

Sharing Frederick Douglass in Antebellum America

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Abstract:

Before Douglass had escaped enslavement in Baltimore, the American Anti-Slavery Society caused a sensation in 1835 with its Great Postal Campaign whereby it sent unrequested abolitionist materials to the South. Years later, enthusiastic individuals would mail Douglass's materials unbidden to acquaintances, strangers, and elected officials. Far from an organized effort, these mailings reveal individual readers, whom we might call Douglass's auxiliaries, taking up the role of unofficial distributors, encouraged to do so by the materials they shared.

These materials include an abridged version of Douglass's 1845 *Narrative*, reprinted as a gratis tract, and issues of his antebellum newspapers, the *North Star* and *Frederick Douglass' Paper*. The tract, whose production did not involve Douglass, explicitly calls for unsolicited distribution. Though Douglass as editor, needing to prioritize subscription lists, had limited use for unsolicited distribution, his newspapers nonetheless showcased the practice by broadcasting the endeavors of reader-distributors. By attending not only to instances of individuals sharing unrequested materials but also to the printed materials themselves as facilitating such sharing, this article builds on insights regarding materiality and circulation of Douglass's writing made by Teresa A. Goddu, Michaël Roy, and others. What emerges is a story that suggests attention to the circulation practices of Douglass's auxiliaries—some of which are documented in Douglass's publications—can offer insights about Douglass, too.

Keywords:

Unsolicited circulation, unrequested sharing, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, *Extracts from the Narrative of Frederick Douglass*, *North Star*, *Frederick Douglass' Paper*

On 3 December 1847, the inaugural issue of Frederick Douglass's first newspaper, the *North Star*, appeared in print, but it was the previous day, 2 December, when another of the Maryland native's publications appeared before a rather different audience—the courts of Baltimore County, Maryland. Here a local man faced charges for circulating—unsolicited—an abridged copy of Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* in the form of a tract/pamphlet.² By “unsolicited,” I mean sending a printed text through the mail to someone who had not requested it. Typically considered a practice of organizations, publishers, and editors, unsolicited mailing most certainly caused a sensation in 1835 when the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS) made good on its

¹ My appreciation goes to Crystal Harris, Katelyn Knox, and Vaughn Scribner as well as the *New North Star* editors and anonymous reviewer for their thoughtful feedback on the argument.

² The abridged reprinting of Douglass's *Narrative* was referred to as both “tract” and “pamphlet” in the period. Following the document's term for itself, I hereafter refer to it as a tract. See note 18.

plan to flood the South with antislavery print during the Abolitionist Postal Campaign.³ Yet beyond the initiatives of the AASS or other antislavery organizations, individuals would do something similar—on a much smaller scale—in the decades to follow. I thus use the term unsolicited distribution or “unrequested sharing” to describe the actions of individuals who were to varying degrees operating outside official capacity in the decades following the AASS’s mass-mailing operation.⁴ These individuals (some of whom were affiliated with organized antislavery, some of whom were not) were involved in mailing unbidden antislavery publications to acquaintances, strangers, and elected officials. Among these unasked-for mailings were Douglass’s materials—not only the tract reprinting of the *Narrative* but also individual issues of his antebellum newspapers, the *North Star* and *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*. Examining such efforts at disseminating Douglass’s writings, by persons who either facilitated or personally did the mailing, reveals the role of individuals—whom we might call Douglass’s auxiliaries—in bringing Douglass’s work to new readers. Only some had ties to organized antislavery, but all shared the belief that Douglass’s materials were important, admirable, and worth sharing, even with those who had not asked to read such publications and perhaps had no desire to do so.⁵

Recent scholarship on Douglass has directed attention to the production, circulation, and reception of his autobiographies and newspapers as part of a broader flourishing of research on early African American print culture.⁶ With respect to Douglass’s autobiographical writings,

³ As James Raven puts it, there has been little interest in theorizing unsolicited print. With primary focus on material printed specifically for free, mass circulation, Raven offers a number of insightful suggestions for further inquiry. See James Raven, “Print for Free: Unsolicited Literature in Comparative Perspective,” in *Free Print and Non-Commercial Publishing Since 1700*, ed. James Raven (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2000), 1–28.

⁴ For scholarship on the postal campaign, see Lacy K. Ford, *Deliver Us from Evil: The Slavery Question in the Old South* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009); Susan Wyly-Jones, “The 1835 Anti-Abolition Meetings in the South: A New Look at the Controversy over the Abolition Postal Campaign,” *Civil War History* 47, no. 4 (2001): 289–309.

⁵ This is not to say enthusiasm, agreement, or sympathy were the only sentiments motivating circulation of Douglass’s words, much of which took place in the pages of newspapers. To be sure, Douglass received negative attention in the press not only from anti-abolitionists but also from fellow abolitionists—namely Garrisonians—as the antislavery movement became increasingly fractured in the 1840s. (Such negative attention directed at abolitionists was not unique to Douglass, and as newspaper editor, he could give as good as he got, regularly commenting negatively and sometimes caustically in the pages of his newspapers on fellow abolitionists Henry Highland Garnet, William Cooper Nell, and others with whom he disagreed). Beyond newspaper reporting, there also were efforts to reprint Douglass’s publications motivated by unsympathetic interest in the doings of abolitionists. See Lori Leavell, “Reprinted in Baltimore: *Abolition Fanaticism* and Frederick Douglass’s Lesser-Known Antebellum Readers,” *African American Review*, forthcoming.

⁶ The following list of recent monographs, edited collections, and articles on early African American print culture—some of which explicitly focus on moving beyond the slave narrative as a genre and Douglass as a figure—is far from exhaustive. See, for example, Elizabeth McHenry, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); Marcy J. Dinius, *The Textual Effects of David Walker’s Appeal: Print-Based Activism Against Slavery, Racism, and Discrimination, 1829–1851* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022); Eleanor Bird, *Beyond the Antislavery Haven: Slavery in Early Canadian Print Culture, 1789–1889* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2025); Tara A. Bynum, *Reading Pleasures: Everyday Black Living in Early America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2023); Bryan Sinche, *Published by the Author: Self-Publication in Nineteenth-Century African American Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2024); Lara Langer Cohen and Jordan Alexander Stein, editors, *Early African American Print Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012); P. Gabrielle Foreman, Jim Casey, and Sarah Lynn Patterson, eds., *The Colored Convention Movement: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021); Laurence Cossu-Beaumont and Claire Parfait, “Book History and African American Studies,” *Transatlantica* 1 (2009): 1–11; Leon Jackson, “The Talking Book and the Talking Book Historian: African American Cultures of Print—the State of the Discipline,” *Book History* 13 (2010): 251–308. (For scholarship focused more specifically on Black periodical culture and editing, see note 7.)

Teresa A. Goddu has been instrumental in focusing attention on the materiality of the slave narrative genre, including Douglass’s 1845 narrative; Patricia J. Ferreira, Fionnghuala Sweeney, and Hannah-Rose Murray, meanwhile, have situated Douglass’s narratives within transatlantic print culture contexts, while Michaël Roy has made the most extensive inroads in deepening our understanding of slave narratives in terms of book history with focused attention on Douglass’s 1845 and 1855 narratives, including how they made their way into print and where they circulated.⁷ Studies of Douglass’s newspapers of late, part of a growing body of scholarship on early Black periodicals and editing more broadly and indebted to the legacy of Irvine Penn Garland’s *The Afro-American Press and Its Editors* (1891), share an interest in these matters.⁸ Journalism historians David Mindich and Frank E. Fee have focused on reception, particularly how fellow journalists responded to Douglass’s work amid a modernizing newspaper industry.⁹ However, the focus primarily has been on matters of production with Benjamin Fagan and Sarah Meer both illuminating the internationalism of Douglass’s papers, particularly in terms of content and contributors; to varying degrees they also emphasize others’ roles in the “collective making,” to use Fagan’s words, of *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* with the emphasis on Douglass’s role as editor but one who coordinated the efforts of other participants in its production.¹⁰

In isolating the specific practice of unsolicited circulation/unrequested sharing, I build on these efforts to approach Douglass’s antebellum publications in terms of book history and print culture studies methodologies. The main objects under analysis are the printed materials:

⁷ Teresa A. Goddu, “The Slave Narrative as Material Text,” *The Oxford Handbook of the African American Slave Narrative*, ed. John Ernest (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 149–64; Patricia J. Ferreira, “Frederick Douglass and the 1846 Dublin Edition of His Narrative,” *New Hibernia Review* 5, no. 1 (2001): 53–67; Hannah-Rose Murray, *Advocates of Freedom: African American Transatlantic Abolitionism in the British Isles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Fionnghuala Sweeney, *Frederick Douglass and the Atlantic World* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007); Michaël Roy, *Fugitive Texts: Slave Narratives in Antebellum Print Culture*, trans. Susan Pickford (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2022).

⁸ The list of scholars writing about early Black periodicals and editing has been growing in the twenty-first century. See, for example, Frances Smith Foster, “A Narrative of the Interesting Origins and (Somewhat) Surprising Developments of African-American Print Culture,” *American Literary History* 17, no. 4 (2005): 714–40; Ivy G. Wilson, “The Brief Wondrous Life of the Anglo-African Magazine; or, Antebellum African American Editorial Practice and Its Afterlives,” in *Publishing Blackness: Textual Constructions of Race Since 1850*, edited by George Hutchinson and John K. Young (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 18–38; Derrick R. Spires, *The Practice of Citizenship: Black Politics and Print Culture in the Early United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019); Todd Vogel, ed., *The Black Press: New Literary and Historical Essays* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001); Eric Gardner, *Black Print Unbound: The Christian Recorder, African American Literature, and Periodical Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Eric Gardner and Joycelyn Moody, “Introduction: Black Periodical Studies,” *American Periodicals* 25, no. 2 (2015): 105–11 (see also the accompanying articles in the issue); Benjamin Fagan, *The Black Newspaper and the Chosen Nation* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2016); Benjamin Fagan, “The Collective Making of *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*,” *Civil War History* 68, no. 2 (June 2022): 131–46; Jim Casey and Sarah Salter, “Challenges and Opportunities in Editorship Studies,” *American Periodicals* 30, no. 2 (2020): 101–04.

