway slaves to freedom over the decades prior to the Civil War.⁹ By chronicling their resistance and resilience in Philadelphia, this study uncovers how gender deeply influenced African American women’s experiences and perspectives as vital participants in resisting and fleeing enslavement, in one of the most important cities in the fight for abolition.

LAYING TRACKS: THE ORIGINS AND OPERATION OF THE PHILADELPHIA UNDERGROUND NETWORK

Though the term “Underground Railroad” would not emerge until the late 1830s–40s, Philadelphia’s network began developing in the late 1700s to early 1800s, rooted in the city’s robust antislavery enterprise. Philadelphia was a critical site in the transatlantic effort against the slave trade and slavery. A mark of the city’s commitment to antislavery that existed among the ethnically and religiously mixed population,” Philadelphians were the first in the nation to protest enslavement (1688) and establish a dedicated antislavery organization, the Pennsylvania Abolition Society (PAS) (1775). In 1780 Pennsylvania was the first state to pass a gradual abolition law, the culmination of almost a century of protest by not only runaway slaves and free African Americans but also Quakers, German Mennonites, and working-class whites who opposed unfair labor competition.¹⁰

Enslaved Philadelphians had been escaping captivity and finding refuge elsewhere in the city since the founding of the colony. In a 1786 letter written to Robert Morris, George Washington detailed the escape of a bondsman owned by a fellow enslaver and declared Philadelphia an unwise destination for southern slaveholders traveling with their human property. One of his own slaves, Ona Judge, would flee when he and Martha Washington lived in Philadelphia during his presidency.¹¹ Attracting scores of newly freed African

Americans at the end of the eighteenth century, Philadelphia would become one of the largest and most important centers of free black life and the abolitionist effort in the young nation.¹²

As sectional tensions intensified in the years leading up to the Civil War, national and Philadelphia abolitionists further increased their efforts. Largely led by black residents, numerous antislavery organizations and groups formed in the city. Philadelphia was host to countless publications, meetings, speeches, and demonstrations initiated by black, white, local, national, and international actors aimed at promoting immediate, uncompensated, universal abolition with no concessions to slaveholders along with a complete rejection the idea of colonization in Africa as a solution for Philadelphia's and the nation's intensifying racial turmoil. In 1830 wealthy businessman and leading black abolitionist James Forten helped to organize the Convention of Free Negroes in Philadelphia and, in 1833, chaired a large meeting of black Philadelphians where they adopted resolutions rejecting colonization and calling for universal abolition and access to education. He also served as a founder of the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS). In 1831 a group of black women—including well-known educator, abolitionist, writer, and public lecturer Sarah Mapps Douglass—formed the Female Literacy Association and published numerous articles discussing issues surrounding abolition and black rights in radical abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison's popular antislavery newspaper, *The Liberator*.¹³

On December 9, 1833, after being denied membership in the AASS, twenty-nine African American and mostly Quaker abolitionist women—including Mary Grew, Lucretia Mott, and Angelina Grimké—allied to form the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Philadelphia (PFASS). Fourteen women partnered to author the PFASS' constitution. Two of them prepared the draft: Margaretta Forten (daughter of James Forten) and Sarah McCrummell. Several other members included Sarah and Harriet Forten (also daughters of James Forten and his wife Charlotte Vandine), the Fortens' granddaughter, also named Charlotte; Sarah Mapps Douglass and her mother, Grace Bustill Douglass; Hetty Burr, Lydia White, Mary Wood, and Amy Hestor "Hetty" Reckless. Working together to "effectively aid in the relieving of the oppression of our suffering fellow creatures" through donations and fundraising, the PFASS—and other such organizations—supported efforts to care for enslaved people who managed to escape bondage and those still enslaved. According to Erica Armstrong Dunbar, members of the PFASS raised approximately \$16,500 from their annual fairs between 1836 and 1853. They donated 85 percent of

all earnings to the Pennsylvania arm of the AASS. The PFASS afforded black women the first opportunity for acknowledgment and leadership in a political arena outside the black church.¹⁴

Not all Philadelphians welcomed freedom seekers flocking to the city. Representative of the city's enduring strain of antiblack racism articulated by both the local government and wider white community, many white Philadelphians had long assailed African American citizens as degraded and often criminal. Ostensibly desiring to recover their historic city now swamped by poor, black, rebellion-prone usurpers, these white citizens often supported legal and extralegal effort to suppress and regulate the city's growing black population. Beginning in 1805, the Pennsylvania legislature would attempt to pass laws aimed at stemming the flow of African Americans to the state and controlling free black communities, particularly in its epicenter, Philadelphia. These included bills to prevent and bar African American immigration into the state, to levy taxes against black citizens for the support of indigent members of their community, and to require black inhabitants to carry proof of residency, as well as laws that would send African Americans convicted of crimes back to slavery. White Philadelphian proponents of such statutes applauded these measures not only for their supposed ability to curb the flow of runaways entering the city, but also for their potential to shrink and constrain the city's surging free black population.

While black and white abolitionists largely thwarted these continued efforts, the Pennsylvania assembly did manage to pass a law disenfranchising African Americans in 1832. The 1838 state constitution famously disenfranchised blacks as well. Plus, the American Colonization Society—which promoted black emigration to western Africa and Haiti—enjoyed vigorous support among white Philadelphians, including many Quaker residents such as prominent abolitionist and women's rights activist Sarah Moore Grimké.¹⁵ Often blaming black inferiority or unconquerable white racism, champions of this philosophy believed that African Americans would never receive full citizenship as equal participants in American society. As Dunbar pointed out: "Racism was central to white colonization ideology; it was hostile at best."¹⁶

Finally, and far from uncommon, many white residents supported and participated in incidences of racial violence. Beginning in 1829 Philadelphia experienced a series of large-scale antiblack racial disturbances. Exacerbated by surging immigration, economic issues surrounding industrialization, rampant poverty, and increasingly strident efforts against slavery from the city's abolitionist class, racial tensions exploded into mob violence. This

resulted in the serious injury and even death of multiple African American citizens and the significant destruction of black property and abolitionist meeting places. Despite these realities, pioneering legislation, coupled with continued interracial abolitionist and antiracist agitation, a growing free black population, and its close proximity to the Mason-Dixon transformed Philadelphia into a haven for fugitive slaves and, eventually, a vital terminus on the Underground Railroad. Nearly 9,000 fugitive slaves entered the city before 1860, including many black women.¹⁷

Spearheaded by black Philadelphians and “synonymous with the underground railroad,” the Vigilant Association of Philadelphia and, in particular, its secret auxiliary, the Vigilant Committee, was the guiding body of the city’s network. The association comprised a myriad of agents, conductors, stations, and modes of transportation, particularly concentrated in African American neighborhoods. Originally organized by prominent abolitionist Robert Purvis and other black and white abolitionists in 1837, the committee of fifteen was founded to “aid colored persons in distress.” An affluent Charleston-born mulatto and long-term resident of Philadelphia, Purvis had committed himself to the antislavery cause in 1830. He became involved in abolitionist activity at the age of seventeen when he met James Forten. Forten would introduce Purvis to notable abolitionists such as Garrison and Benjamin Lundy. In the same year, he would marry Forten’s daughter, Harriet. Purvis’s antislavery agitation would eventually make him the target of mob violence during the race riot of 1842.¹⁸

In July 1838 the Vigilant Association was critically bolstered by an important auxiliary in the Female Vigilant Association, founded to “act in concert” and assist in fundraising. This committee of fifteen black women included Elizabeth White as president, Hetty Burr, “Hetty” Reckless, Elizabeth Colly, and Mary Bustill (the aunt of Sarah Mapps Douglass). Before the close of that year, they and their associates had raised money to clothe, feed, and shelter newly arrived runaways through such efforts as a West Indian Emancipation Day public meeting and a December fair. Herself formerly enslaved, Hetty Reckless used her membership in both the Vigilant Association and the PFASS to convince other members of the society to contribute to efforts to aid fugitives entering the city. She urged them to contribute to community projects and make generous donations. Reckless approached the committee in September 1841, reporting on the thirty-five fugitives she and the committee had assisted to the “land of liberty” and the three additional runaways still in their care. PFASS members resolved to “bear in mind the wants of the

Vigilance Committee.” Reckless would continue to press the organization, noting in May 1845 the difficulties she faced in securing funds for several fugitives “who have passed in to the city lately.”

In the following month, the PFASS would finally agree to aid Reckless by allocating her ten dollars for the “benefit of fugitive slaves.” As Shirley J. Yee observed, PFASS’s reluctance to support Reckless’s efforts point to a “fundamental difference” between black and white antislavery activists—the white activists perceived efforts to aid fugitives as ancillary to the “real” work of eradicating slavery. Going further, Janice Sumler-Lewis asserted that black members pushed the organization to engage in more militant, community-oriented efforts in those that proved to be illegal and extralegal, like donating money to aid in the abetting and harboring of fugitive slaves.

Beyond these two organizations, many other black women played an important role in the Philadelphia network, working as agents, conductors, and “stockholders.” There were individuals who made contributions like baker Mary Myers, who owned a cake shop on Lombard Street and hid fugitives there. On one occasion, she housed and nursed back to health a young fugitive woman who nearly died after shipping herself to Philadelphia on a steamer. Henrietta Bowers Duterte—who became the city’s first black undertaker in 1858—transported fugitives by hiding them in caskets and among funeral processions. Famed orator, writer, and abolitionist Frances Ellen Watkins Harper routinely sent a portion of her earnings as lecturer to William Still and provided aid to fugitives in her home. Harper regularly corresponded with Still, inquiring about happenings on the Philadelphia network. In addition to her fundraising efforts with the PFASS, Sarah McCrummell opened her home to fugitives and Harriet Judah Purvis’s (mother-in-law to Harriet Forten Purvis) home at Ninth and Lombard streets contained a hidden chamber located in the basement to secret runaways.¹⁹

The Vigilant Committee reorganized in 1852 as the Vigilance Committee in an effort to address the ever-growing number of runaways entering the city and—in response to the enactment of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850—“adopt more liberal & systematic measures to aid [fugitives] in their efforts to escape.” Passed to offset antislavery concessions made in the Compromise of 1850, this was a controversial revision to the federal Fugitive Slave Act of 1793. It permitted slave-hunters to seize alleged runaways without due process of law, required federal judges, marshals, and commissioners to convene special commissions (or courts) to assess the valid status of a suspected runaway; and required little proof of the status of the accused. Anyone caught aiding

escaped fugitives or hampering their recovery was heavily fined or jailed. Finally, the act compelled state and local authorities to assist in the recovery of runaways.

