

NEW NORTH STAR

Volume 7: 2025



**Published by the Frederick Douglass Papers
Institute for American Thought
IU School of Liberal Arts, IU INDIANAPOLIS**

NEW NORTH STAR

John R. Kaufman-McKivigan and Jeffery A. Duvall, Editors

Published Annually by the
Frederick Douglass Papers

Our Aims and Scope

The *New North Star* is an open-access online journal featuring new scholarship on the activities and ideas of nineteenth century African American abolitionist Frederick Douglass and the world with which he interacted. Articles also are desired that assess Douglass's impact on events following his lifetime, including current events. The journal is looking for articles in a broad range of disciplines, from history to literature, communications to anthropology. As in the spirit of its namesake, works of fiction and poetry on topics pertinent to Douglass also will be considered for publication. The *New North Star* will feature interviews with authors of new scholarship on Douglass as well as reviews of that recently published literature. The journal is intended for teachers and students as well as scholars, hoping to help bridge the gap between new scholarship and the classroom. Articles describing new techniques on teaching about Douglass and his world are welcomed. The *New North Star* will be maintained by the staff of the Frederick Douglass Papers at IUPUI and hosted on that project's website. Instructions for submitting articles to the *New North Star* can be found on the [journal's website](#).

NEW NORTH STAR

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Return to Holme Hill Farm in the 1850s

Ezra Greenspan
Southern Methodist University

Frederick Douglass stated the plain facts of his birth in the opening sentence of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*: “I was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough, and about twelve miles from Easton, in Talbot county, Maryland.” Missing from his statement of origins was mention of Holme Hill Farm, a tract of five hundred acres of marsh, woodland, and cultivated fields and orchards lying along the western shore of Tuckahoe Creek, which was named and surveyed in the early 1660s shortly after the establishment of Talbot County. It passed through a succession of hands before purchase by Edward Lloyd IV in 1794 and sale, in 1802, from Edward Lloyd V to the chief overseer of his dozen farms, Aaron Anthony. On that middle-sized, grain-growing farm passed down by three generations of Anthonys, in a small log cabin built with landlord’s consent by their Father/Grandfather Isaac Bailey, were born more than a dozen babies descended from Grandmother Betsey and Isaac Bailey during the first decades of the nineteenth century, including the future Frederick Douglass.

Once six-year-old Frederick Bailey moved first to the Lloyds’ Great House Farm (Wye House), then to Baltimore and from Baltimore to various points north, Holme Hill was out of sight, though never far out of mind. For nearly all the remaining descendants of Grandmother Betsey and Mother Harriet Bailey, Holme Hill remained home. It was not continuously so physically, though, once the successive deaths of Aaron Anthony (in 1826) and his children Lucretia (1827), Richard Lee (1828), and Andrew Skinner (1833) led repeatedly to divisions of the Anthony family’s personal and real estate, and consequent separations and dispersions of portions of the Bailey family. Not until the legal maturity of third-generation John Planner Anthony, in 1851, did Holme Hill become an Anthony family working farm on which the scattered members of the Bailey family bequeathed to him returned to their place of origin. From that date, it would remain their home until emancipation reached Maryland on 1 November 1864.

On 22 January 1851, John Planner Anthony (1830–71), son of Andrew Skinner Anthony and grandson of Aaron Anthony, marked a critical rite of passage. To commemorate his arrival at legal manhood and full inheritance as a property-owning White Southern male, he appropriated the ledger kept by his stepfather, White Barwick, and inscribed in his best, boldest calligraphy,

Log Book
January 22nd 1851 Wednesday
Twenty-One years old to day¹

¹ These details, and many that follow, come chiefly from the journal that Anthony kept from 1851–52, with a few stray entries also for 1853; MSA SC 564, Anthony Papers, Mary A. Dodge Collection, Msa.maryland.gov, scan 685, Maryland State Archives (MSA).

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Complying with legal obligation, he rode out several weeks later to Orphans’ Court in Easton to take formal custody of his estate, releasing caretaker Thomas O. Martin “of and from all debts, monies and demands due me as his said Ward . . . and for all negroes due me and in his hands as Guardian.”²

Young master Anthony had prepared carefully for the day; indeed, all his life had been a preparation. In the weeks before leaving St. Michaels to take possession of ancestral Holme Hill Farm on Tuckahoe Creek, he purchased a stock of basic household and farming necessities, including bed, chairs, desk, clock, plough, scythe, chickens, geese, and a horse with the good Eastern Shore name of Ivanhoe.³ Neighbors helped. One was Daniel Lloyd, a slave-rich relative of the master of Wye House, who prepared a housewarming present of a sow and four pigs.⁴ Tallied among his outlays, in addition, was eight dollars eighty-one cents toward “clothing per blacks.” Joining Anthony in the move were his mother Anne, his sister Lucy, and “the old man” (White Barwick). How long they remained with him is unclear, but in any event from January 1855 the house had an additional presence once he married sixteen-year-old Sarah Tharp Masten from Kent County, Delaware, a member of a prominent family. With the birth of daughter Harriet Lucretia nine months later, the Anthony family succession would be assured for another generation.

Just as fundamentally, he brought together on his farm the ingredient most essential, not to mention indispensable, for its profitable operation: his bequeathal of about a dozen slaves. On or about this gray, rainy January day, two generations of Baileys, including Frederick Bailey Douglass’s brother Perry, sister Kitty, and cousin Stephen, along with their spouses and children, assembled at the place of their birth and earliest years. What was a homecoming for Anthony was also one for the Baileys; it could hardly have been one without the other so intertwined were the two families. For the Baileys, however, the collective return to Holme Hill Farm also marked a reunion a long time coming after division, separation, redistribution, sale, and hiring out had dispersed them among various locales in Talbot County. Now, in 1851, with all of Aaron’s children deceased and grandson John P. come into his patrimony, a main branch of the Bailey family descended from Grandma Betsey had a common home.

They lacked, however, the figure who had presided as no other person, White or Black, owner or servant, ever had over the creeks, woods, and marshes of Holme Hill Farm: family matriarch Betsey Bailey. Betsey had died about a year earlier at age seventy-five on the home grounds of master Thomas Auld—she who had seen the dispersal of her dozens of children and grandchildren but not their reunion on common ground.⁵ Even before her passing she was launched on a vibrant afterlife thanks to grandson Frederick’s searing portrayal in his 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, which memorialized her for posterity as mother/grandmother Rachel bereft of her children:

The hearth is desolate. The children, the unconscious children, who once sang and danced in her presence, are gone. She gropes her way, in the darkness of age, for a drink of water. Instead of the voices of her children, she hears by day the moans of the dove, and

² Talbot County Register of Wills, Distributions, 1845–59, p. 115, MSA.

³ Anthony journal, MSA.

⁴ Entry for 25 January 1851, Anthony journal, p. 169.

⁵ Someone from the Anthony family added the update, “Bet died 1849,” to the well-known page of Aaron Anthony’s ledger he denoted, “My Black People ages”; Ledger A, Dodge Collection, Msa.maryland.gov, scan 373, MSA.

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by night the screams of the hideous owl. All is gloom. The grave is at the door . . . my poor old grandmother, the devoted mother of twelve children, is left all alone, in yonder little hut, before a few dim embers. She stands—she sits—she staggers—she falls—she groans—she dies—and there are none of her children or grandchildren present, to wipe from her wrinkled brow the cold sweat of death, or to place beneath the sod her fallen remains. Will not a righteous God visit for these things?

Douglass’s sentimentalized account of “my poor old grandmother” undoubtedly was meant to do dutiful service to the antislavery movement. It was, if anything, intended more for William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, and Edmund Quincy and their followers in the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, which had published the work, than for his own people. He performed this literary labor so magisterially that Betsey Bailey of Tuckahoe quickly took her place alongside Mother Harriet and Aunt Hester, also prominently characterized in its opening chapters, in the gallery of Bailey women adopted by the Anglo-American reading public as personifications of enslaved womanhood—of women, on the one hand, exploited, beaten, and raped; and on the other hand, of women life giving and sustaining. But for the living, breathing Douglass, committing his memories to paper at his table in frozen New Bedford, memory of Grandmother Betsey brought home to him associations grown remote as his life tracked further in time and place from his Eastern Shore childhood. Distanced from the site of his memories, he reclaimed his grounding in conjuring her spirit.

What she meant to Douglass was not necessarily what she meant in her final years to the dozens of Bailey grandchildren on the Eastern Shore. She had walked the road with them not just between Tuckahoe and Wye River but through all the ways and byways of their early years. Not just that; she had delivered some of them, as she had their mothers, into the world. To them she was more continuously a living, breathing presence as mother/grandmother, guardian, care giver, and teacher to three generation of Eastern Shore relatives whom she had midwived, nursed, raised and taught the arts of fishing, weaving, midwifery for a generation after Frederick’s childhood—not to mention, midwifery to the rising generation of Bailey women. The final resting place of her physical remains—most likely either in the vicinity of the Auld residence in St. Michaels or in the slave burial ground at Holme Hill—is indeterminate. Memory of its location died with her grandchildren.

John P. Anthony came well prepared to the task at hand as master of Holme Hill. Born and raised chiefly in rural Talbot and Caroline counties, he was thoroughly at home in the demands of country life. He had some formal schooling, principally at the hands of St. Michaels resident Nathan Wilson, a liberal Quaker well known to teenaged Frederick Bailey and older sister Eliza Bailey and mentioned in Douglass’s *Narrative* as a supporter of his short-lived effort to organize a Sunday school for local slaves.⁶ Whatever benefit organized schooling afforded him, John P.’s primary life training was in the fields and creeks; and with a sizable inheritance dangling before him as motivation, he learned the vocation of farming well. By the time he arrived at Holme Hill after a mobile youth divided between a family farm in Caroline County, Baltimore, and St. Michaels, he had a good working knowledge of Eastern Shore grain agriculture, pomology, animal husbandry, and fishing.

⁶ *Narrative of the Life*, p. 55.

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He also had a quite extensive network of fellow farmers and merchants stretching from Chesapeake-facing Easton, St. Michaels, and Wye River plantations westward across Talbot County to Tuckahoe Creek and over into the Hillsboro neighborhood of adjacent Caroline County. Some of the family names that appear in his ledger and juvenile guardian reports were also familiar enough to teenaged Frederick Bailey to appear in the memoirs and endure in the memory of Frederick Douglass: Lloyd, Skinner, Paca, Covey, Auld, Sears, Hambleton, Tilghman, names inscribed in the annals of early Talbot County. Anthony would also have been acquainted with other names even more intimately familiar to Frederick Bailey/Douglass, such as his just-across-the-creek Black neighbors, the Murrays and the Waymans (family of the future A. M. E. bishop Alexander Wayman, dear friend to both Anna and Frederick and the speaker at first cousin Stephen Bailey’s funeral in 1894). Anthony was also well acquainted with ship captains on the Choptank and Tuckahoe and in Easton, essential figures for transporting his produce to Baltimore and other markets. Closer to Holme Hill, he joined and took an active role in the local Hillsboro lodge of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows.⁷ In short, he made himself quickly at home, a fixture in the economic and social life of his neighborhood.

Like his cohort of property-owning male friends, he was an avid outdoorsman and took pleasure as well as earned profit from the surrounding bounty. He sauntered out frequently in his free time, which might fall at any hour of day, into the woods and creeks that surrounded his and neighbors’ lands to go “a gunning,” “a hunting,” “a ducking,” “a fishing.” When at pleasure, he went alone or with friends; when for profit, more often with “the boys” (his adult slaves). He was skillful with gun, rod, and seine alike. He shot partridge, squirrel, duck, fox (on special occasion), rabbit, and rail; fished shad (endless shad), herring, and mullet—and rarely returned home emptyhanded. His pleasure was often his profit.

What did he do with his catch? His distribution ran the gamut between gift and commercial exchange. Sometimes he brought his catch back home for domestic consumption. He rarely did his own cooking, relying on Kitty or one of the other Bailey sisters, but on one occasion he even tried his hand at making a “Philadelphia stew” of partridge and squirrel for a friend. Just as often, he sought profit, selling quantities to fish hucksters, local traders, even free Black neighbors. The county assessors had valued his property as having “the best fishery on Tuckahoe creek,” and he spent such considerable time there that fishing must have made up a substantial secondary source of his income.⁸ On rare occasion, he might give a small percentage of a day’s catch to either Stephen Bailey or Perry Bailey Downs, though never normatively as a reward for their labor.

Whatever his manner of distribution, he kept methodical count of quantity and payment of catch and output, no matter whether from field, creek, or woods. His language and numeration were typically enlisted in the capitalistic practice of profit-based exchange. Adept with sums, he followed the family custom of careful account keeping. For years his guardians had bought him copy books and spellers, whether for formal or domestic schooling, but in some more formative sense young John P. was effectively homeschooled, learning the habit and method of keeping good accounts from his forefathers. Some years after his grandfather Aaron’s death, John P. gained access to, and eventually possession of, his account ledgers and adorned them with doodles and sketches, as of the kinds of sailing vessels teenaged Frederick Bailey wistfully

⁷ His certificate of membership, dated 28 April 1851, passed through several generations of Anthonys before its donation to the Oxford Museum, Oxford, Md.

⁸ Talbot County Register of Wills, Guardian Bonds, C1866–7 and –8, Book for 1830–39, p. 285, MSA.

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described as skimming across the Chesapeake. This was not simply child’s play; in time he studied those account books and preserved them—and so, after him, would two descendant generations of Anthonys as possessors of what the post-Civil War family had come to regard as their heritage, up to their deposit in 1961 by John P.’s granddaughter to the state archives of Maryland.⁹

Whether mastering the form of numbers, letters, and accounts; or the practices of farming fishing, and hunting, Anthony internalized and enacted an overriding ethos of possessive individualism. Like his forbears, he exerted force on both the natural and the human world pronominally by wielding the first-person single possessive. On the corn, the wheat, the oats, the apples, the watermelons, the turnips—on all the produce that grew out of the ground or from the trees due to intensive human labor—and on his dog, horses, poultry, cows, pigs, sheep, and turkeys Anthony branded his distinctive marker: “my.” Even on an old survey map dating back to his grandfather’s possession of Holme Hill he inscribed his ownership: “These papers relate to my land on Tuckahoe creek J. P. Anthony.”¹⁰ Its usage so dominates the daily ledger he kept for 1851–52 one might call it his chief signifier.

To exemplify the pattern, here’s a sampling of a typical week of Holme Hill Farm activity as recorded in the ledger, rendered typographically in a manner that approximates its unpunctuated shorthand:

[20 December 1851] “commenced my Mediterranean wheat rather afraid of it too afraid it is heated seeded fifteen bushels of it”

[25 December 1851] “finished getting in my corn,” or nearly all. “went to the school house in the morning and voted for Exec[?] Trustees”

[27 December 1851] “finished getting in my corn in the field and commenced seeding again”

Perhaps the most striking characteristic of this shorthand writing style is its elimination of agency or personhood. One might ask not just of these but also of most other entries in the ledger: who “commenced,” who “finished,” who “seeded,” and more broadly who performed the labor that produced *my* harvest of Mediterranean wheat, *my* white corn, *my* oats? This erasure of human agency, separating subject from object, producer from product, pervades Anthony’s ledger from beginning to end. In its specific application on Holme Hill Farm, no matter how unintentionally or unconsciously adopted, it constructs an impassable hierarchical barrier between master and slave.

The fact of the matter is that Anthony performed far less of the farm labor than did either of the two figures most active in his fields, gardens, orchards, patches, barns, outbuildings, and roads: Stephen Bailey and Perry Bailey Downs. Their presence in the ledger is everywhere, their personhood virtually nowhere. Anthony relied on these two men, day in and day out, in part because the amount of labor needed to conduct Holme Hill’s multifaceted, decentralized, labor

⁹ In 1961, Mary A. Dodge, great great granddaughter of Aaron Anthony, donated her family’s papers, including grandfather John P. Anthony’s journal, to the state archives. Her correspondence with archive director Morris Radoff about the donation is in the Maryland State Archives. MSA S1275–1–564, Administrative file for Mary A. Dodge Collection, MSA.

¹⁰ 1812 resurvey prepared for Aaron Anthony, in Mary A. Dodge Collection, MSA SC 564, MSA.

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intensive mode of farming by far exceeded whatever he himself could perform; and in further part because for much of this recorded period Anthony was frequently too ill, probably with malaria, to put in a full day's work, during especially bad spells even to leave the house. This logic governs the ledger's typical phraseology of diurnal activity: Stephen, Perry, or the boys as “sent,” “lent”, “employed” to do whatever it was they were instructed on that specific day to do. Only rarely does Anthony, in his role as master account keeper, credit them with the fruit of their completed labor: Stephen accomplished this, Perry accomplished that. More generally, the fields to which the men were assigned got seeded, the fence posts they were sent to dig or fix got repaired, the goods they were dispatched to collect got delivered to or from the farm, the ditches (whether Anthony's or those of someone to whom he lent or rented his slave) got dug. To switch the figure of speech, they were invariably positioned by their young master downstream from the motive engine of activity they paradoxically generated.

Another primary characteristic of Anthony's ledger is that it was a masculine accounting that documented an adult male worker's set of activities. Women were seldom present, rarely affective. There are, however, a few notable exceptions, as when Stephen's wife Caroline is reported to be helping in the fields during harvest season, or when Perry's wife Maria is reported to be in hysterics one evening due to daughter Isabella's alarming illness. But the most striking exception to the rule is the seemingly incongruous reportage that Anthony gives of women's labor par excellence: on two occasions, he reports Caroline Bailey in childbirth.

Here is the entry for the earlier birthing, followed seemingly incongruously by the next day's entry:

[26 February 1851] “Negro woman Caroline [her name interlineated above “woman”] taken about 2 o'clock at night in child birth. Sent Stephen after old Jenny came before day.”

[27 February 1851] “Mr. Anthony Boothe came over to my house about 11 o'clock to see me about a negro boy we bargained after a while I am to let him have him for a term of three years provided he treats him well which time will be up on the 27th of February 1854 Caroline's child born about 2 o'clock girl child Old Granny went home in the evening all right.”¹¹

One unnamed Negro child in, one unnamed Negro child out of the Anthony household, is a story line that in Anthony's hands seems inadvertent, unconnected. The name of the “girl child” is lost to history; she seems not to have survived long enough to appear in federal census returns or other official records. The name of the latter child, Nathan, emerges only in a later entry, though detached there from any personal information about age or parentage. He was, however, the seven-year-old son of Frederick's younger sister Kitty, and the instant transmissibility of so young a child would have shaken the whole enslaved population of the farm.

Nathan's indenture to the farm of Mr. Boothe begs the question: what disposition of slave master was twenty-one-year-old John P. Anthony?¹² More to the point, how was he disposed to the Bailey family he had inherited from his own? One might respond with the usual distinction advanced by contemporaneous defenders and opponents of slavery alike that slavery conditions

¹¹ The midwife was Jenny Needles, who had attended in the 1840s to Caroline, Kitty, and Maria, sometimes on multiple births; Anthony journal, p. 161.

¹² The indenture might have terminated prematurely after Boothe died in early 1852; Talbot County Register of Wills, Minutes, 1852–55, p. 46, MSA.

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on the Middle Border were far less harsh than those down in the Cotton or Rice States. The most eloquent exponent of this view, curiously, was Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose just published *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was all the rage at all levels of citizenry nationwide in 1851–52 and which a family as well versed as the Anthonys would have been familiar with. Stowe plotted her homiletic tale of American slavery geographically and personally as a descent from the relatively mild conditions of the Shelby farm in Kentucky to the infernal depths of Deep Southern brutality of Simon Legree's Red River plantation in Louisiana—although Uncle Tom's descent is precipitated when the “benevolent” Shelby separates Tom from his family and sells him down the river in order to pay off debts. Although ferociously countered not just by Douglass but by such other Black sons of the Middle Border as Kentucky-born William Wells Brown and Henry Bibb and Maryland-born James W. C. Pennington in their polemical writings, not least their fugitive slave narratives, the distinction held fast in mainstream views of slavery for decades.

At first glance, Anthony may seem to conform loosely to this supposed pattern. His ledger documents no outright acts of cruelty—no whippings, no deprivations, no confinements, no displays even of anger or animosity. He states no frustration—he also states no gratitude—whatsoever with their conduct. Except for his assignment of Nathan to Mr. Boothe, he seems to have exercised a general commitment during this period to keeping together the rest of his human property. One might go further and argue, to the contrary, that in the several years documented in his ledger Anthony performed occasional acts of lenience or consideration to the Baileys. He lends Stephen his seine one day to go fishing (although he keeps for himself three-quarters of Stephen's catch); he allows Perry, Caroline, and Caroline's son George to go to town unaccompanied to see a show, while tasking Stephen to remain behind to store his corn; he authorizes Stephen to go unescorted to a camp meeting outside the nearby hamlet of Chapel and shows no worry that Stephen returns only the next morning; he allows Perry to go to town to witness a hanging; he sends for the doctor three times when Maria is seriously ill. Most significantly, for a decade he did something his father and grandfather most definitely did not: he kept the Bailey family intact—at least up to the Civil War.

How does one explain his behavior and motivation? Kindness, charity, and/or affection seem irrelevant to a relationship founded on a different principle. A more plausible answer is an all-embracing, presumptive expectation of subordination and dependency, the necessary consequence of possession-based racial distinction. Anthony counted and relied on the Baileys' labor, which was available at all hours, responsive to all conditions and circumstances, convenient to whatever his needs, and readily affordable. Rationalized superiority, however, might spill over into something quite else. One instance is an event that broke through the quiet stillness of a winter's night on this outlying farm; here is the full entry:

[21 January 1852] “Boys hauling and cutting wood with Pilot and Ivanhoe some time in the night a stray cat fell down the well consequently she took a severe cold and died and steven took her out in the morning felt rather sheepish about drinking the water next day morning had to drink it though taken with another chill about a hour before day almost dead”¹³

Anthony's internal monologue, recorded in this clipped shorthand, leaves gaps in narrative logic and human agency that require uninvited outsiders to supply continuity via interpretation. A plausible rendering of the key portion of the passage might be this: A cat fell

¹³ Anthony journal, p. 132.

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into the well and drowned; Anthony, apprised, summoned Stephen to remove it but, though queasy about drinking from a possibly contaminated water source, nevertheless did, and shortly afterward fell violently ill, attributing his distress to the water. Whether he gave mind to the effects of contaminated water on his slave population goes unmentioned. What did he care?

The answer to that question is the likely answer to another question: Why did Anthony address—and address twice—Caroline’s childbirths in a journal that all but ignores the presence of women?¹⁴ Anthony provides no explanation, leaving even less context for interpretation than in the cat episode. But at the innermost core of the logic by which he lived his life as master of Holme Hill Farm, twenty-one-year-old John P. Anthony, still a bachelor, conducted his and his people’s affairs according to the operating presumption that Caroline’s babies were *his* future workers. This was a compelling logic for an agricultural entrepreneur who had the labor of only two able-bodied men in the early 1850s but who could count, *sub specie aeternitatis*, on a substantial increase once *his* preadolescent, prepubescent Baileys developed into productive/reproductive adults. The births of these children followed the line of their mothers’ births, carefully set down in family ledgers by Aaron Anthony and his descendants in ruled, vertical columns designated for dollar amounts. On that naturally recurring basis, John P. Anthony had entered his manly estate.

Now, to turn to the Baileys of Holme Hill Farm during the decade preceding the Civil War. We have unfortunately no portal allowing direct access to the lives of the large African American majority that populated the “single” family farm. We do, however, catch occasional views of their persons and shadows, some via refraction from Anthony’s journal and account books, some from county records, and some via extrapolation from the general situation of Maryland’s enslaved population in the closing years of its foundational institution.

Maternal first cousins Perry (1813–80) and Stephen (1819–94) served as Anthony’s mainstays. Operating the farm with no overseer, brothers, cousins, or hired men to share the burden of labor, Anthony relied heavily on these two indispensable workers. Each man performed a multitude of tasks, including days when Anthony himself was too sick to work or was engaged in activities, including recreation, off the farm. Each man was necessarily a jack of all trades. By and large the cousins worked independently at the hundred-and-one jobs assigned them on and near the farm, but occasionally, when the job required, they worked side by side. Whereas in the previous fifteen years they had been hired out annually in exchange for the cash return, from 1851 on they were indispensable to the Anthony home operation. Their young master generally paired them categorically, even grammatically, far more often than he worked them in tandem: Stephen doing this, Perry doing that. But occasionally, likely subliminally, he found an internal rhyme for their joint, separate labor: “Stephen mauling, Perry hauling,” or vice versa. The specifics hardly mattered.

They did of course to Stephen and Perry. They labored six days a week, and sometimes, during busiest bursts of seasonal activity, days stretched into evenings. Anthony occasionally allowed them “holiday” late on Saturday, and Sunday was sabbath for all residents of the farm. On sabbath and special occasions, the Anthonys attended their church or their camp meetings, the Baileys theirs. Whether Anthony preached some version of White evangelical Christianity to them, as Thomas Auld did to Douglass’s disgust, is unknown, but it likely would have made

¹⁴ The second birth, on 20 August 1853, comes as a stray, solitary entry that postdates the daily record by more than a year; Anthony journal, p. 113.

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little difference to their core belief. Stephen’s religious devotion long preceded the coming into his life of this latest generation of Anthony, and it long outlived his passing; after the Civil War he would be a founder of the Bethel A. M. E. Church in Denton, Caroline County, and serve as one of its chief figures for the duration of his life as a free man, as in turn would oldest son George. Caroline’s devotion was itself an article of faith in the minds of her children and grandchildren, whose own religiosity would become well known communally in postwar decades. Less is known about the religious practices of Perry and Maria and their descendants, and Kitty and hers, but a reasonable surmise would be that they too became active members of Black church and community wherever their post-enslavement lives took them.

Caroline, Maria, and Kitty had no lack of domestic responsibilities. Foremost was mothering. The cycle of birthing and mothering begun in the 1840s continued throughout the 1850s, which is why the most effective way of reconstructing their lives, in the absence of most other means of personal evidence or historical documentation, is again through their reproductive histories. Caroline, who would give birth approximately every twenty-four months over a thirty-year span, bore at least five children before the move to Holme Hill, two more in the three-year period of Anthony’s journal, at least three more before the Civil War, and at least two more in the years after her husband returned home in 1867 following his three-year enlistment in the Union Army.¹⁵ Maria pretty much matched her cousin’s childbearing rate up to the war. She had given birth to no fewer than six children before 1851, at least three of whom had died before the move to Holme Hill, and she bore at least two more before the Civil War, at which time outside events interrupted her marital relations. Less is knowable about Kitty, who was likely married to a possibly free man named Perry Wilson, who arrived with two children, the aforementioned Nathan (b. 1844) and Henry (b. 1847)—Henry, who in one of the rainbow arcs of reunification that characterize countless post-Civil War African American family histories, would eventually come to live with his mother in 1877 on Uncle Frederick’s Cedar Hill estate overlooking the national capital.¹⁶

All three mothers had lost children at birth or shortly afterward, but Kitty suffered an especially great abundance of sorrows, no fewer than three children even before the return to Holme Hill. One was her first born, in 1839 (no known name); another a son named Sam born in December 1844 who died in 1846; and another, a year or two later. Little though we know about Sam personally, one prominent fact does survive: he was born into a Bailey cohort, since his aunts Caroline and Maria were also close to delivery—Caroline to daughter Laura in February 1845, and Maria to a baby (name unknown) months afterward. Missing from this close-knit sorority of Bailey women was Arianna, the next born sister after Kitty, who had died in childbirth sometime during her year of service in 1848. Her passing seems to have received no more formal notice than the guardianship report filed with Orphan’s Court the following year for the “orphan” (meaning the fatherless) John P. Anthony: “Money paid to John Mason for making coffin for servant Arianna, belonging to orphan in 1848, as per account and receipt April 14, 1849.”¹⁷ One of the most tragic of the cohort of children descended from Harriet Bailey, Arianna

¹⁵ Statistics are based on the slave lists kept by the Anthony family in account ledgers and the 1870 federal census; the latter details only the children who survived to that date; Anthony ledger A, scan 376.