⁹ See David Mindich, “Understanding Frederick Douglass: Toward a New Synthesis Approach to the Birth of Modern American Journalism,” *Journalism History* 26, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 15–22; Frank E. Fee, Jr., “‘Intelligent Union of Black with White’: Frederick Douglass and the Rochester Press, 1847–48,” *Journalism History* 31, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 34–45.

¹⁰ See Benjamin Fagan, “Journalism,” *Frederick Douglass in Context*, edited by Michaël Roy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 108–20; Benjamin Fagan, “The Collective Making”; Sarah Meer, *American Claimants: The Transatlantic Romance, c. 1820–1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). (For Meer, see in particular chapters 4 and 5.)

Douglass’s 1845 narrative (highly abridged) as a tract and various issues of Douglass’s first two newspapers.¹¹ In both cases, the publications themselves—the tract produced without Douglass, the newspapers produced by Douglass—guided readers to take on the role of informal distributors, as we will see. Meanwhile, the three auxiliaries of Douglass under examination had varying relationships to these publications, ranging from producer to reader-distributor: E. M. Davis, an active participant in the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society, who produced the abridged reprinting of Douglass’s narrative for unsolicited distribution; Robert Gover, an elderly former slaveholder in Maryland newly taken with antislavery ideas, who mailed Davis’s tract to a state legislator who was not expecting it; and Benjamin Coates, a Philadelphia Quaker involved in the Pennsylvania Abolition Society and booster of antebellum Black newspapers and African colonization, who made small financial contributions to Douglass’s papers specifically for unsolicited distribution and personally sent through the mail unbidden copies. Taken together, Douglass’s printed materials and the efforts of his auxiliaries point to the significance of unrequested sharing.

Along with Douglass’s own “essential role,” the “effective circulation of Douglass’s *Narrative* was less the result of a concerted effort,” Roy explains, “than of a series of individual initiatives.”¹² With a focus on two spheres of Douglass’s professional output—autobiographical writing and newspaper editing—the argument that follows finds among such “individual initiatives” a shared practice, one that Douglass himself would come to value. More specifically, close attention to the design of the tract reprinting of Douglass’s narrative reveals how it solicited *yet more* individual efforts of a particular kind; namely, it overtly invites readers to become informal distributors of unbidden copies. With this early instance in mind of Douglass’s words repackaged to generate reader-distributors who would participate in unrequested sharing, we then are positioned to recognize what might otherwise go unnoticed: Douglass would come to appreciate such reader-distributors of later publications—his newspapers—with the newspapers themselves serving as venues for showcasing those efforts. Though it would be an overstatement to say Douglass orchestrated a full-fledged strategy to marshal reader-distributors or participated

¹¹ The tract is not the only reprinting of Douglass’s work in the period. Douglass’s lectures were sometimes transcribed by journalists and printed as stenographics in newspapers, which were reprinted by other newspapers. As part of his lecturing, Douglass developed a satirical “Slaveholder’s Sermon,” a transcription of which ran in a newspaper in Scotland and was reprinted as part of a pamphlet titled *Slaveholder’s Religion* and later as part of a book titled *Slavery and the Slaveholder’s Religion*, both by Samuel Brooke. The pamphlet was advertised in the *Pennsylvania Freeman* and sold at the Philadelphia Anti-Slavery Office. “Slaveholder’s Religion,” *Pennsylvania Freeman*, 9 July 1846, 3, *Newsbank: Selected America’s Historical Newspapers*; “Our Table,” *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, 1 May 1846, 3, *Newspapers.com*. The book was sold at the New York Anti-Slavery Office. “Book Repository,” *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, 19 July 1849, 3, *Newspapers.com*. We might wonder about individual efforts to share unrequested copies of “Slaveholder’s Sermon” in its various formats. Though not reprintings in the strictest sense, translations of Douglass’s *Narrative* were also available. See Roy, “‘Throwing pearls before swine’: The Strange Publication History of *Vie de Frédéric Douglass, Esclave Américain* (1848),” *Slavery & Abolition* 40, no. 4 (2019): 727–49, [Doi.org](https://doi.org/10.1080/17445019.2019.1644444). It is also worth noting that not all instances of reprinting Douglass’s words were motivated by antislavery sentiment; see note 5.

Moreover, Gover’s case is not the only instance of someone facing charges for circulating Douglass’s publications. Though apparently not an instance of unrequested sharing (if the defense’s claims are to be believed), Methodist preacher Jarvis C. Bacon was required to pay a fine after having shared a copy of Douglass’s *Narrative* with two interested White readers in Virginia. Roy, *Fugitive Texts*, 67.

¹² Roy, “Cheap Editions, Little Books, and Handsome Duodecimos: A Book History Approach to Antebellum Slave Narratives,” *MELUS* 40, no. 3 (2015): 77. Roy uses the same language—“individual initiative”—to describe the production of *Extracts*. Roy, *Fugitive Texts*, 68.

extensively himself in unsolicited distribution of his newspapers, we do find some loose coordination among Douglass and his auxiliaries. What emerges, then, is a story that suggests attention to the circulation practices of Douglass’s auxiliaries—some of which are documented in Douglass’s publications—can offer insights about Douglass, too.

Part I: Tracts for the Unwilling

Douglass found an unlikely auxiliary in one Robert Gover of Harford county, Maryland. According to the *Baltimore Sun*, the elderly Gover mailed an abridged edition of Douglass’s 1845 *Narrative* to a Col. William B. Stephenson, resident of Harford county, legislator, and “extensive slaveholder.”¹³ Gover stood accused of violating an 1835 act of the Assembly of Maryland (chapter 325), which forbade the “circulation among the inhabitants of this State, of ‘any pamphlet, newspaper, handbill or other paper, printed or written, of any inflammatory character, having a tendency to create discontent among, and to stir up to insurrection, the people of color of this State.’”¹⁴ “Until recently” Gover himself had been a slaveholder and is described by the *Sun* as one of the “most respectable citizens” of Harford County. The defense argued that the “infirmities of advanced age (about eighty years old)” led to an “impaired mind,” which was “most evident upon the subject of slavery, to the great annoyance of his numerous and respectable relatives in Harford and in our city.” While promoting antislavery ideas to Maryland relations caused private exasperation, circulating antislavery print beyond kin surely brought the family ignominy along with Gover’s legal trouble, the materials having been sent beyond Harford county to include Baltimore (“our city”), part of Baltimore county at the time and where the case was tried. Though Gover’s legal counsel successfully argued for “mental incapacity,” resulting in acquittal, the initial charge is a reminder that distributing such materials without assurance of the recipient’s desire for them could be not just socially but also legally hazardous.

The *Baltimore Sun* article reveals the journalist’s interest in the materiality of this particular “life of Frederick Douglass,” stating it to be a “pamphlet, printed in Philadelphia.” The journalist also states forthrightly what is not known: “how it came into the possession of the traverser does not appear.” The Baltimore paper’s curiosity about how the tract traveled southward to land in Gover’s hands stands out, particularly since Harford county is not a great distance from Philadelphia. Had Gover traveled to or ordered a copy through the mail from Philadelphia? Had he crossed paths with someone peddling abolitionist print in Harford county? The journalist’s statement may indicate, too, curiosity about Gover’s reasons for pursuing or accepting the tract: had he already arrived at an antislavery position, or did reading Douglass’s story lead him to it?¹⁵ Above all, the acknowledgment of what is not known would seem to hint at concern about the degree to which and various routes whereby Philadelphia antislavery materials flowed into Maryland, where slavery’s position was growing increasingly tenuous. While we do not know how (or why) Gover obtained a copy, we do know how Stephenson did—via an unsolicited mailing from Gover—and in this regard, Gover did precisely what *Extracts* itself instructed readers to do.

¹³ “State vs. Robert Gover,” *Baltimore Sun*, 6 December 1847, 2, Newspapers.com.

¹⁴ *Baltimore Sun*, 6 December 1847.

¹⁵ As Roy explains, given that Gover himself recently had manumitted his slaves, it is reasonable to wonder whether Douglass’s *Narrative* influenced the decision. Roy, *Fugitive Texts*, 68.