Under the Fugitive Slave Act few runaways could remain in Philadelphia without running a serious risk of being returned to bondage. Emboldened by the new law, southern enslavers aggressively pursued their self-stolen property with the force of the federal government behind them. Professional bounty hunters and slave-catchers roamed the countryside and cities and towns, hunting runaways for the ample rewards offered by slave owners. As Frederick Douglass observed: "Scarcely a week passes, but some poor fugitive is hunted down in the streets of some of our large cities. In Philadelphia, week after week, instances of this kind are occurring; men and women hunted down in the streets of brotherly love!" During the 1850s ten fugitive slaves were formally seized in the city accordance with the Fugitive Slave Act, while many others were removed without any legal proceedings. In January 1857 committee member Dr. James G. Bias along with three other men printed a notice in a Philadelphia newspaper cautioning "all self-emancipated persons in this community" that "slave-hunters" were "lurking about the city."²⁰

This new law generated uproar in the northern states, where it was perceived as an encroachment on local power and state sovereignty. Vehemently denouncing it as an appeasement to the southern slave power, Philadelphia abolitionists decried the law as "inhuman and diabolical," converting the city's halls of justice into a "slave pen." Moreover, proclaiming the "right of the fugitive slave to resist this law even unto to death," abolitionists and free blacks aggressively protected fugitives in their communities from roving slave-hunters. In one of the more dramatic incidences occurring in Christiana, Lancaster County, an angry group of black and white townspeople killed a slave owner. They were preventing the re-enslavement of two runaways hiding in a local black farmer's home.²¹

However, not all Philadelphians opposed the Fugitive Slave Act. In the name of "law and order," many white Philadelphians—including prominent politicians—ardently advocated for the enforcement of the law as a bulwark against the "horde of lawless creatures ready for rapine, bloodshed, and murder." They felt it a necessary act of allegiance to the Constitution and the nation. Speaker of the state senate and Philadelphia Hunker Whig Charles Gibbons declared that his signature on the bill as "one of the proudest acts of his public life." Under the burden of new and more stringent laws, Underground "parcels"—like Harriet Tubman—were no longer secure

in northern cities. This rendered Philadelphia and its counterparts into way stations with the majority of the “merchandise” remaining only long enough to be renewed and safely transported to their next destination. By the fall and winter of 1851, many fugitives had begun a second journey from their homes seeking their freedom “under the lion’s paw” of British rule in Canada. As Still indicated in a letter to former Presbyterian minister, editor of the *Pennsylvania Freeman*, and abolitionist J. Miller McKim, it was “far better” for fugitives to head to Canada than to remain in Philadelphia under the “dread and danger” generated by the new law. Embarking on yet another quest for freedom, Tubman would leave Philadelphia in 1854, not only spirited away her family and friends to safety in St. Catharines, an African American settlement in Canada’s Niagara region, but would make several more trips back to the Eastern Shore to carry more friends to Canada.²²

“Though at a peril,” the Vigilance Committee remained staunchly devoted to its cause, as hundreds of enslaved men, women, and children continued to stream into Philadelphia, undeterred by the risks associated with the Fugitive Slave Act. Members felt a “very lively dread of the slave-hunters” and on their guard against the serious penalties imposed by the act and retaliation. They often hid or destroyed their records and arranged to send fugitives northward as quickly as possible by different trains and in various directions to evade slave-hunters and others seeking to reclaim their self-stolen property. With Purvis and McKim leading a new group of nineteen, the revamped Vigilance Committee worked diligently to raise money, appoint officers, and have resources and individuals readily available to assist runaways while they settled or passed through Philadelphia. The committee—chaired by respected businessman and antislavery activist William Still—was charged with the everyday, clandestine work of providing freedom seekers sanctuary in the city. Still and the Vigilance Committee worked closely with distant and local operators—particularly from Philadelphia’s black and Quaker religious community. After assuring the successful flight of the fugitive, they secured boarding, clothing, medical attention, legal counsel, and transportation farther north. For fugitives who remained in the city, the committee offered protection and helped individuals and their families establish a home and find employment. According to Still’s records, the committee helped approximately 800 fugitives between 1852 and 1860.²³

The Vigilance Committee and the Philadelphia network functioned not only as a “mysterious conveyance” secretly sheltering runaways and sending them farther north, but also as a public endeavor. They fought legal cases

on behalf of arrested fugitives and raised funds to purchase their freedom and that of their families. They also published accounts of their experiences, organized committees, publicly announced events, and even violently rescued fugitives from slave-catchers. Members printed their names and addresses in the *Pennsylvania Freeman* and in leaflets so that sympathizers, fugitives, and other African Americans in need could readily find them. They also distributed flyers requesting donations of clothing and other paraphernalia to help disguise fugitives and send them on their way to other points along the Underground Railroad. Philadelphia network operatives were therefore deeply involved in the abolitionist movement—from editing or writing for abolitionist newspapers to lecturing to attending antislavery conventions—and campaigns for equal citizenship for northern free blacks, including the right to vote, access to public education, and economic opportunity.²⁴

RIDING THE FREEDOM TRAIN: FEMALE ESCAPES TO PHILADELPHIA

One of the first people runaway women encountered on their arrival to Philadelphia was William Still. Once they were delivered to his office at the Pennsylvania Abolition Society on Front Street just below Chestnut, Still interviewed each person and arranged for protected passage through the city. He kept meticulous records and journals preserved in secret, uncovering the structure, workings, and major players in Philadelphia's Underground Railroad network. He also recorded details about the lives of fugitives: where they journeyed from; how they escaped; when they arrived and their condition; and the efforts and expenditures of the Vigilance Committee to aid them. For Still and other operators on the Underground Railroad, fugitive women escaping with or without children and other loved ones was a specific source of anxiety, as their gender made even more precarious an already dangerous venture. Absconding with children as well as traveling alone greatly increased the possibility of recapture and the return to enslavement. Made nervous by their heightened vulnerability, Still wrote that women "in attempting to escape undertook three times the risk of failure males are liable, to not to mention the additional trials and struggles they had to contend with."

Enslaved women faced many dangers, from swimming in treacherous waters and walking for days and nights in often harsh conditions over strange roads, valleys, mountains, and marshes to enduring starvation and exposure, and hiding in dense woods, thickets, and swamps. They curled up in barns,

outbuildings, or slave cabins to avoid the numerous roving slave patrols and armed private groups and their baying dogs devoted to apprehending fugitives. As Still's numerous accounts of female flights to Philadelphia elucidate, gender deeply influenced their motives for escape as well the difficulties they faced and strategies they employed on their sojourns to freedom. Enslaved women—young and old, and mostly coming from Maryland, Virginia, and Delaware—absconded to Philadelphia for a variety of reasons.²⁵ They often shared many of the same motives for running off as male freedom seekers, such as fear of sale or sale of a loved one, cruel treatment or the threat of it, or simply the desire to be free. Yet for some female runaways, their efforts to flee were deeply connected to their gendered experiences of bondage, especially surrounding sexual violence and exploitation as well as their roles as enslaved mothers and laborers.

As captive mothers, black women faced daily the threat of their children being sold on the southern market or killed by the violence of slavery. In her interview with Still in March 1855, Mary Epps of Richmond, Virginia, reported being the mother of fifteen children, with four being sold, one still in bondage, and the rest dead.²⁶ Enslaved women also endured the devastating possibility of being sold away from their progeny. As one seasoned, Washington, DC, slave trader remarked, "I have often known them [to] take away the infant from its mother's breast and keep it while they sold her."

Deeply concerned with the welfare of their offspring, many women who escaped to Philadelphia chose to run away with their children in an effort to save them from the horrors of bondage. Still recorded the experiences of several of these mothers. For Mary Ennis, having long desired freedom but too afraid to make her attempt, the threat of sale of her two children was the "last straw on the camel's back" and Mary and her brood "bought a ticket" on the Underground Railroad in the spring of 1854. The mother of five small children, Harriet Shephard of Chestertown, Maryland, could not bear the thought of having her offspring being compelled to "wear the miserable yoke of Slavery." Fully aware of horrors of enslavement from her own experiences, Shephard was "induced to make the bold effort to save her children from having to drag the chains of Slavery as she herself had done." Around the first of November 1855, penniless and with all five children, some unable to walk, she daringly seized four horses and two carriages belonging to her master. With the aid of famed abolitionist Thomas Garrett, Shephard, her children, and five other fugitives made safe passage to Philadelphia. Determined that

“she nor her children would ever serve another master,” Rebecca Jones and her three little girls made their way to Philadelphia in 1856 as stowaways on a boat piloted by an Underground conductor. On the same vessel as Rebecca, Caroline Taylor escaped with her two daughters, striving to “save her self and children by flight on the Underground Rail Road.”²⁷

Escaping with children increased the chances of recapture. Cries of hunger, exhaustion, and sickness had the potential to alert roving slave patrolers, hunters, and others to their presence. Still recorded Harriet Stewart of Delaware, who ran away with her eight-year-old daughter Mary Eliza in 1857, and who had not “won their freedom thus far, without great suffering, from the long and fatiguing distance which they were obliged to walk.” Well aware of the perils associated with traveling with children, Harriet Tubman carried with her laudanum (an opiate), lacing small pieces of bread with it and feeding the sedative to children keep them quiet. In another story, a schooner headed to Philadelphia carried fifteen fugitives, and the “children had been put under the influence of liquor to keep them still, so they made no noise.” Conditions during travel were particularly hazardous to the health of babies and young children. A couple with an infant from Alexandria, Virginia—who escaped the clutches of a slave trader leading a coffle to market—successfully reached Philadelphia in the dead of winter, but the cold weather caused the death of their child before they arrived.²⁸

While many enslaved women ran off with children and other loved ones in tow, several would make the painful decision to leave their children behind. Some runaway mothers were lucky enough to have an aunt or grandmother or a father or uncle to leave their children with, like Harriet Jacobs. Despite her reproaches to “stand by your own children, and suffer with them till death,” she knew her grandmother would care for her three young children until she could secure her freedom in Philadelphia. After she arrived there by boat, members of the Vigilance Committee aided her. Many hoped to one day be able to reunite with their children in freedom. With the “constant ringing in her ears of the auction-block,” Louisa Bell of Norfolk, Virginia, set out alone, leaving her two children—Robert and Mary—in the “hands of God.” Imparting to William Still in June 1855 her heartbreaking ruminations on the night of her escape, Louisa said:

she felt more keenly than ever for her little children, and readily imagined how sadly she would mourn while thinking of them hundreds of miles distant, growing up only to be slaves. And particularly would

her thoughts dwell upon her boy, six years of age; full old enough to feel deeply the loss of his mother, but without hope of ever seeing her again.