¹⁶ Perry Wilson’s name joins Kitty’s in the court filing against John P. Anthony’s attempted apprenticeship of their son; Talbot County Register of Wills, Orphans Court Proceedings, 1862–67, p. 212, MSA.

¹⁷ Talbot County Register of Wills, Guardian Accounts, 1849–51, JP 15, p. 182, MSA.

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left a legacy of infant mortality; none of her four or more pregnancies yielded a child known to have survived its mother. The identity of the father(s) is blank.

The three Bailey women came to Holme Hill after spending nearly all their teenage years hired out to families either on nearby farms or in town. They therefore came well prepared to perform whatever tasks, indoors and out, to which the Anthony household put them. A busy farm with multiple operations and a home with no other housekeeper would have kept them and their daughters busy, in addition to the responsibility of feeding, cleaning, and watching out for their youngest children—and in due course, after 1855, also for those of their master and mistress. The servant sisters’ responsibilities broadened as Anthony children came approximately with the frequency of Baileys: Harriet Lucretia (1855), Mark (1857) Richard (1861)—and, after emancipation—Ruth Ann (1865), Mary Masten (1867), and John Planner Jr. (1871).

Firstborn daughter Harriet Lucretia (1855–1930), the fourth generation Anthony most devoted to her family’s history and legacy, retained vividly happy memories of growing up on her family farm alongside companionable Bailey children and adults. On scraps of paper serving as a first draft of a brief memoir of Holme Hill, she jotted down childhood memories of life on the farm, including vignettes of the Black children with whom she played and snippets of commentary about their parents. Particularly vivid in her sepia memories of days of yore was the figure of “Aunt Kittie,” whom she remembered as “head house servant” in the big farmhouse. “We loved her devotedly,” she remarked at a half-century distance, although even then she showed little awareness that her family’s devotion to Aunt Kittie might not have correlated to Aunt Kittie’s sense of devotion to the Anthony household. “Uncle Perry” too she remembered fondly as a devoted servant. She left no reference to “Uncle Stephen” or “Aunt Caroline” or “Aunt Maria,” no doubt chance omissions of exceptionally personable, dependable individuals.

Her childhood played out during the last years of institutional slavery, which she remembered as a generally happy time in which the children, Black and White, on her father’s family farm oftentimes mixed indiscriminately. Together they would wander the fields and creeks of the farm much as young Frederick had roamed the grounds of Great House Farm with young master Daniel Lloyd, or they would share the excitement of watching several of the adult Baileys home manufacture lemon-flavored ice cream in ice-covered pails. Engrained in her memory was the juvenile abandon with which she and her playmates chased down ghosts haunting the neighboring woods and abandoned buildings. One decrepit structure loomed over her memory as a haunted house: “We could see plainly from our home whether the doors and windows of the old house were open or shut, and many a morning my brother Mark and I, with some of the colored children, used to look across the fields to see if the witches or ghosts had been holding revel during the night.” It was in that house the girl Lu saw her first corpse: “a colored woman, a ‘free nigger,’ as those who were not owned by a white person were contemptuously known. Even now I see that black face with the eyelids held down over the sightless eyes by two silver dollars.”¹⁸

There were, of course, strict limits to their joint activities. The Anthonys occupied the masters’ sphere, the Baileys the slaves’, as to residence, meals, clothing, furnishings, travel, schooling—all such arrangements kept strictly separate and unequal. On Sundays, the Anthonys went off to their place of worship, the Baileys to theirs. Other differences were cultural. Remote from the antebellum theaters where White Americans delighted in the stylized appearance of

¹⁸ Harriet Lucretia Anthony, autobiographical notes, 2 November 1919; Dodge Collection, Msa.maryland.gov, scan 0255, MSA.

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Black song and dance by White minstrels on an emergent national stage, she watched fascinatedly the unadulterated “performance” of “our negroes ‘pat Juba’ while others danced to the rhythm of the beats.”¹⁹ Likewise, she witnessed and absorbed their language and customs. But raised as proud Anthonys, she and her siblings were children of a different stamp; through her grandmother’s gentrified family and Pilgrim heritage, they were “the social equal of the Lloyds” of Wye House.²⁰

Perhaps the most revealing measure of Anthony/Bailey differentiation was the looming presence, more substantial than any ghost, of the Bailey she had never met in person but to whom she felt so connected she sent an unsolicited letter several years before his death informing him of his birthdate, which she extracted from great grandfather Aaron Anthony’s ledger listing “My Black people.” Affinity and family pride notwithstanding, she had a bone or two to pick with “Fred,” whose persona lived on not only in local lore but in her cherished copy of *My Bondage and My Freedom*. This family legacy she read carefully, critically, and defensively sometime in the early twentieth century. From that safe distance, for once, a Bailey spoke unvarnished truth to an Anthony, and Harriet Lucretia found herself called to safeguard her family name by superimposing on his claims her counterclaims in her extensive marginalia. His account of the distant past she found informative but occasionally unreliable: “As I understand it now, I am as much opposed to slavery as Fred ever was. I know, however, that he exaggerates the story of the many cruelties he suffered as a slave in my great grandfathers, Aaron Anthony, family.” And in Thomas Auld’s too, whose family she knew well in her youth and whose female members especially she esteemed. The only authority figure, in her estimation, who fully deserved the biting critique Douglass called out for scarring his youth was Edward Covey.²¹

Harriet Lucretia’s companions were primarily younger Baileys of comparable age not yet assigned to labor for the family. By contrast, Stephen and Perry’s oldest sons George and William were already called to work in the fields at seed and harvest time as early as 1851 at ages eleven and ten, respectively. As they filled out their frames, they presumably became too useful to be hired out for long stretches and gradually shouldered much of the work done by their fathers and their grandfathers before them. Mature adults by decade’s end, they had the quality that Anthony most needed for his growing agricultural enterprise: young, hardy bodies. Transported to an alternative reality, as was equally true for their comparable-aged Douglass cousins in Rochester, those bodies would have been fully capable of performing active military service, as some would.

The Bailey girls too labored on a sliding scale by age and physical capacity. As they reached their teens, they would have been available to generate a small income stream by being hired out, as their mothers before them. On the last day of the decade, Anthony contracted with neighboring farmer John H. Rhodes for the one-year hire of sixteen-year-old Mary Bailey, the second oldest (after George) of Caroline and Stephen’s still growing family. Anthony followed the logic and language of the day in stipulating the terms of her hire: in return for her services and thirty dollars payment at the end of the year, Rhodes was “to provide for said negro girl good

¹⁹ Marginal notation on p. 252 of her copy of *My Bondage and My Freedom*; Dodge Collection, MSA.

²⁰ Marginal notation on p. 63 of *My Bondage and My Freedom*; Dodge Collection, MSA.

²¹ Marginal notations on front flyleaf and pp. 264–65, 203, 232 of *My Bondage and My Freedom*; Dodge Collection, MSA.

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and sufficient wearing apparel, bedding and board [and] to treat the said girl with humanity.”²² The proximity of the farms would have allowed Mary to return home on some Sundays, Rhodes permitting. Once her twelve-month service was completed by Christmas, she returned to her family on Holme Hill, though not necessarily for long. If that year had gone well and Anthony’s income-to-labor calculations remained unchanged, she might well have returned to the Rhodes family or been hired out for 1861 to another family in need of labor.

But such work was hardly the limit of Mary’s expected service to the Anthonys. Within a few years she married a local man named William Matthews and, on 24 February 1864, gave birth to Jeremiah, Caroline and Stephen Bailey’s first grandchild and the first member of his generational cohort to be born on Holme Hill Farm. Jeremiah would also be the last person to be brought into chattel slavery by John P. Anthony and his family, as well as the one most briefly held, his condition terminated when emancipation reached Maryland on 1 November. Measured in retrospect, the Bailey family’s gain was the Anthony family’s loss: Mary and her husband would have fourteen additional children, all born free. Likewise, much younger sister Catherine (Kate), born in 1859, would eventually bear fifteen children and earn a community-wide reputation in Talbot and Caroline counties as a nurse reminiscent of the legacy of great grandmother Betsey Bailey. And so on and so on as the families, and the families within families, burgeoned and went their separate ways.

We have no direct answer to the corresponding critical question: how did the Baileys view the Anthonys during these late years of their enslavement? But one rare moment of possible intimacy may expose the tender underside, too delicate to be uttered out loud by the Baileys, of relations between slave and master on Holme Hill. Anthony was ill on and off throughout 1851–52 with intermittent aches, fevers, chills, and general lassitude, exactly the malaise that Douglass associated—and Harriet Lucretia denied existed—with the brackish, marshy environs of Tuckahoe.²³ Local doctors were frequently summoned to the farmhouse to attend to him and administered the standard remedies of the day: bleeding, pills of various kinds of the sort dispensed at his St. Michaels store by Uncle Thomas Auld, occasionally even opium. On one frigid winter night when Anthony was severely feverish, Perry stayed up alongside him and placed hot bricks around his person to keep him warm. What motivated Perry? Was it concern or was it a command performance? Or was it possibly fear, fear not just for his but for his entire family’s future? He knew too well that if his bachelor master died, as he nearly did at least once that year, the breakup of the Bailey family would likely soon ensue, as had happened during his childhood and youth following the deaths of Aaron Anthony and Andrew Skinner Anthony. Whatever his sentiment and motivation, next day he was back to work, beating hominy for the Anthony family dinner table.²⁴

No family ledger survives detailing Anthony’s thoughts and activities after 1852, but, with no reported problems on the farm, it seems reasonable to conclude that the general course of Holme Hill life tracked along established grooves to decade’s end. Having more slaves than tasks to assign, he followed the common Maryland slaveholding practice of hiring out his superfluous hands, including the odd child, for all or part of the calendar year. But his primary need was farm labor, and there were enough tasks on the farm to keep Stephen and Perry busy

²² Dodge Collection, Msa.maryland.gov, scans 0245–46, MSA.

²³ *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York: Miller, Orton and Mulligan, 1855), p. 33.

²⁴ Entry for 18 January 1852, Anthony journal, scan 663, MSA.

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year-round. They performed a variety of seasonal tasks: they worked in the fields, logged timber, helped with slaughtering of livestock and preservation of meat, repaired fences, did construction on the farm’s various outbuildings, and ran errands outside the farm for the Anthony family. In addition, they worked with other slaves in the construction and repair of the miserable state of roads in lightly populated Hillsboro. Increasingly as the decade progressed, their eldest sons joined them.

Anthony was one of the more energetic citizens of the Chapel/Tuckahoe district during the last years of slavery. A father since 1855, he joined with two other men in announcing they would be taking bids in late 1857 for the construction of a new schoolhouse in their district, the building to be ready by 1 February. To help finance the initiative, they sent out notices they would be selling the old schoolhouse lot, the structure, and its furniture to the highest bidder on 5 February for cash—the proceeds to be divided between Talbot and Caroline counties.²⁵

Public schooling for (White) children was not then mandatory in Maryland or, for that matter, other states south of the Mason Dixon, but Anthony and his wife, both literate and better educated than most of their neighbors, supported public schooling in their community. What they advocated for their neighbors they practiced at home. Alternately home and district-schooled, their children grew up well prepared to master the basic skills of reading, writing, and accounting—skills, it would turn out, essential for productive lives in the postbellum free labor, literacy-intensive economy. Anthony home schooling and local public schooling stopped strictly, however, at the color line. However “devoted” they might have believed themselves to the welfare of their “servants,” they made no comparable provision for the servant children. Not even oldest child Harriet Lucretia, who passed familiarly as “Miss Lu” to decades of families in the nearby port of Oxford as a revered schoolteacher and administrator, apparently made any effort to teach the Bailey children she grew up alongside, by contrast with her distant cousin Sophia Auld’s instruction of bright, inquisitive Frederick Bailey in Baltimore.

More community-minded than his father or grandfather, Anthony also prodded county officials to redress the dilapidated state of its public infrastructure. Whereas he could assign road work within the bounds of his farm to Perry, Stephen, and their oldest sons, for external work he needed to cooperate with neighbors in a joint appeal to the county commissioners. Several times in the late 1850s, they petitioned the county to undertake projects to improve adjacent or nearby roads and bridges, particularly those along east-west roads crossing the county between the communities of Hillsboro and Easton.²⁶ The county consented to some of these requests, and it is not unlikely that Anthony rented out one or more of the adult Baileys to pitch in with the manual labor, as Grandfather Isaac Bailey, Betsey’s husband, occasionally had done in the early years of the century.

Anthony was also expanding his farming operation during these last years of cheap, abundant labor suitable for pre-mechanized agriculture. In April 1859, he and Sarah acquired a thirteen-acre parcel of land along Tuckahoe Creek on the cross-county public road between Hillsboro and Easton (possibly the fateful path along which six-year-old Frederick and his Bailey cohort had walked in the years Aaron Anthony oversaw the Lloyd holdings). The seller was Daniel Cowgill, a member of a prominent Quaker family well known throughout the county as outspoken opponents of slavery (his father Ezekiel would be one of only two Talbot men who

²⁵ *Easton Star* (17 November 1857): 3.

²⁶ Talbot County Board of Commissioners, Road Record, 1854–1910, C1910–1, pp. 136–46, 159–69, MSA; *Easton Star* (25 May 1858): 3.

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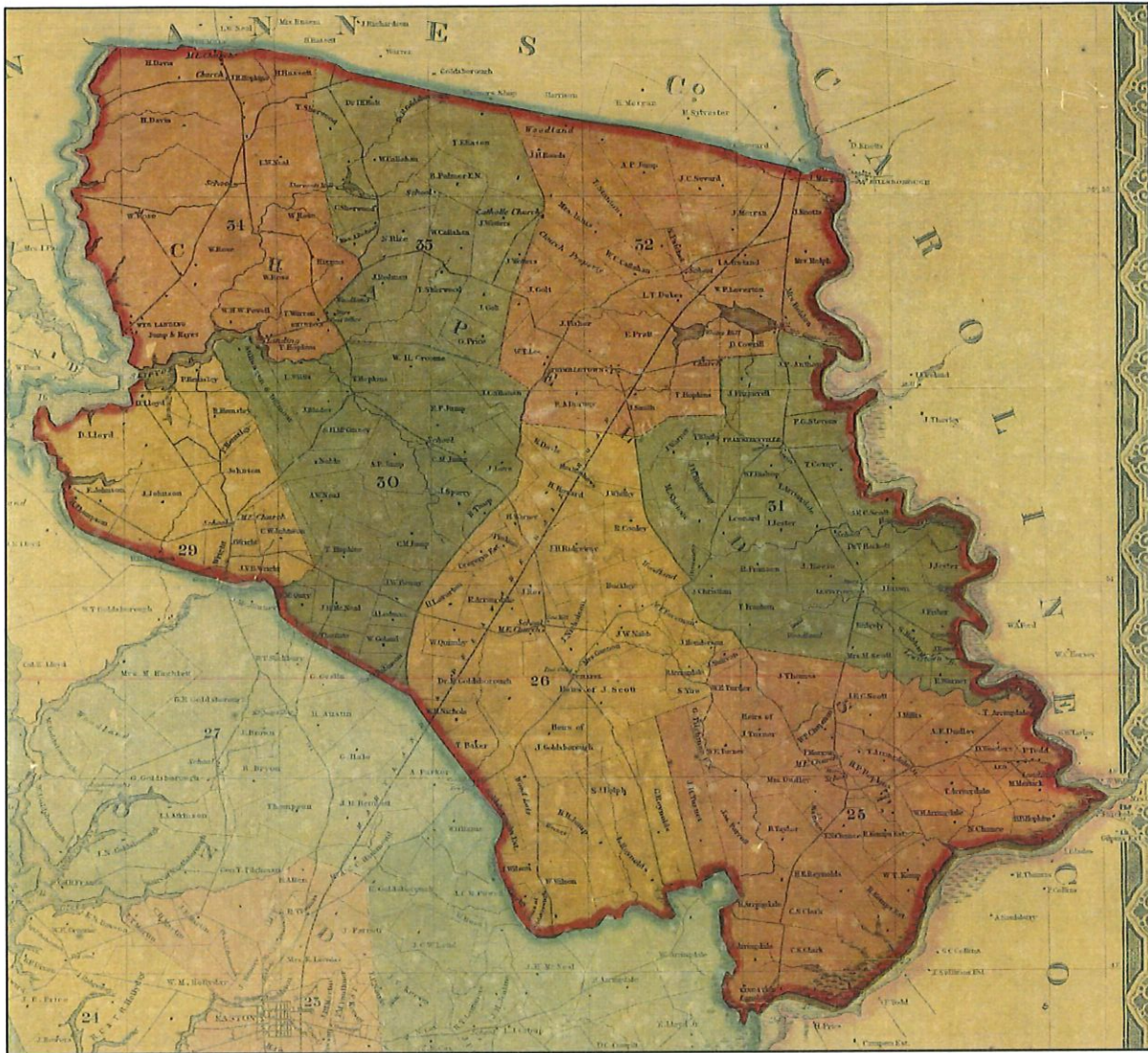
cast their ballots for Lincoln in 1860).²⁷ Commercial exchange between Anthony and Cowgill required no corresponding ideological or political agreement about slavery, yet, as both men knew once the showdown election of 1860 loomed, the future of land, labor, and slavery was less settled than it had been in decades. Anthony, it turned out, was making an optimist’s gamble. With a growing cohort of enslaved laborers at his disposal numbering not fewer than twenty-three men, women, and children according to the 1860 federal census (more than two-thirds of whom were Baileys), expanding his operation would have seemed a reasonable investment.²⁸

The lives of Anthonys and Baileys on Holme Hill Farm continued uninterruptedly over the course of the 1850s, the Bailey family intact except for the comings and goings of young adults hired out for one period or another. Season followed season, year after year, tasks revolving with the cycle of the seasons. Babies were born, boys and girls leapfrogged adolescence into adulthood and went out to service, and Anthony’s workforce increased; but conditions on the farm remained generally stable within the vagaries of meteorological and market conditions. Seen from above, the farm’s boundaries were hardly more spacious than a thumbprint on the 1858 map of Talbot County produced by cartographer William Dilworth. But even that meticulously detailed map, demarcating the public domain by units of White (generally male) landowners, provided only a two-dimensional representation of a county encompassed within a larger unit of definition, as the whole of Maryland, Eastern and Western Shores both, shifted and swayed in entering a period of dangerously destabilizing conditions. By decade’s end, a new era loomed in which, sooner rather than later, Holme Hill would be home to neither Anthonys nor Baileys.

²⁷ Details of Anthony’s 1859 purchase of the land are contained in an 1866 transaction he made with a Caroline County neighbor; Talbot County Land Records, Book 72, pp. 549–50, Talbot County Courthouse.

²⁸ 1860 U.S. Census, Slave Schedule, Talbot County, Maryland.

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Dilworth 1858 Map of Talbot County, Maryland State Archives

“We Must Fasten Ourselves to our Countrymen”: Economic Uplift in the Writing and Editorial Practices of Frederick Douglass

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In February 1853, Frederick Douglass accepted an invitation from Harriet Beecher Stowe to visit her home in Andover, Massachusetts. Douglass had been defending her novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, against Martin Delany's attacks for its pro-colonization ending. According to Douglass's subsequent letter to Stowe, dated 8 March 1853, Stowe told him during the visit that she “designed to do something which should permanently contribute to the improvement and elevation of the free colored people in the United States.”¹ Douglass, whose writing in the early 1850s expressed a growing commitment to improving the material conditions of the northern Black community, believed a multi-racial industrial college would equip Black youth with the knowledge and the skills to earn a decent living in the mechanical and agricultural arts, and would blunt Southern defenses of chattel slavery. He told Stowe, “The most telling, the most killing refutation of slavery, is the presentation of an industrious, enterprising, upright, thrifty, and intelligent free black population.”² Inspired by Stowe's offer, over the next two years Douglass expended an enormous amount of time and energy promoting the industrial college in the columns of his newspaper, the committee minutes at national Black conventions, and his work on the second edition of the anti-slavery giftbook, *Autographs for Freedom*. Although the plan to build an industrial college within one hundred miles of Erie, Pennsylvania did not come to fruition and Stowe would provide Douglass just five-hundred thirty-five dollars, a fraction of the \$15,000 he believed necessary to build it, Douglass's class-inflected writing in support of the school registers his growing frustration with the Garrisonians and other White middle-class abolitionists who did not seem sufficiently concerned about the meager opportunities for skilled employment for northern Blacks.

Douglass's efforts to raise awareness about his community's material needs coincides with his turn away from the moral suasion practiced by William Lloyd Garrison and his followers, and his turn toward the political activism practiced by wealthy philanthropist Gerrit Smith. Historians have enumerated many of the ways that Douglass broke from Garrison, the man who discovered him in 1841 at an anti-slavery meeting on Nantucket and published his slave narrative in 1845 with the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society in Boston. Philosophically, Douglass rejected Garrison's uncompromising view of the United States Constitution as a proslavery document and instead saw the practical value of pursuing abolition through the political process; additionally, in light of the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850, Douglass advocated justified antislavery violence, a sharp departure from Garrisonian nonviolence.³ On a personal level, according to John R. McKivigan, “historians have noted that the paternalism of White Garrisonians played a leading role in causing Douglass's alienation

¹ *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, 2 December 1853.

² *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, 2 December 1853.

³ For a detailed discussion of Douglass's endorsement of violence as a justified response to the Fugitive Slave Law and his growing estrangement from Garrison, see Robert S. Levine, *The Lives of Frederick Douglass* (Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press, 2016).

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from that faction.”⁴ Robert S. Levine chronicles Douglass’s growing frustration with his Garrisonian handlers during his lecture tour to England and their insistence that he simply narrate his life’s story without adding polemics.⁵

Incidentally, Douglass’s letter, written from Scotland to Garrison and published in the 27 March 1846 issue of *The Liberator*, functions as a harbinger of what I believe is another notable source of the rift between the two men: their varying levels of attention to northern Blacks’ working conditions. Discussing the abject poverty that he witnesses firsthand in Ireland, Douglass asserts the necessity that reformers address all types of oppression: “Though I am more closely connected and identified with one class of outraged, oppressed and enslaved people, I cannot allow myself to be insensible to the wrongs and sufferings of any part of the great family of man. I am not only an American slave, but a man, and as such, am bound to use my powers for the welfare of the whole human brotherhood.”⁶ After describing his encounters with Irish beggars on the streets of Dublin, whose condition he attributes disingenuously to intemperance, likely in a nod to Garrisonian moral suasion, he challenges the readers of *The Liberator*, “He who really and truly feels for the American slave, cannot steel his heart to the woes of others; and he who thinks himself an abolitionist, yet cannot enter into the wrongs of others, has yet to find a true foundation for his anti-slavery faith.”⁷ Douglass, who had experienced the hardships of supporting his family as a common laborer after he could not find work as a skilled caulker in racially stratified New Bedford, already believed that abolitionists should simultaneously fight to end chattel slavery and to address Blacks’ socioeconomic inequality in the northern workplace.

At the same time Douglass was distancing himself from Garrison, he was becoming more aligned with White labor reformers. Demonstrating his familiarity with the rhetoric of reformers like William Heighton and George Lippard in Philadelphia and Robert Dale Owen and Augustine Duganne in New York, Douglass repurposed the labor movement’s defense of the producing classes and critique of “merchant princes” to inspire and encourage his younger Black constituents to pursue skilled trades. A multi-racial, coeducational industrial college that combined classical education in literature and skilled training would prepare Black youth to become proud artisans and mechanics, idealized figures within the White-led antebellum labor movement that distinguished “honest” labor from anti-republican exploitation. In his letter proposing the industrial college to Stowe, Douglass deploys his signature correlatives and develops claims that echo the labor movement’s pride in independent craftsmanship. “We must become mechanics; we must build as well as live in houses; we must make as well as use furniture . . . We need mechanics as well as ministers. We need workers in iron, wood, clay, and leather . . . To live here as we ought, we must fasten ourselves to our countrymen through their everyday and cardinal wants. We must not only be able to *black* boots, but to *make* them.”⁸ Although mechanics’ livelihoods were under threat in the 1850s as wage labor gradually replaced the apprenticeship system of labor,⁹ and the quaint world of the “village blacksmith”

⁴ John R. McKivigan, “The Frederick Douglass-Gerrit Smith Friendship and Political Abolitionism in the 1850s,” *Frederick Douglass: New Literary and Historical Essays*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1990), 205–32, 205.

⁵ Levine, *The Lives of Frederick Douglass*, 81–82.

⁶ Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass: Early Years, 1817–1849*, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York, International Publishers, 1950), 138.

⁷ Douglass, *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, 141.

⁸ Douglass, *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*.

⁹ For a fuller discussion of the transition from apprenticeship to wage labor and its impact on the working classes, see Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788–1850*

that Douglass invokes was becoming a memory of the preindustrial past, he deploys the “mechanic accents” of the White-led labor movement to promote the industrial college, drawing attention to material inequities in the North that he believed Garrison and his followers were largely ignoring.

This essay argues that Douglass’s support for an industrial college between 1853–1855 was part of a broader strategy of class-inflected racial uplift that informed his literary output and further alienated him from a mentor who once trumpeted his successes. My comparative analysis of *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* with Garrison’s *The Liberator* in November and December 1853, two months that mark the height of Douglass’s efforts to promote the industrial college, brings Douglass’s economic concerns and rhetorical strategies into relief. Along with his newspaper writing and editorial practices, Douglass’s class-inflected and sometimes pointed critiques of the Garrisonians that appear in both editions of *Autographs for Freedom* establish him as a pragmatic and class-conscious reformer who spiritedly combined resistance to chattel slavery in the south with resistance to labor exploitation in the north. As per an advertisement that ran in his newspaper in December 1853, the anti-slavery giftbook—like Douglass the reformer—will appeal to “the friends of humanity, and the opposers of every species of Oppression, under whatever garb it assumes, or name it bears.”¹⁰

Situating Douglass’s “Ambitious” Industrial College Plan

Douglass’s tenacity to establish an industrial college is important not only for gaining a fuller understanding of the context in which the abolitionist leader broke on principle from the Garrisonians, but also for appreciating the flurry of writing and editorial work that reveals Douglass as a pragmatic reformer devoted to economic empowerment. The critiques against predominantly White and middle-class abolitionists that appear in *Autographs for Freedom*, as we will see, are less surprising when viewed in the context of Douglass’s championing of a multi-racial and coeducational industrial college, a project that occupied much of his writing in the early 1850s. Douglass’s growing attention to the needs of the northern Black community informs the founding of *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* in the summer of 1851 when he merged his Rochester-based *The North Star* with the Syracuse-based *Liberty Party Paper*, financed by Gerrit Smith and edited by John L. Thomas. As David W. Blight notes, Douglass’s decision to strike a deal with Smith, whose Liberty Party advocated ending chattel slavery through the political process, deepened Douglass’s rift with Garrison and his followers.¹¹ According to John Stauffer, “Douglass embraced the Constitution as an antislavery document” as early as January 1851, shortly after which Smith, who had been frustrated with the editorial work of Thomas, broached the merger.¹² Douglass would become the editor of the new venture, while Smith would take on *The North Star*’s debts and provide a monthly subsidy of one-hundred dollars for two years.¹³ The Garrisonians, who were displeased that Douglass started his own newspaper in 1847, were further incensed with this new political alliance with Smith. In response, McKivigan states, “The

(New York, Oxford University Press, 1984), and Bruce Laurie, *Artisans Into Workers: Labor in Nineteenth-Century America* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1989).