This tract version of the narrative—*Extracts from the Narrative of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*—states forthrightly that it was printed specifically for “gratuitous distribution” by E. M. Davis, a figure active in the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society.¹⁶ Though “gratuitous distribution” may seem straight-forward enough, close examination of the tract’s contents, including Davis’s arrangement and abridgement of content from the *Narrative* and the added paratext supplied by Davis, affords a better sense of the varied forms gratuitous distribution might take. Labeled number seven and eight, *Extracts* was part of a series of antislavery tracts Davis produced, which included such titles as *Extracts from the Slave Code*, *Declaration of Sentiment of A. A. S. Society*, and *Superiority of Moral over Political Power*.¹⁷ Philadelphia’s Anti-Slavery Office advertised these titles as “gratis tracts for general distribution,” a category distinct from another list of “tracts” and a list of “pamphlets.” It is not clear precisely how the Anti-Slavery office distinguished between *pamphlet* and *tract*, but cost would seem the predominant factor: each pamphlet includes a price whereas all tracts (except for the “gratis” ones) go for “1 cent each.”¹⁸ Though highly condensed, *Extracts* includes a wide range of memorable material from *Narrative*’s paratexts and main text, starting with an excerpt from William Lloyd Garrison’s preface, continuing with Douglass’s opening words regarding his lack of self-knowledge, and including other memorable events from later in the narrative, such as the murder of fellow slave Demby and Douglass’s overpowering of Covey. And yet readers familiar with *Narrative* may notice that the abridgments remove any trace of Douglass’s escape. It is true *Narrative* itself omits the precise details of *how* Douglass left, but the escape itself, its anticipation, and personal challenges in its aftermath loom large.¹⁹ In contrast, *Extracts* jumps from Douglass’s account of the altercation with Covey to a new paragraph where readers find Douglass—suddenly and inexplicably—in New Bedford. Curiously, then, this abridged version of Douglass’s story omits the escape nearly altogether.

¹⁶ While Goddu’s brief mention of *Extracts*, documented with an uncertain publication date “(1845?),” first brought Davis’s tract to my notice, Roy’s book has given the most extensive attention to it. Goddu, “Slave Narrative,” 159; Roy, *Fugitive Texts*, 67–8. In 1851, Davis was elected president of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society. Roy, *Fugitive Texts*, 68. Davis is identified as the Philadelphia agent for the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* in July (and most other months) of 1845. “Local Agents for the Standard,” *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, 3 July 1845, 4, Newspapers.com.

¹⁷ “Catalogue,” *Pennsylvania Freeman*, 15 January 1846. This notice refers to titles in “E. M. Davis’s series.” Another notice from the previous year in the same newspaper refers to Davis’s latest tract: “E. M. Davis’ Tract No. 9 is out and should be circulated with all possible despatch.” *Pennsylvania Freeman*, 4 December 1845, *Readex: Newsbank*. This notice helps narrow the timeline for when *Extracts* was published. See note 30.

¹⁸ Marcy Dinius locates the “tract” tradition within the realm of the religious and the “pamphlet” within the political. As she explains, “Following the founding of the New England Tract Society in Boston in 1814 and the American Tract Society in New York City in 1825 to mass-produce religious readings cheaply and circulate them as widely as possible, the tract was more commonly and closely associated with evangelical religious content.” Still, “contemporary scholars often use the words interchangeably.” Dinius, *The Textual Effects*, 116–17. In this regard, contemporary scholars would seem to follow antebellum habits for describing *Extracts*: it was reported on as a “pamphlet,” even as the document’s paratexts refer to it as a “tract,” and the Philadelphia Anti-Slavery office advertised it as a “tract.” “Catalogue,” *Pennsylvania Freeman*, 1846.

¹⁹ To be sure, *Narrative* details Douglass’s attempt to escape with a small group of friends (unsuccessful following a betrayal), describes his preparations for a second successful solo attempt while being hired out in the Baltimore wharves, belabors his reasons for omitting details of the escape itself (so as not to foreclose others’ opportunities), and allows readers to witness the brief thrill and longer terror of complete isolation upon arriving in New York before finding people he can trust who help him get settled in New Bedford. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845), 88–91, 102–7, 101–2, 107–11, *Documenting the American South*, Docsouth.unc.edu.

While we can speculate on what may have informed Davis’s abridgement choices, one effect is they invite readers to appreciate the use value of the material object in their hands—the tract. For *Extracts* might be said to shift, if only subtly, the emphasis from the drama of Douglass’s escape to the challenge of getting antislavery print into the hands of readers, a challenge *Extracts* itself was poised to meet. To recognize this aspect requires close attention to the particulars of the abridgement: the last portion of the main text—preceding an excerpt from Douglass’s “Appendix”—does not retain the paragraph break marking the final two paragraphs of *Narrative*.²⁰ (See Figure 1.) This combining of paragraphs means that the final paragraph of main text in *Extracts* focuses on a specific predicament Douglass encountered and its (somewhat mysterious) resolution—initially not being able to afford Garrison’s *Liberator* only eventually to become a “subscriber.”²¹ “In about four months after I went to New Bedford,” Douglass writes of his early fugitive experience, “there came a young man to me, and inquired if I did not wish to take the ‘Liberator.’ I told him I did; but, just having made my escape from slavery, I remarked that I was unable to pay for it then. I, however, finally became a subscriber to it.”²² In the original *Narrative*, these are the opening three sentences of the penultimate paragraph, which is followed by a final paragraph about Douglass’s foray into public speaking as a member of Garrison’s organization. In *Extracts*, however, the combining of these two paragraphs results in a new controlling idea for the final paragraph of the main text: the difficulty of subscribing to the antislavery newspaper—rather than a passing detail mentioned en route to Douglass’s rise—becomes the focus. Davis’s abridgment choices thus center attention on getting antislavery print to readers as *the* prevailing concern. In this way, Davis’s *Extracts* serves as an answer to the problem Douglass presents himself as having experienced in the *Narrative*: while a recently transplanted young Douglass could not afford a subscription to the *Liberator*, others similarly situated could now obtain another form of antislavery writing, a free tract edition of Douglass’s book. To return briefly to the known figures involved in sending and receiving *Extracts*, Robert Gover and William B. Stephenson, there is no indication that either fits this description—keen to read Douglass’s book but unable to afford it. However, Davis anticipated other challenges of

²⁰ Compare to the paragraph breaks that create the final two paragraphs in *Narrative*. Douglass, *Narrative*, 116–17.

²¹ Douglass, *Extracts*, 31.

²² Douglass, *Extracts*, 31. These details would be told differently ten years later in *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) where it is revealed that the newspaper agent signs up Douglass as a subscriber despite an inability to pay: “In four or five months after reaching New Bedford, there came a young man to me, with a copy of the ‘Liberator,’ the paper edited by WILLIAM LLOYD GARRISON, and published by ISAAC KNAPP, and asked me to subscribe for it. I told him I had just escaped from slavery, and was of course very poor, and remarked further, that I was unable to pay for it then; the agent, however, very willingly took me as a subscriber, and appeared to be much pleased with securing my name to the list. From this time I was brought in contact with the mind of William Lloyd Garrison. His paper took its place with me next to the bible.” Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, ed. David W. Blight (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 284.

The subsequent account of this experience in *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* is modified again, though little changed from the 1855 version. Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, revised ed. (Boston: De Wolfe and Fiske, 1892), 263, *Documenting the American South*, Docsouth.unc.edu. While the earliest (1845) account leads readers to believe that inability to pay meant subscribing was delayed until he “finally” made the subscription list, these later accounts suggest that Douglass became a subscriber despite inability to pay—most likely, via the arrangement of deferred payment. Throughout 1838, the year Douglass left Maryland, *The Liberator* lists an annual subscription as \$2.50 if paid “in advance,” whereas delayed payment—“in three months from the time of subscribing”—ran \$3.00. By the start of 1839, the three-month-window had been extended to six, and these terms remained in place throughout 1840, covering the timeframe in which Douglass began reading the paper. The Library of Congress has digitized the *Liberator*: loc.gov.

connecting readers to antislavery print, and these challenges—along with their associated potential readers who would seem to resemble Stephenson—are explicitly acknowledged in the tract’s paratext.

Not unlike the main text of the *Narrative* featured in *Extracts*, which underscores that Douglass eventually becomes a newspaper subscriber, Davis offers another path to become a paying reader of antislavery literature, a gratis tract facilitating a book purchase. “I have found it very difficult,” Davis writes at the end of the tract, “to make extracts from this work, it is so thrillingly interesting from beginning to end; but such as have been selected, I hope may induce every one who has read them, to procure the book and read the whole of it. It can be had for 25 cents at the Anti-Slavery Office No. 31 North fifth street.”²³ (See Figure 2, paragraph 1.) Reading a free, highly abridged reprinting of Douglass’s *Narrative* should lead one to North fifth street where the book could be purchased. Praising the book as “thrillingly interesting” perhaps indicates that readers of adventure tales overlap with consumers of reform literature. What is more immediately apparent, however, is that Davis thought it worthwhile to justify why a reader of the gratis tract still should purchase the book. Put plainly, *Extracts* was not intended to replace, compete with, or stand entirely separate from the book but at least in part to encourage book sales. (In this regard, Davis’s envisioning the tract-version leading to a book purchase most parallels those instances when Douglass as *North Star* editor sent out free copies with hopes the recipients would become future subscribers, as we will see.) This is not to say, of course, that the gratis tract was part of a profit-driven model; reform print culture generally and antislavery print culture in particular largely were motivated by noncommercial aims.²⁴ Rather, attending to the paratexts helps us consider the broader array of roles the gratis tract may have filled, one of which was to court book buyers or at least bring the tract’s readers into the Anti-Slavery Office where they might be persuaded to make purchases or contributions. We might wonder how many readers of *Extracts* followed the path Davis lays out to become paying customers at Philadelphia’s Anti-Slavery Office. Likewise, we cannot say whether Gover ever purchased Douglass’s book and thus followed in the fugitive author’s footsteps—as depicted in *Narrative* and Davis’s *Extracts*—to become one who paid to read antislavery literature. Even so, Davis’s abridgements alongside his instructions to readers make plain a path from free tract to purchased book.