Former captive Josephine Robinson arrived from Washington, DC, in 1858; her desire for freedom had “compelled” her to resign her three boys to the “cruel mercy of slavery.” Their whereabouts a mystery, Josephine never saw her children again. As Deborah Gray White aptly observed, tainting enslaved women’s efforts to secure liberation, “the physical relief which freedom brought was limited compensation for the anguish they suffered” in leaving their children.²⁹

Fugitive women also fled in reaction to the routine occurrence and constant threat of sexual violence and exploitation they endured under enslavement. As Still wrote, the “number of young slave girls shamefully exposed to the base lusts of their masters . . . truly was legion.” Sanctioned by law and justified by widely accepted negative stereotypes about black women’s sexuality as innately lascivious and debased, sexual exploitation and violence against enslaved women was permitted by owners, overseers, and traders. This advanced their financial interests by attempting to produce the most desirable, thus profitable, labor force possible and increasing the slave population on their plantations. Utilized as a means of terror, coercion, and control, sexual violence was meant to compel obedience and loyalty as well as assert white male domination over the bodies and lives of black women. As scholars have established, bondswomen’s experiences of sexual violence and exploitation was a part of an interconnected system of white hegemony that facilitated the seizure of black women’s sexuality for multiple purposes, including politics, pleasure, punishment, and profit.

Still recorded several stories of women fleeing sexual abuse. Young and light-complexioned, Matilda Mahoney of Baltimore fled to Philadelphia in 1854 to escape being sold into concubinage in the “fancy trade.” Knowing quite well that an “article” like Matilda would command a very high price in the New Orleans market, the son of her owner—a slave trader—had been trying for two years to convince his father to allow him to sell her. Made even more vulnerable with her enslaver teetering on the edge of death, Matilda made her escape on the Underground Railroad with the help of her lover, James Jefferson of Providence, Rhode Island. Frances Hilliard from the Eastern Shore of Maryland absconded in August 1855 to avoid concubinage. As an enslaved woman, she had been purchased and sold by several different traders, who

designed to speculate upon her as a “fancy article.” They would dress her very elegantly, to show her off to the best advantage possible, but it appears that she had too much regard for her husband and her honor to consent to fill the positions which had been basely assigned her by her owners.

Nancy Grantham of Richmond, Virginia, fled to Philadelphia to “shun her master’s evil designs.” On the night of her escape, Nancy was summoned to her enslaver’s bedchamber, where he told her that he was “coming to [her] pallet that night, and with an oath he declared if [she] made a noise he would cut [her] throat.” This outrage would move Nancy to a “death-struggle” for her freedom and she absconded soon after by boat in 1858.³⁰

Finally, as domestics, many runaway women chose to leave because of cruelty and violence at the hands of mistresses. While many women toiled in the fields alongside men, they were almost exclusively charged with domestic labor by virtue of their gender status. This work put them in close proximity to their owners—in particular the wives and female relatives of their enslaver—making them all the more vulnerable to abuse. Contesting popular historical notions that treat violence under enslavement as a men’s-only realm and white women’s violence as anomalous, numerous women testified to the unbearable brutality of their mistresses as a key motivator in seeking passage to Philadelphia on the Underground Railroad.³¹ Still recorded several of their stories as well.

Hinting at possible sexual advances made by her owner, Mary Epps fled from her mistress, who had a “jealous disposition,” causing her to be hired out to a “hard” family. There she was nearly starved and repeatedly beaten, flogged, and abused. After the death of her owner, Maria Joiner of Norfolk fell into the hands of his daughter “who drank and was very abusiveful [*sic*] using great violence.” Reaching a breaking point, she bolted with her husband Peter to Philadelphia in June 1855. Knowing only “sorrow and misery” under her yoke, Cordelia Loney of Fredericksburg, Virginia, escaped from her mistress while they were visiting Philadelphia. Though behaving “unusually kind” in an attempt to ward off the city’s abolitionist class, Cordelia’s mistress treated her “very cruelly”—choosing neither to feed nor clothe her well, physically abusing her, and selling off all four of her children. Eliza Jane Johnson of Wilmington, Delaware, charged her mistress with “unkind treatment generally” and attempting to “work her to death.” When times became so hard that she “could not stand” her any longer, Eliza “took out” with her

child in 1857. Though close proximity to owners made enslaved women more vulnerable to violence and made it difficult to flee, they often took advantage of their precarious position to learn their owner's routine, collect intelligence, and secure their trust, finding the opportune time to make their escapes.³²

Beyond reasons for absconding, gender also played an important role in fugitive women's strategies to find success on the Underground Railroad, as they both subverted and took advantage of conventional notions of gender. To avoid detection on their passage to Philadelphia, many bondswomen played on dominant understandings of racialized gender roles. Again, Still provided the stories. In order to slip aboard a steamer without suspicion, Susan Brooks of Norfolk, Virginia, approached the boat with a "clean ironed shirt on her arm, bare headed and in her usual working dress, looking good-natured of course, and as if she were simply conveying the shirt to one of the men on the boat." Wearing the garb and claiming to be carrying out the domestic duties typically associated with bondswomen, Susan made it on the ship and into her hiding place with little difficulty. Appropriating male captives' greater opportunities for mobility, many runaway women disguised themselves as men to make their escape. Clarissa Davis of Portsmouth, Maryland, donned her brother's clothing, allowing her to make her way unmolested to a Philadelphia-bound ship—where she was hidden in a box by a sympathetic black seaman. Anna Maria Weems of Washington, DC, "perfected herself in the art of wearing pantaloons, and all other male rig" to pose as a coachman for an Underground agent helping her to escape. Fugitive women traveling alone were not only more vulnerable to aggressive slave-catchers' use of force to recapture runaways, but also generated more suspicion than their male counterparts, as their labor roles—reproductive, domestic, and field work—kept them largely relegated to their owner's property and left with few explanations as to why they are out alone, often at night.³³

Some enslaved women's strategies for freedom also challenged traditional notions of womanhood, particularly surrounding armed resistance. Undermining typical constructions of women as submissive, nonthreatening, and averse to violence, many female runaways could be found brandishing weapons to prevent their recapture just like their male counterparts. William Still indicated that many enslaved women were willing to "stand their ground" and "spill blood; kill, or die" rather than be carried back to bondage. Lizzie Amby remarked she would "wade through blood and tears for her freedom." Confronted by six white men and a boy demanding that they identify themselves, Mary Elizabeth Grigby and Emily Foster—along

with two fugitive men—drew their “pistols and dirks,” declaring that they would not be “taken.” When one of the white men pointed the muzzle of his gun directly at one of the women, she dared him to “shoot! shoot!! shoot!!!” wielding a double-barreled revolver in one hand and a long dagger in the other, “utterly unterrified [*sic*] and fully ready for a death struggle.” Harriet Tubman carried a pistol not only for protection, but also as additional “encouragement” to exhausted and frightened runaways who wanted to turn back. Offering a stern warning to those in her charge contemplating a return to slavery, she declared that a dead fugitive could tell no tales—namely the secret details of her work as a conductor. Another young woman who had been boxed up as freight consigned to Philadelphia carried a sharp pair of scissors with her for protection and carved a hole in her wooden box for fresh air.³⁴ As these examples reveal, contrary to popular notion of women’s resistance, fugitive women were more than willing to turn to violence in their efforts to seize their freedom.

DISEMBARKING: LIFE IN PHILADELPHIA

Many women who arrived in Philadelphia continued their journey elsewhere to either reunite with loved ones located further north or to escape the strict provisions of the Fugitive Slave Act. Some would decide to stay and forge their new lives in the City of Brotherly Love. For fugitive women, life there was both full of promise and distress. Freedom allowed runaway women to shed the subjugations of enslavement and assert and celebrate their new, hard-won status of free citizens. For many, their effort to fashion a new existence and identity in freedom—and avoid detection as fugitives—began with choosing a new name. As famed abolitionist and women’s right activist Sojourner Truth remarked when asked if she had always gone by that name: “No, indeed . . . when I left the house of bondage, I left everything behind. . . . I went to the Lord and asked him to give me a new name.”