¹⁰ *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 16 December 1853.

¹¹ David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (New York, Simon & Schuster, 2018), 217.

¹² John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press, 2004), 164.

¹³ McKivigan, “The Frederick Douglass-Gerrit Smith Friendship,” 214–15.

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Garrisonian press, led by the *Liberator*, launched what Douglass dubbed a ‘war of destruction’ on his new newspaper.”¹⁴

In addition to their willingness to use the political process as an antislavery strategy, Douglass and Smith shared a commitment to improving the lives of the northern Black community. Henry Mayer explains, “Smith had several valuable attributes for the [abolitionist] movement: sincerity, money, and a strong commitment to the welfare of black people. He supported a number of black educational and entrepreneurial ventures,” and “he had given away many plots of land near North Elba in the central Adirondacks to fugitive slaves and impoverished city folk.”¹⁵ McKivigan explains that although “many of the grants had been abandoned and confiscated for unpaid taxes” by 1855, Smith was viewed as a genuine “friend to blacks.”¹⁶

That Douglass shared an affinity with Smith’s brand of pragmatic reform is clear when he invokes his former experience as a skilled laborer to defend his newly created paper’s attention to racial uplift in the north. Explaining in “Stop My Paper” that he does not fear losing subscribers and having to work again with his capable hands, Douglass writes, “He who has rolled oil casks, stowed ships, sawed wood, swept chimneys, and labored at the bellows in New Bedford for a living, until his hands became hard like horns, has, we say, no dread of returning to manual labor, bringing, as he well knows it does, manly independence, sound sleep, and a good appetite.”¹⁷ Here Douglass draws on the labor movement’s investment in “sturdy” masculinity over the dissipation and effete professionalism associated with the upper classes, and his pride in “honest” labor coincides with his paper’s broad appeal for socioeconomic justice: “The paper has a great work to do for the slave, for the free colored people, and for all men, for its sympathies are not limited to any particular color, creed, class, or crime.”¹⁸ Benjamin Quarles is right in attributing Douglass’s growing attention to class concerns partly to his journalism work: “[His] newspaper career gave him a broadened insight concerning the peculiar problems of the [Black American] . . . His outlook after assuming editorship showed a keen awareness of the problems confronting the rank and file of [Black Americans] whose modest abilities were insufficient to bestride even the lower hurdles of color prejudice.”¹⁹ Although reliable numbers attesting to racial stratification within the skilled trades are not available, circumstantial evidence is suggestive. For instance, Stephen P. Rice attributes the lack of Black membership in mechanics’ institutes to the fact that “by the 1830s, White employers and workers in the north worked to exclude free black men from practicing many of the skilled trades.”²⁰ In discussing the work of the Manual Labor School Committee, Leslie M. Harris reports that attendees at the 1855 Black convention believed “that the racism of white workers and employers kept the majority of free blacks in low-paying, low-status occupations.”²¹ Without reliable opportunities for

¹⁴ McKivigan, “The Frederick Douglass-Gerrit Smith Friendship,” 216.

¹⁵ Henry Mayer, *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York, St. Martin’s Griffin, 1998), 429.

¹⁶ McKivigan, “The Frederick Douglass-Gerrit Smith Friendship,” 211.

¹⁷ *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 24 July 1851.

¹⁸ *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 24 July 1851.

¹⁹ Benjamin Quarles, *Frederick Douglass* (New York, Da Capo Press, 1997), 96.

²⁰ Stephen P. Rice, *Minding the Machine: Languages of Class in Early Industrial America* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004), 55.

²¹ Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626–1863* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2003), 237.

apprenticeships and training available to Black youth in the north, Douglass took matters into his own hands and promoted a multi-racial industrial college.

It is important to note that Douglass's plan reflected his optimistic belief that working-class Whites were not inherently racist and could overcome their race prejudice. He believed that non-slaveholding Whites in the South could be educated and made to understand that enslaved labor prevented their own rise in economic status. For example, in an April 1854 speech before the antislavery convention in Cincinnati, Douglass asserts about the poor Whites of Virginia and Kentucky, "I believe it within the bounds of probability, that three millions of people in the south who own no slaves, will in time by the aid of education and enlightenment, come to see that the slaveholder's humiliation is necessary for the elevation of the slaves and themselves . . . Labor, white and black must fall or flourish together."²² In the North, Douglass held out hope that working-class Whites might find common ground with skilled Blacks against exploitative labor practices. For example, in a May 1853 speech before the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, Douglass describes how newly arrived Irish immigrants are taught race prejudice: "The Irish people, warm hearted, generous, and sympathizing with the oppressed everywhere when they stand upon their own green island, are instantly taught on arriving in this Christian country to hate and despise colored people. They are taught to believe that we eat the bread which of right belongs to them."²³ Brian Kelly points out that moments of interracial solidarity exist in the historical record of the long nineteenth century and should not be "dismissed as quaint,"²⁴ and, as I have shown in *Cross-Racial Class Protest in Antebellum American Literature*, White-authored sensational fiction and African American literature share numerous formal and thematic correspondences, including class sympathy that, at times, transcend racial difference. Therefore, Douglass's plan for a multi-racial industrial college is consistent with his indefatigable optimism in the early 1850s that race prejudice among working-class Whites could be *unlearned* and thereby lead to skilled employment opportunities for Black youth living in the North.

Rather than treating Douglass as merely "expedient" for merging his paper with Smith's, and rather than characterizing his plans for the industrial college as part of "an ambitious separatist agenda," both of which Mayer contends,²⁵ we should not be surprised that Douglass would begin advocating in February 1853 for a multi-racial industrial college, open to young men and women, for the benefit of northern Black families. Douglass, who experienced workplace racism upon reaching freedom in the north and settling in New Bedford from 1838–1844, and then moved his family to Rochester, in part, for the educational opportunities available to his children, understood the urgency of establishing industrial schools for the masses of Black youth—male and female—who did not have the means to attend the handful of colleges open to them. According to Quarles, "In 1827 there was a total of ten [Black] schools, primary and grammar, in five cities—Portland, Boston, New Haven, New York, and Philadelphia."²⁶ Efforts to start a manual labor college for Blacks can be traced to 1831, when White abolitionist Arthur Tappan proposed a school in New Haven, Connecticut, only to see the White townsfolk close ranks and quash it.²⁷ Quarles notes that Douglass had opposed "a purely [Black] college,"

²² Frederick Douglass, *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews, Volume 2: 1847–54*, ed. John W. Blassingame (New Haven, Conn, Yale University Press, 1982), 474.

²³ Douglass, *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series One*, 433.

²⁴ Brian Kelly, *Race, Class, and Power in the Alabama Coalfields, 1908–21* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2001), 4.

²⁵ Mayer, *All on Fire*, 432.

²⁶ Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1969), 106.

²⁷ Quarles, *Black Abolitionists*, 107.

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consistent with Garrison’s opposition to independent Black institutions, at the national Black convention held in 1847 in Troy, New York.²⁸ The convention’s *Proceedings* reveal that Douglass was among the seventeen nay votes as he sided with Henry Highland Garnet who at that time “did not see the necessity of Colored Colleges, because there were those to which colored youth could be admitted.”²⁹

We can see Douglass’s emerging attention to educating and training Black youth in the short-lived American League of Colored Laborers that he helped to found in June 1850. Northern Blacks were often limited to menial positions such as porters, waiters, and domestic servants due to widespread race prejudice. In his letter to Stowe, Douglass writes, “Prejudice against the free colored people in the United States has shown itself nowhere so invincible as among mechanics.”³⁰ Furthermore, with northern Black men and women facing increased competition for menial positions from the growing number of European immigrants, Douglass supported a means by which Black youth could acquire a skilled trade and comfortably raise a family. Although Harris notes that “the [League] seems not to have survived past [its] first organizational meeting,”³¹ Douglass’s newspaper coverage of its activities testifies to the importance they gave education. Their class-inflected ten-point plan states, “We recommend skillful, honorable, profitable labor to the free colored men of the United States . . . [who] are already impressed with the importance of educating their rising youth in the sciences . . . but science without a trade or some way of turning it to useful account, loses more than half its value. We therefore recommend that they be just as careful to educate their youth in the Arts of Agriculture, Manufacture and Commerce, as in the Sciences.”³² Although the league did not exist long enough to develop proposals like an industrial college, Douglass’s appeal to Stowe to support one is consistent with his class sympathies and longstanding interest in improving the material conditions of the northern working poor.

Prior to his proposal for the industrial college, Douglass’s attention to class-accented racial uplift is apparent in his repudiation of the colonization movement. He and Garrison shared a firm commitment to immediate emancipation of the enslaved,³³ but Douglass went farther by critiquing colonization as antithetical to efforts to help the native-born Black community strive and succeed in their homeland. Douglass regularly published counterarguments to colonization in his newspaper, such as on 2 December 1853: “[Emigrationists] are confounded with that despondency and despair which preclude the possibility of their working for their elevation here, with that hopeful ardor which is the life blood of the anti-slavery enterprise.”³⁴ Despite *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* concluding with the primary Black characters sailing for Liberia, a colonization ending that Stowe would later renounce, she seemed a receptive audience to the industrial college plan that Douglass presented to her in February 1853. Robert S. Levine writes, “Given Stowe’s emphasis in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* on the need to educate America’s blacks, Douglass could not help regarding her as a fellow believer in the importance of black elevation.”³⁵

²⁸ Quarles, *Frederick Douglass*, 125.

²⁹ *Proceedings of the National Convention of Colored People, and Their Friends, Held in Troy, N.Y. on the 6th, 7th, 8th, and 9th October, 1847* (Troy, N.Y., Steam Press of J.C. Kneeland and Co., 1847), 9.

³⁰ *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 2 December 1853.

³¹ Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery*, 239.

³² *The North Star*, 13 June 1850.

³³ Mayer, *All on Fire*, 72.

³⁴ *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 2 December 1853.

³⁵ Robert S. Levine, “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*: An Analysis of Reception,” *American Literature* 64, 1, (1992): 71–93, 78. For more on Douglass’s and Stowe’s shared emphasis on Black elevation, see

Evidence of their shared interest in the racial uplift of the Black working class appears in Stowe's earlier writing, when she published the short story "The Two Altars," a diptych, over two weeks in June 1851 in the *New-York Evangelist*. Douglass and Griffiths would reprint Stowe's story in the first edition of *Autographs for Freedom* the following year.

The story's second act features a fugitive family from enslavement working hard and living in a modest tenement in New York City. Stowe's description of the setting highlights the values of industriousness and education that Douglass would promote in his industrial college plan: "As we push gently aside the open door, we gain sight of a small room, clean as busy hands can make it, where a neat, cheerful young [multi-racial] woman is busy at an ironing-table . . . A bright, black-eyed boy, just come in from school, with his satchel of books over his shoulder, stands cap in hand, relating to his mother how he has been at the head of his class."³⁶ In keeping with the Franklinian virtues of thrift and education that dominate the scene, young Henry proudly turns over his school-tickets, which teachers gave to reward outstanding academic work, to his mother for safe keeping in their lone piece of china, a teapot.

Artisan republican rhetoric imbues the introduction of the father, George, as he returns home from a long day of work, anticipating Stowe's capable and "sturdy" artisan George Harris in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: "A neatly dressed colored man walked up, with his pail and white-wash brushes."³⁷ A skilled and highly sought-after interior painter, George has earned five dollars, an impressive sum for one day, and will be able to buy a new cap for his son and a new dress for his daughter: "'Those that's had me once—that they never want any other hand to take hold in their rooms. I s'pose it's a kiner practice I've got, and kinder natural!'"³⁸ The frugal and fiscally responsible family, who have no debt and splurge on delicacies like oysters only rarely, gather around the stove for tea and George recalls how the enslaver in Georgia used to hire him out and steal his hard-earned money. Just as Henry begins to read the evening prayer from the Bible, slavecatchers burst into what Stowe reminds readers is a "simple, honest, kindly home, in a moment so desolated," and return him to slavery under the Fugitive Slave Law.³⁹ An illustration of the sensational scene—a coarse White slavecatcher manhandles Henry and a White gentleman in a top hat reads from an affidavit, while Henry's wife and children cower in the background and the family Bible lies on the floor of the otherwise tidy tenement—appears in the English edition of *Autographs for Freedom* and ties together the diptych's thematic content for readers.⁴⁰ In the first half of the diptych, set in 1776, the humble rural abode of a White family, whose husband-father is suffering the winter at Valley Forge, is disrupted by soldiers of the Continental Army in search of supplies for the Revolutionary cause. In the second half, set in 1850, the home of the Black family is violently torn apart by slavecatchers who are willing to sacrifice good and honest men to preserve the Union. Stowe's representation of the skilled father, the domestic mother, and their school-aged children in a well-maintained tenement embodies the racial uplift that Douglass hoped to achieve for the Black community through his industrial college plan.

Robert S. Levine, *Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, and the Politics of Representative Identity* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 171–74.

³⁶ Harriet Beecher Stowe, "The Two Altars," *Autographs for Freedom* (Boston, John P. Jewett and Company, 1853), 140.

³⁷ Stowe, "The Two Altars," 141.

³⁸ Stowe, "The Two Altars," 141–42.

³⁹ Stowe, "The Two Altars," 145.

⁴⁰ Harriet Beecher Stowe, "The Two Altars," *Autographs for Freedom* (London, Samson Low, Son and Company, 1853), 100–101.

“We Must Fasten Ourselves to our Countrymen”: Economic Uplift in the Writing and Editorial Practices of Frederick Douglass

Class Inflections in *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*

While it is impossible to know how deep a class divide existed between subscribers to Garrison’s *The Liberator* and subscribers to *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, it is clear from Douglass’s newspaper editorials and the entries in *Autographs for Freedom* that he represented the Garrisonians as predominantly White, largely middle class, and mostly indifferent to the needs of the Black working classes. A survey of issues of the respective newspapers printed in November and December 1853—crucial months in Douglass’s media blitz of Stowe to secure funding for the industrial school and in his deteriorating relationship with Garrison—reveals a stark contrast in the periodicals’ class sympathies.

George M. Fredrickson argues in *The Black Image in the White Mind* that as part of their celebration of free labor over slave labor, middle-class abolitionists were largely indifferent to the plight of the multi-racial working classes in the north. “Most of the abolitionists believed that the capitalistic free-labor system of the North was healthy at the core, that its arbitrary inequalities were surface phenomena . . . and that such inequalities were not sufficiently inhibiting to negate the general proposition that everyone had a substantial opportunity for self-improvement.”⁴¹ Specifically, Fredrickson notes, “In the first issue of the *Liberator*, [Garrison] denied the existence of conflict between wealth and property, or between labor and capital, and demonstrated his faith in an industrial order held together by the benevolence of the rich and the cultivation of Protestant virtues by the poor.”⁴² Most of the articles and editorials in the November and December 1853 editions of Garrison’s *Liberator* focus on the efforts of abolitionists, temperance reformers, and women’s rights supporters—three reform movements dominated by White middle-class activists—and give scant attention to the concerns of the working classes. Throughout November and December 1853, news coverage in *The Liberator* consists foremost of reprinted articles detailing abolitionist activities and temperance conventions, singling out praise for reformers Susan B. Anthony and Lucretia Mott, while taking jabs at newspaper editor Horace Greeley, a self-described man of the people and a contributor to both editions of *Autographs for Freedom*, for promoting outspoken women reformers like Antoinette Brown. The *Liberator* also covers women’s rights conventions in cities such as Cleveland, where Garrison spoke, and conventions in Louisville, where Lucy Stone, infamous for wearing bloomers, was well received by a large audience. In the 18 November 1853 edition, Garrison reports on Douglass’s speeches, celebrates the twenty-year anniversary of the Philadelphia Anti-Slavery Society, and advertises a series of books for the middle class; in the 25 November 1853 edition, Garrison rounds out articles about anti-slavery activities with extensive coverage of women’s rights conventions. Nevertheless, articles that would appeal to working-class Black readers appear sporadically in the *Liberator*. For instance, Garrison reprints an article from the *Baldwinsville Gazette* about the high-profile “Jerry Rescue,” whereby a fugitive from slavery, living and working as a cooper in upstate New York, was rescued from would-be slavecatchers. Announcements about popular amusements like a Boston phrenology museum, and news reports about shipwrecks and other tragedies, reflect how class-accented sensational news items dominated the penny press and pervaded antebellum print culture, even a newspaper with a strong middle-class orientation like the *Liberator*.

⁴¹ George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (Middletown, Conn, Wesleyan University Press, 1987), 38.

⁴² Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind*, 38, n74.

In contrast, Douglass's newspaper in November and December 1853 is marked by working-class accents, demonstrating how his editorial choices reflect his growing attention to Blacks' material conditions. Consistent with labor papers like Lippard's *Quaker City Weekly* (1848–1850) in Philadelphia, Douglass reprints articles that detail horrific workplace accidents, that call for safety reform, and that, notably, do not appear in the pages of the *Liberator* during the same months. On 25 November 1853, a reprinted article from the *Worcester Spy* describes the “terrible powder mill explosion in Spencer, Massachusetts,” which killed five workers on a site that saw a fatal explosion just two years earlier.⁴³ “Can there be no remedy?,” the exasperated writer asks.⁴⁴ On the front page of the 2 December 1853 edition, Douglass reprints the short news item “Death by Chloroform” from the *Bridgeport Standard*, which details how a machinist fell and broke his leg; when physicians prepared to set the leg and give the suffering man chloroform, “he suddenly expired.”⁴⁵ The numerous articles involving fatal work-related accidents would be of special interest to Douglass's White and Black working-class readers and might evoke empathy in middle-class subscribers. While *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, like the *Liberator*, is committed foremost to covering abolitionist activities and advancing antislavery arguments, the sensational news reports involving laborers in Douglass's paper contrast with the middle-class ethos of Garrison's paper.

Further, Douglass's newspaper, which serialized his novella *The Heroic Slave* and Charles Dickens' novel *Bleak House*, is more responsive to popular, class-accented cultural expressions than the *Liberator*. Under “Musical Notices” on 18 November 1853, penned by Douglass's assistant Julia Griffiths, as indicated by the byline “J.G.,” a favorable review of the Hutchinson family's performance of “Little Topsey's [sic] Song” is followed by an equally positive review of the song “Katy's Cry” that was inspired by Solon Robinson's class-inflected sketches about “Little Katy, the Hot Corn Girl,” published in Greeley's *New York Tribune*. By the middle of December 1853, Robinson had expanded his serial into the full-length city-mystery novel *Hot Corn: Life Scenes in New York*, which features sympathetic portrayals of White and Black working-class characters who are exploited and then abandoned by White “merchant princes.”⁴⁶ In the Musical Notice, Griffiths praises “Katy's Cry” for its financial support of Reverend Lewis Pease's trade school for working-class youth in New York City. Griffiths writes, “The profit, derived from the sale of this song, will be given to the admirable Institution, entitled *the Five Points House of Industry*.”⁴⁷ Although the House of Industry catered primarily to the White working classes living in the racially diverse Five Points area, a *New York Times* report of 23 December 1853 on the children's Christmas production “A Five Points Opera” indicates that White and Black children performed on stage together, a rare moment of cross-racial sympathy that Douglass hoped to reproduce in a multi-racial industrial college. *Frederick Douglass' Paper* would report on the successful sales of Robinson's sensational novel *Hot Corn* throughout January 1854, yet one more indication that Douglass considered the interests of working-class readers.

Douglass's Media Blitz: Newspapers, Letters, and Committee Reports

⁴³ *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, 25 November 1853.

⁴⁴ *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, 25 November 1853.

⁴⁵ *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, 2 December 1853.

⁴⁶ For a fuller analysis of the working-class discourses of artisan republicanism and cross-racial sympathy in *Hot Corn*, see my article “Whiteness and Working-Class Studies,” *Whiteness and American Literature*, ed. Jolene Hubbs (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2025), 266–80.

⁴⁷ *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, 18 November 1853.

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In addition to addressing working-class concerns, *Frederick Douglass' Paper* played a key role in Douglass's media blitz of Stowe, who seemed, at least in February 1853, a reliable donor for the industrial college. The amount of money Stowe earned from the unprecedented sales of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—300,000 copies were sold between March and December 1852—was a matter of great public interest and covered regularly in the northern press. Prior to his meeting with Stowe in Andover, Douglass ran a blurb detailing the proceeds: “We learn that Mrs. Stowe received, last week, from her publishers, Messrs. Jewett & Co., of this city, the sum of \$10,000, this being her second payment as copyright on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, making upwards of \$20,000, received by her in nine months.”⁴⁸ Given that Douglass and his associates estimated that buying the land outside of Erie and erecting the initial buildings for the industrial college would cost \$50,000 (approximately \$2,000,000 in 2025), Stowe's financial help was essential. The fact that Stowe was about to embark on a tour of England, where she would collect a penny offering along her route, made her a promising source of funding. Moreover, Stowe had a well-deserved reputation for using her money for the causes of abolition and racial elevation. Douglass reports on 11 February 1853 that “Mrs. Stowe has given J.P. Jewett, \$25, W.B. Bradford, \$10, in aid of the relief of Mr. Kauffman of Penn.,” referring to the conviction of White abolitionist Daniel Kauffman of Boiling Springs, Pennsylvania, for sheltering and assisting thirteen fugitives formerly enslaved in Maryland.⁴⁹ Two months later, Douglass reports on Stowe's generous support of the Edmonson sisters, two formerly enslaved young women from Maryland, to attend the Young Ladies Preparatory School at Oberlin College. Although Stowe would eventually give Douglass only a small portion of her fundraising efforts, David S. Reynolds reports that Stowe “applied the money from the British penny offerings toward funding antislavery newspapers and lectures, education for free blacks, and the purchase of several enslaved blacks to secure their freedom.”⁵⁰ Douglass's faith in Stowe's initial enthusiasm for his industrial college plan was not misplaced, and he helped to remind Stowe of her promise in a series of articles in his newspaper throughout 1853.

The first mention in *Frederick Douglass' Paper* of Stowe's financial pledge to help fund an industrial college appears on 4 March 1853, in news coverage of the Liberty Party's Convention held in Syracuse: “[Frederick Douglass] had been upon a pilgrimage to Uncle Tom's Cabin, and had talked with Mrs. Stowe, who was soon to leave this country for Scotland, where she expected to receive a sum of money to invest in an educational institution for the education of the colored race.”⁵¹ The next month, on 15 April 1853, Douglass references, and thus encourages, Stowe's pledge as part of three strategically placed, interrelated articles on the industrial college plan. In “Mrs. Stowe's Visit to England,” Douglass writes, “The chief good which we anticipate from Mrs. Stowe's mission, is the founding of an Institution, in which our oppressed and proscribed youth, Male and Female, may obtain a plain English education, and a practical knowledge of various useful Trades . . . Give us education and trades, and we shall live to attend the funeral of slavery, and to see the last colonization ship rot at the wharf.”⁵² In an adjacent column, Douglass responds to an editorial in the *Oberlin Times* accusing the industrial

⁴⁸ *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, 4 February 1853.

⁴⁹ *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, 11 February 1853.

⁵⁰ David S. Reynolds, *Mightier Than the Sword: Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Battle for America* (New York, W. W. Norton, 2011), 162–63.

⁵¹ *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, 4 March 1853.

⁵² *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, 15 April 1853.

college plan of racial exclusivity and sets the writer straight: “The impression made by the foregoing, is that Mrs. Stowe and we are for establishing a manual labor school, ‘exclusively’ for colored youth; whereas, nothing of the sort is proposed . . .it will be a school where colored youth (now shut out from all respectable trades) shall have a fair chance for making themselves master mechanics.”⁵³ The working-class accents of these two articles are echoed in Stowe’s letter, printed below Douglass’s response to the *Oberlin Times*, in which she praises a Bible she received in Andover from the English working classes: “There is no class that I regard with such honest pride as I do the working class of our own free States . . .That the working men of England should sympathize with the American slave is not wonderful. In his person honest labor is outraged and loaded with dishonor and contempt—*labor*, the only true noble thing in such a life as this, is made a badge of disgrace.”⁵⁴ Whether or not Stowe was fully on board with the project at this stage is uncertain, but Douglass positions the three articles to emphasize that he and the celebrity novelist share sympathy for the multi-racial working classes.

Douglass provided his readers with regular updates about Stowe’s movements and speeches in Europe that spring and summer, detailing how much money she was raising on the trip (one-thousand dollars in Scotland, for instance), and, on 27 May 1853, he reported that Stowe has “signified to [her] contributors that they should look to our columns to know what disposition is made of their donations.”⁵⁵ That Stowe was uneasy with Douglass’s reporting on her fundraising efforts is underscored by the fact her brother, Reverend Henry Ward Beecher, felt compelled to publish a letter in *The National Era* on 7 July 1853 to correct “an erroneous statement going around the papers that Mrs. Stowe had determined to give the proceeds of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to the education of colored people.”⁵⁶ Beecher contends, “She has not set apart her whole income to [the northern Black community]. She retains the right of employing her means as her judgment may dictate.”⁵⁷ Douglass biographers speculate about why Stowe turned cold toward Douglass’s plan and ultimately provided him with just five-hundred thirty-five dollars for the industrial college. Quarles points to the controversy in the news that summer about how she planned to use the \$20,000 she collected in Great Britain as one possible cause, and adds that Stowe may have “concluded that the school could not succeed because all the manual labor colleges she had heard of had been failures.”⁵⁸ Levine surmises Stowe may have lost interest “perhaps because she thought blacks could not successfully run their own school, or perhaps because she was aware of criticisms of the project from other blacks.”⁵⁹ Mayer claims that to quell the public disagreements between Douglass and Garrison in late 1853, Stowe “hint[ed] that her support for his training school depended upon a cessation of hostilities”⁶⁰; if the mutual attacks published in the December issues of the *Liberator* and *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* are any indication, those hostilities did not cease but accrued. Harris argues that the plan failed because of the lack of funds from White abolitionists and the sheer scale of the enterprise: in 1855, Black “conventioners were overwhelmed by the seeming difficulty in providing training for different types of skilled labor for large numbers of students in an institutionalized setting.”⁶¹

⁵³ *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 15 April 1853.

⁵⁴ *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 15 April 1853.

⁵⁵ *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 27 May 1853.

⁵⁶ *The National Era*, 7 July 1853.

⁵⁷ *The National Era*, 7 July 1853.

⁵⁸ Quarles, *Frederick Douglass*, 131.

⁵⁹ Levine, “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*,” 85.

⁶⁰ Mayer, *All on Fire*, 433.

⁶¹ Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery*, 237.

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Whatever the reason for Stowe’s decision not to provide the funds, and whatever precise moment Douglass realized it, Douglass sustained a media blitz of Stowe during the second half of 1853 as he tried to will the industrial college into existence.