At the same time, Davis’s paratext would seem to indicate *Extracts* is intended for readers not at all like the young Douglass who desired but could not afford the *Liberator*. “They [the tracts] are too valuable to be thrown away,” Davis explains: “Let them be circulated freely among all, particularly those who are not willing to be identified with the active Abolitionists.”²⁵ (See Figure 2, paragraph 3.) Who exactly does Davis have in mind when he refers to those “not

²³ Douglass, *Extracts*, 32.

²⁴ For attention to the noncommercial participation of religious, reform, and antislavery organizations in the production and circulation of printed materials up through 1840, see David Paul Nord, “Benevolent Books: Printing, Religion, and Reform,” *A History of the Book in America—An Extensive Republic: Print, Culture, and Society in the New Nation, 1790–1840*, vol. 2, ed. Robert A. Gross and Mary Kelley (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 220–46. For religious publishing in this era and beyond, see David Paul Nord, *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Candy Gunther Brown, *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789–1880* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004). For attention to “free print” in a comparativist framework, see Raven, ed., *Free Print*.

²⁵ Douglass, *Extracts*, 32.

willing to be identified with the active Abolitionists”—people with antislavery sentiment who are nonetheless worried about the social repercussions of being associated with “active Abolitionists”? Or those who lack antislavery sentiment altogether? Regardless, the paratext makes clear that free copies of *Extracts* are intended “particularly” for those short—not on cash but—on inclination. For these unwilling readers, little likely to darken the door of the Anti-Slavery office, (William B. Stephenson—the man to whom Gover sent a copy—likely among them), Douglass’s narrative would need to come to them. The gambit of reprinting Douglass’s book for this disinclined audience thus hinged on a specific format, the made-to-move tract.

Yet format was only part of the equation of getting Douglass’s story to those “not willing.” As scholars of book history assure us, circulation is not an inevitable outcome of publication, something Davis clearly knew.²⁶ Though somewhat hidden behind the passive imperative voice, the wording “[l]et them be circulated freely” is a directive for the tract’s readers to “circulate them.” In fact, the top of the first page includes the more explicit “Read and Circulate.” In addition to the handy tract format, readers-as-distributors would be needed—to return, again, to the Gover case—if people like Stephenson stood any chance of becoming readers. This is where Gover’s compliance with Davis’s paratextual instruction is evident: the Harford emissary took it upon himself to see the tract “circulated freely” to at least one person who was “not willing to be identified with the active Abolitionists.” Unsolicited distribution, we might say, was not necessarily the only role Davis envisioned for the tract, but as the paratext and Gover’s story indicate, it was a key part of *Extracts*’ design, even as Gover’s story may lead one to wonder what efficaciousness such a method of unsolicited distribution stood to offer.

While we do not know whether there were others whose receipt of *Extracts* is attributable to Gover, this tract, along with the others produced by Davis and given away at the Philadelphia Anti-Slavery Office, were not the only antislavery texts in which Davis had a role. In fact, Davis personally participated in the distribution of another antislavery publication, the production of which he had nothing to do. Roughly twelve years after printing *Extracts*, Davis sent a copy of Hinton Rowan Helper’s *The Impending Crisis of the South: How To Meet It* (1857) to one Dr. John K. Lee. Largely an economic argument against slavery penned by a writer from the North Carolina piedmont, Helper’s book generated attention, and Davis took notice.²⁷ In an undated presentation slip, Davis explained to Lee he had purchased five-hundred copies of the book “for gratuitous distribution” but was eager to acquire more: “I can circulate judiciously ten times that number.”²⁸ To approach this larger number, he would need help. From Lee, Davis requested a list of “the names, with post-office addresses, of any parties you would like the book sent to, and such amount of funds as you feel justified in contributing.”²⁹ In both instances—*Extracts* and *The Impending Crisis*—Davis prioritized unsolicited distribution, but as the creator of *Extracts*, Davis used the tract’s paratext to recruit readers as distributors while as someone uninvolved in the production of Helper’s book, Davis himself took up the role of reader-distributor. Furthermore, in the case of Helper’s book, we know Davis sought recommendations of individuals to whom he could send the book unsolicited: had Davis done likewise with *Extracts*?

²⁶ Robert Darnton’s frequently cited “communication circuit” visualizes the role of various actors in getting printed material from printer to reader. Darnton, “What Is the History of Books?” *Daedalus* 111, no. 3 (1982): 65–83.

²⁷ For more on Helper’s book, including its circulation, see David Brown, *Southern Outcast: Hinton Rowan Helper and the Impending Crisis of the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006).

²⁸ William E. Woodward, *Meet General Grant* (New York: Horace Liveright, 1928), 149.

²⁹ Woodward, *Meet General Grant*, 149.

Looking beyond Davis, we find evidence of possible involvement of others in *Extracts*' movement. The Anti-Slavery Society of Eastern Pennsylvania declared in August of 1845 that Davis's series, which reprinted various antislavery texts, had “widely circulated, with the aid of our friends, in different parts of this State and the neighboring States of Delaware and New Jersey.” Was *Extracts* (printed after 28 May but before 4 December) among these tracts?³⁰ Though Gover's story of mailing the tract to Stephenson alone does not necessarily confirm Goddu's keen speculation that *Extracts* “may have reached a wider audience than Douglass' more expensive volume,” it certainly does not negate it.³¹ Once we figure in the possibility that Davis may have not only produced *Extracts* but also been involved in assembling a mailing list and/or mailing unsolicited copies as he later seems to have done with Helper's book, we can imagine more possibilities for how *Extracts* may have made its way to readers. Irrespective of whether Davis's reprinting or Douglass's bound volume predominated in circulation, *Extracts* helps us recognize the role of unsolicited circulation undertaken by reader-distributors, a practice Douglass's newspapers would later showcase.

Part II: Newspapers for Non-Subscribers

Just as *Extracts* was intended for reluctant readers, so too did unsolicited circulation have a role to play in getting the *North Star* and *Frederick Douglass' Paper* to new readers, including those lacking interest. Less a practice of Douglass's, it was more so taken up by boosters of the papers. Even so, unsolicited circulation is not entirely absent as a method evident in the papers' pages. Before examining one particular reader's ongoing interest in sending out unrequested copies of Douglass's papers, I first turn to a few scattered references in the pages of Douglass's newspapers emanating from the editor's voice. When comparing unsolicited circulation as a practice of the paper to its use among readers, we discover that readers—who need not concern themselves with maintaining subscription lists—utilized the practice to a wider array of ends. At the same time, Douglass—by printing those efforts in his papers—can be said to facilitate the endeavors of reader-distributors.

The first issue (3 December 1847) demonstrates some of Douglass's uses for unsolicited circulation with references to the practice appearing more than once. The notice “Specimen Number” refers to sending out unsolicited copies specifically to secure new subscribers: “We send this number of our paper to a great number of persons at a distance, as a Specimen number, some of whom have ordered it, and some have not. Those wishing to continue the paper will forward *two dollars*, otherwise it will not be sent again. Our next issue, No. 2, will be on the first Friday in January, and regularly every Friday of each week thereafter.”³² As a sample issue, the “Specimen number” allowed a “great number” of recipients the opportunity to peruse the paper without financial obligation. While those who ordered the free issue would seem likely candidates for future subscribers, Douglass had less assurance anything would come of sending

³⁰ “From the Pennsylvania Freeman. Eighth Annual Meeting of the Anti-Slavery Society of Eastern Pennsylvania,” *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, 11 September 1845, 1, Newspapers.com. We do not know the month of *Extracts*' publication in 1845. But assuming Davis printed the tracts in order, we can say that since *Extracts* is no. 7 and 8, its publication would have been between after 28 May (the publication date of Douglass's *Narrative*) and before 4 December when it was announced that Tract No. 9 was available. See note 17.

³¹ Goddu, “The Slave Narrative,” 159.

³² “Specimen Number,” *North Star*, (Rochester, New York): 3 December 1847, 2, *Library of Congress: Chronicling America*.

the issue to those who had not requested it. Sending out free issues in these terms came with no promise of payoff in the form of new subscribers.

Though newspaper offices may come to mind as predictable places for an editor to send free issues, it seems unlikely he has such recipients in mind here, given the practice of newspaper exchanges was common in the period whereby editors entered into arrangements where they swapped issues through the U.S. postal service at no cost.³³ But Douglass may have sent the “Specimen number” to organizations with reading rooms, particularly since it was not uncommon for individuals to make a gift of subscriptions to such groups.³⁴ For example, the Buffalo’s Young Men Association includes in its published *Annual Report* from 1852 an itemized list of newspaper and periodical subscriptions available in the Association’s library, listing “Frederick Douglass Paper” [sic] as having been “donated” by one George Johnson.³⁵ Sending a free issue to a literary organization or reading room could turn into subscriptions after all—whether for the organization or individual readers who chanced on the donated issue there.

Whether or not Douglass has such fraternal organizations in mind, he assuredly is thinking about individuals as recipients. To be sure, another reference to the practice in the first issue provides a particular example of the “some [who] have not” ordered the Specimen number. In an article titled “Free Papers,” Douglass famously supplies transcriptions of both the bill of sale documenting his transfer from Thomas Auld to Hugh Auld and the manumission papers signed by the latter. With hallmark withering sarcasm, Douglass frames both documents as “evidence of our right to be free in this democratic and Christian country.” But for our purposes here, what is most noteworthy—if initially easy to overlook—is the short sentence preceding the first document: “We shall send him [Thomas Auld] a copy of this paper.” Though it is certainly true that Auld may have been interested in becoming a subscriber, Douglass’s announcement of mailing him a free copy surely communicates something other than an effort to secure Auld as a paying reader. This first issue of the *North Star* thus illustrates how Douglass turned to unsolicited circulation not only to generate subscribers but also to showcase rhetorical bravado.