New arrivals to Philadelphia would discover a thickly populated, flourishing metropolis in need of laborers, offering the possibilities of labor autonomy, occupational variety, economic security, and upward mobility unavailable under enslavement. As free citizens, fugitive women had the ability to pick employers, negotiate labor contracts to fit their needs, and quit when they experienced abuse, found better opportunities, or were simply unsatisfied. Though the majority of these women would find work in the domestic sector

as cooks, servants, laundresses, and caregivers, several women also labored as teachers, musicians, caterers, dressmakers, hairdressers, stenographers, seamstresses, school mistresses, and milliners. A few enterprising women even operated their own businesses including mortuaries, boarding houses, restaurants, grocery stores, cigar shops, and selling goods from pushcarts—like the popular pepper pot stew, fresh fish, berries, radishes, and other items.³⁵

Residency in Philadelphia provided access to the largest free black population in the country, with its own vibrant and well-developed social, cultural, political, and religious institutions. Black Philadelphians formed churches, including the critically important Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church; ten schools, an orphanage, beneficial societies, and a number of black lodges. For fugitive women and the larger black community, these organizations eased their transition to freedom by providing support networks, facilitating community cohesiveness, and offering an important defense against discrimination and hardship. Further, arriving to an African American population mostly comprised of women, Philadelphia gave many runaway women the chance to recreate and sustain the vital female kinship networks that had been crucial to their survival under enslavement. They built relationships with other women in their neighborhoods, churches, and the city's various black women's clubs and organizations. They found support in their transition to freedom as well as in female-centered spaces to create their own notions of womanhood and discuss politics and other concerns. Philadelphia also presented new opportunities for leisure including gambling and dancing. Finally, some runaway women took advantage of their new status by marrying and establishing families now protected under the law, a right denied them in captivity. Asserting a bodily autonomy unavailable to enslaved women, Hannah Moore found liberty in Philadelphia after fifty-seven years of bondage and married a man who owned a comfortable house left to him by his Quaker employers.³⁶

While Philadelphia proffered many fugitive women a life beyond captivity, the transition was often difficult and not all who came to the city would find success. With most arriving with little more than the ragged, travel-worn clothes on their back, little-to-no education, and few economic resources, the majority of female runaways would join the ranks of the city's laboring poor. Nearly 2,000 African Americans would settle in the crowded Seventh Ward, a narrow piece of land in the southeastern segment of city, with over 60 percent of inhabitants considered very poor to poor. The Cedar Street corridor, located on the city's south side, also became a hotspot for black

families when cheap tenements were built in the Cedar and Locust wards as well as in nearby poverty-stricken West Southwark and Moyamensing, some of the most dangerous neighborhoods in the city. Many former slaves settled in West Philadelphia, Spring Garden, Northern Liberties, and what is now Center City.³⁷ Often living in dark, one-room, poorly insulated, and scantily furnished shanties or tenements in the city's cramped and dirty alleys and lofts, poor African Americans faced disease, malnutrition, and overexposure to the elements. In 1848 Philadelphia coroner Dr. Napoleon B. Leidy reported that of his seventy-six cases of dead black citizens, many were discovered deceased in alleys and backyards and in "cold and exposed rooms and garrets, board shanties, five and six high . . . erected . . . mostly without comforts, save a bare floor."³⁸

Whether working two or three jobs or unable to secure employment opportunities due to increasing hostile labor competition from often-racist Irish, German, and other immigrants, fugitive women were relegated to mostly menial work, with the poorest inhabitant employed as raggers and boners. African Americans and philanthropic whites—some working closely with William Still and the Vigilance Committee—organized relief efforts to clothe, shelter, feed, and find work for freedom seekers settling in the city. In 1845 Hetty Reckless and Hetty Burr established the Moral Reform Retreat at the corner of Lombard and Seventh, where "colored girls and women of the lowest and most destitute class" could apply for assistance "under the care of coloured persons." With "no lack of applicants for admission," the retreat "comfortably situated" nearly 200 women, with an average stay of six weeks. There, fugitive women could not only find respite from harsh urban life, but also participate in skill building and other educational efforts.³⁹

Many African American women struggling with poverty sometimes turned to begging or crime—particularly theft—as a means of survival. Local newspapers warned of individuals collecting aid under guise of helping fugitive slaves and some even resorted to stealing from members of their own community. In July 1857 authorities charged Anna Brown with kidnapping twelve-year-old Mary Bailey with the intent to sell her for \$150. It is also probable that some fugitive women sought an escape from destitution and economic autonomy as laborers in the brothels, bawdy houses, and taverns of the city's vice circuit.⁴⁰

Though Philadelphia provided refuge from enslavement, many African American women longed for home, deeply mourning the traumatic loss of families and communities. Still reported women like Susan Bell and Josephine

Robinson who desperately sought information or hoped to hear word from the husbands, children, and other loved ones still under the yoke of slavery, many of which who would never be heard from again. Some—like Tubman—would even find the courage to re-enter slaveholding territories in attempt retrieve their loved ones. Raising money and making important connections with prominent abolitionists like Thomas Garrett, Frederick Douglass, Lucretia Mott, and Lewis Tappan, Tubman would embark on her first rescue mission in 1850, successfully retrieving her niece, Kessiah, and her two children.⁴¹

Fugitive women's experiences, whether marked by struggle or comfort, were often tainted by prevalent racism. Many white Philadelphians and local officials felt threatened by black aspirations for "upward social mobility, the heightened aggressiveness of blacks in the economic sphere, and the increased belligerence of their social and political style and rhetoric." They perceived the growing number of former slaves—particularly the poor—settling in their city as "degraded rabble" representing a "cancerous sore . . . [threatening] to infect and poison . . . healthy portions of the city." Continuing its earlier efforts to circumscribe the free blacks in the city, an 1852 bill introduced to the Pennsylvania House of Representatives sought to ban African Americans from immigrating to the state and heavily fine anyone who aided in their attempts. Philadelphia's enduring strain of antiblack racism relegated runaway women and other blacks in the city to the most undesirable and poorly paid jobs. Local businesses and public transportation companies barred fugitive women and the larger black community. In one 1853 case, two elegantly dressed young women returning home from a lecture stepped into a streetcar and took seats. The conductor immediately accosted the women, demanding they exit the car. While one of them instantly stepped out, the other remained seated, refusing to withdraw. The car was stopped, the conductor seized her, and "by physical force, removed her out of the car." Fugitive women with school-age children also faced limited and segregated educational opportunities, as their offspring were denied entry into the city's public schools. As the state superintendent of Common Schools declared:

It is not proper, under any circumstance, to admit Negro pupils into white schools, if other provisions can be made for them. The association is degrading and offensive to the Whites. . . . The Negro pupil cannot be expected to apply their minds and attention in their studies when they are in a society of those who despise them and are in every respect their superior.⁴²

Finally, black women and their communities were vulnerable to the frequent outbreaks of racial violence in the city. Between 1834 and 1838 alone, Philadelphia experienced nine major race riots and a large number of minor incidents. Perpetrators threatened the property of antislavery leaders, incinerated gathering halls and churches, and violently attacked individuals. As Frederick Douglass observed in 1849, Philadelphia “has been the scene of a series of most foul and cruel mobs, waged against people of color—and it is now justly regarded as one of the most disorderly and insecure cities in the Union.”⁴³ In the same year on October 8, a mob targeted The California House, a boarding establishment on the corner of St. Mary’s and Sixth Street, owned by a African American man and his white wife. After a furious fight with black defenders, members of an Irish gang called the Killers “broke into the house, destroyed everything before them, and set fire to the building, which was soon wrapped in flames.” Several adjacent houses caught fire. As black residents fled the engulfed boarding house, the “females were pelted with stones by the rioters while carrying off articles of furniture.” The white rioters drove off police and accosted fire companies attempting to put out the blaze, shooting firemen, slicing the hoses, and taking off with the fire engines. Returning the next day heavily armed, white rioters continued the destruction of the African American neighborhood, until the military subdued them. Dubbed the California House Riot, the violent melee lasted two days and resulted in the murders of three white and one black man as well as the serious injury of twenty-five others.⁴⁴

It is important to point out that fugitive women also received distain and policing from their own communities, particularly from the better situated. Erica Armstrong Dunbar asserts that as black women and their communities formed mutual aid societies and erected their churches, they regulated themselves and the wider free black community through disciplinary tribunals within the black church aimed at enforcing the strict dogma of the respectability politics. Organizations such as the Female Benevolent Society of St. Thomas, the Daughters of Africa, and the African Female Band monitored their communities and ostracized those who failed to follow established moral codes. Those who chose not to live “pious” lives were not welcomed or supported. African American women utilized the church to guard the sanctity of marriage, guard women against violent husbands, and maintain order and propriety within the free black community. By threatening black congregants with expulsion for “immoral” behavior—such as drinking, public brawls, disagreements, or violations of church custom—these women

“used the might of the early black church to protect the image of free black Philadelphia.”⁴⁵

African Americans in Philadelphia resisted familiar racism in their new home, calling for increased access to education and better schools, fair employment opportunities, and an end to the racial discrimination that constrained their hard-won freedom. In the 1790s black Philadelphians rebelled against segregated seating in interracial churches, withdrawing to forge their own institutions. These churches created an energetic black community that continued to grow. In response to their children's exclusion from the city's public schools, African Americans opened their own facilities like the Augustine Society. Sarah Mapps Douglass established a school for African American girls in 1840.