After Stowe departed for Europe in late March 1853, Douglass and his associates went to work developing and promoting their industrial college plan. Over three days in July 1853 in Rochester, New York, Douglass’s home base, Black luminaries gathered for a national convention to discuss strategies for ending chattel slavery in the south and effecting racial uplift in the north. In his opening day address, Douglass, paving the way for unveiling his industrial college plan on the third day, presents racial uplift as an antislavery strategy: “The intelligent and upright free man of color is an unanswerable argument in favor of liberty, and a killing condemnation of American slavery.”⁶² The head of the committee investigating the viability of an industrial college was Charles L. Reason, the son of Haitian immigrants and a mathematics wunderkind who was made an instructor in the New York City schools at the young age of fourteen. Reason, who would serve as a literature and mathematics professor at New York’s Central College in 1849 and later as the principal of a manual labor school in Philadelphia, supported Douglass’s efforts to merge classical and mechanical education. According to Anthony R. Mayo, “Long before manual and vocational training had been introduced in courses of public instruction, he advocated a system of education which combined the training of both mind and hand, as best calculated to promote in young people lives of usefulness, self-respect, and self-dependence.”⁶³ Reason’s report from the morning session at the convention insists on education as a means of racial empowerment, arguing that an industrial college will develop “that kind of power most essential to our elevation,” and, like Douglass, calls for an institution that combines the classical study of literature with training in trades and agriculture.⁶⁴

In his report, Reason collapses the false binary between the intellectual and the craftsman, lamenting, “Literature has too long kept itself aloof from the furrowed field, and from the dust and bustle of the work-shop. The pale, sickly brow and emaciated form have been falsely shown to the world as the ripeness of mental discipline; and sun-burnt and brawny muscular arms, have been among the majority of students synonymous with dullness of parts, and ignorant vulgarity.”⁶⁵ Douglass, in his novella *The Heroic Slave*, first published in *Autographs for Freedom* and then serialized in his newspaper, similarly describes his protagonist Madison Washington: “His whole appearance betokened Herculean strength; yet there was nothing savage or forbidding in his aspect . . . He was just the man you would choose when hardships were to be endured, or danger to be encountered,—intelligent and brave. He had the head to conceive, and the hand to execute.”⁶⁶ Consistent with such defenses of the dignity of “honest” labor by Douglass and White labor reformers alike, Reason concludes with class-inflected discourse, “In the sweat of their brows, we would have our scholars grow powerful, and their sympathies run out for humanity everywhere. On the altar of labor, we would have every mother dedicate her child to the cause of freedom.”⁶⁷ The report also includes a plan to educate

⁶² *Proceedings of the Colored National Convention, Held in Rochester, July 6th, 7th and 8th, 1853* (Rochester, N.Y., Office of Frederick Douglass’ Paper, 1853), 17.

⁶³ Anthony R. Mayo, “Charles Lewis Reason,” *The Negro History Bulletin*, 5, 9 (1942): 212–15, 215.

⁶⁴ 30. Douglass clarifies the industrial college’s balanced education in the 25 March 1854 issue of *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* when he writes, “For every branch of Literature taught, there shall be one branch of handicraft also taught in the School.”

⁶⁵ Mayo, “Charles Lewis Reason,” 31.

⁶⁶ Frederick Douglass, *The Heroic Slave* (New Haven, Conn., Yale University Press, 2015), 7.

⁶⁷ *Proceedings of the Colored National Convention, Held in Rochester*, 32.

the college's female students, suggesting, for instance, "that looms could be erected for the weaving of carriage and other trimmings; for bindings of various kinds."⁶⁸ Following the report, Douglass publicly read and entered into the minutes his entire letter to Stowe of 8 March 1853 in which he asserts that establishing an industrial college will deal a blow to chattel slavery and at the same time improve the material conditions of the working poor: "The slave, not less than the freeman, would be benefited by such an institution. It must be confessed that the most powerful argument now used by the Southern slaveholder, and the one most soothing to his conscience, is that derived from the low condition of the free colored people of the North."⁶⁹ Finally, during the evening session, Reason offered a resolution, which was adopted, that the industrial college would not practice "the principle of complexional exclusiveness,"⁷⁰ consistent with Douglass's appeals to the multi-racial working classes. Enthusiasm for the industrial college, fomenting in 1853, headlines the second edition of *Autographs for Freedom*, Douglass's other major editorial enterprise at the end of that year.

***Autographs for Freedom* and the Class Accents of Racial Uplift**

Autographs for Freedom, a giftbook published in December 1852 and December 1853 as a fundraising venture by the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society, features short stories, sketches, essays, and poems by notable Black and White men and women connected with the antislavery cause. The giftbook was edited by Douglass and the Society's secretary, British abolitionist Julia Griffiths who, at Douglass's request, came to Rochester and served as his editorial assistant and confidante from spring 1849 until 18 June 1855 when she returned to Europe. As the book's title indicates, each author concluded their contribution, which ranged from one to sixty-six pages, with their signature, a collector's item during the period. The modest first edition, released on 23 December 1852 so that it could be exchanged as a Christmas gift, sold for seventy-five cents for a plain bound copy and one dollar for gilt. In contrast, the second edition, released in December 1853, sold for one dollar twenty-five cents for a plain bound copy, one dollar fifty cents for gilt edges, and two dollars for full gilt sides and edges, demonstrating that it, ironically, was marketed to the same middle-class audience that its contents critique. In a recent article, John R. McKivigan and Rebecca A. Pattillo detail the giftbook's political aims, arguing that Douglass and Griffiths chose contributors strategically to widen the antislavery coalition beyond Garrison and his followers: "*Autographs*' essays endorsed voting, which Garrisonians opposed as sanctioning the nation's proslavery government, and treated the northern churches as potential antislavery allies, instead of the 'bulwark of slavery' that the Garrisonians claimed."⁷¹ While McKivigan and Pattillo's analysis is instructive, and I agree with their characterization of Douglass and Griffiths as "tactical pragmatists," they devote little attention to the second edition and do not take up either edition's working-class accents and anxieties about the northern marketplace, what I argue constitutes another significant and, until now, largely underappreciated area of divergence between Douglass and the Garrisonians in the early 1850s.

⁶⁸ Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*

⁶⁹ *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, 2 December 1853.

⁷⁰ *Proceedings of the Colored National Convention, Held in Rochester*, 46.

⁷¹ John R. McKivigan and Rebecca A. Pattillo, "*Autographs for Freedom* and Reaching a New Abolitionist Audience," *The Journal of African American History* 102, 1 (2017): 35–51, 42.

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To illustrate how Douglass and Griffiths shaped *Autographs for Freedom* to develop a critique of comfortably situated and self-satisfied middle-class abolitionists indifferent to labor reform, I provide an example of Douglass’s perception of the class divide among abolitionists. In “The Testimonial to Mrs. Stowe, and What shall be done with it?” published in *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* on 27 May 1853, Douglass responds to an editorial attacking the industrial college plan that ran earlier that month in the London *Anti-Slavery Advocate* and signed only by “an American Abolitionist.” In the reprinted editorial, the “American Abolitionist” writes, “All schemes of instruction, amelioration, etc. are delusive and cruel while slavery lasts, as well talk of painting and making watertight the house while it is on fire, as combine instruction and slavery . . . Let suffering be ameliorated, but above all let *wrong*, the cause of suffering, be *righted*.”⁷² In his refutation, Douglass represents the anonymous author as a Garrisonian who may be full of “thunder” for the abolitionist cause, “a great thing,” but who is indifferent to the plight of the Black working classes in the north because of his own race and class privilege.⁷³ Douglass writes, “We venture to affirm that he is ‘an American Abolitionist’ with a *white* skin; for no colored man, who sets any value upon education—who is at all concerned for the welfare of his children, or that of his race generally—can think of postponing all efforts for promoting their welfare until slavery is abolished.”⁷⁴ Furthermore, Douglass argues, “If free blacks must not be improved while slavery lasts, must free whites? Why must everything be done for the one, and nothing for the other? We venture to say that this preacher against instruction and amelioration lives in the utmost ease himself, and does all he can to educate his children.”⁷⁵ Douglass concludes his defense of the industrial college plan by highlighting the race prejudice among abolitionists that he hopes it will address. “If anyone is surprised at our indignation, they should remember that, even among abolitionists, it is almost impossible for a Free Colored man to get his child into any respectable employment; and the doors of the workshop, as well as the gates of the college, are closed against him.”⁷⁶ That Douglass believed some White middle-class abolitionists like Garrison did not devote enough attention to the needs of the Black working classes in the North is evident, as I’ve shown, in Douglass’s newspaper writing and editorial practices. This historical context, reconstituted through an array of Black and antislavery print culture sources, illuminates the class accents of the fiction and nonfiction appearing across the two editions of *Autographs for Freedom*. Significantly, the giftbook captures Douglass and his supporters’ heady excitement over the industrial college plan and registers the growing rift between the two men and their respective followers.

Numerous entries spanning the two editions of *Autographs for Freedom* critique middle-class abolitionists who exploit the multi-racial working classes, develop sympathetic portrayals of proud and “honest” Black craftsmen, and insist on economic uplift as an effective antislavery strategy. The first edition’s five-page sketch “The Man-Owner,” penned by the Reverend Edgar Buckingham of Cambridge, Massachusetts, aligns Southern slaveowners with Northern capitalists as indifferent to those they exploit. A Poe-inspired Gothic representation of the divided self, the sketch features a northerner who suddenly becomes a “man-owner” when he reaches adulthood and turns twenty-one, because, as it turns out, he is tormented by that part of the self—figured as an unruly servant—that is “disobedient” and beyond his conscious control.

⁷² *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 27 May 1853.

⁷³ *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 27 May 1853.

⁷⁴ *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 27 May 1853.

⁷⁵ *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 27 May 1853.

⁷⁶ *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 27 May 1853.

The northerner becoming a “man-owner” is made plausible in the sketch by his coolness toward the working classes: “Yet he did not like to associate with men lower in the social scale than himself . . . Nor did he care for, or believe in, any suggestions or plans, the object of which was the elevation of the poor as a class, and the levelling upwards of the human race.”⁷⁷ The sketch’s class accents draw attention to economic stratification in the north, and its closing moral ensures its commitment to the abolitionist cause: “Who will believe that any man ought to have the ownership of another, when it is so rare to find one of us wholly competent to govern and to own himself?”⁷⁸

A direct critique of middle-class abolitionists appears in Horace Greeley’s essay “The Dishonor of Labor” in the second edition of *Autographs*. Greeley begins with the claim that chattel slavery will end once people understand “that no man can really enjoy more than his own moderate daily labor would produce,” a claim that would appeal to the multi-racial producing classes in the north, and he goes on to call out privileged abolitionists.⁷⁹ Greeley chastises “Every rich Abolitionist, who is ashamed of being caught by distinguished visitors while digging in his garden or plowing in the field,” and “Every Abolitionist lecturer who would send a hireling two miles after a horse, whereon to ride three miles to fulfil his next appointment respectably.”⁸⁰ Greeley’s class-accented critique of the pretensions of the professional middle class resonates with his “Work and Wait” essay that appears in *Autographs*’ first edition, in which he proffers the following advice to abolitionists: “Be preeminent in your consideration and regard for the rights and wrongs of labor in your own circle, even the rudest and humblest. An abolitionist who hires his linen made up at the lowest market rate, and pays his wash-woman in proportion, will do little good to the antislavery or any other philanthropic cause.”⁸¹ The working-class sympathy expressed in these contributions to *Autographs for Freedom* echo Douglass’s own critique of Garrisonians when he promotes the industrial college plan and economic uplift in his letter to Stowe: “I have long felt that too little attention has been given, by our truest friends, in this country, to removing this stumbling block out of the way of the slave’s liberation.”⁸² These critiques of northern labor practices would have likely resonated with the giftbook’s Black readers, which Meaghan M. Fritz and Frank E. Fee, Jr. suggest were considerable based on the fact that “Douglass’s black correspondents praised *Autographs* in letters published in *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*.”⁸³

In addition to critiquing middle-class abolitionists, both editions of *Autographs for Freedom* feature short stories that use sensational plot lines, invoke artisan republican rhetoric of “honest” labor, and provide sympathetic portrayals of Black and White working-class characters. These features show that Douglass and Griffiths were responsive to the popular city-mystery novels that appealed to laborers in the northeast and dominated the literary marketplace in the early 1850s. The three longform fiction pieces across *Autographs*’ two editions include Douglass’s *The Heroic Slave*, Stowe’s “The Two Altars,” and the South Carolinian and former enslaver William Henry Brisbane’s “Narrative of Albert and Mary.” Brisbane’s tale stages

⁷⁷ Edgar Buckingham, “The Man-Owner,” *Autographs for Freedom* (Boston, John P. Jewett and Company, 1853), 100.

⁷⁸ Buckingham, “The Man-Owner,” 103.

⁷⁹ Horace Greeley, “The Dishonor of Labor,” *Autographs for Freedom* (New York, James C. Derby, 1854), 194.

⁸⁰ Greeley, “The Dishonor of Labor,” 196.

⁸¹ Horace Greeley, “Work and Wait,” *Autographs for Freedom* (Boston, John P. Jewett and Company, 1853), 79.

⁸² *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 2 December 1853.

⁸³ Meaghan M. Fritz and Frank E. Fee, Jr., “To Give the Gift of Freedom: Gift Books and the War on Slavery,” *American Periodicals* 23, 1 (2013): 60–82, 68.

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debates over chattel slavery through an unlikely meeting of the daughter of an enslaver and her fiancé, the title characters who hail from the Carolinas, and their mild-mannered pirate captors, Captain Templeton and his ship’s minister Gracelius. Drawing upon tropes from sensational pirate tales published in the cheap press and weekly story papers, Brisbane’s story features the steamship explosion that took place on 14 June 1838 off the coast of North Carolina, killing more than one-hundred people. After Albert and Mary are tossed overboard during a violent thunderstorm, just prior to the ship exploding and sinking, the young couple is rescued at sea by Templeton and his pirates, who prove to be the kind of oxymoronic characters that David S. Reynolds has identified in the period’s politically subversive popular fiction: “One effect of yellow fiction was to break down firm moral categories by valorizing both the heroic and the villainous, both the pious and the impious.”⁸⁴ The pirates are kind to the helpless couple, promising to return them to land once they raid a suitable ship: “I know that you have been trained to believe that pirates are necessarily devoid of humane feelings, and are ever thirsting for blood. But I trust we are as hospitable and kind a people to our guests, as are to be found on land.”⁸⁵ Albert, who disavows Christianity because his parents defend owning slaves through Scripture, as do Mary and her parents, pleads with their captors to give up piracy, at which point Templeton and Gracelius defend pirating by echoing perverse defenses of chattel slavery coming out of the South.

Brisbane, a Baptist minister from Beaufort, South Carolina, who inherited and later freed the people he enslaved after he was unable to counter arguments he read in abolitionist pamphlets, published anti-slavery tracts and sermons pseudonymously and made appeals to the White working classes in the South. According to Susanna Ashton, “Brisbane hoped to win ‘upstate’ or ‘upcountry’ South Carolina citizens over to the antislavery cause by arguing that their own best interests were to resist the political power of the class of elite enslavers and to embrace free labor.”⁸⁶ In Brisbane’s only known short story “Narrative of Albert and Mary,” Gracelius defends the pirates through disingenuous arguments that call up Southern defenses of chattel slavery: “Piracy itself is nothing more than the appropriating of the products of another’s labor and skill, without his consent or contract. The absence of the contract, or the consent of the producer, does not alter the nature and extent of the pirates’ right.”⁸⁷ Moreover, referencing paternalistic defenses of slavery, Gracelius claims that pirates are bound to treat their victims mildly: “Nothing more should be done than is absolutely essential to the maintenance of the peculiar institution of piracy. It is not the relation of the pirate to the producer or prisoner which is sinful, but infidelity to the solemn trust which that relation creates.”⁸⁸ After the kind but deluded pirates fulfill their word and place the young couple on a French merchant ship, whose captain they have brutally killed, Albert and Mary return to the United States transformed by the experience. Albert becomes a Christian because he realizes Southern slaveowners pervert the Bible’s true message and convinces his parents to free their enslaved. Mary becomes an abolitionist who convinces her parents to do likewise. The newlyweds commit to making their own way in the world, “never more to be dependent on the wealth of their parents,—assured as

⁸⁴ David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011), 281.

⁸⁵ William Henry Brisbane, “Narrative of Albert and Mary,” *Autographs for Freedom* (New York, James C. Derby, 1854), 92–93.

⁸⁶ Susanna Ashton, “Ablaze: The 1849 White Supremacist Attack on the Pendleton Post Office,” *Southern Spaces*, published 2 December 2022, para. 15, Southernspaces.org..

⁸⁷ Brisbane, “Narrative of Albert and Mary,” 104.

⁸⁸ Brisbane, “Narrative of Albert and Mary.”

they were that all they could bestow upon them would be the product of unrequited toil.”⁸⁹ The class-accented conclusion finds the newlyweds and their families “living happily in moderate circumstances, in a little town in one of the free States,—in the direct line of the ‘underground railroad;’ and many a poor fugitive finds a comfortable shelter in either of their humble cottages.”⁹⁰ For Brisbane and other contributors to the giftbook, the extreme wealth and moral corruption of Southern slaveowners is contrasted against the “humble” and “honest” life enabled by free labor in the North.

Of course, Douglass knew that the virtues of free labor were not equally realized by Blacks in the northern workplace, and the industrial college plan opens the second edition of *Autographs for Freedom*. Penned by Reason, who at the time was the principal of the Institute for Colored Youth (later Cheyney University) in Philadelphia, “The Colored People’s ‘Industrial College’: What Some of the Builders Have Thought” emphasizes the proposed multi-racial institution’s benefits to the free Black community in the north, and reinforces its coeducational mission to prepare “every man and woman . . . to do good battle in the arena of active life.”⁹¹ Consistent with Douglass’s frustration with middle-class abolitionists, the featured essay begins with a list of causes taken up by abolitionists: “the Abolition of Capital Punishment—for the Prohibition of the Liquor Traffic—for the Rights of Women, and similar reforms.”⁹² Notably missing, Reason asserts, is reformers’ attention to the abolition of race prejudice in the northern marketplace. Reason writes, “But [the free Black man at the north] has failed to see a corresponding earnestness, according to the influence of Abolitionists in the business world, in opening the avenues of industrial labor to the proscribed youth of the land.”⁹³ Reinforcing the industrial college’s balance of classical education and skilled training, Reason anticipates how the school will produce “intelligent young laborers, competent to enrich the world with necessary products—industrious citizens, contributing their proportion to aid in the advancing civilization of the country;—self-providing artisans vindicating their people from the never-ceasing charge of a fitness for servile positions.”⁹⁴ In keeping with the critique of middle-class abolitionists for condoning and participating in the exploitation of the working classes and at the same time obliquely invoking White labor advocates’ troubling figuration of economic exploitation as “wages slavery,” Reason concludes, “Abolitionists ought to consider it a legitimate part of their great work, to aid in such an enterprise—to abolish not only chattel servitude, *but that other kind of slavery*, which, for generation after generation, dooms an oppressed people to a condition of dependence and pauperism.”⁹⁵ Reason’s opening salvo to the Garrisonians, along with the numerous class-accented selections over the two editions, demonstrates that *Autographs for Freedom* served Douglass and Griffiths not only as a means of raising funds for the antislavery cause but also as a venue for expressing their conviction that economic uplift was itself an antislavery strategy that deserved the attention of the abolitionist movement.

Conclusion

In the 1850s, Douglass was uniquely positioned as a seasoned newspaper editor and an accomplished writer to represent the material concerns of the working classes, both Black and

⁸⁹ Brisbane, “Narrative of Albert and Mary,” 125.

⁹⁰ Brisbane, “Narrative of Albert and Mary,” 126.

⁹¹ Charles L. Reason, “The Colored People’s ‘Industrial College’: What Some of the Builders Have Thought,” *Autographs for Freedom* (New York, James C. Derby, 1854), 15.

⁹² Reason, “The Colored People’s ‘Industrial College,’” 13.

⁹³ Reason, “The Colored People’s ‘Industrial College.’”

⁹⁴ Reason, “The Colored People’s ‘Industrial College,’” 14-15.

⁹⁵ Reason, “The Colored People’s ‘Industrial College,’” 15—emphasis added.

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White, in the north. According to Kyle A. Edwards, “During the pre-war and war years Douglass spoke out for the need to build an alliance between white workers, slaves, and abolitionists to overthrow the slave system.”⁹⁶ Edwards also cautions us to remember that Douglass grew disenchanted with class radicalism and unions in the decades after the Civil War, and he expressed fear of mobbing and violence in response to working-class uprisings in France. Douglass “disparaged communism in comparison with true republicanism,”⁹⁷ and, anachronistically, continued to tout free labor ideology in the 1870s despite that class divisions were becoming entrenched in America, and upward economic mobility was becoming more elusive for the working classes. Douglass defended strikebreakers and eschewed violence on the picket line at home,⁹⁸ coming full circle by embracing Garrisonian moral suasion in the 1840s, advocating justified antislavery violence in the 1850s, and returning to nonviolent resistance in the 1870s. In the article “The Labor Question” in his newspaper *The National New Era*, Douglass writes that he would support striking workers, so long as “such results are achieved solely by moral persuasion, and neither violence nor intimidation are resorted to.”⁹⁹

Perhaps not surprisingly, after the Civil War, Douglass found himself an object of class-inflected critique from fellow Blacks. Having established himself comfortably in his fourteen-acre Cedar Hill estate in the Anacostia neighborhood of Washington, D.C. in 1877, Douglass faced negative press when he was appointed that year to serve as the first Black marshal of the District of Columbia under the presidential administration of Rutherford B. Hayes. According to Blight, “Some blacks supposedly complained that Douglass was ‘too-high-toned’ to represent ‘the mass of his people.’”¹⁰⁰ This latter view of Douglass as an aloof aristocrat is a far cry from the antebellum labor reformer who reveals himself a man of deep conviction about socioeconomic justice as seen in his artisan republican promotion and defense of the industrial college plan and in his prickly attacks on middle-class abolitionists willing to exploit the multi-racial working poor in the north.

Despite the changes over time to his own class status, Douglass continued to regret that the industrial college he worked so hard to establish never materialized. Douglass’s disappointment in Stowe’s change of heart is palpable in his 20 January 1854 editorial announcing that the plan is in jeopardy: “Our eminent and philanthropic friend, Mrs. Stowe, for reasons which she deems quite satisfactory, does not, at present, see fit to stand for these the patron of the proposed Institution.”¹⁰¹ Douglass would remain perplexed by Stowe’s decision. In the 1892 edition of *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass explains, “After her return to this country I called again on Mrs. Stowe, and was much disappointed to learn from her that she had reconsidered her plan for the industrial school. I have never been able to see any force in the reasons for this change. It is enough, however, to say that they were sufficient for her.”¹⁰² Although the Business Committee led by Reason at the October 1855 national Black convention held in Philadelphia ultimately abandoned the industrial college plan, calling it

⁹⁶ Kyle A. Edwards, “Appendix A: Douglass and Marx on the Paris Commune and the Labor Question in the United States,” in August H. Nimtz’s and Kyle A. Edwards’s *The Communist and the Revolutionary Liberal in the Second American Revolution: Comparing Karl Marx and Frederick Douglass in Real Time* (Boston, Mass, Brill, 2024), 317–51, 318.

⁹⁷ Edwards, “Appendix A,” 329.

⁹⁸ Edwards, “Appendix A,” 337.

⁹⁹ “The Labor Question,” *The New National Era*, 26 October 1871.

¹⁰⁰ Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*, 584.

¹⁰¹ *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 20 January 1854.

¹⁰² Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (Boston, De Wolfe & Fiske Co., 1892), 358.

“impracticable” and “inadvisable,”¹⁰³ Douglass’s work resulted in a commitment from the Black business community to place advertisements in the northern press for apprenticeships available to their youth. Through their tireless efforts to start an industrial college, Douglass, Griffiths, Reason, and their allies left behind a wealth of literary output, including two editions of the underappreciated giftbook *Autographs for Freedom*, that drew attention to the plight of the multi-racial working classes in the north and promoted economic uplift of the Black community as a crucial antislavery strategy.

¹⁰³ *Proceedings of the Colored National Convention, Held in Franklin Hall, Sixth Street, Below Arch, Philadelphia, October 16th, 17th and 18th, 1855* (Salem, N.J., Printed at the National Standard Office, 1856), 26–27.

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.)

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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.)

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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 1949, 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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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 “[I]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.

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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.

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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?

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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.

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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.

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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 direct,” 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 Fafluk, *The Literary Gift in Early America* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2025).

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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.

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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*.

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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.

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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.

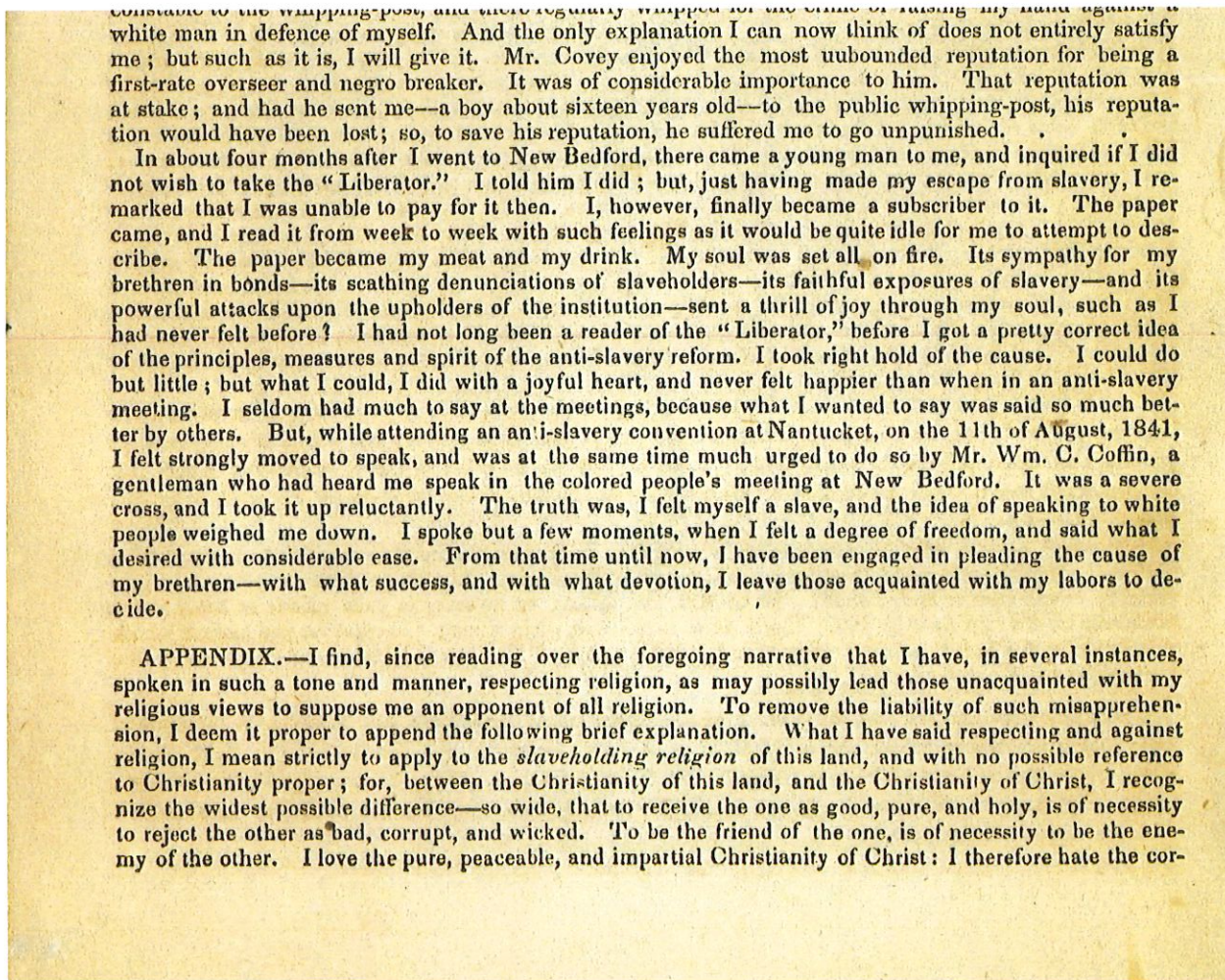


Figure 1: From page 31 of *Extracts*, the final page of content from the main text of *Narrative*, followed by Douglass's Appendix. Image courtesy of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

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that I have felt it my duty to testify.