Even so, perusal of multiple issues of the paper over time reveals that the practice of sending out free issues primarily comes up in reference to the ongoing need for subscribers. Over two years after the first issue, Douglass again mentions sending copies to those who had not ordered the paper. The intention—just as it was in sending out sample copies of the first issue—

³³ See Laura J. Murray, “Exchange Practices among Nineteenth-Century U.S. Newspaper Editors: Cooperation in Competition,” in *Putting Intellectual Property in Its Place: Rights Discourses, Creative Labor, and the Everyday*, by Murray, S. Tina Piper, and Kirsty Robertson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 86–109.

³⁴ While the term “gift subscription”—purchasing a subscription to a periodical for someone else—is common to twenty-first-century periodical culture, it does not seem to have been in usage in the antebellum U.S. Nonetheless, there are references here and there to the concept. For example, one advertisement for *Schoolfellow* (described as a “magazine for boys and girls”) leads with “A Gift for Children” and states a one-year subscription costs one dollar. *Independent* (New York), 8 May 1856, 5, Newspapers.com. From the “Godey’s Arm-Chair” section of *Godey’s Lady’s Book* appears a testimonial about the value of the magazine, leading with “A New Year’s Present”: “We respectfully suggest to the gentlemen that a copy of the ‘Lady’s Book’ for the ensuing twelve months would be a very suitable gift, and no doubt very acceptable New Year’s gift either to a wife, daughter, or sweetheart.” It follows up to say, “The Virginia ‘Sentinel’ makes this remark; it is not ours.” *Godey’s Lady’s Book and Magazine*, December 1855, 567, *Google Books*, Google.com.

³⁵ *Sixteenth Annual Report of Executive Committee of Young Men’s Association of the City of Buffalo* (Buffalo: Charles E. Peck, 1852), 13. The same information appears again the next year. *Seventeenth Annual Report of Executive Committee of Young Men’s Association of the City of Buffalo* (Buffalo: Jewett, Thomas, and Co., 1853), 16. *Google Books*, Google.com.

explicitly concerns generating subscribers: “The North Star is sometimes sent to friends who do not take the paper, in the hope that they may see fit to subscribe for it. Subscriptions and donations for the same may be safely enclosed, addressed to Frederick Douglass, Rochester, New York” (22 February 1850).³⁶ The term “friends” could be non-specific, newspaper parlance. But since the *North Star* is an abolitionist paper, “friends” likely refers to those known to be in reform circles not currently on the list of subscribers, a reminder that editors of antislavery periodicals competed for subscribers from a shallow pool. Perhaps the wording “[s]ubscriptions and donations for the same” simply indicates that whether one wishes to subscribe to the paper or send a monetary contribution to support the paper, either can be sent in the same manner, “the same” referring to the *North Star*. Yet “for the same”—if read as referring to “subscriptions”—would seem to indicate the *North Star* office is eager to receive “donations” specifically to fund the practice of mailing issues to “friends who do not take the paper.” Again, the emphasis is on securing new subscribers with gratis copies mailed “in the hope that [recipients] may see fit to subscribe for it.” Via monetary contributions earmarked for unsolicited distribution, the paper’s current subscribers can assist the newspaper in growing its subscription list. We might recall the previously discussed penultimate paragraph of Douglass’s *Narrative* (the final paragraph in Davis’s *Extracts*) where Douglass presents himself as numbering among abolition’s supporters unable to afford a subscription to the *Liberator*. While Douglass himself did not receive donated issues of the *Liberator*, perhaps beneficiaries of such gifted copies of the *North Star* would, like the young Douglass, find themselves better positioned at a future time to become paying subscribers.³⁷

As we have seen, Douglass saw value in sending, from time to time, unbidden copies of his paper to recipients, primarily to generate subscribers. The handful of instances discussed above, of course, does not tell us how frequently the paper went out from the Rochester office in this capacity. But the appearance in the paper of these few and scattered references may have given the paper’s readers ideas to do something similar themselves. Regardless of where the idea originated, however, the practice was not limited to Douglass as supporters of his newspapers also participated, and their motives may have been somewhat different from Douglass’s. In some instances, we know of individuals who paid for more than one subscription, presumably for distribution to others, likely including those who had not sought out the publication. For example, Cincinnati-based abolitionist Sarah Ernst was committed to Garrisonian abolition but

³⁶ Leigh Fought points out that Douglass’s assistant, Julia Griffiths, was perceived by at least one of the paper’s subscribers as responsible for such approaches. Fought describes Griffiths’s handling of an accusation from the sister (Debra Weston) of a subscriber (the Garrisonian Maria Weston Chapman) whose request that the subscription be suspended while she was out of town was ignored. The papers piled up. Fought explains Griffiths’s logic: “[Griffiths] argued that she did not expect Chapman to pay the bill for unwanted papers. Instead, knowing that Chapman’s unclaimed papers were given away to interested parties who might become subscribers, she considered the uncompensated copies an investment.” Fought goes on to say, “Griffiths happily mailed complimentary copies to potential subscribers.” Leigh Fought, *Women in the World of Frederick Douglass* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 114–15. While scholars continue to puzzle out the degree of Griffiths’s and others’ roles in the day-to-day operations of Douglass’s papers, I refer to these efforts as within the purview of the editor’s role, even as Griffiths and others may have been acting on behalf of Douglass at various times.

³⁷ While the 1845 narrative indicates Douglass would have to wait to become a subscriber, subsequent accounts raise the possibility that Douglass became a subscriber despite inability to pay. Most likely, he was placed on a deferred payment plan. (See note 22.) Is it possible, however, that he received, for a time, a gratis subscription funded by a *Liberator* patron?

maintained a relationship with Douglass after he parted ways with Garrison.³⁸ Moreover, in seeking to cultivate a broader antislavery network, she contributed to efforts outside the Garrisonian fold; as part of this endeavor she sustained multiple subscriptions to *Frederick Douglass' Paper*. Though what she did with the duplicate copies goes unexplained, we can assume they were given away. She disclosed privately, in fact, that it was to forestall criticism of favoring Garrison's organization over other abolitionist groups that led her to pay for multiple subscriptions.³⁹ Participation in distributing Douglass's papers thus could be motivated by various intentions.

Particularly illuminating of the practice of unsolicited distribution of Douglass's papers are the letters of Philadelphia Quaker Benjamin Coates. A member of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society and Pennsylvania Colonization Society—at once antislavery and pro-colonization—Coates's correspondence reflects an ability to maintain relationships with people on all ends of the political spectrum with respect to slavery, abolition, and colonization, even as he vociferously argued the merits of his stripe of antislavery.⁴⁰ Via the mail service, Coates distributed printed materials, including various newspaper issues and pamphlets, to his correspondents in hopes of advancing his reform agendas. Coates and Douglass were in correspondence, and Douglass published some of their respective letters in both the *North Star* and *Frederick Douglass' Paper*.⁴¹ The Philadelphian was keen on persuading Douglass of the merits of African colonization and later the African Civilization Society, both of which Douglass criticized. Their differing approaches to antislavery notwithstanding, Coates and Douglass found unsolicited distribution of Douglass's newspapers worthwhile but for different reasons, reasons that have less to do with differing antislavery politics and more to do with their respective positions as newspaper booster and newspaper editor.

Coates's main approach to supporting Douglass's papers was through small financial contributions earmarked for unsolicited distribution. In a 1 January 1851 letter to Douglass, Coates refers to the five dollars enclosed to purchase a subscription to Douglass's *North Star*.⁴² More than enough for an individual subscription, which ran two dollars, the remaining money should be put toward “sending copies of the paper occasionally to prominent Southern men, members of Congress and others, where you think they will do the most good.”⁴³ As previously discussed, *Frederick Douglass' Paper* would later run a notice that appears to invite financial

³⁸ For Ernst and Douglass's ongoing affiliation, see Robert K. Wallace, “Finding His Voice on the Road, in the Lecture Hall, and in His Newspaper: Frederick Douglass in Cincinnati in 1852,” *New North Star* 1 (2019): 18–33.

³⁹ Stacey M. Robertson, *Hearts Beating for Liberty: Women Abolitionists in the Old Northwest* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 107.

⁴⁰ For examination of debates about African colonization that played out in Pennsylvania, including specific attention to Coates, see Beverly Tomek, *Colonization and Its Discontents: Emancipation, Emigration, and Antislavery in Antebellum Pennsylvania* (New York: New York University Press, 2011). (See in particular chapter 6 for its focus on Coates.) For more on Coates, see Emma J. Lapsansky-Werner and Margaret Hope Bacon, eds., *Back to Africa: Benjamin Coates and the Colonization Movement in America, 1848–1880* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005).

⁴¹ For documentation of letters exchanged between Coates and Douglass, see John R. McKivigan, ed., *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, Series Three: Correspondences, vol. 1, (Yale University Press, 2009); John R. McKivigan, ed., *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, Series Three: Correspondences, vol. 2, (Yale University Press, 2018). The accompanying digital *Frederick Douglass Papers Project* reproduces letters calendared in the printed volumes: Frederickdouglasspapersproject.com.

⁴² Benjamin Coates to Frederick Douglass, 1 January 1851, in *Back to Africa*, Lapsansky-Werner and Bacon, eds., 72–75. (Originally published in *The North Star*, 16 January 1851.)

⁴³ Coates to Frederick Douglass, 1 January 1851, 72.

contributions specifically to offset the cost of sending out unsolicited issues to “friends.” Here Coates would seem to anticipate the request (providing money for unsolicited mailings of the paper) but with a distinction: Coates believed in getting copies into the hands of readers who would *not* be considered “friends” of the antislavery cause.