Several other black Philadelphians issued a petition demanding equal access to the common carriers and better treatment in general. Indicating a “long catalogue of injuries and outrages,” in 1864 William Still and the other petitioners decried the black Philadelphians' common experiences of racial discrimination including in their efforts to utilize the city's public transport system:

The colored citizens of Philadelphia suffer very serious inconvenience and hardship daily by being excluded from riding in the city passenger cars. . . . Why . . . should they be excluded in Philadelphia—in a city standing so pre-eminently high for its benevolence, liberality, love of freedom and Christianity as the city of Brotherly Love?⁴⁶

In addition to pervasive racial antagonism, fugitive women knew that their freedom was not guaranteed in “The Cradle of Liberty.” As previously discussed, the Fugitive Slave Act made settling in the city a risky endeavor. Still reported that in February 1851 authorities arrested Euphemia Williams, a mother of six, under provisions of the act in the upper part of the city after twenty-two years of residency. Dragged from her home only partially clothed by slave-hunters just after dawn and forced to leave behind her screaming children, Euphemia was hurried to court to answer to the charge of being a fugitive from labor. After a lengthy trial, the court released Euphemia due to lack of evidence. “Numerous colored friends” took her to the Philadelphia Institute on Lombard Street where preparations had been made for a reception and “celebration of this joyous event.” In another case, Hannah Dellum would not be as lucky. Seized while washing clothes at her house

of employment and several months pregnant, Hannah and her son Henry would be handed over to her former Maryland enslaver and forced back into bondage in March 1851.⁴⁷

Compounding the threat imposed by the Fugitive Slave Act, black women also faced the persistent threat of kidnapping through force or foul play. As slavery in the North was dismantled, the trafficking of free African Americans—particularly children—for sale in the South became widespread.⁴⁸ It was far from a new phenomenon; Philadelphians had witnessed frequent kidnappings as early as the 1790s. In 1799 prominent black religious leader and antislavery advocate the Reverend Absalom Jones and seventy-three other black Philadelphians directed a petition to Congress. In it they detailed how free blacks were kidnapped in Philadelphia “like droves of cattle . . . fettered and hurried into places provided for this most horrid traffic, such as dark cellars and garrets.” Despite the abundance of evidence collected to substantiate their claims, they were unable to secure any federal action. By the 1820s the kidnapping of free blacks had become a well-organized business venture, with the kidnappers maintaining a regular chain of communication and trade from Philadelphia to the eastern shore of the Chesapeake. An 1826 investigation uncovered the efforts of an interracial, Delaware-based gang that had successfully lured nearly fifty black men, women, and children onto ships in Philadelphia and transported them south to be sold, and in May 1844 one Philadelphian exclaimed the state was “infested” with kidnappers.⁴⁹

The danger of kidnapping intensified as the new Fugitive Slave Act emboldened slaveholders, slave-catchers, bounty hunters, and “man-stealers” now firmly supported by federal might and more lax laws that required little proof of the abductee’s status. An article entitled “Caution!!!” in the *Provincial Freedom* remarked on the numerous women and children “annually sold into hopeless slavery” in Philadelphia and as far north as Canada, warning readers not to be lured away by the “flattering proposals” of “smooth-tongued” strangers offering such enticements as employment opportunities. In 1851 Marylander Thomas McCreary and two or three other men kidnapped sisters Rachel and Elizabeth Parker, murdering Rachel’s employer, Joseph Miller, and selling Elizabeth into slavery in New Orleans. Fortunately, the two men were caught in Baltimore before they could sell Rachel. Despite a lukewarm effort on the part of Pennsylvania’s governor to extradite them, his Maryland counterpart refused to allow the men to be arrested in the state. After an ardent effort by their community, antislavery advocates, and other

sympathizers, both teenage girls safely returned to Pennsylvania after over a year of captivity.

As demonstrated in the Parker case, African American women and their communities were willing to confront the efforts of “land-pirates” roaming their neighborhoods. In February 1851 at Philadelphia, after it became known that a fugitive slave was hidden in one of the houses and being pursued by two men, African American residents in Paschall’s Alley below Sixth were “out in all their strength. Daring slave-hunters to take anyone in their community, the large group of boisterous citizens refused to step down until the police arrived.⁵⁰ The experiences of fugitive women who remained in Philadelphia, render the city as both imbued with hope, offering new opportunities and the shelter and comfort of a growing free black community. It also offered a precarious environment, tempered with fear and trepidation, as the specter of re-enslavement, persistent racism, and the knowledge that many of their brethren remained in bondage combined to depress and constrain their determined efforts.

CONCLUSION

Despite numerous hardships and struggles, fugitive women bravely took the dangerous and daunting odyssey that was passage on the Underground Railroad. Ringing liberty’s bell, those women who chose to forge their new lives in freedom as Philadelphians took advantage of new opportunities. They found ways to navigate around the city’s pitfalls and ardently strived to create a life for themselves and their families on their own terms. Black women were not only freedom seekers on the Underground Railroad; many who were already free witnessed first-hand the difficult plight of fugitives entering their communities and decided to work on their behalf on the clandestine network. Acting as conductors, agents, and stockholders, these women dedicated themselves to the monumental task of clothing, feeding, sheltering, and educating runaways and the large free black community of Philadelphia. Examining the experiences and contributions of African American women involved in the Philadelphia wing of the Underground Railroad not only adds their voices to an historical narrative that is traditionally dominated by male actors, but also expands and complicates our understandings of their modes of resistance to chattel slavery and emphasizes their role in the city’s world-renowned abolitionist movement. Their endeavors emphasize the key

role of gender in shaping their efforts to escape bondage and strike a blow to the “peculiar institution.” It underscores the necessity of exploring African American women’s lived experiences and perspectives.

ASHLEY COUNCIL received her BA in English from Kennesaw State University and her MA in African American studies from Morgan State University. She is currently a second-year PhD student at Rutgers University. Her research focuses on nineteenth-century black women and questions of race, gender, and sexuality.

NOTES

1. Data collected by the US Weather Bureau in 1916 reveals the average temperature in Dorchester County in March since 1897: a chilly 45.2 degrees. US Department of Agriculture Weather Bureau, *Climatological Data for the United States by Sections*, vol. 3, pt. 5 (Washington, DC: Washington Weather Bureau, 1917).
2. On the life of Harriet Tubman, see Sarah H. Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* (Auburn, NY: W. J. Moses, 1869); Catherine Clinton, *Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2004); Erica Armstrong Dunbar, *She Came to Slay: The Life and Times of Harriet Tubman* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2019); Jean McMahon Humez, *Harriet Tubman: The Life and the Life Stories* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003); Kate Clifford Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman, Portrait of an American Hero* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2004); Milton C. Sernett, *Harriet Tubman: Myth, Memory, and History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007). Regarding Tubman’s wish, see Bradford, *Scenes in the Life*, 14–15.
3. While attempting to thwart an overseer pursuing a fleeing enslaved man, the teenaged Tubman was struck in the head by a two-pound weight, fracturing her skull and leaving her with “a wound ever afterwards visible.” She received little medical attention, and it took a long time to heal; for the rest of her life, she would experience frequent and sudden bouts of unconsciousness. The injury also coincided with an explosion of religious fervor and vivid imagery. Harriet often unexpectedly broke out into loud and excited religious praising and she claimed she had prophetic dreams and visions. Some of her dreams eventually took on a significant role in Harriet’s life, influencing not only her but also how other people perceived her. Historian Kate Clifford Larson suggests that Harriet’s head injury coupled with her subsequent experiences point to temporal lobe epilepsy (TLE). Symptoms include seizures or sleeping spells,

- vivid religious visions, “states of tremendous anxiety and fear alternating with exceptional hyperactivity and fearlessness, and dreamlike trances while appearing to be conscious, followed by the episodes of overwhelming and crippling fatigue.” Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land*, 57–60; Bradford, *Scenes in the Life*, 74–75; Emma P. Telford. “Harriet: The Modern Moses of Heroism and Visions,” typescript, 6, Cayuga County Museum, Auburn, NY, c.1905.
4. There was a widespread feeling among fugitive slaves that reaching Philadelphia would nearly guarantee their liberty, a notion that was partly attributed to the general antislavery sentiment long attached to the city. William J. Switala points to the large numbers of advertisements for escaped slaves printed in Philadelphia newspapers and the growing number of court cases in which runaways had been apprehended and held for reclamation by their enslavers. Nilgun Anadolu Okur, “Underground Railroad in Philadelphia, 1830–1860,” *Journal of Black Studies* 25.5 (May 1995): 538, doi:10.1177/002193479502500502; William J. Switala, *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2001), 159; Bradford, *Scenes in the Life*, 19. Philadelphia earned the nickname “Cradle of Liberty” in 1787, after the signing of the US Constitution there. Deb Nelson, *Dropping In on Philadelphia* (Vero Beach, FL: Rourke Educational Media, 2016).
 5. As Deborah Gray White points out, the responsibilities of childbearing, child-care, and concern for the welfare of their children made flight a more difficult endeavor for enslaved women than men. Indeed, fugitive men loved their progeny but, unlike male runaways, bondswomen who left children behind could not be sure they would receive the best possible care. Further, fathers were more likely sold away from their families, while women and their children were often sold as a group. Also, some slaveholders used bondswomen’s children to keep them from fleeing, as was the case for Harriet Jacobs. Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (London: W. W. Norton, 1999), 70–71.
 6. On the Underground Railroad, see David Blight, *Passages to Freedom: The Underground Railroad in History and Memory* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2006); Fergus M. Bordewich, *Bound for Canaan: The Epic Story of the Underground Railroad, America’s First Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Amistad, 2006); Charles Blockson, *Hippocrene Guide to the Underground Railroad* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1994); Charles Blockson, *The Underground Railroad* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1987); Eric Foner, *Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of America’s Fugitive Slaves* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Peter C. Ripley, Roy E. Finkenbine, Michael F. Hembree, and Donald Yacovone, *The Black Abolitionist Papers*, 5 vols. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985); Wilbur H. Siebert, *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Macmillan, 1898). While not officially adopted until 1875, “Virtue, Liberty, and Independence”

- has been Philadelphia's motto since 1778. Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission (<http://www.phmc.state.pa.us/>), March 23, 2005. Okur, "Underground Railroad in Philadelphia," 537; Billy G. Smith, ed., "Philadelphia: The Athens of America," in *Life in Early Philadelphia: Documents from the Early Revolutionary and Early National Periods* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 3; "From Philadelphia," *New York Tribune*, July 14, 1858.
7. Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land*, 116.
 8. A result of the historical tendency to focus on the experiences and perspectives of men as well as limited primary evidence, little is known—beyond Harriet Tubman—about the activities and sacrifices of black women who freed themselves or labored as assistants and operatives on the Underground Railroad. While historians have demonstrated fugitive slaves were indeed more likely to be male, hundreds of women fled enslavement utilizing the Underground Railroad. Exploring the activities of enslaved and free black women in the Philadelphia Underground network is, in part, an attempt to add their voices to scholarship that has given little attention to their efforts. On slavery and fugitivity, see: John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Andrew Delbanco, *The War Before the War: Fugitive Slaves and the Struggle for America's Soul from the Revolution to the Civil War* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018); White, *Ar'n't I a Woman*.
 9. Born in 1821 to formerly enslaved parents in Burlington, New Jersey, William Still arrived in Philadelphia in 1844. Teaching himself to read and write while working odd jobs, he secured employment as a clerk and janitor for the Pennsylvania Abolition Society in 1847, and by the following decade he would become one of Philadelphia's leading antislavery activists. Still's mother, Sidney, was a fugitive slave. While her husband (Still's father) Levin had managed to manumit himself, she was still locked in bondage with their four children, including two infant girls. In her first attempt, slave-catchers recaptured her and her children nearly 150 miles from her enslaver's plantation. Biding her time until she could regain her owner's trust, Sidney escaped again and successfully reunited with her husband. However, her freedom would come at a cost: her six- and eight-year-old sons, Levin and Peter, whom she left with her enslaved mother. Sidney and Levin would go on to have fourteen more children, including William Still. Through his antislavery work, Still would find his eldest brother, Peter, who managed to escape slavery with his wife and children. Later, Peter and his mother were reunited after having been separated for forty-two years. Desiring to keep "green" in popular memory the "heroism and desperate struggle" of the fugitive slaves that he encountered, Still published his reports as *The Underground Rail Road: A Record of Facts* in 1872, which remains the most definitive account of the exodus. William Still, letter to J. W. Jones,