I have found it very difficult 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 5th street. The conclusion of Garrison's introductory to the book seems appropriate in this place. Here it is.

“Reader! are you with the man-stealers in sympathy and purpose, or on the side of their down-trodden victims? If with the former, then are you the foe of God and man. If with the latter, what are you prepared to do and dare in their behalf? Be faithful, be vigilant, be untiring in your efforts to break every yoke, and let the oppressed go free. Come what may—cost what it may—inscribe on the banner which you unfurl to the breeze, as your religious and political motto—“**NO COMPROMISE WITH SLAVERY! NO UNION WITH SLAVEHOLDERS!**”

These tracts are the 7th and 8th Nos. of a series commenced last winter, and published at intervals of from four to six weeks, in editions of 10,000 copies each, for gratuitous distribution, by E. M. Davis. They can be had at the Anti-Slavery Office No. 31 North 5th street. They are too valuable to be thrown away. Let them be circulated freely among all, particularly those who are not willing to be identified with the active Abolitionists.

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.)

Devils and Dinner Tables: Frederick Douglass and Inherited Medieval Etiquette at Great House Farm

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I. Introduction: The “Little Nation” of the Plantation

In an 1855 letter to his editor, Frederick Douglass—American abolitionist, author, and magnanimous preacher—professed his vocation to tell of the “histor[y] worth the writing.” This history was that of himself, drafted and edited in long form over many cold months at his writing desk in Rochester, New York. Yet his second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, extended far beyond a recounting of personal childhood memories. Through detailed and journalistic imagery, Douglass weaves a cinematic encephalogram of American slavery, providing a map that unveils the “light of truth on a system” that stands “for judgment” before “the whole civilized world” (Douglass 2003, 6). Douglass’s map does what only a primary source narrative can do: tell “the real plot of the story,” capture the atrocities of antebellum America in such a way that no reader can be left with any “illusions about slavery” (Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction* 2021, 858–59).

Each of Douglass’s three narratives begins by charting the brutal architecture of the American antebellum South that governed his earliest memories on the Wye plantation in the 1820s. Born into bondage in the “worn-out, sandy, desert-like” Talbot County on Maryland’s Eastern Shore, Douglass grew up amid the ecosystem of slavery, bound not only by the buzzing shipyards of the Chesapeake and the muddy banks of Tuckahoe Creek but also by a fiendish overseer and master, Aaron Anthony (Douglass 2003, 30). Like the Biblical Moses, Douglass was orphaned, stranded as a boy in the reeds and marshes.¹ He was separated from his mother and his grandmother, and began to labor at a young age, later confessing that, as a child, his “soul was often pierced with horrors” (“What to the Slave is the Fourth of July” 2016, 210). The brutal realities of plantation life severed his boyhood yet, masterfully, he “turned the childhood recollections . . . into a stunning description of *slave society* in microcosm” (Blight 2018, 20). In confronting his traumatic past, Douglass produced a diaphanous narrative in which to view the “microcosm” of the plantation, allowing readers to observe the systemic evils embedded in American slavery on an intimate level.

Ten years after composing his first autobiography in 1845, Douglass reaped success with *My Bondage and My Freedom*, an intimate muckraking of slavery that sold “five thousand copies in the first two days and fifteen thousand within three months” (Blight 2018, 253). At the time of the book’s publication, abolitionists and Americans alike were starved for a genuine understanding of the nature of Southern slavery. They needed then, as we do today, a history told not only by scholars from afar but one written straight from the calloused hands of a man who had worked and bled in the sweltering beds of the plantation fields. Douglass, named by

¹ Moses, Israelite and patriarch of the Hebrew Bible, began his life as a slave in Egypt. He was rescued from the Nile and brought up as a foster child of the Pharaoh’s daughter (*King James Version Bible*, Ex. 2).

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Keidrick Roy “the realist,” sacrificially offers a diagram of his life in bondage so that we, as onlookers to the ever-crowded past, may not be blinded by false narratives or Southern propaganda (Roy 2024, 212). Far from a piece of fiction, Douglass’s narrative is rich with dialogue, imagery, and anecdotes that unabashedly dissect the mechanics of slavery with the precision of a surgeon. Treasuring the sacredness of the primary text, I will close-read Douglass’s second narrative as history, examining passages where he points to a Southern feudal identity, despite Founding Fathers “such as Jefferson” who “claimed to have abolished the final vestiges of ‘feudalism’” (Roy 2024, xv).

Scholars and historians have long debated the nature of the southern plantation, classifying it on a range from “feudal” to “capitalist.” Michael Gorup resituates “antebellum slavery in the context of nineteenth-century Euro-Atlantic capitalism,” adding to the historical linkage between slavery and modern capitalism (Gorup 2023, 985). Marxian analysis, as in Cedric Robinson’s *Black Marxism*, further connects “slave owner capitalism as the product of a second colonialism, rooted in the plantation economy” (Foster et al. 2020, 98). Keidrick Roy, however, sides with Black abolitionists who “pointed to the vestiges of feudalism as another catalyst for systemic inequalities” in his recently published *American Dark Age: Racial Feudalism and the Rise of Black Liberalism* (Roy 2024, 4). Roy empowers Black antebellum-era intellectuals to define for themselves the reality of the plantation, drawing on their descriptions of slavery as the primary text of the period. Following Frederick Douglass’s characterization of “*skin aristocracy*,” Roy coins the concept “*racial feudalism*” to describe the uniquely American “hierarchical society stratified along racial lines” (Roy 2024, 8).

Roy’s “*racial feudalism*” illuminates how Frederick Douglass’s 1855 autobiography² simultaneously characterizes the American South as a medieval heir and as a singular historical phenomenon, for Roy’s concept understands the complexity of history. A limited economic analysis of production incentives, for example, would underscore the plantation’s violence, and immediate classification into a pre-existing form, such as feudalism, likewise fails to take into account the extensive perversion of racism in the North American continent. It is necessary to have a historical lens that accounts for the South’s distinct edges and points; thus, I augment the contemporary discussion of the plantation system by suggesting a new method to understand its multifaceted European inheritance: by viewing the plantation as a cultural genetic mutation, novel in the lineage of prior civilizations.

The metaphor of the plantation as mutation facilitates a way historians can understand how American identity was both dependent on European philosophy and yet highly individualistic, as commented on by de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*.³ In terms of inheritance, U.S. culture fed on more than just European Christianity and Enlightenment thought; wealthy landowners seized upon the agrarian nature of the South and modeled the structure of medieval, localized manors built upon the backbreaking labor of men chained to the land. The European imprisonment of serfs to the humus, their political immobility to rise out of their caste, and their land made them de facto slaves. Similarly, class mobility was denied to Southern Blacks. They lived in a rigid state, a “hierarchy” of “White over Black” (Roy 2024, 38). The plantation’s core DNA of abuse, suppression, and power lust was, as it were, grafted

² Keidrick Roy’s *American Dark Age* masterfully examines Douglass in “Chapter 9: ‘Why Am I Black?’: Frederick Douglass and Identity-Aware Liberalism,” yet this paper will close-read Douglass in Roy’s aforementioned feudal context.

³ Alexis de Tocqueville, et al., *Democracy in America*. (Cambridge, Mass: Sever and Francis, 1862).

from the peat of Europe to the fields of the New World; however, 19th-century America had mutated in such a way that, like a virus, its violent manner had evolved.

The specific DNA alteration of the Southern plantation from the parent strand of medieval Europe was its pernicious dependence on racism to govern its culture. Although many factors, such as resource distribution, religion, and geography had a stake in Southern identity, none were so potent as the razor-edged split between Whites and Blacks. Following Caroline Levine's definition of politics as "a matter of distributions and arrangements" that not only "impose order on space," but "enforc[e] hierarchies of high and low, white and black," the antebellum Southern plantation is in itself its own political form, embodying hierarchy in the cruelest sense (Levine 2015, 3). Plantations operated as micro-societies, with rigid political parties—master, overseer, and slave—dictated by blood. Geographically fractured from the industrial North, as well as cities and urban hubs, Southern plantations were free to fashion themselves as independent city-states. Slavery molded the South into a system "with a distinct class structure, political economy, ideology, and a set of psychological patterns" that resulted in its estrangement from the rest of the world (Genovese 1965, 3). The Machiavellian slaveholding class became de facto feudal lords, setting the rules and constraints of their plantations. Douglass describes this phenomenon in the early chapters of his autobiography: the slave plantation is "a little nation of its own, having its own language, its own rules, regulations, and customs" (Douglass 2003, 50).

These rules often manifested in facades of etiquette; slave owners perfected the art of normalizing violence through polite displays of power. From demanding the salutations of their slaves to the hierarchy of the dinner table, Whites in Frederick Douglass's second narrative micromanaged with a watchful eye the participation of all plantation members in their behavioral caste system. Douglass's attentiveness to etiquette, table manners, and dress in *My Bondage and My Freedom* reveals often hidden ways the South masked racial cruelty as formality, and also traces the Great House Farm Plantation's mannerisms to Europe's feudal courts, where etiquette originated in displays of chivalry. The analogy of genetic mutation summarizes the plantation's position as both an inheritor of feudal behaviors as well as its distinctive attentiveness to racism that makes it a system both familiar and alien in history.

II. The Heritability of Evil

Christianity—perhaps the most influential importation from Europe to the New World—was molded into American Protestant sects by the indelible *King James Version (KJV)* of the Bible. For Frederick Douglass, the *KJV* was the sanctuary of the soul, his one steadfast consolation from the moment of his conversion at the age of thirteen. As he wrestled with the reality of slavery, he "reached for the Old Testament Hebrew prophets" and their "awesome narratives of destruction and apocalyptic renewal, exile, and return" to shape his perception of American slavery (Blight 275). For Douglass, the *KJV* was not only a school of theology and history, but it also offered, as David Blight argues in *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*,⁴

⁴ In a review of Blight's formidable seven-hundred sixty-four page book, Diane Barnes argues that Blight "envisions Douglass as a prophet of freedom, and throughout the book he places more emphasis on the great man's connection to religion and Christianity than previous scholars have allowed," using "parables of the King James Bible as an organizing thread" (Barnes 2019, 643). For further reading on Douglass's life of faith, see D.H. Dilbeck's *Frederick Douglass: America's Prophet*.

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instruction in rhetoric. Douglass’s writing is steeped in scriptural language, reverberating with warnings of God’s impending judgment on the propagators of slavery and the “ungodly.” The biblical books of Daniel and Revelation foretell the coming day when the Lord will separate the “wheat” from the “chaff,” for “nothing is secret that shall not be made manifest; neither anything hid, that shall not be known and come abroad” (*King James Version Bible*, 2 Pt. 2.20, Matt. 3.12, Lk. 8.8). In this mode of “judgment” writing, Douglass exposes the dark underpinnings of a society founded on oppression, poking and probing at the anatomy of the plantation system. *My Bondage and My Freedom* thus reads as both a journalistic exposé and a prophetic indictment, providing firsthand insights into the political and moral depravity of American slavery.

Yet writing in the form of a biblical prophet necessitates a disentangling of the politics that plunged a generation into moral decay. Old Testament prophets such as Isaiah and Malachi warned of the imminent fall of the kingdom of Israel, a punishment for the wickedness entrenched in courts and political offices. King Solomon, cautioning against vanity and injustice, writes that he “saw under the sun the place of judgment, that wickedness was there, and . . . the estate of the sons of men . . . are beasts” (Eccl. 3.16–18). This form of religious unmasking reveals both ethical failings and oppressive political systems; Douglass’s *My Bondage and My Freedom* exemplifies “just how much this new literary self-creation was a political act” (Blight 2018, “Bondage and Freedom”).

In the Hebrew Bible, the morality of the ruling political power had a substantial effect on the prosperity of the kingdom. When the ruling party was, such as King David, “a man after [God’s] own heart,” the Israelites abounded in blessing (Acts 13.22). However, as much as God seems “to set apart,” or to make *holy*, certain familial lines, he equally differentiates the descendants of those who have disobeyed him (“holy,” *Oxford English Dictionary*). As God warns, He visits “the iniquity of the fathers upon the children of the third and fourth generation of them that hate me” (Ex. 20.5). The curse of Ham illustrates this idea: while Shem honors his drunken father, Noah, Ham’s disrespect leads to a generational curse upon his descendants, who later inhabit regions like Sodom and Gomorrah, Babel, and Nineveh, all lands which are regarded later in the Bible as dwellings of wicked and Godless peoples⁵ (Gen. 9–10). As David Brion Davis notes, “the Hebrew word for slave, ‘*ebed*,’ was one used in a sense to refer to a righteous punishment sanctioned by the Lord” (Davis 1988, 79). Old Testament misconduct was subject to heavenly judgment, and subsequently, the punishments of the wicked were worse than earthly: the repercussions of evil could be felt for generations.

What I term the *heritability of evil* is a concept inspired by the Hebrew Bible that allows sin to linger in families and governments for centuries, propelled as a transmittable trait. This theory helps explain the repetition of pernicious political systems in history, such as a society’s acceptance of slavery. When the *heritability of evil* is applied to the American South, scholars can better comprehend the plantation as a mutation or as a system welded with European feudal characteristics. Slave owners, such as Douglass’s Col. Lloyd, were reminiscent of their European predecessors in the violence of their aristocracy, entrapment of lower classes, and separation from the labor that fueled their wealth. As W. E. B. Du Bois, an admirer of Douglass, observed:

⁵ See Aaron Demsky’s “The Genesis of Jewish Genealogy” for a detailed mapping of the so-called “Table of Nations” in Genesis 10, which pairs the descendants of Noah’s three sons with regions in Mesopotamia and Egypt. This mapping has, unfortunately, been a source to promulgate racist thought, which Andre Christian Allies unpacks in his 2024 dissertation “The Curse of Ham: An Africentric-Postcolonial Reading of Genesis 9:18–27 in the Context of the Coloured People of the Cape, South Africa.”

the Virginian plantation began as “a feudal domain,” a code “based on an attempt to reestablish in America the waning feudalism of Europe” (*The Negro* 2014, 189).

Before applying this theory to Douglass’s writings, it is important to distinguish the concept of the *heritability of evil* from Christianity’s doctrine of “original sin.” Original sin, as explained by Saint Augustine, insists that because of the fall of Adam, humanity “continue[s] to suffer disturbances,” and a saint’s entire life is engaged in a war against those “evil inclinations” (Augustine 444–45). Certain Protestant sects, such as Calvinists, believe in total depravity, wherein all are born enmeshed in the sin of our first parents, Adam and Eve, thus marked as fallen creatures. The notion of inherited sinful nature has been in religious discussion for hundreds of years, but where the *heritability of evil* separates itself from “original sin” is in its application to specific families rather than operating as a universal trait. Functioning as a recessive gene, certain individuals pass down their family’s degeneration to their offspring. Evil men beget evil children, perpetuating cycles of moral and political corruption.

The cycle of oppression, however, quickly morphed into something distinctly American once it began to ferment on New World soil. The Southern feudal experiment darkened under violence and cruelty, becoming a beast resembling its feudal father. African American abolitionists agree with Du Bois that “various holdovers of the European feudal era remained operative in the United States,” yet, as Keidrick Roy distinguishes, American slavery was distinctly *American* through the establishment of feudalism based on race (Roy 2024, 100).

Frederick Douglass captures this duality in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, reflecting on his childhood plantation in Tuckahoe, Maryland’s feudal relics and sui generis system:

In isolation, seclusion, and self-reliant independence, Col. Llyod’s plantation resembles what the baronial domains were during the Middle Ages in Europe. Grim, cold, and unapproachable by all genial influences from communities without, *there it stands*; full three hundred years behind the age, in all that relates to humanity and morals. This, however, is not the only view that the place presents. Civilization is shut out, but nature cannot be . . . the whole place is stamped with its own peculiar, iron-like individuality. (Douglass 2003, 50–51)

Here Douglass explicitly confronts the plantation’s medieval roots, acknowledging the problem of the city-state plantation’s “isolation,” or rather its refusal to become industrialized and connected to the cities of the North. Douglass claims the plantation is also similar to the “Middle Ages” in “humanity and morals,” having been furnished upon a similar hierarchical structure. Yet Douglass hesitates to characterize the plantation as entirely feudal; his wavering stance demonstrates historians’ difficulty in situating the plantation in the folds of history. Through the lens of the “historic mutation,” we can understand Douglass’s partition between the South and Europe, the two civilizations having been placed alongside each other in writing without surrendering distinction.

Douglass’s writing illuminates how the *heritability of evil* could be passed over both the vast Atlantic Ocean and through the crevasses of time, spawning the rigid rules of the plantation and releasing it to morph into a new diabolical manifestation. Much like the noble courts of feudal Europe, everything in Douglass’s sphere was dictated “according to plantation *etiquette*” (Douglass 2003, 54). White men fashioned themselves to be “well-bred southern gentlem[e]n,” quite “alive to the sentiment of honor,” just as a chivalrous knight would be in the court of his queen (Douglass 2003, 188). Though the South distinguished itself in racial cruelty, the

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mannerisms of the White upper class seemed to be traced from European skin. Bertram Wyatt-Brown, in his book *Southern Honor*, stresses “the continuity of human ethical principles,” admitting that “for better or worse, we are [the past thinkers’] heirs” (Wyatt-Brown 2023, xi). Honor was just as central to Southerners as it was for the feudal hierarchy; because of this, it was important for Whites that Blacks not only remain subordinate but that they “show obedience with apparently heartfelt sincerity,” resulting in a greater level of violence against Black personhood (Wyatt-Brown 2023, 363).

A strong piece of evidence for the *heritability of evil* is both American slavery’s and European feudalism’s dependence on inherited power and patrimony. In both contexts, social status and authority were determined by bloodlines. As in an English manor or feudal castle, plantation life revolved around the master’s family, each generation maintaining its hold over the land. Douglass’s first master, Col. Lloyd, was an inheritor of “perhaps the richest family in Maryland” (Blight 2018, 22), and his family enjoyed the status of being in “the sacred precincts of the great house” (Douglass 2003, 81). Young Douglass was personally implicated in the evil of legacy when his master, Captain Anthony, died, leaving him to be “valued and divided with the other property” between “his two children, Andrew and Lucretia” (Douglass 2003, 128). This concentration of familial power was a result of the “call upon master and family of the estate to be responsible for their position as lord of the community” (Stephens 1995, 16). In the antebellum South, many factors in life were predetermined for a child before it was even born; whether or not the person would be a slave or a free person, an inheritor of wealth or uneducated, and even the professions of their future descendants. This cruel predestination of fate ruled the citizens of the plantation. In a setting that cherished heritage, one need not wonder how easily good and evil natures, political structures, and religious ideologies were inherited.

The legacy of oppressive feudal power structures elucidates how seamlessly the Southern land-owning gentry was able to exert authority over their slaves. Inheritors of the worst of evils, British immigrants’ descendants “folded feudalism into [the United States’s] emerging liberal order,” shaping the South in prioritizing dynastic family structures and managerial style (Rabbiee 2020, 8, 17). This importation of despotism is evident in Douglass’s depictions of the Maryland plantations; the idea of “rank and station” was “rigidly maintained on Col. Lloyd’s plantation” and “non-intercourse was observed between Capt. Anthony’s family and that of Mr. Sevier, the overseer” (Douglass 2003, 60). Escaping from the station one was born into was impossible; our “destiny was now to be fixed for life” (129), as Douglass puts it.

If the *heritability of evil* caused the plantation to receive from Europe feudal structures in its DNA, then the overseer was the phenotype, or physical expression, of these evil traits. The arrival of Mr. Gore on Col. Lloyd’s plantation in Tuckahoe was the incarnation of the hellish terrors of slavery. Mr. Gore, along with the slave overseer, is described by Douglass “as distinct from the slaveholding gentry of the south as are the fish-women of Paris,” taking the “raw material of vulgarity and brutality . . . and stamp[ing] it as a distinct class of southern society.” His every expression invokes the demonic and demonstrates the “mean ambition of his class” that embeds evil in its very nature (Douglass 2003, 90–91). Douglass’s classification of the overseer “fraternity” allows for interpreting Mr. Gore’s faults as not only a result of an ill-formed conscience, but a result of being a member of an entirely corrupted species. Evil, then, is not unique to individuals on the plantation, but rather it has pervaded the nature of an entire social class with the inheritance of malice.

Douglass directly engages with the notion of the *heritability of evil* in the first chapter of

his first autobiography. “If the lineal descendants of Ham are only to be enslaved,” he notes, referencing the generational curse upon Noah’s sinful son, then, “according to the scriptures, slavery in this country will soon become an unscriptural institution; for thousands are ushered into this world, annually, who—like myself—owe their existence to white fathers, and, most frequently, to their masters, and masters’ sons” (*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* 2011, 15). Douglass is alluding to a racist theory that claimed that Ham’s descendants were Africans, and therefore accredited the Bible as justification for treating Blacks as a “lesser and cursed species.” Yet in their hypocrisy, Douglass points out that White Southerners dependent on inheritance must realize that they cannot apply curses to racial groups without recognizing that they themselves are blood-related to their own mixed-race children.

Despite many Americans imagining themselves as bearers of new Enlightenment ideals, long-standing racist and class-based ideologies were very much present in the upbringing of the young nation. In Douglass’s time, America was barely a generation removed from being “under the British crown.” Douglass reminds Americans of this close connection, explaining that only a few decades before, England was seen “as the fatherland” which imposed “upon its colonial children such restraints, burdens, and limitations” in its “mature judgment” (“What to the Slave is the Fourth of July” 2016, 197). The scaffolding and persona of the U.S. was “indebted to medieval thought,” and in the decades leading up to the Civil War, the South uplifted its “neo-feudal aristocracy,” showing favor for “English precedents” over “reason” (Rabiee 2020, 9, 11). It would be naive to imagine that the Southern civilization originated without a parent country; however, it is critical to avoid quickly classifying her as an asexual, or exact reproduction of feudal Europe, when in reality she is a much more complex and multifaceted body.

III. Southern Etiquette: The Cruellest Performance of Power

While legal, religious, and governmental systems are influential in ordering a community, “the ‘little rules’ of manners are necessary to enact the larger social order in every encounter” (Hemphill 1999, 4). The late historian C. Dallett Hemphill argues that manners offer a “new perspective on society,” since they illuminate “how power was actually distributed and how larger changes in cosmology, polity, or economy were being worked out in everyday life” (Hemphill 1999, 4). The interactions of class on Douglass’s plantation, from dinner at the master’s house to formal greetings, are complicated by Hemphill’s theory, offering concrete examples of the broader politics governing the South. The history of manners is a particularly productive lens for Southern historians because of its direct relationship to race relations. From the segregation of buses, schools, and restaurants to a White man’s refusal to address a slave by name, the violent regulation of race governed the South even after the ratification of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments. Racial etiquette “provided a script for all members of southern society,” and the violent consequences that resulted from breaking that script prompted Jennifer Ritterhouse to claim that etiquette “did not simply reflect [Southern] culture, but helped to *make* it” (Ritterhouse 2007, 23). This is because etiquette enabled Whites to maintain a sense of honor while dehumanizing Black people, envisioning themselves as chivalrous in the tradition of the English gentleman, even as they masked their racial cruelty behind the veneer of

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manners.⁶

Behavioral manners were an instrumental regulation to maintaining the status quo; etiquette on the plantation was as salient before the Civil War as it remains in the contemporary South. Flannery O’Connor’s realism and short stories, for instance, resonate so powerfully because of her careful observance of Southern behavioral norms in her characters’ interactions. She famously commented in 1963 that for two races to live alongside each other, a “code of manners based on mutual charity” is necessary for survival, and such a code provided the South “enough social discipline to hold us together and give us an identity” (qtd in Day 2001). In the South, a display of good manners signified an understanding of societal rules and a conscious decision to follow them. In this way, manners are “clear structures of power” that emphasize “overt expressions of hierarchy such as bowing, ceremony, differences in class and address, but also more subtle forms of human relations . . . and reinforced social distinctions” (Ownby 2007, viii).

Manners, therefore, are performative and signal class status. The appearance of being “genteel,” defined as “having the manners or lifestyle associated with people of a high social position,” has always been of great importance to this southern elite (“genteel,” *Oxford English Dictionary*). *Genteel*, or *gentility*, is derived from the classical Latin *gentilis*, a word used to classify people according to family or racial group. The American South inherited this form of classification from the ancient Romans and British, performing manners as a signifier of their “moral uprightness,” “coupled with high social position” (Wyatt-Brown 2023, 88). In every civilization, one party tries to assert its power over the other. For the Southern elite, the desire to continually segregate race and class manifested in a complex system of unspoken societal rules, presented through the artifice of manners.

Manners were not only a means of asserting social and racial superiority, but they were also fashioned as a justification for one’s righteousness. Norbert Elias, who viewed the antithesis of Western expression in the Middle Ages to be between the Roman Catholic Church and its heretics, pointed to “civilité” as the Church’s way of promoting herself as holier than the pagans; none in medieval Europe were as chivalrous as the crusaders, and the most virtuous were those highly connected to Church power. The earliest verses on the precepts of behavior were written by Latin-speaking clerics, followed by the 15th century’s “great epic poems of chivalrous society,” and later, in collections of poetry dedicated to table manners (Elias 1982, 60). Thus, exterior etiquette became strongly linked to an expression of a devout interior life.

One of Douglass’s masters, Captain Thomas Auld, is characterized as “intense[ly] selfish” and “destitute of every element of character capable of inspiring respect,” yet often he “tried to conceal” his malicious emptiness, doing so “with the appearance of piety” (Douglass 2003, 140–42). Auld, like many other slaveholders, practiced the virtues most acclaimed by society; at the time, these were religious behavioral mannerisms, such as church attendance, preaching, public prayer, and almsgiving, all mechanisms for identifying themselves as saintly, despite their cruel treatment of slaves behind closed doors. Douglass said of these Christians that they “attend with Pharisaical strictness to the outward forms of religion, and at the same time neglect the weightier matters of law, judgment, mercy, and faith” (Douglass 2011, 118). Douglass’s understanding of religious hypocrisy comes straight from the Gospels; in the

⁶ Hildegard Hoeller writes in her commentary on the American novel of manners that “manners, in a European sense are, after all, a decidedly undemocratic concept, designed to separate classes along unspeakable yet visible lines of taste and behavior,” concluding that “a mannered American is then perhaps not American at all” (135–36).

appendix of *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, he quotes Jesus' rebuke against the Pharisees⁷ as an example of "the overwhelming mass of professed Christians in America" (Douglass 2011, 118). To Douglass, slaveholders are but Pharisees eager to be noticed amid their virtuosity, cloaking their interior vice with outward displays of Christian fraternization.

The Southern elite, with their self-righteous sense of morality, often failed to recognize that the very manners they upheld as markers of civility served as a form of restraint—not only for the enslaved, but perhaps even more so, for themselves. As Douglass observes, the "slaveholder, as well as the slave, is a victim of the slave system" (Douglass 2003, 61). The elite's stress on social behavior was driven by their anxiety over maintaining their perceived class status. The "favored and petted white children" of wealthy slaveholders were enslaved in conduct. These children were reprimanded for minor infractions, such as "handling his little knife or fork improperly," or "soiling the tablecloth," bound for life to the meticulous "ceremony of [dressing or] undressing" (Douglass 2003, 34–35). Their early lessons in behaviors from their parents, often met with punishment, trained their mannerisms to be performed with perfection, cycling the elite's anxiety of appearance through the generations.