By no means a mass mailing campaign, Coates’s participation in disseminating the *North Star* nonetheless has something to tell us about the circulation of Douglass’s newspapers beyond the subscription route. First, not unlike Douglass, Coates thought it important to broadcast the attainments of Black Americans to counter racial prejudice. Roughly 1,500 words, the letter opens with a focus (approximately one-fourth of the letter) on the value of Black-edited newspapers as “among the best vindications of the capacity of colored man to fill respectable positions in society.”⁴⁴ Such papers would carry persuasive power when “read by those who need information as to the capabilities of our colored population for other pursuits besides waiting on table, blacking boots, or wheeling barrow.”⁴⁵ Coates is clearly thinking not only about the problem of slavery but also about the limited opportunities available to the free Black population. For Coates, Black newspapers (he singles out Samuel Ringgold Ward’s Syracuse-based *The Impartial Citizen* as another impressive paper) may be the “best vindication” not only because the work of running a newspaper displays the achievement of the editor but also because the news covered within the publications’ pages showcases an array of African American attainments.⁴⁶ But just as significant in this regard may have been the advertisements, which displayed Black businesses and services, such as James McCune Smith’s medical practice.⁴⁷ As Coates saw it, these displays of African American achievements inevitably would lead to social and political gains: “Their efforts for mental improvement as exhibited by their Papers, and the talents they there show themselves to be possessed of, must lead to the successful assertion of their rights.”⁴⁸ To no small degree, then, for Coates the *North Star* was worth circulating because of its evidentiary function. Second, singling out of “members of Congress” indicates that Coates saw value in getting the paper into the hands of political leaders. Notably, there is no indication these are lawmakers sympathetic to the antislavery cause. In fact, the further emphasis on another category of potential recipients for Douglass to consider—“*prominent Southern men*”—explicitly points to a desire to place the *North Star* in front of presumably antipathetic readers. Though it might be tempting to assume Coates aimed for mere goading, the Philadelphia philanthropist would seem to have made the suggestion with earnest hopefulness about its efficacy.⁴⁹ Coates’s letter is evidence of belief in the power of print to change minds, his

⁴⁴ Coates to Frederick Douglass, 1 January 1851, 72.

⁴⁵ Coates to Frederick Douglass, 1 January 1851, 72.

⁴⁶ Coates to Frederick Douglass, 1 January 1851. Frances Smith Foster and Robert Fanuzzi explain that defining a “black newspaper” is hardly straight-forward and can depend on whether one prioritizes editor, contributors, subscribers, etc. See Foster, “A Narrative of the Interesting Origins” and Fanuzzi, “Frederick Douglass’s ‘Colored Newspaper’: Identity Politics in Black and White,” in *The Black Press: New Literary and Historical Essays*, ed. Todd Vogel (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 55–70.

⁴⁷ In the *North Star*, James McCune Smith ran a recurring brief advertisement for his New York medical practice: “Dr. J. M’Cune Smith, 93, West Broadway.” See, for example, the issue from 14 January 1848, pp. 3. *Library of Congress: Chronicling America*, Loc.gov.

⁴⁸ Benjamin Coates to Frederick Douglass, 1 January 1851, 72.

⁴⁹ See Lapsansky-Werner and Bacon for discussion of what they describe as Coates’s “mediator posture.” As they explain, “Coates was never shy about writing to anyone who shared his interests, or who might be persuaded to share them.” Coates participated in ongoing communication with a wide array of people who held differing ideas about slavery and the future of Black Americans in the U.S. Lapsansky-Werner and Bacon, *Back to Africa*, 30, ix.

suggestion that Douglass send copies “where you think they will do the most good” indicating a specific metric: good may be transacted wherever a mind might be changed via a Black-edited newspaper.

Most significantly, Coates’s letter was not private correspondence. Douglass ran it in the *North Star* later that month (16 January 1851). As the rest of the letter spotlights Douglass’s and Coates’s ongoing disagreement over African colonization, the letter’s publication points to Douglass’s distinctive willingness to run pieces on an array of political opinions at odds with his own. But the letter’s publication indicates something else: it offers readers a model for how they, too, could support circulation of the *North Star* at minimal cost. While the Philadelphia philanthropist—again, one who differs significantly from Douglass on antislavery doctrine—supplies financial support, the editor determines where to send the copies. It is hard to say whether Douglass would have agreed with Coates that sending the paper specifically to “*prominent Southern men*” would be worthwhile. Despite the announcement about sending Thomas Auld a copy of the paper, Douglass’s primary interest in unsolicited distribution, as we have seen, was with building the subscription list.⁵⁰ But another letter years later (17 April 1856)—this one unpublished—from Douglass to Coates reveals the editor to be a happy participant in the basics of this arrangement.⁵¹ In this private correspondence, which showcases their ongoing yet cordial disagreement about colonization, Douglass concludes the letter with a request: “Please send me any names you may have to whom you think my Book or paper will be acceptable, and either shall be promptly sent as you shall direct.”⁵² (Whether the “Book” refers to the *Narrative* or *My Bondage and My Freedom* [1855] is unclear but may refer to the latter since it had just been published the previous year).⁵³ This later unpublished letter shows Douglass, then, turning to Coates for a list of suitable recipients of unsolicited mailings. Since

⁵⁰ Since Douglass seemed to prioritize building the subscription list, we might assume it depends on whether he thought it likely that such readers—regardless of motivation, which could include sympathy/agreement as well as disagreement or a desire to surveil abolitionist print—would become subscribers.

⁵¹ Foner reproduces the complete letter. While reiterating their ongoing differing opinions on colonization, Douglass praises Coates for his “earnest and disinterested endeavors to promote” the interests of Black Americans. “To Benjamin Coates, Esqr.,” *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass: Pre-Civil War Decade, 1850–1860*, ed. Philip S. Foner, vol. 2 (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 387–8. This unpublished letter (“Frederick Douglass to Benjamin Coates”) also has been transcribed in *The Frederick Douglass Papers*. See Series 3: Correspondence, vol. 2, pp. 182–83). Here the transcription retains a crossed-out word from the letter, omitted from the Foner edition: “Please send me any names you may have to whom you think my Book or paper will be ~~received~~ acceptable—and either Shall be promptly Sent as you Shall derect,” 183. This change from “received” to “acceptable” would seem to underscore Douglass’s emphasis on sending the free material to those considered likely to be eager and approving readers.

⁵² Frederick Douglass to Benjamin Coates, 17 April 1856, 183.

⁵³ By late January of 1859, Douglass began running a notice that promised the following: “To any person who will send us *five dollars*, with the names and addresses of five new subscribers, we will send a copy of ‘MY BONDAGE AND MY FREEDOM,’ a book of nearly five hundred pages, neatly bound, embellished with a likeness of the author, and other engravings. *The book will be sent, postage paid*, to any person who will send us the names of five subscribers, with *five dollars*.” Giving away copies of *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) four years after its publication would seem to indicate an inventory of unsold copies, but would Douglass have been eager to give them away in 1856? Regardless, this advertisement shows Douglass linking free book distribution—an instance of what scholars call a “literary gift”—to building his newspaper subscription base. See “Inducement,” *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 28 January 1859, *New York Heritage Digital Collections*, Nyheritage.contentdm.oclc.org.. For more on the concept of the literary gift, see Leon Jackson, *The Business of Letters: Authorial Economies in Antebellum America* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2008); David Faflik, *The Literary Gift in Early America* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2025).

Douglass specifies addresses where Coates assumes the reading material “will be acceptable,” we can see Douglass thinking like an editor here: unlike Coates, who sees unsolicited mailing as opportunity to persuade the unpersuaded, Douglass is most interested in sending out free copies—whether of the book or paper—where the prospect exists of courting future newspaper subscribers. These distinctions notwithstanding, both the published letter from Coates and unpublished letter from Douglass reveal a means by which Douglass’s paper made its way to readers who had not requested it. Above all, by publishing Coates’s letter in the *North Star*, Douglass broadcast a model of financial support for unsolicited dissemination of Douglass’s paper, perhaps eliciting participation from others.

Douglass’s publishing an ostensibly private letter demonstrating how readers could help with unsolicited circulation was not a one-off. Just over a year later, Coates again wrote Douglass (25 February 1852), who now had been overseeing *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* for roughly nine months after having merged the *North Star* with the *Liberty Party Paper*.⁵⁴ This time Coates sounds more despondent about ongoing challenges facing the free Black population and lack of support for Black-edited newspapers, particularly from Black readers. After making an aside to advocate for African colonization (he cannot resist an opportunity to champion this cause, it seems), he returns to his true purpose in writing Douglass, which is to offer financial support for the circulation of *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, despite their ongoing disagreement about colonization. “My object in writing,” Coates explains, “was to say that if my *mite* will be received towards the circulation of your paper, or in any other manner aiding your efforts to promote the anti-slavery cause and the improvement of your brethren, please make use of it as you think *best*.”⁵⁵ Whereas Coates’s previous letter specifies the amount sent, here we know only that it is a small contribution (his “*mite*”). Again, Coates prioritizes “circulation of your paper,” even as he acknowledges Douglass may have other ideas for how to use the money.⁵⁶ Though the previous letter specifies unsolicited mailings, this one does not. We might assume, however, that Coates presumes Douglass would understand him to mean the model of unrequested mailings from the earlier letter.