- November 4, 1873, William Still Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (hereafter HSP); William Still, *The Underground Rail Road: A Record of Facts, Authentic Narratives, Letters, &C., Narrating the Hardships, Hair-Breadth Escapes, and Death Struggles of the Slaves in Their Efforts for Freedom, As Related by Themselves and Others or Witnessed by the Author: Together with Sketches of Some of the Largest Stockholders and Most Liberal Aiders and Advisers of the Road* (Philadelphia: Porter and Coates, 1872).
10. Foner, *Gateway to Freedom*, 6; Gary B. Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720–1840* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 4; Michael Kraus, *The Atlantic Civilization: Eighteenth-Century Origins* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1949), 125.
 11. Switala, *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania*, 159; letter to Robert Morris, April 12, 1786, in *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscripts Sources 1745–1799*, vol. 28, ed. John Fitzpatrick (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office), 407–8. Erica Armstrong Dunbar's biography *Never Caught: The Washingtons' Relentless Pursuit of Their Runaway Slave, Ona Judge* (New York: 37 Ink, 2017) is an example of one of his slaves escaping from Philadelphia. Also see "A Caution to All Travellers to Philadelphia from the Southern States," *Virginia Journal and Alexandria Advertiser*, March 30, 1786.
 12. Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 4. While the Gradual Abolition Act of 1780 stands as one of the earliest and most radical legislative efforts toward abolishing slavery, it was ultimately inadequate as it failed to free virtually any enslaved person in the state at that moment, to guarantee the rights of blacks, and to secure black citizenship. The law freed no slave born before 1780 and those born after kept them in bondage until twenty-eight years of age, the majority of their productive lives. See Kali Gross, *Colored Amazons, Crime, Violence, and Black Women in the City of Brotherly Love, 1880–1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 25; *Pennsylvania—An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery, 1780*, The Avalon Project, Lillian Goldman Law Library Digital Collections, Yale University, New Haven, CT. On freedom and slavery in Philadelphia, see Erica Armstrong Dunbar, *A Fragile Freedom: African American Women and Emancipation in the Antebellum City* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008); Gary B. Nash, and Jean R. Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees: Emancipation in Pennsylvania and Its Aftermath* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). In the 1688 Germantown Quaker petition against slavery, German attorney Francis Daniel Pastorius and three other Quakers living in Germantown (now a part of Philadelphia) urged the Society of Friends to regard African-descended people as fellow human beings and to abolish slavery based on the biblical notion of the "Golden Rule." It was the first formal protest against slavery in North America. Katharine Gerbner, "'We Are Against the Traffik of Men-Body': The Germantown Quaker Protest of 1688 and the Origins of American Abolitionism," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal*

- of *Mid-Atlantic Studies* (hereafter *PH*) 74.2 (2007): 149–72, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27778768>; “Quaker Protest Against Slavery in the New World, Germantown (Pa) 1688,” Quakers and Slavery, Haverford College Quaker and Special Collections, Haverford, PA.
13. Dunbar, *A Fragile Freedom*, 71–72. On the rise of Garrisonian abolitionism and more radical, aggressive antislavery work, see James Brewer Stewart, *Abolitionist Politics and the Coming of the Civil War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008). For information on Philadelphia’s long and rich abolitionist history, see Richard Newman and James Mueller, eds., *Antislavery and Abolition in Philadelphia* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011); Switala, *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania*, 160; Ray Allen Billington, “James Forten: Forgotten Abolitionist,” *Negro History Bulletin* 13.2 (1949): 36. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44174890>; “A Voice from Philadelphia,” *The Liberator*, April 13, 1833. On Sarah Mapps Douglass and the Female Literary Association, see Marie Lindhorst, “Politics in a Box: Sarah Mapps Douglass and the Female Literary Association, 1831–1833,” *PH* 63.3 (1998): 263–78, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27774117>.
 14. Dunbar, *A Fragile Freedom*, 76–79, 94; Blockson, *The Underground Railroad*, 37, 235; *Minutes of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society*, 1833–1841, Manuscript Collections, HSP. Dunbar avers that, by the 1840s, black women’s participation in the organization would wane as the PFASS objectives and efforts concentrated on moral suasion and immediate emancipation to the exclusion of local issues, including aiding fugitive slaves and Philadelphia’s free black community. Switala, *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania*, 173.
 15. Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 173–74; W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1899), 30. In opposition to an 1832 bill to “to prohibit the migration of negroes and mulattoes into this commonwealth,” Forten organized a meeting to create a memorial in opposition to proposed law. Appealing to the state’s own constitutional history and rejecting paranoid fears of black insurrection—intensified by Nat Turner’s violent 1831 rebellion in Virginia that left over fifty dead—the memorial emphasized their allegiance to the state. They also negated notions that free African Americans were more likely to be destitute and, thus, a burden on the city by including a litany of black Philadelphia’s accomplishments and the institutions they created. “House Bill 446,” *Journal of the House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (1831–32), vol. 1 (Harrisburg, PA: Henry Welsh, 1832), 968; “To the Honorable the Senate and House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania: The Memorial of the People of Color of the City of Philadelphia and Its Vicinity,” *The Liberator*, April 14, 1832; “Appendix to the Memorial from the People of Color to the Legislature of Pennsylvania,” *Hazard’s Register of Pennsylvania*, vol. 9, January to July 1832 (Philadelphia: William F. Geddes, 1831–35), 361; Lindhorst, “Politics in a Box,” 267. Also see

- "Letter from Harrisburg," *Daily Evening Express*, March 5, 1859; "Speaking Out," *Pennsylvania Freeman* (hereafter *PF*), March 4, 1852. Writer, orator, and educator Sarah Moore Grimké and her sister Angelina Emily Grimké were two of the most prominent white, female antislavery and women's rights activists in Philadelphia. Beverly C. Tomek, *Colonization and Its Discontents: Emancipation, Emigration, and Antislavery in Antebellum Pennsylvania* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 50. On the Grimké sisters, see Catherine H. Birney, *The Grimké Sisters. Sarah and Angelina Grimké, The First American Women Advocates of Abolition and Woman's Rights* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1885); Gerda Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina: Pioneers for Woman's Rights and Abolition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).
16. Dunbar, *A Fragile Freedom*, 49. A small percentage of black Philadelphians did support colonization efforts. Agreeing that white racial prejudice would never permit African Americans full access to equality and citizenship, black supporters believed colonization was a viable means to contest discrimination. Black leaders Richard Allen and James Forten initially supported the effort but would later move away from that philosophy. On Philadelphia and the colonization movement, see Eric Burin, *Slavery and the Peculiar Solution: A History of the American Colonization Society* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2008); Dunbar, *A Fragile Freedom*; George Fredrickson, *Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971); Svend E. Holsoe, "Matilda Newport: The Power of a Liberian-Invented Tradition," *Liberian Studies Journal* 32: 2 (2007): 28–41; Nash, *Forging Freedom*; Eli Seifman, "The United Colonization Societies of New-York and Pennsylvania and the Establishment of the African Colony of Bassa Cove," *PH* 35.1 (January 1968): 23–44. Karen Fisher Younger, "Philadelphia's Ladies' Liberia School Association and the Rise and Decline of Northern Female Colonization Support," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 134.3 (July 2010): 235–361.
 17. For a description of the racial disturbances in Philadelphia during the nineteenth century, see Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro*, 26–30. Also see John Runcie, "'Hunting the Nigs' in Philadelphia: The Race Riot of August 1834," *PH* 39.2 (April 1972): 187–218; Samuel Webb, ed., *History of Pennsylvania Hall, Which Was Destroyed by a Mob on the 17th of May, 1838* (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Gunn, 1838); Beverly C. Tomek, *Pennsylvania Hall: A "Legal Lynching" in the Shadow of the Liberty Bell* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). The federal census of 1850 counted 19,761 free blacks in Philadelphia, constituting 4.8 percent of the population; Switala, *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania*, 158. For fugitive slave figures, see Okur, "Underground Railroad in Philadelphia," 537.
 18. Organized societies to aid runaway slaves were not unknown in the history of eastern Pennsylvania. In 1837 a vigilance committee existed in Buckingham,