This anxiety manifested in a strong motion to keep the slave from rising in social status through manners. Whites sometimes favored a slave's profanity, bad temper, and ill choice of words because it allowed for further dehumanization. On commenting on dinner manners in *De Civilitate Morum Puerilium*, Erasmus advises young princes not to eat "the moment they have sat down" because that is what the "wolves do" (qtd in Elias 1982, 89). A man uninformed of certain mannerist rules could be equated to being an animal. Slaveholders propagated this comparison on the plantation, particularly during the Christmas holidays. Though the slaves were given time off to enjoy the season, this was only a pretense to "better secure the ends of injustice and oppression," particularly through coercing their slaves into becoming "deplorably drunk" with "cunning tricks," as Douglass reports (Douglass 2003, 186–87). Paradoxically, the behavioral standards were reversed; "not to be drunk . . . was disgraceful," and "he was esteemed lazy . . . who could not afford to drink whiskey" (Douglass 2003, 184). The slaves were kept in habitual sin and denied access to the Christian set of virtues lest they rise in social repute.

Douglass's childhood is an example of the slave owner's promotion of undignified behavior. Douglass goes so far as to remark how he was much freer from the rigid social expectations of the South than his master's children, enabling him to be "in his life and conduct, a genuine boy, doing whatever his boyish nature suggests" (Douglass 2003, 34). No one was bothered by the young Douglass's roaming about directionless, playing in the mud and dust as wildly as "horses, dogs, pigs, and barn-door fowls without . . . incurring reproach of any sort" (Douglass 2003, 34–35). Although this lifestyle seemed more "free" in nature, the lack of guidance in the behavioral rules of society resulted in young Douglass being cast off apathetically as a barn animal, intentionally part of a scheme on behalf of his master to prevent him from ever approaching success.

While reflecting on his boyhood experiences, Douglass observes the differences between himself and the White boys of the plantation, narrating these memories from the third person. He strings a series of repetitive, simple sentences with verbs immediately following the pronoun "he." It is not until the end of chapter one's commentary that Douglass reveals what the reader is likely already aware of, that "such a boy . . . was the boy whose life in slavery I am now narrating." His paragraph of definitive statements issues unwavering claims about the nature of

⁷ See Matthew 23

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the slave boy’s childhood in childlike simplicity and readability, yet with a tone that is distant and cold. His refusal to take possession of verbs through the first person “I” is Douglass’s subtle method of disassociating from his childhood. Although the young Douglass “literally runs wild” with “no nice little speeches to make for aunts, uncles, or cousins,” he seems to retrospectively yearn for a stern fatherly reproach as was received by the master’s children (Douglass 2003, 34–35). This yields a complex dilemma for Douglass to puzzle out: is it wrong for him to desire to be a part of the White behavioral system, corrected and reprimanded for his manners as a youth, so that in his adulthood he may know the rules of etiquette and advance socially in the realm of the upper class, or should he rightfully deny manners altogether because they have violently bonded his race?

Douglass’s fellow slaves wrestle with their conflicting relationships to the cruel behavioral standards placed on them through different adaptations of White, European manners. Among the slaves in Tuckahoe, manners were used to divide rank; according to Douglass, “strange and ridiculous as it may seem, among a people . . . with so many stern trials,” there is “not to be found, among any people, a more rigid enforcement of the law of respect to elders than they maintain.” Young slaves had to not only demonstrate obedience to their masters, but also approach the company of an older slave “with hat in hand, and woe betide him if he fails to acknowledge a favor, of any sort, with the accustomed ‘*tank’ee,*’ &c” (Douglass 2003, 54). These instructional customs between slaves were just as purposeful as the master’s enforcement of manners. These aforementioned slave elders, who naturally desired to be shown the respect that was denied to them, believed that adoption of the White behavioral system was the path to promoting themselves. Yet Douglass recognizes that even though societal standards are built on a European backbone, etiquette can still be utilized for a slave’s glory. He goes so far as to champion the idea of the “black gentleman,” proclaiming that there is no more well-mannered man than “in the African” (Douglass 2003, 54). This powerful declarative sentence reclaims the European genteel identity for the empowerment of the slave. The slaves’ use of manners amongst themselves is a way in which they can utilize a form that has bound them in the behavioral encampment and reverse it, flipping societal hierarchy on its head.

IV. Demons Beneath the Dishes: Table Manners from the Medieval Era

The manners that governed both slave and master were not unique to the plantation but “determined largely by . . . inheritance from European nations,” and nowhere is this more evident than “in the conventions governing our table manners and practices” (Carey 1933, 1). The *heritability of evil* expresses itself in the dining room; it is in this setting that manners divide class as sharply as a steak knife, demonstrating again the performative nature of manners and the anxieties associated with them. Yet dinnertime is also a repeated form echoed throughout history. Mealtime in the master’s house is not isolated to the plantation civilization but rather speaks to traditions of hierarchical power relations, such as a king hosting a feast in which he is seated at the head of the table, or younger daughters who were customarily obligated to serve food to their brothers. In an article published by the *American Anthropologist* in 1888, Garrick Mallery interprets manners as “ceremonial customs” (Mallery 1888, 193), tracing performed social behaviors as far back as the Middle Ages. Dinner, in particular, he sees as “no longer a meal, but an institution” and as “the great theatre of London life,” emphasizing the performed nature of an upper-class meal (Mallery 195).

Norbert Elias's historical mapping of upper-class Western table manners begins with him quoting a thirteenth-century poem written as a litany of rules for court behavior. As European civilization matured over time, developing a division of labor and a pool of resources, dining became the chief expressive mode of the elite, for a "barbarian only eats . . . the cultured man can dine" (Mallery 1888, 195). The abundant table of a nobleman was his boast of personal wealth; his polished etiquette was his gentle defiance of human nature. As wealth and power consolidated over time, reaching their height in the era of absolutist monarchs, such as Louis XIV, plebeians who were not in the court "familiarize[d] themselves with the manners and customs of the court" to associate themselves with the aristocrats (Elias 1982, 100). From the king's inner circles sprang forth a diluted stream of fashions, customs, and behaviors that the lower class did their best to mimic. Yet upper-class Southerners wished to drink not only at the runny downstream of the European elite but rather to make themselves the American fountainhead. Their ease with etiquette, the "mystiques of the paternalistic male and the gracious female," suggested "upper-class southerners were trying to live out manners they associated with an old landed aristocracy" (Ownby 2007, X). Manners were the slave-owning South's attempt to create an American aristocracy.

In Frederick Douglass's accounts of dinner on the plantation, the various cast members gathered around the superfluous table reveal the master's attempts to make aristocracy out of artifice, crafty as Rumpelstiltskin spinning spools into gold. The house slaves are dressed in costume, "discriminatory selected" with "special regard to their personal appearance" so that "in dress, as well as in form, in feature, in manner and speech, in tastes and habits, the distance between [house slave and field hand] . . . was immense . . ." (Douglass 2003, 81). The slaves selected to be house servants "constituted a sort of black aristocracy on Col. Lloyd's plantation," and are intentionally set apart in such a way from the field hands to intensify division amongst the slaves (Douglass 2003, 83). They are draped in their master's silk and taught an elevated mode of speech and manners as a means of distinction. Nowhere is the divide of power so sharply visible as at dinner in the great house.

To further emphasize the immense hierarchical distance between field hand, footman, and master, Douglass contrasts the "glittering table" with the deprivation of the "poor slave" (Douglass 2003, 81). He begins chapter seven, "Life in the Great House," not with a description of wealth or opulence, as one might expect, but rather, Douglass chooses to subvert the reader's expectations by focusing his attention on the slave:

The close-fitted stinginess that fed the poor slave on coarse corn-meal and tainted meat; that clothed him in crashy tow-linen, and hurried him on to toil through the field, in all weathers, with wind and rain beating on his tattered garments; that scarcely gave even the young slave-mother time to nurse her hungry infant in the fence corner; wholly vanishes on approaching the sacred precincts of the great house, the home of the Lloyds (Douglass 2003, 81).

Despite a biting emphasis on scarcity, Douglass's opening sentence is strung with an abundance of clauses. He poetically draws out in length sympathy from the reader for the "tattered" slave beaten "with wind and rain." With rhetoric inundated in pathos, Douglass situates the reader's gaze on the slave before allowing him or her to enter, through imagery, the luxurious home of his master. The reader retains Douglass's images of the "hungry infant" torn from its mother's arms throughout the litany of foods displayed on the master's table, such as "black-necked wild goose, partridges, quails, pheasants . . . beef, veal, mutton, and venison" (Douglass 2003, 81–

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82). This contrast makes the surplus of the “table of the great house” even more repulsive, for it embodies the religious hypocrisy Douglass so despised.

What is more insidious about the master’s table is its reliance on the importation of both foods and slaves from abroad. During the time of Douglass’s writing, the Western world reigned under the “age of empire,” burying in its breast the evils of imperialism, and exercising power over its colonial counterparts. According to Edward Said, although it is difficult to “show the involvements of culture with expanding empires,” we must attempt to connect trade routes and nations because “geography and power” are at stake (Said 1994, 7). Douglass does not forget to list his master’s imports in great detail in his commentary on dining:

The fertile garden . . . with its scientific gardener, imported from Scotland . . . Baltimore gathered figs, raisins, almonds, and juicy grapes from Spain. Wines and brandies from France; teas of various flavors, from China; and rich, aromatic coffee from Java, all conspired to swell the tide of high life, where pride and indolence rolled and lounged in magnificence and satiety (Douglass 2003, 82).

Luxury goods arrive at the master’s table from abroad, likely at great pains from laborers along trade routes; yet, *men and women* have also been imported to the plantation, listed by Douglass alongside a bulk of items. The slave trade dehumanized people sold in markets; at the theater of the dinner table, they are degraded further to become a decoration, meaningful only in easing the shift from scene to scene like stagehands, replacing appetizers with entrees with quiet swoops of their clean, white gloves. At this, etiquette is achieved for the indolent slave master, yet it is at the cost of an inscrutable number of small, silent deaths of personhood.

After Douglass’s commentary on the “dazzle and charm” of the rotating menus and the appearance of the servants and the room, Douglass directly addresses the reader with a series of rhetorical questions, demanding their conscious confrontation with the evil described. He does not spare his blunt judgment of the supper ‘institution,’ but rather condemns the master family’s performed dining as harshly as the prophet Jeremiah; “lurking beneath all their dishes,” Douglass exclaims, are “invisible spirits of evil, ready to feed the self-deluded gormandizers with aches, pained, fierce temper, uncontrolled passions . . . and gout” (Douglass 2003, 84). The demonic is disguised by the appearance of gentility, void as godless Pharisees; Douglass admits to this point, claiming, “Alas! It may only be a sham at last!” This exclamatory remark reveals Douglass’s critical interpretation of his memories, that the practiced etiquette was itself a fiction. Everything at the dinner time stage is measured to segregate and reinforce caste, from uniformity to permitted dialogue.

The hierarchy of the dinner table translates over to American Protestantism, distinctly pronounced during the distribution of the Lord’s Supper. The Lord’s Supper, which Douglass refers to as “the most sacred and most solemn of all the ordinances of the Christian church,” is intended to be a unitive rite in which all members of the body of Christ partake equally of Christ’s gift.⁸ Yet even as a freedman, Douglass is permitted to receive communion only after all the Whites have left the altar rail. As the Whites sang “very sweetly” and “the colored members . . . went forward” to receive, Douglass “went *out*,” rejecting a church that failed to

⁸ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines the distribution of communion as “the source and summit of the Christian life . . . the efficacious sign and sublime cause of that communion in the divine life and that unity of the People of God by which the Church is kept in being” (CCC 1324–25).

care for his soul as an equal (Douglass 2003, 259–60). The Whites' refusal to take bread and wine alongside even a freed slave at the altar rail of God demonstrates how deeply embedded their systems of hierarchy were within society. Segregation dominates in the privacy of the home as well as in the holy sacrament.

Their issuance of holy communion is not godly, but rather, according to St. Paul, sacrilegious. St. Paul sternly corrects citizens of Corinth for their abuse of the Lord's Supper, claiming that their divisions of class during the consumption of communion lead them to "eateth and drinketh [their] damnation" (1 Cor. 11.29). The Christian churches of New Bedford, likewise, are guilty of division during the administration of communion. They would better fit the mold of Christian brotherhood if "when [they] come together to eat," they "tarry one for another" (1 Cor. 11.33).

In all likelihood, the table of the slave more closely resembled the egalitarian "wedding feast" of heaven than any fabricated feast or contrived communion ritual staged by slaveholding Whites. Douglass's childhood caregiver and grandmother, Betsy Bailey, was a priestess in her rite, speaking in tongues to the fertile Maryland soil to produce a plethora of potatoes to feed her young. "'Grandmother Betty,' as she was familiarly called, was sent for in all directions, simply to place the seedling potatoes in the hills; for superstition had it that if 'Grandmamma Betty but touches them at planting, they will be sure to grow and flourish'" (Douglass 2003, 31). Her providential fortune in finding food for the grandchildren and neighbors entrusted to her care was Nature's confirmation of her place with the "elect."⁹ Holiness exuded from her fingertips; her magic could not be contained by Whites despite their various tools of suppression, such as young Douglass's malnourishment by Aunt Katy.¹⁰ Betsy Bailey demonstrated that eating could be a ceremony of love rather than an antiquated form. Even though slaves were dehumanized at the master's table, they challenged the European structure of manners by living more naturally and authentically. Douglass enjoyed his boyhood eating sweet potatoes and fresh fish caught from his grandmother's hands, roaming in the open air "freed from all restraint;" he admitted that for most of his "first eight years of life," he was a "happy boy, upon whom troubles fall only like water on a duck's back" (Douglass 2003, 35).

Yet this quiet defiance of European manners could not undermine the violence of the plantation system. Slaveholders, desperate to emulate the landed gentry, were consumed with avarice for their European counterparts, conspiring to resurrect the rubble of feudal manors on their white-columned estates. Their insecurity over class and identity in the New World manifested in displays of dominance, often enforced through brutal punishment. When enslaved individuals failed to conform to the prescribed codes of conduct, their so-called "bad manners" were met with unyielding chastisement; the penalty for a slave's bad manners was a brutal whipping, for it was said "that he has the devil in him" (Douglass 2003, 190). The consequence of the *heritability of evil* was the recycling of malevolent power dynamics that had chained the serfs to the earth hundreds of years before Douglass's birth.

The antebellum South's behavioral performances inevitably forced its actors to reenact scenes from a European past, wherein footmen waited upon their lords with silver trays and

⁹ See Robert White's translation of John Calvin's sermons in *The Doctrine of Election* for further clarification on "the elect."

¹⁰ Most slave children, too young to work as a field hand, were denied proper nourishment; "the bitter pinches of hunger I had to endure . . . I have fought with the dog . . . for the smallest crumbs" (Douglass 2003, 58). See also "Slave Child Mortality: Some Nutritional Answers to a Perennial Puzzle" by Kenneth F. Kiple and Virginia H. Kiple.

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vassals adhered to codes of chivalry. Frederick Douglass’s descriptions of the plantation’s evident fidelity to manners, particularly at mealtime, suggest the primacy of European feudal power, even in a country that claims to be built of a character entirely her own. Scholars must grapple with *the heritability of evil* by identifying its presence elsewhere, not only in the writings of Douglass but also in the broader cultural and literary landscape of American history, particularly in its intersection with race and gender. Beneath polished exteriors, etiquette remains a tool for sustaining hierarchies and widening social divides. The *heritability of evil* embedded in American DNA reveals persistent connections to European ancestry, perpetuated in mutations that reveal antagonistic cultural norms.

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The Last Reconstruction President? Benjamin Harrison and the Fight for Voting Rights

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The reader will note that the main title of this article, “The Last Reconstruction President,” is followed by a question mark. That’s because what I have to say is in the manner of a speculation, but, as I hope will become clear, my aim is to invoke a particular perspective for an appreciation of Benjamin Harrison’s leadership.

It has been an enduring truism, if not to say cliché, of American history that the disputed presidential election of 1876 ended in a compromise that marked the end of the noble endeavor that was Reconstruction, with its attendant defense of African American rights. As I have argued elsewhere, this interpretation of an enormously complex series of events is seriously flawed, if not dead wrong.¹ But I will not here revisit the much-disputed question of an alleged compromise of 1877. Instead, I take as my framework the often-overlooked question of what happened *after* 1877 to what we may term the “Reconstruction impulse.” By that I mean the desire among Republicans to carry forward the ideals and objectives of Reconstruction. I would submit that that impulse to uphold democracy in the South did not entirely die out in 1877, that it persisted among many late-nineteenth-century Republicans who hoped somehow to see its aims truly fulfilled. And I would argue that among those Republicans few emerged as more earnest exemplars of that persistent Reconstruction impulse than Benjamin Harrison.

Benjamin Harrison had been a champion of African American voting rights for years before he ran for president in 1888, and the issue played an important role in his campaign for the White House that year. And, once in office, he made voting rights legislation a signal element in his administration’s agenda. When that project narrowly succumbed to legislative barter, I would submit, the Reconstruction impulse finally died, not to be resuscitated for more than half a century.

At the outset, it is important to note that Benjamin Harrison’s support for African American voting rights reflected his fundamental commitment to republicanism—republicanism with a small *r*—the ideal of representative government in which sovereignty resides in the people and that only their consent, normally expressed through voting, can endow governmental power with legitimacy. As early as his college days, Harrison, a deeply religious man, looked upon politics as a moral enterprise, in which “members of civil society owe to that society . . . certain duties for the neglect of which God will not hold them guiltless.” Throughout his life, he believed that “the repository of all power, the originator of all policy, is the people” and that “the foundation of our structure of government is the principle of control by the majority.” And the essence of republican rule by the majority was the equality of all persons. “Every man,” Harrison insisted, “is possessed of an immortal spirit of equal value in the sight of God,” and “The theory upon which our Government is builded is that every qualified elector shall have an equal influence at the ballot-box with every other.” This God-given equality and majority rule

¹See, for instance, Charles W. Calhoun, *Conceiving a New Republic: The Republican Party and the Southern Question: 1869–1900* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006). I am grateful to John McKivigan and Charles Hyde for inviting me to participate in the 2025 Frederick Douglass Symposium. I salute Charlie and his team for all they have accomplished since my last visit to the Benjamin Harrison House more than a decade ago.

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represented the indispensable foundation of the Republic. American representative government faced its greatest challenge in the Civil War, and Harrison believed that the Union and republicanism triumphed at the end of the war, because, he said, “God has desired that this experiment of free government should have a more perfect trial.”²

But how would that “more perfect trial” play out? What kind of nation was the United States going to be after the war? Would it truly be a republic? In the immediate aftermath, Benjamin Harrison believed that the formerly enslaved African Americans must be free to enjoy basic rights. But, like many other members of his party, he expressed an initial hesitancy about Black suffrage, believing that those who had recently emerged from bondage might lack the understanding and education necessary to exercise the franchise capably. But the recalcitrance of southern Whites and the oppressive regimes they immediately established under President Andrew Johnson’s so-called plan of restoration, quickly changed Harrison’s perspective. He soon came to believe that African Americans must have the right to vote if they were ever going to protect themselves and their interests and ensure their effective freedom and full participation in the governance of the newly reconstituted republic. And yet, even after the establishment of new southern state governments under congressional Reconstruction, even after the enactment of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, and even after the passage of Federal Enforcement Acts to uphold those amendments and African Americans’ right to vote—even after all these measures—violent resistance against Blacks and southern White Republicans persisted. In 1874, Harrison told a campaign audience in Lafayette: “That land”—meaning the South—“is full of blood; and . . . who can doubt that these rivers of blood which the Southern earth has drunk since the war . . . call with a mighty voice for the condemnation of the world and the vengeance of God?”³

It was clear to Harrison and many other like-minded Republicans that more must be done to achieve the full and unfettered exercise of the elective franchise in the South. But that year, 1874—the year he made the Lafayette speech—turned out to be a pivotal year in the devolution of Reconstruction. In the congressional elections that year, for the first time since before the Civil War, the Democratic Party—dominated by its southern wing—won control of the national House of Representatives. The new House would include sixty-one former Confederate officers. This election, in 1874, ushered in a long period of divided government at the national level, during which neither party held clear control of all three entities, the presidency and both houses of Congress, and this divided government persisted until Benjamin Harrison assumed power in 1889. During this decade and a half of governmental stalemate, the prospects for the passage of necessary new legislation to close the loopholes in Reconstruction and protect the right to vote remained essentially nil.

Nonetheless, few Republicans were more fervent than Harrison in their belief that the Republican Party must not abandon the formerly enslaved. In 1876 he declared, “We entered into an obligation [as] solemn as a covenant with our God to save these people from the dastardly outrages that their rebel masters are committing upon them in the South.” But the Democrats won the Senate as well as the House in 1878, and they promptly attempted to repeal existing

² Benjamin Harrison, untitled and undated essay, ca. 1851–1852, Benjamin Harrison Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., hereafter cited as Harrison Papers; *Speeches of Benjamin Harrison*, comp. Charles Hedges (New York: United States Book Company, 1892), 12, 56, 241, 545; Benjamin Harrison, *Views of an Ex-President*, comp. Mary Lord Harrison (Indianapolis: Bowen-Merrill, 1901), 13.

³ Unidentified newspaper clipping [Harrison, speech at Lafayette, Indiana, September 30, 1874] Scrapbook #1 Harrison Papers.

Reconstruction laws wholesale. Only the veto of their efforts by President Rutherford B. Hayes prevented them from doing so. To Harrison, it seemed that the “serpent” of states’ rights had not been destroyed by the war but was again “gathering its wounded parts together to strike terror and destruction to the Union.” In 1880, three years after the supposed abandonment of Reconstruction, Harrison told a campaign audience that “the underlying and overlying question of the hour . . . is the issue of free elections and an honest count. . . . When every black friend of the flag under which we marched, . . . is made secure in all of his personal and political rights, then, and not until then, is the contest over.”⁴

But as time wore on, Harrison’s hopes about what could be done grew dim. In 1883, the Supreme Court nullified the Civil Rights Act of 1875, which aimed to establish equal access to public accommodations. Harrison, who now held a seat in the Senate, told a gathering of African Americans in Indianapolis that it might take a constitutional amendment to secure those rights, but he also confessed his doubt “whether in the present condition of parties in this country, we could ever pass such [an] amendment again.”⁵

By the early 1880s the solid Democratic South had fully formed, and it went far toward putting Grover Cleveland in the presidential chair in 1884. At that time, the three states of Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina all had majority Black populations. African Americans overwhelmingly sided with the Republicans, but because of the Democratic Party’s suppression of the Black vote, Cleveland won all three of those states. Had the Black vote been cast and counted, Cleveland would have lost those states, which would have given the presidency to his Republican opponent James G. Blaine. This fraudulent outcome in 1884 essentially nationalized the issue of vote suppression in the South. For the first time, Northern Republicans saw that Democrats’ repressive tactics in the South led to defeat in a national election in which they were directly involved and interested. The bulldozing of Black voters in the South, Harrison charged, was not only wrong in itself, but it also resulted in the “disfranchisement of white Republicans in the north.” “The men who put down the Rebellion,” he argued, should “insist upon having an equal voice at least with the Confederates in the administration of the Government.”⁶

Less than two weeks after Cleveland’s inauguration, Harrison wrote a fellow Hoosier: “The disfranchisement of Republicans in the South is a question, the gravity of which cannot be exaggerated; but,” he added ruefully, “what can we do?”⁷ The Democrats taking power had few incentives to enforce existing federal voting protections in the South, and, even under Republican administrations, securing convictions had proved nearly impossible. And the prospect for any new enforcement legislation seemed dead. Perhaps, Harrison speculated, the only solution was to try first to bolster the Republican Party in the South by splitting the White vote on the tariff or other financial questions.

The next year, 1886, Harrison’s own bid to retain his Senate seat brought home to him the impact of unfair election methods. Hoosier Democrats had gerrymandered the state’s legislative districts, so that even though the aggregate tally for Republican candidates in the legislative elections that year surpassed the Democrats by some 10,000 votes, the Democrats managed to win a slight plurality of General Assembly seats and elect a Democrat to replace Harrison in the Senate. For Harrison, this anti-democratic maneuvering brought back to center stage the issue of

⁴ *Indianapolis Journal*, 2 October 1876, 29 September 1879, 21 August 1880.

⁵ *Indianapolis Journal*, 23 October 1883.

⁶ Benjamin Harrison to M. C. Garber, 6 December 1884, Harrison Papers.

⁷ Benjamin Harrison to W. W. Slaughter, 14 March 1885, Harrison Papers.

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equal suffrage. On the eve of the presidential election year of 1888, he decried the “abominable, cruel, bloody . . . treatment of the poor blacks in the South,” and declared that “the one overwhelming, towering first question of the day is the restoration of equal suffrage throughout this land.”⁸

Harrison’s accent on this theme continued into the winter and spring of 1888, in the run-up to the Republican National Convention that year. He reminded audiences of the anomalous consequence of emancipation, which increased the population base in the South for assigning congressional seats and electoral votes, but because of the suppression of Black voting, White voters in those states wielded substantially more power than their counterparts in the North. Harrison condemned as a “farce” the fact that in several districts in Alabama, for instance, the total vote cast for congressmen did not reach 2,000 per district, while in most northern districts the average vote ranged from 30 to 50,000. Hence, the issue of the right to vote, he insisted, “is the dominant question at the foundation of our Government, . . . embracing all others, because it involves the question of a free and fair tribunal to which every question shall be submitted for arbitrament and final determination.” Harrison gave attention to financial issues, but he scoffed at the worshippers “at the shrine of Mammon” who feared that raising the suffrage question would “disturb the public pulse” and damage trade. “[T]here is no peace,” he declared, and “there can be no security for commerce, no security for the perpetuation of our Government, except by the establishment of justice the country over.”⁹

Harrison, of course, went on to win the Republican nomination that year. And we know that the ensuing fight with Cleveland and the Democrats became known as the great tariff battle of 1888, and that Harrison himself spoke frequently on the tariff issue in his front-porch campaign. But if Harrison modulated his treatment of the suffrage question, he also rejected suggestions that the party ignore it. As he told one advisor, “I would not be willing myself to purchase the Presidency by a compact of silence upon this question.” The “question of a free ballot,” he said, “is one of the few essential things,” whose settlement should precede “all others in natural order.” Such, too, was the belief of Republican Party orator Frederick Douglass, who campaigned for Harrison and told an audience in 1888, “the whole question of the future of the negro in the south is involved in the election now before you.” And, Douglass added, “Great as is the question of the Tariff, the question of national integrity, of national honor is greater. It is far more important that the nation’s soul shall be preserved than that nation’s pocket shall be protected.” For his part, Harrison drew an explicit link between economic issues and the suffrage question. “There would be no tariff question now,” he said, “if the labor vote of the south had not been suppressed.” As he told a visiting delegation of voters, “this great question of a free ballot, so much disturbed by race questions in the South, would be settled this year if the men of the South who believe with us upon the great question of the protection of American industries would throw off old prejudices and vote their convictions upon that question.”¹⁰

But not many White southerners threw off their old prejudices in 1888. The Solid South remained solid, and Cleveland won every former slave state. But, except for Connecticut and New Jersey, Harrison won a solid North and the presidency. He also carried with him clear

⁸ Benjamin Harrison, *General Harrison at Danville* (pamphlet, n.p., November [1887]), 5; *Indianapolis Journal*, 21 December 1887.

⁹ Harrison, *Speeches*, 16, 21.

¹⁰ Benjamin Harrison to Whitelaw Reid, 27 September 1888, Reid Family Papers, Library of Congress; Frederick Douglass, manuscript speech on behalf of Benjamin Harrison, Frederick Douglass Papers, Library of Congress; Harrison, *Speeches*, 162.

Republican majorities in the House and the Senate, the first time the Republicans had won both the presidency and the Congress since the early 1870s. Now in 1889/90 they were in a position to act.