Even as Coates alludes to making a donation for getting the paper to readers who have not sought it, he also calls more explicit attention to Douglass’s subscribers:

Yet if you decline on that ground, you will allow me to make it as a donation for the cause of the oppressed. And as I do not wish to do anything to injure your cause in any way, nor to call forth any personal remark on myself, it will probably be best not to make any acknowledgement yet in your paper. I have no desire to see my name in the paper in any shape, and instead, henceforth, not to hurt the feelings of any of the subscribers to your paper, by seeing in it the name of one so thorough [sic] devoted to the colonization cause as I am known to be.⁵⁷

The “ground” is Coates’s support for colonization. Here Coates suggests that Douglass may be inclined to reject the contribution, refrain from running the letter, or leave off Coates’s name

⁵⁴ Benjamin Coates to Frederick Douglass, *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 20 May 1852, *Frederick Douglass Papers Project*, frederickdouglasspapersproject.com.

⁵⁵ Coates to Frederick Douglass, *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 20 May 1852.

⁵⁶ Coates to Frederick Douglass, *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 20 May 1852.

⁵⁷ Coates to Frederick Douglass, *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 20 May 1852.

because the men disagree on the issue. Yet since Coates already knows Douglass to be an editor who regularly publishes content with which he disagrees, including Coates’s own letters, this portion of the letter is likely performative, a rhetorical move to call Douglass’s open-mindedness to the attention of the paper’s readers, for Coates anticipated the letter would be published. Still, Coates acknowledges that running a paper is tricky business (one must take care “not to hurt the feelings of any of the subscribers”), underscoring that the concerns of the editor can diverge from those of the paper’s boosters. Whatever the case may be, Coates’s 1852 letter—not unlike the previous one—contains a model for supporting the circulation of Douglass’s newspaper. The new emphasis here is that one can support efforts to circulate Douglass’s paper even if the editorial stance actively opposes one’s own approach to antislavery; as Coates puts it, “I am indebted to you for publishing what I know you do not approve.”⁵⁸ As with the previous letter, Douglass saw fit to publish it (20 May 1852). Running Coates’s letter thus allows Douglass to show he accepts contributions to aid the paper’s circulation from those advocating competing antislavery agendas.

While these first two published letters allow Coates to model financial support for unsolicited distribution of Douglass’s papers, another letter reveals Coates’s personally sending unbidden issues of the paper by post. On 17 September 1858, Douglass published on the front page of *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* a longer letter from Coates, this one similar to the two prior letters as it extols the merits of African colonization and praises Douglass for his labors on behalf of Black Americans.⁵⁹ But for our purposes what stands out is Coates’s description of mailing unasked-for copies of the paper. “In discussing the slavery question,” Coates writes, “with a wealthy intelligent slaveholder,” he found the man insistent that African descendants could not “become useful citizens.” Coates continues, “Well, I sent this gentleman a few copies of your paper, and when I next saw him, asked him what he thought of it.” Whereas the first letter from Coates references a financial contribution explicitly for unsolicited circulation of the paper, and the second letter does so less explicitly, both feature Coates as a behind-the-scenes, albeit publicly acknowledged, financial supporter of the circulation of Douglass’s papers. Here in this third letter, however, Coates demonstrates he, too, participates directly in mailing unasked-for copies. Coates’s interaction with the southern acquaintance illuminates another way in which individual subscribers of Douglass’s papers took part in circulating them—outside a build-the-subscription-base model. To be sure, Coates’s motivation—for mailing Douglass money to facilitate circulation to other readers and for sending copies to his own acquaintances—was ideological: he sought to persuade anyone who would listen that slavery was a problem in part by exposing them to Black-edited newspapers by Douglass and others. His focus, it should be clear, was not necessarily on generating subscribers for Douglass’s papers.⁶⁰

This letter also includes details further revelatory of how Douglass’s newspaper was shared with less-than-eager recipients. Coates personally delivered to this acquaintance not one issue but “a few copies” of *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*. Though he “sent” them through the mail, Coates clarifies his relationship with the man was not limited to correspondence but rather

⁵⁸ Coates to Frederick Douglass, *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 20 May 1852.

⁵⁹ Benjamin Coates, “Emigration and Colonization,” *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 17 September 1858, 1, *Library of Congress: Chronicling America*: Loc.gov. (The letter is dated 1 September 1858.) This letter also has been reproduced at the Frederick Douglass Papers Project: frederickdouglasspapersproject.com.

⁶⁰ Though it is not clear whether he read the issues Coates mailed him and though he remained unpersuaded by Coates’s argument, the recipient’s reply indicates some familiarity with Douglass: “‘O,’ he replied, ‘Fred. Douglass is half white.’” Benjamin Coates, “Emigration and Colonization.”

involved a person he “saw” with some frequency. These details suggest Coates found ways to share the newspaper as part of extended conversations that unfolded both in person and through the mail, indicating a degree of intimacy absent from an editor’s sending out unsolicited copies. Perhaps most significantly, this example complicates easy distinctions between *solicited* and *unsolicited*. Unlike the example of Gover’s sending *Extracts* to Stephenson, this scenario concerns someone with whom Coates already was in conversation, and this detail may help explain why Coates did not find himself summoned by the courts as Gover did, despite the fact that Coates and the acquaintance were not politically akin.⁶¹ While this correspondent did not seem to request a copy of *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, it still may not be accurate to describe this instance of circulation as *unsolicited*, for it involves two acquaintances conversing on a topic pertaining to the contents of the paper. Admittedly, then, the solicited/unsolicited distinction can be reductive. Nonetheless, attending to the specifics of how individuals shared Douglass’s newspapers helps us not only trace the various means by which the paper made its way to unlikely readers but also allows us to delineate more precisely the particulars of those pathways.

Douglass’s papers were not the only Black-edited publications Coates supported with both money and personal distribution. In Thomas Hamilton’s *Weekly Anglo-African*, Coates found another periodical worthy of support. A letter from Hamilton (19 September 1859) confirms Coates as a subscriber: “Your [sic] of the 17th containing Five Dollars (\$5) for subscriptions to the ‘Weekly Anglo African’ is rec. I will forward the back nos. thro our mutual friend Mr. Pinney.”⁶² As with the *North Star*, Coates sent five dollars, which in both instances paid for more than one subscription. However, Coates purchased these subscriptions to the *Weekly Anglo-African* and had them sent to him rather than advising Hamilton to mail them unsolicited. Presumably, Coates desired more than one subscription to maintain a stock of issues available to send through the mail to strangers and/or share with acquaintances. Hamilton’s letter also references a future contribution Coates had promised to another publication of Hamilton’s, the *Anglo-African Magazine*. “You will please accept my thanks for your kind offer,” Hamilton writes, “to be one of 10 or 20 to give \$10 each toward making up a Library fund. I am happy to say that I have already rec. the pledge + cash of two others.”⁶³ As Emma J. Lapsansky-Werner and Margaret Hope Bacon explain, a “movement” was underway “to raise enough money to buy subscriptions of the *Anglo-African Magazine* to place in all the public libraries in the United States.”⁶⁴ Rather than an individual endeavor, the library fund was a loosely organized effort, albeit a small-scale one, to make the magazine more widely available. Lapsansky-Werner and Bacon clarify that Coates made good on the promise: a subsequent issue of the *Anglo-African Magazine* lists Coates as having sent the ten dollars.⁶⁵ Like Coates’s participation in the distribution of Douglass’s papers and purchase of multiple subscriptions to the *Weekly Anglo-African*, the collective effort on behalf of the *Anglo-African Magazine* was not aimed at generating subscribers but, rather, focused on making it available to new readers. Of course, as previously suggested when considering where Douglass may have sent specimen numbers,

⁶¹ The location of the “southern gentleman” is not disclosed, but since Coates mentions him to be someone he visits with in person, we might assume the man to be in the upper South, perhaps Maryland or Virginia, both of which had in place legislation to prevent the circulation of antislavery print at this time.

⁶² Letter from Thomas Hamilton to Benjamin Coates, Lapsansky-Werner and Bacon, *Back to Africa*, 149.

⁶³ Lapsansky-Werner and Bacon, *Back to Africa*, 149.

⁶⁴ Lapsansky-Werner and Bacon, *Back to Africa*, 149, 340n.

⁶⁵ Lapsansky-Werner and Bacon clarify that confirmation of Coates’s donation would appear in the November 1859 issue. Lapsansky-Werner and Bacon, *Back to Africa*.

placing the periodical in public libraries certainly could lead to subscribers. Still, what should be apparent is that building the subscription-base was not the goal in any of these examples involving Coates, marking a significant distinction from Douglass’s limited uses for unsolicited circulation in his role as editor.

Running an antebellum periodical was not for the faint of heart as any study of the period’s newspapers attests, and this was certainly true for Black-edited papers.⁶⁶ Editors had to keep their subscription lists foremost in mind or suffer the fate of yet another fallen paper. We might look beyond the realm of newspapers for insight: the AASS created a Tract Fund in 1854, printing abolitionist ephemera for gratis distribution. But compared to its previously discussed well-known efforts from the 1830s, it was a significantly scaled-back endeavor. By 1854, the “AASS could barely afford the costs of publication,” Roy explains, “so it was important that copies ended up in the hands of people who might actually be won over—as opposed to white southerners who would burn them.”⁶⁷ Keen as the AASS was to circulate its materials indiscriminately, it had to temper its tactics with financial reality. Those running the AASS, then, are not unlike Douglass who must balance accounting books, a responsibility that surely informed his approach to unsolicited distribution.⁶⁸ In contrast, those operating as individuals or as part of loosely organized collective efforts—unburdened by the struggle to keep an organization or publication financially solvent—could turn to creative ways to make Douglass’s newspapers available to readers, including those presumed least likely to become subscribers.