- Bucks County. The committee's members included William H. Johnson, a prominent abolitionist there, *National Enquirer*, July 27, 1837; Robert C. Smedley, *History of the Underground Railroad in Chester and the Neighboring Counties of Pennsylvania* (Lancaster, 1883), 358. Larry Gara, "William Still and the Underground Railroad," *PH* 28.1 (1961): 37; Vigilant Committee of Philadelphia Records, 1839–1844 (Collection 1121), HSP; *National Enquirer*, August 10, 1837. Free blacks were the main activists in the vigilance committees that sprang up in Philadelphia, Boston, Syracuse, and other cities. The leadership of these groups, organized at the local level but in regular communication with counterparts elsewhere, was generally interracial, but the committees were "to a considerable extent, and in some places entirely sustained by the colored people," the white abolitionist Samuel May Jr. observed. While Philadelphia's committee began as an interracial organization, by 1840 it was composed entirely of blacks. Foner, *Gateway to Freedom*, 74, 26; Clare Taylor, ed., *British and American Abolitionists: An Episode in Transatlantic Understanding* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1974), 341–42; Vigilant Committee of Philadelphia Minutes, HSP. On Robert Purvis, see Margaret Hope Bacon, *But One Race: The Life of Robert Purvis* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007); Joseph A. Borome, "Robert Purvis and His Early Challenge to American Racism," *Negro History Bulletin* 30.5 (1967): 8–10.
19. *PF*, July 5, July 26, and December 27, 1838; PFASS minutes, September 9, 1841, June 12, 1845, and April 10, 1846, HSP; Shirley J. Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828–1860* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 98–99; Janice Sumler-Lewis, "The Forten-Purvis Women of Philadelphia and the American Anti-Slavery Crusade," *Journal of Negro History* 66.4 (1981): 283–84, doi:10.2307/2717236. On the Female Vigilant Association, also see Joseph A. Borome, "The Vigilant Committee of Philadelphia," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 92 (January 1968) 320–51; Gayle T. Tate, *Unknown Tongues: Black Women's Political Activism in the Antebellum Era, 1830–1860* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2003), 70; Blockson, *The Underground Railroad*, 235; Still, *The Underground Rail Road*, 609–10, 755.
 20. Vigilant Committee of Philadelphia Minutes, Vigilant Committee of Philadelphia Records, 1839–1844 (Collection 1121), HSP; Franklin and Schwening, *Runaway Slaves*, 149–81; "Extract," *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, December 1851; Foner, *Gateway to Freedom*, 164; Stanley Campbell, *The Slave-catchers: Enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, 1850–1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 199–206; *Philadelphia Morning Times*, January 21, 1857.
 21. "Kidnapping," April 3, 1851, and "Arrest of Symmes," April 10, 1851, *PF*. The 1861 Christiana Riot is the most violent incident of black resistance to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Maryland slave owner Edward Gorsuch attempted

to arrest two runaway men, but was killed during the pursuit. Though those African Americans considered most responsible escaped to Canada, authorities charged thirty-three blacks and five whites with obstructing the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, a violation that carried a charge of treason. While some perceived the actions of these men as carrying out the promise of American freedom, others viewed them as murderers who disregarded the nation's laws. After a trial held in Philadelphia, the prosecution failed to secure treason convictions, but public opinion remained polarized. On the Christiana Riot, see Ella Forbes, *But We Have No Country: The 1851 Christiana, Pennsylvania Resistance* (Cherry Hill, NJ: Africana Homestead Legacy, 1998); Roderick W. Nash, *The Christiana Riot: An Evaluation of Its National Significance* (Lancaster, PA: Lancaster County Historical Society, 1961); "The Christiana Riot," *Lancaster Intelligencer*, September 30, 1851. For another example, see "Attempted Murder in Chester County, PA," *Public Ledger*, December 30, 1850.

22. All in *PF*: "Refuge for Kidnapers [*sic*]," May 22, 1851; "Great Demonstration of Northern Servility," November 28, 1850; "Shameful Outrage," January 2, 1851; "More Servility," March 6, 1851; "Harrisburg for the Southern Market," *National Era*, July 17, 1851; "Fugitive Slave Law," *Wayne County Herald*, October 31, 1850; Ripley et al., eds., *Black Abolitionist Papers*, 2:9–10; William Still to James M. McKim, November 2, 1857, Elijah Pennypacker Letters, Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania. Likely a result of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, African Americans formed but little over one thirty-third of the population in 1870, the lowest proportion ever reached in the history of Philadelphia (as of 1899). Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro*, 36. Though under British law African Americans were entitled the same rights and privileges as all citizens under the Crown, the black people of St. Catharines and other colored settlement routinely experienced racism. Many white folks and Canadian officials perceived the former slaves settling in the country as undesirable citizens, lazy, inferior, ignorant, and "brutally trained." In addition to relegation to menial labor and violence, African Americans were denied access to public transport and local businesses, were marginalized in the religious community, and faced limited and segregated educational opportunities. African Americans in St. Catharines resisted familiar racism in their new home, calling for better schools, more access to land ownership, and an end to the racial discrimination that constrained their hard-won freedom. On Tubman's move to St. Catharines, see Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land*, 133. "Under the lion's paw": Robin W. Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: A History* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), 238. On African American flights to and settlements in Canada, see Dann J. Broyld, "Fannin' Flies and Telling' Lies: Black Runaways and American Tales of Life in British Canada Before the Civil War," *American Review of Canadian Studies* 44.2 (April 2014): 169–86; Jason H. Silverman, *Unwelcome Guests: Canada West's Response to American Fugitive*

- Slaves* (Millwood, NY: Associated Faculty Press, 1985); "Too Much of a Good Thing," *Weekly News*, November 14, 1850.
23. On the formation and reorganization of the Vigilance Committee and the number of fugitives they assisted, see: Vigilant Committee of Philadelphia Records; Borome, "The Vigilant Committee," 323–29; Still, *The Underground Rail Road*, 611–12; Switala, *Underground Railroad Pennsylvania*, 160–64. Philadelphia's religious community also played a vital role in the city's Underground Railroad network. Black congregants from the AME, Presbyterian, and Baptist denominations along with white sympathizers from the Quaker, Unitarian, and Universalist communities raised money, collected necessities, offered hiding places, and served as agents for fugitives arriving to the city. The earliest religious organization formed was the Free African Society founded in 1787 by the Revs. Abaslom Jones and Richard Allen. Originally formed to provide economic assistance to the free black community, soon it became a source of support for runaways and the first attempt at an Underground Railroad system in Philadelphia. Allen and Jones would go on to establish their own independent black churches, Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church and African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas, only the first of numerous black congregations in the city. See Switala, *Underground in Pennsylvania*, 169–70.
 24. On "violently rescuing fugitives from slave-catchers," see "The Williamson Case," *The Pittsburgh Gazette*, August 3, 1855; Still, *The Underground Railroad*, 77–88; Borome, "The Vigilant Committee," 323; Borome, "Robert Purvis and His Early Challenge to American Racism," 12; "An Appeal," *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, November 13, 1851.
 25. Still, *The Underground Rail Road*, 80. On origins of fugitives arriving in Philadelphia, see Okur, "Underground Railroad in Philadelphia, 1830–1860," 537.
 26. Still, *The Underground Rail Road*, 75.
 27. *Ibid.*, 75, 207–8, 302–3, 326–29; Ethan Allen Andrews, *Slavery and the Domestic Slave-trade in the United States* (Boston: Light and Stearns, 1836), 147.
 28. Still, *The Underground Rail Road*, 418, 562; Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land*, 203; Andrews, *Slavery and the Domestic Slave-trade*, 152–53.
 29. Linda Brent, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. Lydia Marie Child (Boston, 1861), 139; Jean Fagan Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs: A Life* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2004), 66; Still, *The Underground Rail Road*, 264, 456; White, *Ar'n't I a Woman*, 71.
 30. Still, *The Underground Rail Road*, 460. Black women historians have elucidated the complex sexual lives of enslaved women, a precarious terrain dominated by violence, subjugation, denigration, and objectification at the hands of white (and black) men. Recent scholarship from Stephanie Jones-Rogers also reveals white women's roles in bondswomen's experiences of sexual violence and exploitation. As brothel keepers or madams, white women "initiated sexual

- violence against enslaved women, and as mistresses, personally orchestrated acts of sexual violence . . . in hope that the women would produce children that would augment their wealth.” *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019). On enslaved women and the experiences of sexual violence and exploitation, see Adrienne Davis, “‘Don’t Let Nobody Bother Yo’ Principle’: The Sexual Economy of American Slavery,” in *Sister Circle: Black Women and Work*, ed. Sharon Harley and the Black Women and Work Collective (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 103–28; Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Thelma Jennings, “‘Us Colored Women Had To Go Through a Plenty’: Sexual Exploitation of African American Slave Women,” *Journal of Women’s History* 1 (Winter 1990): 45–74. On Matilda Mahoney and Nancy Grantham see Still, *The Underground Rail Road*, 172–73, 288, 459. On concubinage and the fancy trade see Tiye Gordon, “The Fancy Trade and the Commodification of Rape in the Sexual Economy of 19th Century U.S. Slavery,” MA thesis, University of South Carolina, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2015, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1722008905/>.
31. Thavolia Glymph writes against prevailing historical notions that assert a connection between black and white women on the basis of the shared gender oppression. These notions suggest that the mistresses of plantations suffered under the “weight of the same patriarchal authority to which slaves were subjected” and that black and white women “mutually ascribed” to a cult of domesticity. She argues that the violence inflicted upon the enslaved at the hands of white mistresses, particularly against enslaved women, was a routine and brutal occurrence in the plantation household. White women perceived violence as an essential means to extract labor from enslaved women. Further, the silences surrounding white women’s violence and existing frameworks available to understand it not only obscure their contributions to the nature of slavery, its maintenance, and, in particular, the brutalization and destruction of black bodies. It also greatly diminishes white women’s agency and power, largely rooted in their investment in white supremacy, its trappings and its social and economic imperatives. Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). On white women’s significant role in the enforcement and perpetuation of chattel slavery, see Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property*.
32. Still, *The Underground Rail Road*, 75, 112–14, 418; *Journal C of Station No. 2 of the Underground Railroad, Agent William Still, 1852–1857*, 143, Pennsylvania Abolition Society Papers, HSP; Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 102.