During the transition period before they took power, Republicans debated the priority they should give to the many issues facing the country. That they would tackle the tariff was clear, but Harrison and others again argued that they should not turn a blind eye to the suffrage question. Before heading to Washington, he told his old comrades in the local Grand Army of the Republic [GAR] post that he hoped to hear “a bugle call throughout the land demanding a pure ballot. A free ballot, honestly expressed and fairly counted, is the main safeguard of our institutions, and its suppression under any circumstances cannot be tolerated.” Critics such as the *New York Times* labeled Harrison’s GAR speech a “loose declamation” and “not very becoming for a President-elect.” Frederick Douglass, on the other hand, insisted that Black suffrage “affects the fundamental principles that underlie . . . our republican government,” and he urged Harrison to do whatever was necessary to secure “a genuine republican government in the south.” The point was underscored a few weeks later by the cold-blooded murder of an Arkansas Republican who had mounted a legal challenge to the fraudulent methods used against him in his recent run for Congress.¹¹

Harrison fully understood the urgency. In his inaugural address, he frankly attributed the economic backwardness and other problems of the South to “the prejudices and paralysis of slavery [that] continue to hang upon the skirts of progress.” “The freedom of the ballot is a condition of our national life,” he declared, “and no power vested in Congress or in the Executive to secure or perpetuate it should remain unused upon occasion.” He argued that if states refused to defend the right to vote, Congress should act. He especially cited congressional elections, over which Congress’s right to impose regulations stood clearly embedded in the Constitution. “The people of all the Congressional districts,” Harrison said, “have an equal interest that the election in each [district] shall truly express the views and wishes of a majority of the qualified electors residing within it.”¹²

Harrison took office on March 4, 1889, but the fifty-first Congress elected with him would not convene until the following December. The intervening months witnessed turmoil in the South that underscored Harrison’s call for action. The state of Florida had seen flagrant violations of existing federal election law during the 1888 campaign, but when Harrison’s attorney general launched an investigation, armed groups resisted the serving of arrest warrants and the calling of witnesses. They murdered at least one potential witness and a deputy marshal, and, ultimately, the Florida prosecutions yielded only three convictions. Reports reached Washington of “a rapidly growing revolutionary tendency in the South, tending towards a guerrilla system of warfare.” General William T. Sherman declared publicly that “these negroes must have the rights which the Constitution gives them . . . and the war won’t be over until that is done.” In Virginia, in the fall of 1889, the gubernatorial election campaign witnessed widespread fraud and intimidation. Hoosier Republican Congressman J. B. Cheadle, campaigning in Virginia, reported that “there is not even a semblance” of “a republican form of

¹¹ *New York Times*, 2, 3 January 1889; *The Papers of Frederick Douglass*, Series 1, ed. John W. Blassingame and John R. McKivigan (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979–1992), 5:399–403; Kenneth C. Barnes, *Who Killed John Clayton?: Political Violence and the Emergence of the New South, 1861–1893* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998), 70–78.

¹² James D. Richardson, *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 1789–1902* (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of National Literature and Art, 1903), 9:8, 13.

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government” in that state. He urged Harrison to use his upcoming annual message to alert Congress and the country “to the imperative duty of securing to the humblest citizen his right of suffrage.” Similarly, Louis T. Michener, Harrison’s good friend and political advisor, sent the White House a message from a meeting of Black leaders in Indianapolis, who called for “some action [to] . . . give to the colored people of the South, some protection in the exercise of their rights as citizens.” Michener acknowledged that new voting rights laws might lead to bloodshed, but, he wrote, “better blood-shed than slavery and outrages and murder for political reasons in this civilized nation.”¹³

Once again, Harrison needed no prompting. In his December 1889 annual message, he put the question directly to White southerners and the nation at large: “When and under what conditions is the black man to have a free ballot? . . . When is that equality of influence which our form of government was intended to secure to the electors to be restored?” He called upon Congress to use “its well-defined constitutional powers” to “secure to all our people a free exercise of the right of suffrage.” “This generation,” Harrison said, “should courageously face these grave questions, and not leave them as a heritage of woe to the next.” At last in power after fifteen years of divided government, Harrison and congressional Republicans fully appreciated the grave responsibility of the moment. As one Kansas representative put it, “If the Republican party allows this opportunity to pass without effecting a remedy, I fear its opportunity will not return.”¹⁴

In short order, committees in the House and Senate set about framing new protective legislation. They considered several approaches, but followed the president’s lead in favoring an expansion of federal supervision of congressional elections. The Lodge Federal Elections Bill, named for Massachusetts representative Henry Cabot Lodge, outlined the mechanism for the enhanced supervision: When a body of citizens within a congressional district requested intervention, the local federal judge could designate supervisors to oversee the registering of voters, the conduct of elections, and the counting of votes. These federal supervisors would forward their vote tabulations, along with those of state officials, to a federal board of canvassers who would decide which candidate for Congress won. Should the canvassers’ decision come under challenge, a federal judge would resolve the dispute.

Heretofore—since the end of Reconstruction—Democratic state and local election officials had determined outcomes in congressional elections. The bill’s provision that federal canvassers and federal judges could henceforth potentially perform that key function alarmed White southerners and their northern Democratic allies. Such a reworking of the system could possibly recast the political make-up of the South, with consequent reverberations for the political stalemate in the nation at large.

For that reason, the Democrats fought fiercely against the Lodge Bill in the summer of 1890. They branded the measure a “force bill” designed to resurrect the so-called horrors of Reconstruction. In the House of Representatives, Speaker Thomas Reed exercised iron control, and the Republicans passed the bill fairly quickly. In the Senate, however, with its obstructionist rules, the Democrats dragged out debate on a pending tariff bill to prevent the chamber from

¹³ Calhoun, *Conceiving a New Republic*, 229–230; E. E. Baldwin to John Sherman, 9 May 1889, John Sherman Papers, Library of Congress, hereafter cited as Sherman Papers; *Indianapolis Journal*, 26 September 1889; J. B. Cheadle to Benjamin Harrison, 16 November 1889, L. T. Michener to E. W. Halford, 1 October 1889, Harrison Papers.

¹⁴ Richardson, *Messages and Papers*, 9:55–56; Harrison Kelley to Albion W. Tourgée, 7 January 1890, Albion W. Tourgée Papers, Chautauqua County Historical Society, Westfield, New York, hereafter cited as Tourgée Papers.

moving on to the Lodge Bill. As Republicans considered their options, eyes turned to President Harrison, who complained that the situation in the Senate was “very annoying and discouraging.” In White House meetings, he told senators that voting for the bill was their “highest duty.” His office staff cultivated public support by providing the press with extracts from Harrison’s inaugural address and annual message endorsing elections legislation. Newspapers reported that he was “leaving no stone unturned to let the Republican Senators know that he wants the [Lodge] bill passed.” “It can be authoritatively stated that President Harrison’s views have undergone no change whatever,” reported the *Indianapolis Journal*. “He believes in a federal election bill, and is very deeply concerned in the prospect of a failure to pass the bill.”¹⁵

But Republicans could not muster enough votes to limit debate on the tariff, and some who placed greater emphasis on the tariff began to suggest that the elections bill be shelved. Finally, Republican senators agreed to open the way for the tariff by delaying the Lodge Bill and giving it first priority in the next session of Congress in December 1890. Senate backers expressed confidence in the bill’s passage at that time, but others had doubts. As Frederick Douglass pointed out, “What if we gain the tariff and many other good things if in doing it the soul of the party and nation is lost?”¹⁶

While these events unfolded, 1890 also witnessed the midterm congressional election campaign. Railing against Republican activism in several areas, the Democrats accused their opponents of inflicting the country with tariff-driven high prices and profligate spending by the “Billion Dollar Congress.” In their condemnation of the elections bill, they pulled out all the stops. The result brought a massive shift in the House of Representatives, reducing the Republicans to eighty-eight seats while the Democrats garnered two-hundred thirty-five. In a sense, the Lodge Bill proved a godsend to Democrats, especially in the South, where they raised the specter of a revived Reconstruction. As a result, Republicans saw their congressional representation from the old slave states fall from twenty-five seats to four. Some southern Republicans believed that the Lodge Bill backers had paved the way for the Democrats. One discouraged Alabama Republican wrote the national party chairman, “The Republican Party must get out of the ‘Negro rut’ if they desire any success in this country.”¹⁷

But when the Republican members returned to Washington for the second session of the outgoing Congress, in December of 1890, many Republicans saw the midterm election as an object lesson in why new legislation was needed. President Harrison agreed. He saw the recent election as a “disaster”—all the more reason to use his annual message to voice his fervent support for the Lodge Bill. Numerous times over the years, he argued, Congress had enacted legislation regulating national elections. But existing Federal law remained “just short of effectiveness,” because state authorities still held “all control over the certification which establishes the *prima facie* right to a seat in the House of Representatives.” The Lodge Bill would rectify this flaw. The President dismissed the Democrats’ overwrought warnings of a new “force bill.” “Every law,” he noted, whatever its subject, “has force behind it.” “The qualifications of an elector,” he said, “must be sought in the law, not in the opinions, prejudices,

¹⁵ Elijah W. Halford Diary, 14, 15 August 1890, Benjamin Harrison to Mary Scott Dimmick, 16 August 1890, Benjamin Harrison Papers [privately held at the time of my research by Benjamin Harrison Walker, whose collection was subsequently deposited at the Benjamin Harrison Presidential Site, Indianapolis]; *New York Times*, 19 August 1890; *Chicago Tribune*, 18 August 1890; *Indianapolis Journal*, 17 August 1890.

¹⁶ Frederick Douglass to George F. Hoar, 2 September 1890, George F. Hoar Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Massachusetts.

¹⁷ J. H. Purnell to M. S. Quay, 19 December 1890, Sherman Papers.

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or fears of any class, however powerful. The path of the elector to the ballot box must be free from the ambush of fear and the enticements of fraud.”¹⁸

Old-time Radical Republican, Albion Tourgée, saluted the president for the “courage and statesmanship” of his “firm convictions.” Nonetheless, in the Senate, Democrats launched a prolonged all-out attack against the Lodge Bill. They claimed that the midterm elections represented an “emphatic, resounding condemnation” of the measure, after which, as one southern Democrat put it, the Republicans could not “warm the cold fingers of this cadaver.” The Republicans’ aim, said another Democrat, was simply to subject the South to “negro ascendancy and party despotism.” While the Democrats filibustered, the Democratic press branded Harrison “a schemer” conspiring to help Republicans bring his “pet measure” to a vote. But as one congressional ally noted, the president “feels deeply the humiliation, and I believe he would rather die trying to protect the rights of American citizens, than to live and not make the effort.”¹⁹

Republicans went toe-to-toe with the Democrats in the debate, but, as it turned out, Republicans were not unanimously behind the Lodge Bill. The principal dissenters were senators from western silver-mining states who colluded with southern Democrats to win support for the free coinage of silver. As one Colorado Republican senator baldly put it, “There are many things more important and vital to the welfare of this nation than that the colored citizens of the South shall vote.” In the end, after weeks of debate, enough western Republicans joined the Democrats in a move to cut off consideration of the bill and take up another subject. The motion carried, and with that dramatic stroke, the Lodge Bill was dead. As one Harrison ally lamented, “The confederacy and the Western mining camps” had joined forces to “betray the Republican party and the rights of citizenship for silver.”²⁰

President Harrison did not disguise his disappointment. In a rare newspaper interview, he asserted, “That the majority shall rule is an underlying principle of our institutions. . . . It will not do for the people of any section to say that they must be let alone; that it is a local question to be settled by the States of whether we shall have honest elections or not.” But the chance for a resuscitation of the Lodge Bill seemed remote, given the Democratic control of the next House recently elected. Whether the suffrage question would become “a dominant issue” in the future, Harrison told the interviewer, would depend “upon how much the public conscience is quickened regarding the principle of right.” On that point, he was not hopeful. A few months later, in August 1891, he told a Vermont audience, “the prejudices of generations are not like marks upon the blackboard, that can be rubbed out with a sponge. They are more like the deep glacial lines that the years have left in the rock, but the water, when that surface is exposed to its quiet, gentle, and perpetual influence, wears even these out.”²¹

In his third annual message at the end of 1891, Harrison again raised the issue of “a free ballot and equal representation,” but he forbore recommending a reconsideration of the Lodge Bill. Instead, he proposed a bipartisan commission, to be appointed by the Supreme Court, to investigate how to secure “to every elector a free and unmolested exercise of the suffrage.” Even

¹⁸ Benjamin Harrison to Howard Cale, 17 November 1890, Harrison Papers; Richardson, *Messages and Papers*, 9:128–129.

¹⁹ Albion W. Tourgée to Benjamin Harrison, 2 December 1890, Harrison Papers; *Congressional Record*, 51st Congress, 2nd Session, 245, 459; *New York Times*, 30 December 1890; Harrison Kelley to Mr. and Mrs. Albion W. Tourgée, 1 January 1891, Tourgée Papers.

²⁰ *Congressional Record*, 51st Congress, 2nd Session, 873; John C. Spooner to J. M. Bundy, 27 January 1891, John Coit Spooner Papers, Library of Congress.

²¹ *New York Tribune*, 17 March 1891; Harrison, *Speeches*, 543.

this modest proposal had no chance of enactment. Moreover, while prospects for federal action to protect the right of suffrage faded, the dangers to African Americans' physical safety multiplied. Harrison became the first president to publicly attack lynching, which he said "shame[s] our Christian civilization." He urged Congress to enact "the strongest repressive legislation" wherever lynching came under federal jurisdiction. But, again, he could not realistically hope that the Democrats would act. In the South, Harrison's attempts at moral suasion fell on deaf ears, and vigilante violence continued.²²

Despite the Senate vote killing the Lodge Bill, Harrison's efforts had won him honor and appreciation among the nation's Blacks. Frederick Douglass, who had held office during the administration, said it was "To the President [that] the credit is due for creating the bill in the first place, and then" using "[h]is moral influence, as well as his official indorsement and assistance" on its behalf. Harrison's efforts, Douglass said, "should endear him to the colored people as long as he lives."²³

White Democrats in the South had quite another view. Indeed, after the defeat of the Lodge Bill, Democrats in the southern states felt freer to institute "legal" suppression of the Black vote through such mechanisms as poll taxes, literacy tests, and the grandfather clause. Moreover, the bill's defeat proved a pivotal moment in American politics. Democrats North and South tarred the measure with the odious label "force bill" and portrayed it as a measure not to protect Black voting but to oppress southern Whites. Grover Cleveland, running against Harrison again in 1892, condemned the bill as "a most atrocious measure" and "a direct attack upon the spirit and theory of our Government." In his campaign for re-election that year, Harrison recognized the futility posed by a public attitude growing increasingly negative, and so he forbore calling explicitly for new federal legislation. Instead, he repeated his suggestion for a commission to study election wrongdoing, and expressed the hope that it could be "corrected by the states." The compilers of the Republican campaign textbook for 1892 took a full retreat from the Lodge Bill, claiming that although Republicans regarded free and fair elections as "dear," the party was in "no sense committed to this bill, or to any other particular method of curing the evil of dishonest elections."²⁴

Cleveland won the election, and the Democrats carried Congress. Benefitting from vote suppression schemes, Cleveland amassed huge majorities in the South, contributing to his national edge of more than 360,000 votes. In the new House, Democrats would hold a 60-percent majority, though a smaller six-seat margin in the Senate. Theodore Roosevelt, a member of Harrison's administration and a future president, concluded that the 1892 election demonstrated "the inadvisability of legislation providing for Federal control of elections" because "the people at large . . . would not sustain such an attempt." When the Democrats took power, they lost little time in repealing voting rights legislation that had originated in the enforcement laws of the early 1870s. In subsequent years, southern Democrats perfected their suppression of Black suffrage, and Republican calls for measures to protect the right to vote dwindled. In 1896, Republican William McKinley ran for president almost exclusively on economic issues. When he won, he gave an inaugural address that claimed that "free and fair elections are . . . more universally

²² Richardson, *Messages and Papers*, 9:210–211; *Public Papers and Addresses of Benjamin Harrison* (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1893), 294.

²³ *Indianapolis Journal*, 1 June 1892.

²⁴ *New York Times*, 14, 19 July 1892; *Proceedings of the Tenth Republican National Convention Held in the City of Minneapolis, Minnesota, June 7, 8, 9, and 10, 1892* (Minneapolis: Harrison & Smith, 1892), 141; Republican National Committee, *The Republican Campaign Text-Book for 1892* (New York: Brodix Publishing, 1892), 197–199.

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enjoyed to-day than ever before.” Along with this flight of fancy, McKinley hailed the recent election as demonstrating unity in the country and promised White southerners he would do nothing to disturb it.²⁵

During the fifteen years of government stalemate preceding Harrison’s term, the insidious Myth of the Lost Cause had become accepted more and more widely, and Americans, both northern and southern, acquiesced in the myth’s practical application in Jim Crow repression. By 1896, Harrison himself reportedly conceded that the so-called “force bill” had become “a dead issue.” Republicans, he said, would “leave all that business to the local authorities.”²⁶ Nonetheless, one can argue that Benjamin Harrison’s fight on behalf of federal voting rights legislation during his administration marked him as truly the last Reconstruction president. The effort failed, however, and the defeat of the Lodge Bill brought the effective end of Reconstruction. And the ensuing years witnessed a rapid atrophy of the Reconstruction impulse. Indeed, the Lodge bill turned out to be the last significant attempt at civil rights legislation until the middle of the twentieth century.

In his post-White House years, Harrison felt deep anxiety over the country’s direction. He refused to speak for McKinley’s re-election in 1900. Surveying the nation, he feared that a “canker of greed” had “eaten into the hearts” of Americans. He warned that aggressive competition among corporations drove them to exploit labor in the headlong quest for profits. And he condemned those among the wealthy who engaged in selfish practices such as the evasion of taxes, which deepened society’s inequities. Still, turning increasingly again to his deep Christian faith, Harrison, like many Social Gospel proponents, maintained hope for a moral regeneration in politics. Two months before his death, he wrote to a friend “In the old Republican days the subject of slavery and of the saving of the Union made appeals to the consciences and liberty-loving instincts of the people. These later years have been full of talk about commerce and dinner pails, but I feel sure that the American conscience and the American love of liberty have not been smothered. They will break through this crust of sordidness and realize that those only keep their liberties who accord liberty to others.”²⁷

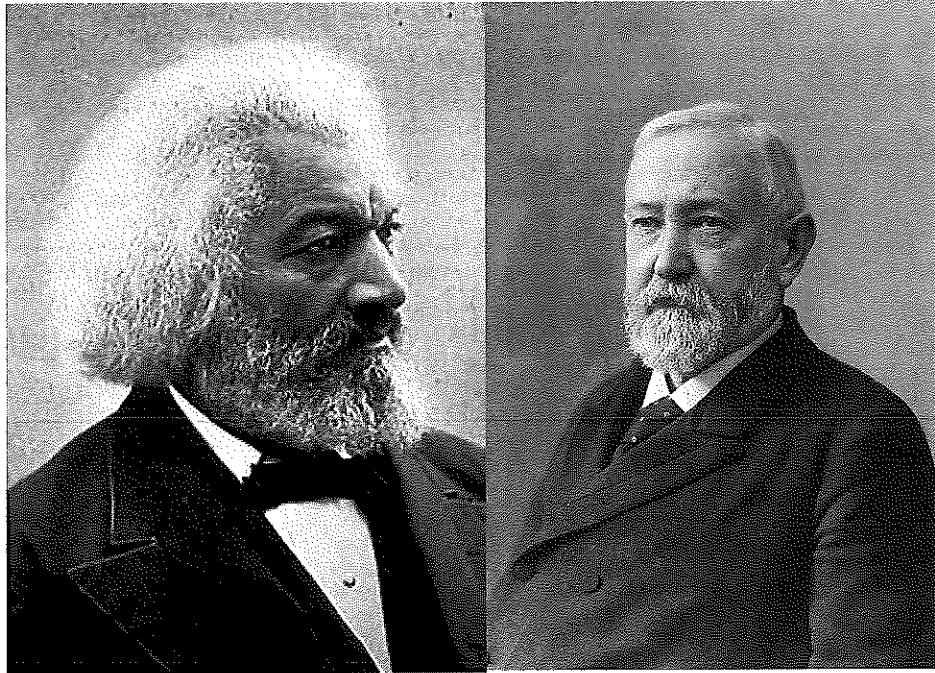
²⁵ Theodore Roosevelt to Benjamin F. Tracy, 20 November 1892, Benjamin Franklin Tracy Papers, Library of Congress; Richardson, *Messages and Papers*, 10:15, 18

²⁶ *Richmond Times*, 6 October 1896. For a perspective on the development of the Lost Cause Myth, see David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001).

²⁷ Harrison, *Views of an Ex-President*, 331–357, 363, 500, 508–509; Benjamin Harrison to P. S. Kennedy, 5 January 1901, Harrison Papers.

**Frederick Douglass, Benjamin Harrison, and
Accepting the Outcome of the Election of 1892**

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In 2024, numerous political commentators observed a series of uncanny resemblance between the then current election and that of 1892. The situation of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris in the 2024 election seemed remarkably similar to that faced by Benjamin Harrison in the 1892 contest. The incumbent administration was confronted by a former president, Donald Trump in 2024 and Grover Cleveland in 1892, who, after losing four years earlier, was campaigning vigorously to regain the White House. After hard-fought and ultimately close elections, both former presidents proved victorious. Supporters of the losing candidates worried about what the return of the opposition to the White House meant for the government policies that had long defined their party. One of the most loyal Harrison backers who found himself in this situation after the 1892 election was Frederick Douglass and this essay will examine his response to that political reverse.

A runaway Maryland slave, Douglass joined the abolitionists and quickly became an international celebrity thanks to his oratorical skills and moving autobiography. In the political sphere, Douglass was first a supporter of the non-voting wing led by William Lloyd Garrison, and in the 1850s, a tentative advocate of the Liberty Party and then the new Republican Party. Abraham Lincoln's issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 cemented Douglass's allegiance to the Republicans. During Reconstruction, Douglass aligned himself with those Republicans most staunchly committed to protecting the rights that African Americans had

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gained from the adoption of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments. Foremost among those was U.S. President Ulysses S. Grant who resisted but eventually failed to prevent the former slaveholding class from regaining political control of southern states.¹

In the face of worsening conditions for African Americans in the South, Douglass loyally supported Grant for a third term in 1876 and 1880, making him a member of the Republican Party faction remembered as “Stalwarts.”² In his last autobiography, *Life and Times*, Douglass dismissed the two Republican presidents nominated and then elected in Grant’s place, Rutherford B. Hayes and James A. Garfield, as temporizers in defending African Americans from the transgressions of Southern Democrats. Worse yet was Chester A. Arthur, who succeeded to the presidency after Garfield’s assassination, whom Douglass condemned for “his self-indulgence, indifference and neglect of opportunity . . .”³ But, to Douglass, the worst of all non-Stalwart Republicans was Maine Senator James G. Blaine, the Republican candidate in the 1884 election who lost the White House to Democrat Grover Cleveland. Douglass angrily recalled Blaine’s opposition in 1875, while Speaker of the House, to Stalwart efforts to pass a new “force bill” to use federal power to defend Black southerners’ right to vote. Douglass contended that the consequent loss of the South’s electoral votes to the Democrats was the principal reason Blaine lost the presidency nine years later. To Douglass:

The defeat of the Republican party in 1884, was due rather to its own folly than to the wisdom of the Democratic party. It despised and rejected the hand that had raised it to power and it paid the penalty of its own folly. The life of the Republican party lay in its devotion to justice, liberty and humanity. When it abandoned or slighted these great moral ideas and devoted itself to materialistic measures, it no longer appealed to the heart of the nation, but to its pocket.⁴

Douglass created considerable public controversy earlier in 1884 when, two years after the death of his first wife Anna, he married Helen Pitts, a White woman twenty years his junior and a former secretary at the Recorder of Deeds office. To Douglass’s pleasant surprise, the new Democratic president Grover Cleveland not only kept him in his lucrative federal post but invited the mixed-race couple to all formal receptions at the White House, winning Douglass’s respect for standing up to what he described as “fierce and bitter reproaches from members of his own party in the South.”⁵ Finally, after a year and a half, Cleveland requested Douglass’s resignation in order to replace him with a Democrat. Free of public office after almost a decade of service, Douglass toured Europe and the Near East with his new wife. Abroad from September 1886 to August 1887, the couple returned to Washington as the nation was gearing up for the next presidential contest.⁶

¹ I have written elsewhere about Douglass’s earlier political activities: John R. McKivigan, “Stalwart Douglass: *Life and Times* as Political Manifesto,” *Journal of African-American History*, 99:46–49 (Winter-Spring 2014) and John R. McKivigan, “Frederick Douglass and the African American Response to the Election of 1860” in *The Election of 1860 Reconsidered*, edited by James Fuller (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2013), 141–64.

² Herbert J. Clancy, *The Presidential Election of 1880* (Chicago, Illinois: Loyola University Press, 1958), 47–48, 82–83, 98–101, 109–11; Charles W. Calhoun, *From Bloody Shirt to Full Dinner Pail: The Transformation of Politics and Governance in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2010), 67–71.

³ Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself, His Early Life as a Slave, His Escape from Bondage, and His Compete History to the Present Time* (Boston: DeWolfe, Fiske & co., 1893) in *Douglass Papers*, ser. 2, 3:393.

⁴ Douglass, *Life and Times*, 3:407. Also see “We Are Confronted by a New Administration” (16 April 1885) in *Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 5:183–84.

⁵ Douglass, *Life and Times*, 3:392.

⁶ David W. Blight: *Frederick Douglass; Prophet of Liberty* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 649–54, 665–75.

In his first term, Cleveland made progress in his promise to install civil service reforms in the federal patronage system but failed to deliver the tariff reductions his party desired. Cleveland's unwavering opposition to expanding the coinage of silver helped plant the seeds that would, in a few years, grow into the Populist movement. While he occasionally condemned violence against southern Blacks, Cleveland did nothing to enforce the Fifteenth Amendment protecting African American voting rights. Facing a Republican dominated Congress after the 1886 election, Cleveland's first presidential term was best remembered for his high number of vetoes rather than legislative accomplishments. Republicans increasingly viewed Cleveland as vulnerable if he sought reelection.⁷

In the contest for the 1888 Republican presidential nomination, Douglass favored Senator John Sherman because of the Ohioan's long record of supporting the protection of African American rights. Douglass wrote Sherman in April, relating "there is no man living with any chance of being president of the U. States whom I would rather see in that quality than yourself."⁸ Douglass attended the party's national convention in Chicago that year and, in an address to delegates on its first day, he implored them to remember "your black friends . . . now stripped of their constitutional right to vote . . ." He further exhorted delegates: "Be not deterred from duty by the cry of 'bloody shirt' . . . Let that shirt wave so long as blood shall be found upon it."⁹

The 1888 Republican National Convention witnessed a protracted battle between candidates for the presidency. Blaine had not put his name forward to run again. Douglass's choice, Sherman, led on the first sixth ballots with strong support from Southern delegations.¹⁰ Previous supporters of Blaine, however, threw their support behind Benjamin Harrison, the former U.S. senator from Indiana with a good Civil War military record and popularity among veterans. Harrison passed Sherman on the seventh ballot and won the nomination on the eighth.¹¹

Harrison had announced his candidacy that spring for the Republican presidential nomination, declaring himself a "living and rejuvenated Republican." The words "Rejuvenated Republicanism" became the slogan of his presidential campaign. Eager to defeat Cleveland, Republican leaders hoped Harrison could restore his home state that Cleveland had flipped in 1884 to their column and win in a closely contested election.¹²

What exactly was "Rejuvenated Republicanism"? Harrison had defined his views in a series of speeches earlier in 1888 on the past history and future role of the Republican Party. Harrison declared: "What unfinished work remains to be done? It seems to me that the work that is unfinished is to make that constitutional grant of citizenship, the franchise to the colored men of the South, a practical and living reality." He described the ways that Southern Democrats had

⁷ Allan Nevins, *Grover Cleveland: A Study in Courage* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1932), 269, 273, 277–79, 326–28; Richard E. Welch Jr., *The Presidencies of Grover Cleveland* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1988), 65–66; Henry F. Graff, *Grover Cleveland* (New York: Times Books, 2002), 73–85.