Considered together, *Extracts* and Douglass’s antebellum newspapers point to a certain interconnectedness among the printed objects, their producers, and the readers who shared them with others. Namely, the printed objects themselves—the tract and Douglass’s papers—encourage readers to become informal distributors. Davis as producer of *Extracts* and Douglass as editor of the newspapers have similar roles: whereas Davis provides explicit paratextual instruction urging readers to become distributors, Douglass prints Coates’s letters, which model how readers can participate in unsolicited distribution—whether by dollar or deed. His newspapers thus became venues for showcasing how readers could participate in unsolicited distribution. Readers of Davis’s pamphlet and Douglass’s newspapers received encouragement, explicit or subtle, to take on a new role in Robert Darnton’s “communications circuit” as reader-distributors. Those who accepted the invitation—by, say, sending an unasked-for copy of *Extracts* to an elected official, paying for an extra subscription to the *North Star* earmarked for unsolicited circulation, or treating an acquaintance unexpectedly to a few issues of *Frederick*

⁶⁶ For attention to Douglass’s own self-awareness of the challenges facing African American newspapers, see Fanuzzi, “Frederick Douglass’s ‘Colored Newspaper,’” 60–61.

⁶⁷ Roy, *Fugitive Texts*, 52.

⁶⁸ This is not to suggest all editors of antislavery newspapers took the same approach to unsolicited mailings. The *National Era*, for example, had some limited use for the practice when it came to members of Congress: “According to custom, we send a number of the *Era* to every member of Congress, simply to remind him that there is such a paper at the Capital, so that he may order it, or not, as he pleases. It is the only number that will be sent without being ordered,” *National Era*, 8 December 1853, p. 2, Newspapers.com. A notice in the *Radical Abolitionist*, November 1855, likewise, seems to indicate some use for the practice: “Take notice, that we do not make any charges for papers sent to those who have not ordered or subscribed for them.” *Radical Abolitionist*, November 1855, 28. In fact, mailing unsolicited issues was a practice that varied among mainstream newspapers more generally. A notice in the *Missouri Statesman* (Columbia, Mo.), titled “To Non-Subscribers,” reads as follows: “Very frequently we send a number of the *Statesman* to our friends who are not subscribers hoping, that by a perusal of it, they may be induced to subscribe.” *Missouri Statesman*, 11 February 1849, 1, Newspapers.com. Whatever the specific approach to unsolicited mailing, generating subscribers unsurprisingly would seem the prevailing concern for newspaper editors across the board.

“Sharing Frederick Douglass in Antebellum America”

Douglass' Paper—thereby joined the ranks of Douglass's auxiliaries. It is true that unrequested sharing can be difficult to trace. Despite the potential for sensational reaction, most instances of one individual sending to another a publication of Douglass's surely transpired with no trace left in archival or print records. Nonetheless, attention not only to instances of individuals participating in unsolicited distribution but also to the printed materials that encouraged such sharing adds to our growing understanding of how Douglass's publications moved in antebellum America.

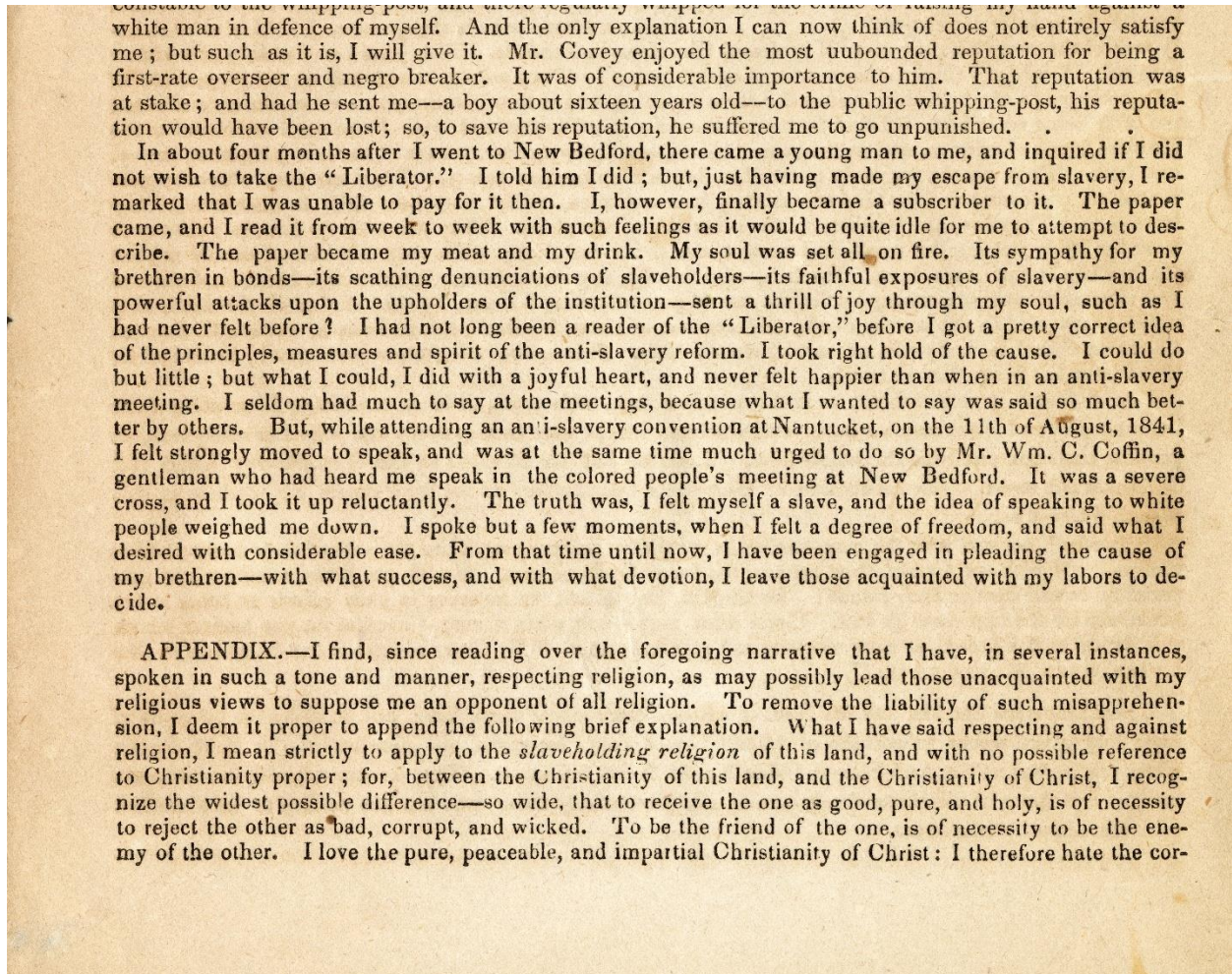


Figure 1: From page 31 of *Extracts*, the final page of content from the main text of *Narrative*, followed by Douglass's Appendix. Image courtesy of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

“Sharing Frederick Douglass in Antebellum America”

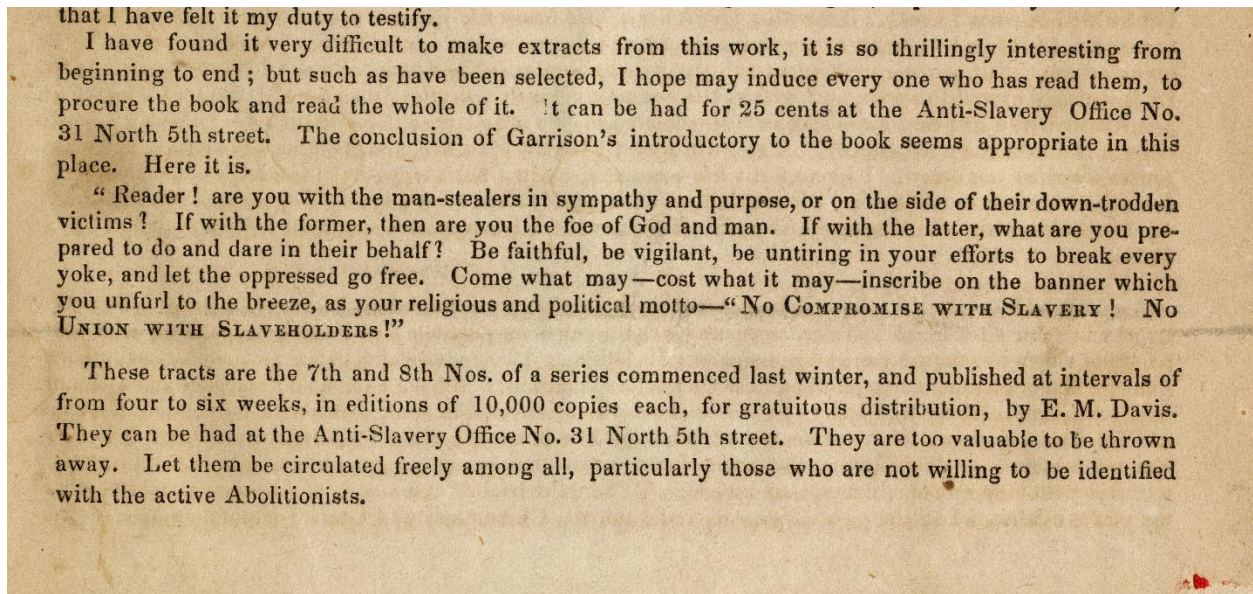


Figure 2: From page 32 of *Extracts*, the final three paragraphs of the tract. Image courtesy of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. (Please see separate tif file.)