33. Still, *The Underground Rail Road*, 60, 182, 212. As Deborah Gray White asserts, labor divisions on most plantations permitted greater mobility for male slaves than female slaves. Few chores performed by bondswomen took them off their owner's land. Typically, enslavers selected enslaved men to assist in the transportation of crops, supplies, and other material. Additionally, more enslaved men were artisans and craftsmen, making it more difficult for women to be hired out. This increased mobility not only allowed for men to experience varied forms of labor, but also created more opportunities to abscond. White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?* 75–79.
34. On enslaved women and armed resistance, see Rebecca Hall, “Not Killing Me Softly: African American Women, Slave Revolts, and Historical Constructions of Racialized Gender,” PhD dissertation, University of California, Santa Cruz, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2004. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/305199975/>. Still, *The Underground Rail Road*, 125, 103, 608; Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land*, 116–18.
35. The majority of Still's recordings of the names of fugitives arriving to Philadelphia included their original names as well as the aliases they adopted upon arrival. Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth: a bondswoman of olden time, emancipated by the New York Legislature in the early part of the present century: with a history of her labors and correspondence drawn from her "Book of Life": also, a memorial chapter, giving the particulars of her last sickness and death* (Boston, 1875), 164. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro*, 103–4; “Colored People of Philadelphia—No. III. Occupations of Women—Property.” *PF*, March 31, 1853.
36. Switala, *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania*, 167. By 1840 there were 1.63 black women for every black man in Philadelphia. Many African American men left the city for rural areas seeking agricultural work. Others took to the open seas, securing employment as seamen and returning to Philadelphia only for short periods. Dunbar, *A Fragile Freedom*, 5. White argues that enslaved women formed supportive female communities in which family members and friends aided each other in survival, asserting that these networks were critical to black women's resistance. Not only did these close-knit relationships help enslaved women “to survive the dual responsibilities of laborer and mother,” but they also fostered the creation of their own “independent definitions of womanhood.” More than that, these communities enabled efforts to resist sexual exploitation and violence by providing opportunities to control reproduction through abortion, abstinence, and infanticide. As White argues, “the inability of slave owners to penetrate the private world of female slaves is probably what kept them from learning of many abortions (“Ar'n't I a Woman,” 126–27). Still, *The Underground Rail Road*, 550. On slavery, emancipation, and the significance of marriage, see Ira Berlin and Leslie S. Rowland, *Families and Freedom: A Documentary History of African American Kinship in the Civil War*

- Era* (New York: The New Press, 1998); Noralee Frankel, *Freedom's Women: Black Women and Families in Civil War Era Mississippi* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1999); Mary Farmer-Kaiser, *Freedwomen and the Freedmen's Bureau: Race, Gender, and Public Policy in the Age of Emancipation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010); Tera Hunter, *Bound in Wedlock: Slave and Free Black Marriage in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019); Leslie Ann Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We: Women's Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).
37. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro*, 170–71; Gross, *Colored Amazons*, 27; Dunbar, *A Fragile Freedom*, 4. A population study of African Americans in Philadelphia showed 1 in 5 African Americans in Center City was a former slave; 1 in 3 in West Philadelphia, 1 in 3.5 in Spring Garden, and 1 in 4.3 in Northern Liberties. *Statistical Inquiry into the Condition of the People of Colour, of the City and Districts of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Kite and Walton, 1849), 11.
 38. *Statistical Inquiry into the Condition*, 34; Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro*, 172. Also see “Destitution in Philadelphia,” *The Jeffersonian*, March 1, 1855.
 39. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro*, 31–33; “The Irish in America—George Thompson,” *The Liberator*, July 4, 1851; “Colored People of Philadelphia—No. III. Occupations of Women—Property,” *PF*, March 31, 1853; “The Germans of Pennsylvania,” *York Gazette*, York, August 12, 1856; “The Moral Reform Retreat” and “The Retreat,” *The Friend. Religious and Literary Journal*, October 7 and November 6, 1847.
 40. *Statistical Inquiry into the Condition*, 35; “The Mysteries and Miseries of Philadelphia,” *Cumming's Evening Bulletin*, January 29, 1853. While many black women turned to crime—particular larceny—to survive, it is important to point out that during the decades leading up to the Civil War, African Americans in Philadelphia faced intense policing and the stricter enforcement of property crimes. As Kali Gross argues, the criminal justice system systematically targeted blacks and other poor residents of the city and the “focus on property crimes amounted to racial profiling in the sense that it rendered African Americans’ possession of almost anything of value grounds for a policeman’s accusation of larceny.” This zeroing-in on property crimes found black women highly vulnerable to arrest and conviction. A result of their high numbers in domestic work, they were more likely to be falsely accused; were less likely to be believed over their white employers; and when they committed crimes, they were often witnesses (Gross, *Colored Amazons*, 33–34). Fugitive from labor, Ellen Wells traveled throughout the nation, soliciting for donations to purchase her children, mother, and other loved ones. When a prominent Boston abolitionist who encountered Wells after she left Philadelphia wrote to Still inquiring about her, he reported she was a fraud and a prostitute. “Imposters,” *PF*, September 22, 1853; Blockson, *The Underground Railroad*,

233. On Anna Brown see: "Arrested on a Charge of Kidnapping," *Lancaster Examiner*, July 22, 1857.
41. Still, *The Underground Rail Road*, 158, 456; "A Guide to the Stranger or Pocket Companion for the Fancy, Containing a List of the Gay Houses and Ladies of Pleasure in the City of Brotherly Love and Sisterly Affection" (Philadelphia, ca., 1849), 17. Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land*, 317.
42. "The Mysteries . . .," *Cumming's Evening Bulletin*, January 29, 1853; "Colored People of Philadelphia," *PF*, October 9, 1852. "Free Negroes in Pennsylvania," *Lancaster Examiner*, January 21, 1852. In the February 19 edition of *PF*, African Americans published a memorial denouncing the efforts of the state assembly: "Memorial of the People of Color," February 19, 1852. Still, *The Underground Rail Road*, lii. Also see William Still, "The Passenger-Cars and Colored Citizens," *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, January 2, 1864; "Domestics," *PF*, June 30, 1853; "Colored Children in Public Schools," *Saturday Express*, December 23, 1854.
43. Frederick Douglass, "Philadelphia," *North Star*, October 19, 1849.
44. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro*, 32; Frederick Douglass, "Philadelphia," *North Star*, October 19, 1849; "A Bloody Riot in Philadelphia," *National Era*, October 18, 1849; "Riots at Philadelphia—Loss of Life." *Christian Advocate and Journal*, October 18, 1849. Nineteenth-century Philadelphia was host to a number of vicious street gangs—like the Killers, Bouncers, and Schuylkill Rangers—who roamed majority black neighborhoods such as Southwark, Moyamensing, and Northern Liberties (Gross, *Colored Amazons*, 33). On the "Killers" gang, see George Lippard, *Life and Adventures of Charles Anderson Chester, the Notorious Leader of the Philadelphia "Killers": Who Was Murdered, While Engaged in the Destruction of the California House, on Election Night, October 11, 1849* (Philadelphia: Yates and Smith, 1849); Matt Cohen, and Edlie L. Wong, eds., *The Killers: A Narrative of Real Life in Philadelphia*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017). For another example of racial violence, see: "Outrage in Moyamensing," *PF*, February 21, 1850.
45. Dunbar, *A Fragile Freedom*, 6, 52.
46. Emma Jones Lapsansky, "'Since They Got Those Separate Churches': Afro-Americans and Racism in Jacksonian Philadelphia," *American Quarterly* 32.1 (1980): 3, doi:10.2307/2712496. Herbert Aptheker, ed., *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States* (New York: Citadel Press, 1969), 113; Dunbar, *A Fragile Freedom*, 70; "Petition for the Colored People of Philadelphia to Ride in the Cars," in Still, *Underground Rail Road*, lv–lvi.
47. Still, *The Underground Rail Road*, 566; "A New Slave Case," *PF*, February 13, 1851; "Fugitive Slave Case," *Public Ledger*, March 10, 1851; "The Fugitive Slave Case," *PF*, March 13, 1851; *Thirteenth Annual Report of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society* (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Thompson, 1851), 28.

48. Julie Winch draws numerous parallels between the Underground Railroad and the kidnapping epidemic plaguing the North in the years leading up to the Civil War. Both employed black and white agents, had a network of “safe houses” and made liberal use of forged documents—in one case free papers and in the other fraudulent bills of sale. These efforts also relied on secrecy and supplied their “merchandise” with elaborate fictions to tell overly inquisitive strangers. “Philadelphia and the Other Underground Railroad,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* III (January 1987): 325.
49. The petition is printed in John Parrish, *Remarks on the Slavery of the Black People; Addressed to the Citizens of the United States, Particularly to Those who are in Legislative or Executive Stations in the General or State Governments; and Also to such Individuals as Hold Them in Bondage* (Philadelphia, 1806), 49–51. Apart of the numerous personal liberty laws passed by the state legislature, including in 1820 and 1826, Pennsylvania passed legislation responding to the threat of slave-catchers which included fines and imprisonment. However, these laws would have little impact on the frequency of abductions. See: Lindhorst, “Politics in a Box,” 267; Winch “Philadelphia and the Other Underground Railroad,” 7; Foner, “Gateway to Freedom,” 37; “Kidnappers,” *PF*, May 9, 1844. For local newspaper discussions of Philadelphia’s kidnapping problem, see “Danger to the Colored People,” *PF*, March 27, 1851; “Daring Case of Kidnapping and Murder,” *Monongahela Valley Republican*, January 23, 1852; “More Slave Hunting in Philadelphia,” *PF*, July 28, 1853; “Selections from the *Liverpool Mercury*, of Oct. 11,” *The Liberator*, November 11, 1853; “Kidnapper Mobbed,” *Brooksville Jeffersonian*, November 4, 1854; “Men Hunters,” *Pittsburgh Gazette*, October 2, 1854; “Bigler and McCreary,” *The Jeffersonian*, May 19, 1853; “Hangman Alberti,” *Lebanon Courier and Semi-Weekly Report*, April 7, 1854.
50. “Caution!,” *Provincial Freedom*, March 24, 1855; Still, *The Underground Railroad*, 551; Fred Fowler, “Some Distinguished Negroes,” *Journal of Negro History* 3.1 (January 1918): 476–85. Also see Lucy Maddox, *The Parker Sisters: A Border Kidnapping* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2016). “Exciting Scene,” *Public Ledger*, February 14, 1851.