⁸ Frederick Douglass to John Sherman, 25 April 1888, Frederick Douglass Papers, LOC. Also see Charles W. Calhoun, *Minority Victory: Gilded Age Politics and the Front Porch Campaign of 1888* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2008), 82.

⁹ Douglass, *Life and Times*, 436–37; Calhoun, *Minority Victory*, 109.

¹⁰ In another of his "firsts," Douglass had received one vote from a Kentucky delegate on the fourth ballot. Blight, *Prophet of Liberty*, 682–83.

¹¹ Stan M. Haynes, *President-Making in the Gilded Age: The Nominating Conventions of 1876–1900* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Co., Inc., Publishers, 2016), 148–56.

¹² Calhoun, *Harrison*, 57–59.

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suppressed the votes of American Americans in order to sweep those states into their Electoral College column:

No bloody shirt—though that cry never had any terrors for me. I believe we greatly underestimate the importance of bringing the issue to the front, and with that oft-time Republican courage and outspoken fidelity to truth denouncing it the land over. If we cannot do anything else we can either make these people ashamed of this outrage against the ballot or make the world ashamed of them.¹³

In another spring speech, Harrison promised “legislative remedies” to punish “crimes against the ballot”:

Whatever they are, we will seek them out and put them into force—not in a spirit of enmity against the men who fought against us—forgetting the war, but only insisting that now, nearly a quarter of a century after it is over, a free ballot shall not be denied to Republicans in these States where rebels have been rehabilitated with a full citizenship. [Applause.] Every question waits the settlement of this. The tariff question would be settled already if the 1,000,000 of black laborers in the South had their due representation in the House of Representatives.¹⁴

Harrison’s “Rejuvenated Republicanism” greatly pleased Douglass and he accepted an invitation from the party’s national committee to take the field for their 1888 ticket. He and Charles Morris, a young Black man who later would marry one of Douglass’s granddaughters, traveled through five Northern states, speaking, as Douglass later recalled “indoors and out of doors, in skating rinks and public halls, day and night . . .”¹⁵ The Republican Party platform had stressed the need for a higher tariff, but Douglass left most of the discussion of that issue to Morris. Douglass instead spoke of the need to protect Black civil and voting rights, arguing “the soul of the nation was in this question and that the gain of all the gold in the world would not compensate for the loss of the Nation’s soul.”¹⁶ Comparing the past records of Cleveland and Harrison all the way back to the crisis of the Civil War, Douglass enthusiastically endorsed the Hoosier’s election.¹⁷ In that year’s very close election, Harrison flipped back two states Blaine had lost to Cleveland, New York and Indiana, and triumphed in the electoral college.

The newly elected president was immediately deluged by a flood of requests for appointments to federal office, large and small. Harrison’s brusque handling of many of those requests offended some of the party’s most influential bosses, which would cause significant political problems for him later. Amongst the swell of office seekers was Douglass who requested as a reward for his campaign services being returned to the lucrative post of Recorder of Deeds for the District of Columbia that he had held under the James A. Garfield administration. Perhaps seeking to make a high profile African American appointment, Harrison chose Douglass as the U.S. minister plenipotentiary to the Caribbean republic of Haiti. Douglass probably was not pleased at having to report on his diplomatic activities to Harrison’s choice for secretary of state, James G. Blaine.¹⁸

¹³ Benjamin Harrison, “Chicago, 20 March 1888” in Charles Hedges, ed., *Speeches of Benjamin Harrison, Twenty-third President of the United States* (New York: United States Book Company, 1892), 22.

¹⁴ Harrison, “Detroit, 22 February 1888” in Hedges, *Speeches of Benjamin Harrison*, 15–16.

¹⁵ Douglass, *Life and Times in Douglass Papers*, ser. 2, 3:238.

¹⁶ Douglass, *Life and Times in Douglass Papers*, ser. 2, 3:438.

¹⁷ “Parties Are to Be Judged by Their Fruits” (25 October 1888) in *Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 5:390–98.

¹⁸ Frederick Douglass to Benjamin Harrison, 7 March 1889, General Correspondence File, reel 5, frame 285–86, FD Papers, LOC; Blight, *Prophet of Liberty*, 691–93; Calhoun, *Harrison*, 60–61, 68–72.

In advancing its domestic agenda, with narrow majorities in Congress, the new Harrison administration immediately ran into serious intra-party disputes over legislative priorities. A compromise bill initiated by Sherman to stimulate the rural economy through an increase in the amount of silver currency passed both houses along party lines. Ohio congressman William McKinley prepared a bill to significantly raise tariffs that passed the House one-hundred sixty-four to one-hundred forty-two votes, also along largely partisan lines, but stalled in the Senate.¹⁹

Simultaneously working its way through Congress were two measures aimed to assist African Americans. One was a bill introduced by Senator Henry W. Blair of New Hampshire, a friend of Douglass, to finance education in the South with federal funds. First introduced in 1881 by Blair, the bill passed the Senate in 1884, 1886, and 1888. While in the Senate, Harrison amended the measure to guarantee that common schools would be provided to all children, regardless of race. Each time, the “Blair Education Bill” was blocked in the House. In 1890, however, the bill failed in the Senate, as some Republicans preferred to rally Republican strength behind passage of an even more important civil rights measure.²⁰

That other piece of legislation was the Federal Elections Bill, a measure that would empower federal oversight of elections for U.S. Representatives. Since the “Redemption” of the former slave states in the 1870s, White southern Democrats passed laws restricting voter registration and instituting electoral requirements to prevent most African American males, enfranchised by the Fifteenth Amendment, from voting. The Elections bill was drafted by Representative Henry Cabot Lodge and sponsored in the Senate by George Frisbie Hoar, both from Massachusetts, with the strong endorsement of President Harrison. The bill would empower the federal circuit courts to supervise elections and use deputy U.S. marshals to protect voting rights in states adjudged violating the Fifteenth Amendment. The bill passed the House along strict party lines by just six votes.²¹

In the Senate, the Democrats adopted the tactic of prolonging debate over the McKinley tariff bill indefinitely to prevent discussion of the Elections measure. After efforts to change Senate rules to end debate over the McKinley bill failed, champions of higher tariffs among Republicans, such as Pennsylvania Senator Matthew Quay—already angered by perceived snubs from Harrison over patronage—persuaded colleagues to postpone consideration of the Elections bill to the next session following the 1890 congressional elections in order to pass the protectionist legislation. After the vote on the Elections bill was so postponed, Douglass wrote Hoar: “What if we gain the tariff and many other good things if in doing it the soul of the party and nation is lost?”²²

The Republican Party then performed disastrously in the fall 1890 congressional elections, losing eighty-six House and four Senate seats and falling to gain a minority in the former body. This loss distressed Douglass and tested his faith in the Republicans. In an article

¹⁹ Calhoun, *Harrison*, 84–100.

²⁰ Charles W. Calhoun, *Conceiving a New Republic: The Republican Party and the Southern Question, 1869–1900* (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 2006), 198–200; Calhoun, *Harrison*, 92; Jeffery A. Jenkins and Justin Peck, “The Blair Education Bill: A Lost Opportunity in American Public Education,” *Studies in American Political Development*, 35:1–25 (August 2020); Allen J. Going, “The South and the Blair Education Bill,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 44:267–90 (September 1957); Daniel W. Crofts, “The Black Response to the Blair Education Bill,” *Journal of Southern History*, 37:41–65 (February 1971).

²¹ Calhoun, *From Bloody Shirt to Full Dinner Pail*, 129–30; Elisa Hink, “The Federal Elections Bill and the End of Reconstruction in 1890,” [Digitalscholarship.unlv.edu](http://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu).

²² Frederick Douglass to George F. Hoar, 2 September 1890, George F. Hoar Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society; Calhoun, *From Bloody Shirt to Full Dinner Pail*, 130–34.

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solicited by *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Paper*, he analyzed various popular theories explaining the election outcome and argued that the Republican loss was due to the party's failure to defend African American rights, asserting “The success of the Republican party does not depend mainly upon its economical theories, its strength lies in another direction. Its appeal is to the conscience of the nation, and its success is to be sought and found in firm adhesion and fidelity to the humane and progressive ideas of liberty and humanity which called it into being.”²³

The loss of control of Congress fueled dissension in the Republican Party about both its agenda and leader in the next presidential election. Harrison doubled down on his support for fair elections in the South by calling upon the returning lame duck Congress, where his party retained control, to fulfill its promise and pass the Lodge bill. In his State of the Union message, Harrison reminded Congress: “The path of the elector to the ballot box must be free from the ambush of fear and the enticements of fraud; the count so true and open that none shall gainsay it.”²⁴ Democrats launched a filibuster to prevent a vote on the bill. Democrats counted on Western state “silver Republicans” to break ranks and aid them in defeating the bill. After more maneuvering, six Republicans bolted and efforts to resume debate on the Lodge bill failed.²⁵ When the new Congress took over in March 1891, all hope was lost.

Most of these legislative maneuvers occurred while Douglass was serving the country as its lead diplomat in Haiti. The issues concerning Douglass and the failed effort to obtain a lease for a naval coaling station at the Môle Ste. Nicholas in northwest Haiti are too complicated to discuss here. After Douglass resigned that diplomatic post in July 1891, he wrote a lengthy article for the *North American Review* that placed most of the blame for the effort's failure on others, but especially on Secretary of State Blaine rather than Harrison.²⁶

Quarrels over patronage distribution and a popular reaction against the administration's activist legislative agenda left Harrison vulnerable in 1892 and moved other Republicans to challenge him for the party's presidential nomination. Hoping to defeat any such challenge, in an article in the *New York Independent* in April 1892, Douglass gave a full-hearted endorsement to a second term for President Harrison, praising him for his support of both the Blair Education bill and the Federal Elections bill. He blamed those measures' failures in Congress on the behavior of “just enough of half-hearted men, wearing the livery of Republicanism, to serve the purpose of Democracy and to defeat the honest purpose of an honest President.”²⁷ Douglass praised Harrison's unwavering support for African American rights:

He has never thought to compassionate the murderers of the Negro by whining about the so-called difficult race problem with which they have to struggle. His trumpet was never given an uncertain sound; he has simply insisted upon justice, fair play and obedience to constitutional obligations as the solution of the race question.²⁸

²³ “The Cause of the Republican Defeat” (1890) in *Douglass Papers*, ser. 4, 1:463–64. See also Calhoun, *Harrison*, 108–09; *Douglass Papers*, ser. 5, 5:496.

²⁴ Quoted in Calhoun, *Harrison*, 111.

²⁵ Calhoun, *Harrison*, 110–16; Calhoun, *From Bloody Shirt to Full Dinner Pail*, 134–35.

²⁶ “Haiti and the United States: Inside History of the Negotiations for the Môle St. Nicolas. Part I,” *North American Review*, 153:33–45 (September 1891) in *Douglass Papers*, ser. 4, 1:472–73. Douglass also stated similar opinions in “President Harrison and “Our Colored Citizens” (April 1892) in *Douglass Papers*, ser. 4, 1:538–39.

²⁷ “President Harrison and Our Colored Citizens” (April 1892) in *Douglass Papers*, ser. 4, 1:538. Giving a speech on Haiti in Wilmington, Delaware, on 1 January 1892, Douglass said that he approved of Harrison's message and that Harrison was his candidate. “Colored People's Jubilee,” *Delaware Gazette and State Journal*, 7 January 1892.

²⁸ “President Harrison and Our Colored Citizens” (April 1892) in *Douglass Papers*, ser. 4, 1:537.

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Douglass accompanied Harrison to the former's old hometown of Rochester, New York, where both men participated in Decoration Day activities in what was regarded as a key swing state in the upcoming election.²⁹

Shortly before the 1892 Republican National Convention, Douglass gave a newspaper interview that was widely circulated in the press. He assured the reporter that he planned to attend the upcoming convention to lobby for Harrison's renomination. He declared: "To my mind we never had a greater President." He listed multiple reasons but gave greatest emphasis to Harrison's backing of the Federal Elections Bill: "To the President the credit is due for creating the bill in the first place, and then pushing it through the House and almost through the Senate. His moral influence, as well as his official endorsement and assistance were behind the measure."³⁰ Douglass also singled out Blaine, Harrison's potential rival for the party's nomination, as the individual most responsible for the failure of the effort in Congress in 1875 as well as the most recent attempt to pass legislation to give federal protection to African American voting rights.³¹

As was his regular habit, Douglass travelled to Minneapolis in early June 1892 to attend the Republican National Convention.³² There was considerable discontent within the party with the prospect of renominating Harrison in the face of the Democratic resurgence. Sherman and McKinley considered, and then rejected, a battle with Harrison for the nomination. Blaine allowed his name to be put forward by his supporters in the weeks leading up to the convention, prompting him to resign from the cabinet. Even Harrison himself considered declining to run again in what was shaping up to be a difficult rematch against former president Cleveland.³³

Douglass actively lobbied for Harrison at the convention, giving press interviews and making speeches before wavering state delegations. He was reported carrying a large picture of Harrison projecting from his coat pocket.³⁴ Douglass gave a widely-published interview at the convention to the *New York Tribune*, praising Harrison and condemning Blaine as the candidate whom the Democrats most wanted to see nominated and declared: "I for one do not care to accept advice from this quarter."³⁵ After considerable behind-the-scenes maneuvering, Harrison won renomination on the first ballot. Vice President Morton did not seek a second term and was replaced by Whitelaw Reid, former editor of the *New York Tribune* and Harrison's ambassador to France.³⁶ Pleased with the convention's outcome, Douglass told a reporter: "Harrison has made a great President, true to all the pledges of the party, true where others were false, and brave when

²⁹ "Renominate Benjamin Harrison" (31 May 1892) in *Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 5:486; *Brooklyn Eagle*, 30 May 1892; Burlington (Vt.) *Free Press*, 2 June 1892. While he made no speeches in Rochester, Douglass gave an interview to the *Indianapolis Journal* in which he expressed his reasons for supporting Harrison and his confidence that African Americans would fully back his re-nomination and re-election. "Colored Men Want Harrison," *Indianapolis Journal*, 1 June 1892.

³⁰ "Renominate Benjamin Harrison" (31 May 1892) in *Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 5:487. Also see Calhoun, *Harrison*, 117.

³¹ "Renominate Benjamin Harrison" (31 May 1892) in *Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 5:488.

³² Douglass declined having the party pay for his transportation there. Frederick Douglass to Lewis T. Michener, 21 June 1892, Louis T. Michener Papers, LOC.

³³ Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and Fred L. Israel, eds., *History of American Presidential Elections*, 3 vols (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1971), 2:1706-08

³⁴ "Fred Douglass not at Sea," Maysville (Ky.) *Evening Bulletin*, 7 June 1892; "After the Colored Delegates," *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel*, 7 June 1892.

³⁵ "Expressions of Opinion," *New York Tribune*, 8 June 1892.

³⁶ Morton had plans to instead run for the governorship of New York. Robert Sobel, *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Executive Branch, 1777-1989* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Company, 1971), 260-61.

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others were cowardly . . . The ticket is a remarkably strong one, and will steadily grow in strength until November when it will sweep the country.”³⁷

To Douglass’s disappointment, the tariff issue became foremost in the campaign debate. Harrison defended the protectionist McKinley Tariff passed during his term. For his part, Cleveland assured voters that while he opposed absolute free trade, he supported a significant reduction in the tariff. At the campaign’s start, Cleveland warned against the “dangerous and reckless experiment of free, unlimited coinage of silver at our mints.”³⁸ This was also the year of the pro “Free-Silver” Populist insurgency and Southern Democratic leaders were fearful that defecting White farmers might allow African American voters to bring Republicans back into power in their states.³⁹ The Democrats therefore made state control of elections a central part of their platform in 1892. Their campaign rhetoric complained that Republicans, through the Lodge bill, had attempted to restore the franchise to unqualified Black voters who sought control of the government to avoid hard work.⁴⁰

Increasing age reduced the number of speeches Douglass delivered in the 1892 campaign. He reunited with his 1888 campaign partner Charles Morris for a Brooklyn rally for African American voters where he stressed the need to remain loyal to the Republican Party.⁴¹ In a speech in Concord, New Hampshire, in September, Douglass indicated some worry about the direction of the Republican campaign, calling it “a great mistake for that party to dwarf and belittle the moral side of their character, by presenting us on all occasions, only the one theme, tariff, tariff, tariff.” Instead, Douglass argued: “The soul of a nation is its honor, and you bound yourselves when you pledged yourselves that you gave the negro his liberty, when you gave him the right to vote, you pledged yourselves that you would see to it that that right would be protected.”⁴² In mid-October, Douglass voiced optimism: “This country will elect Harrison . . . The President is the friend of the working people and they know it. We could easily carry the county if we had a fair count in the South.”⁴³ Mentioning the problems Southern Blacks faced voting might be a hint that Douglass was actually worried about the election’s outcome.

Douglass ultimately provided his strongest support to Harrison’s 1892 campaign not in speeches, but in articles and public letters. In August 1892, Douglass wrote a letter to the *New York Herald*, agreeing with Black journalist T. Thomas Fortune’s complaints about the decline in African American rights in the Southern states since their “Redemption” by Democrats. Douglass made clear that he did not blame Harrison for the Republicans’ failure to intervene effectively. Instead, Douglass attacked Blaine as “the marplot of his party. In his studied attention to economic questions he had succeeded in diverting from us the natural flow of Republican aid and comfort.” Rather than follow that course again and risk losing the election, as in 1884, Douglass promised his role in the campaign “will be founded not on hard money, the tariff, the

³⁷ “Frederick Douglass Gratified,” *New York Tribune*, 12 June 1892. Also see “Colored Delegates,” *Daily Inter-Ocean*, 15 June 1892.

³⁸ Schlesinger and Israel, *History of American Presidential Elections*, 2:1710–11.

³⁹ Calhoun, *Harrison*, 210, 213.

⁴⁰ Sig Synnestvedt, *The White Response to Black Emancipation: Second-class Citizenship in the United States Since Reconstruction* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), 41; Heather Cox Richardson, *The Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor, and Politics in the Post-Civil War Northern 1865–1901* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 202–14.

⁴¹ “Foraker Will Be There,” Brooklyn (N.Y.) *Daily Times*, 10 October 1892; “Afro-Americans Meet,” Brooklyn (N.Y.) *Daily Times*, 11 October 1892; “The Colored Men,” *New York Tribune*, 15 October 1892.

⁴² “The Courage and Manliness of John P. Hale” (3 August 1892) in *Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 5:496.

⁴³ Douglass also claimed that he would be making five speeches in Indiana for Harrison. “Will Work for Harrison,” *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, 19 October 1892.

McKinley bill, nor any other kind of bill. I don't see anything for us to do but to make sentiment favorable to the race, and let us make it aggressively."⁴⁴

Bishop Levi J. Coppin solicited an article from Douglass for his denomination's *AME Church Review*, advising African Americans on how to vote. In his piece, Douglass first criticized the small minority of African American leaders whom he branded as "tricksters" or "disappointed office-seekers" for advocating either voting for Cleveland or for an independent race and color party: "They tell us that Mr. Cleveland is a good man. What if he is? He is harnessed to a wicked party and must go where his party drives him." Douglass called on all African Americans to rally behind Harrison:

[T]he triumph of the Democratic party in the approaching election would be hailed as a national approval of the whole brood of infernal crimes by which the South has been kept solidly Democratic during the last dozen years; and yet I, a colored man, and one who has tasted the bitter cup of slavery, am asked to vote the Democratic ticket. I cannot do it.⁴⁵

The *AME Church Review* article won Douglass widespread praise and requests to write similar articles for other African American periodicals.⁴⁶

As many including Douglass had feared, former president Cleveland won election to a second term on 8 November 1892 over Harrison. With as many as a million African Americans intimidated away from the ballot box, Cleveland won forty-six percent of the popular vote while Harrison received forty-three percent. In the Electoral College, Cleveland was awarded two hundred seventy-seven electors, almost twice the number won by Harrison. In the Senate, Democrats emerged with a slight forty-three to forty majority, with five seats going to third-party candidates. In the House of Representatives, the Democrats gained a decisive majority, two-hundred twenty to one-hundred twenty-one, over the Republicans, with thirteen seats going to minor party candidates. This marked the first time since 1858 that the Democrats controlled the White House and both houses of Congress.⁴⁷

Douglass's response to Harrison's defeat and the return of Cleveland to power was sought out immediately by Charles Dana, the editor of the Democratically inclined *New York Sun*. Douglass's public letter composed the day after the election was surprising and might have some lessons for people worried about the outcome of 2024 election. After campaigning so hard on the threat Democrats posed to African American rights, Douglass surprisingly declared: "My opinion is that those who have apprehended a violent change for the worse, both in the general condition of the country and in that of the colored people North and South, will find themselves agreeably surprised by the little difference which this change of administration will make."⁴⁸ He predicted that the Democrats would discover making significant changes in the nation's tariff and currency

⁴⁴ "Protection Demanded" (August 1892) in *Douglass Papers*, ser. 4, 1:555–56.

⁴⁵ Levi J. Coppin to Frederick Douglass, 18 August 1892, General Correspondence File, reel 6, frame 616L, *Douglass Papers*, LOC; "The Negro in the Present Campaign," *A.M.E. Church Review*, 9:114–26 (October 1892) in *Douglass Papers*, ser. 4, 1:561–62, 571.

⁴⁶ Douglass received praise from S. H. Blocks, who requested a similar essay for his Georgia newspaper. George Washington Turner also asked Douglass to write for the *New York Recorder* on the election. Cortlandt Parker to Douglass, 20 August 1892, General Correspondence File, reel 6, frames 621–22, *FD Papers*, LOC; George W. Turner to Douglass, 15 September 1892, General Correspondence File, reel 6, frame 676L, *FD Papers*, LOC; S. H. Blocks to Douglass, General Correspondence File, reel 6, frames 705–07L, *FD Papers*, LOC.

⁴⁷ Third-party candidates, including Populist James B. Weaver, won eleven percent of the vote cast. Richard White, *The Republic for Which It Stands: The United States during Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, 1865–1896* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 752–56.

⁴⁸ FD to Editor of the *Sun* (Charles Dana), 10 November 1892, General Correspondence File, reel 12, frame 494, *FD Papers*, LOC; also *New York Sun*, 8 January 1893; *Douglass Papers*, ser. 4, 1:575.

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policies would prove harder to pass Congress. He went on to declare that he couldn't predict the election's impact upon African Americans in the South. The campaign's heavy focus on economics, Douglass reasoned, ironically meant that the Democrats

will learn that the victory was not a national approval of the outrages committed by them on the negro. They will learn that lynch law and murder were not endorsed by this election. They will learn that their victory was not won as against any policy of the Republican party in favor of the rights of the negro . . . The Southern question so-called has nothing to do with this defeat or victory. Had the negro been an element in this campaign the result might have been different. But he was not.⁴⁹

Douglass complained that most Republicans had done nothing to answer Democratic accusations that the Blair and Lodge bills aimed at “negro ascendancy.” The person Douglass blamed for this failed strategy should be no surprise:

The advice of the Hon. James G. Blaine was scrupulously followed during all the canvass, and to him the thanks of the Southern Democracy are once more due for effective service. In his plan of campaign all thought of humanity was eliminated. There was not in it a single moral idea to touch the conscience, not a humane sentiment to touch the heart of the nation. All was as cold and selfish as dollars and dimes could make it . . . The Democratic boast of having achieved a moral victory is the veriest absurdity, since morals had nothing whatever to do with the contest.⁵⁰

Even in defeat, Douglass had not abandoned hope for his Republicans. His recipe for their recovery was:

No party could have behind it a grander record. It has only to resume its old time character of being the bold and earnest defender of the rights of man, and be known in this vocation, not less than in its concern for the rights of corporations and associated wealth to be again strong with the workingmen of the country. Let it again place on its banner, ‘One country, one citizenship, one liberty, one law, for all people without regard to race, color or previous condition,’ and its power will soon become as great as in its palmiest days.⁵¹

So, Douglass's advice to Democrats of today is essentially to rededicate their party to its fundamental principles of equal rights for all Americans and quit catering to wealthy corporate donors. Follow that prescription in the next four years and the party can reassemble its prior voter base, win back control of the federal government, and become the guiding political force for the twenty-first century. The history of the second Grover Cleveland administration might be evidence for such an optimistic forecast. Cleveland's ideological rigidity helped lead the nation into an economic depression and made the opposition Republicans into the majority party for decades to come. On the other hand, when back in power under William B. McKinley, the Republican Party abandoned its historic commitment to safeguard African American rights to pursue the pro-business economic agenda that had disillusioned Douglass. Lessons from 1892, even from Frederick Douglass, therefore, might not be reliable guides for modern-day political quandaries.

⁴⁹ *Douglass Papers*, ser. 4, 1:577.

⁵⁰ *Douglass Papers*, ser. 4, 577, 579.

⁵¹ *Douglass Papers*, ser. 4, 1:579.

Who is “Normal”? The Elusive Correspondent of *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*

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Historical research is a field often filled with intrigue and mystery. This is especially true when an event’s finer details are lost to the sands of time. With crucial facts missing, historians are forced to conjecture for a likely answer. This is a common occurrence in the study of the nineteenth century’s most prominent abolitionist, Frederick Douglass. Douglass’s life is extensively documented through his output of personal correspondence, newspaper articles, and public orations. However, a day-by-day account of Douglass’s whereabouts is one of the chief focuses of the Frederick Douglass Papers project.

To aid in the investigation of where Douglass was each day of his life, historians can find a wealth of information in his newspapers. One of which, the weekly *The North Star* began in 1847; the paper was filled with news on upcoming abolitionist lectures, reports on atrocities committed on Black Americans, and excerpts from other abolitionist papers. In 1851, *The North Star* changed its name to *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* (*FDP*) and lasted until 1860. The contents of *FDP* offer historians an invaluable window into the world of antebellum abolitionist thought.

One of the many intriguing mysteries of Frederick Douglass, and by extension *FDP*, is the identity of a semi-frequent contributor who penned numerous letters to Douglass under the pseudonym “Normal” and was labeled by Douglass as “Our Philadelphia Correspondent.” The “Normal” letters, of which twelve are known to exist from 1857 and 1858, cover a period when primary sources on Douglass’s whereabouts are scant. Analyzing the correspondence by “Normal” can give historians a fresh perspective not only on Douglass’s activities, but also on the political, social, and cultural dynamics of the abolitionist movement in the 1850s.

“Normal” is not the only pseudonymous contributor to *FDP*; there was “Communi-paw” (James McCune Smith), “Rock” (John Stewart Rock), “Ethiop” (William J. Wilson), “Philo” (George T. Downing), and numerous others. In this era, it was a common practice to use a pseudonym; this was done to “create and signal belonging to what was becoming a well-defined and inter-connected Black print community within a single newspaper as well as between newspapers across multiple regions.”¹ “Normal,” however, appears to be one of the last correspondents to remain unidentified—leaving us asking, who is “Normal?” Despite the semi-regularity of these letters, an extensive search for the identity of “Normal” has never been attempted in the history of the Frederick Douglass Papers’ five-decade existence.

A newfound vigor for this mystery began when undergraduate researchers Jake Williams and Avery James Lester were hired through the Frederick Douglass Papers’ summer MURI project. MURI, or the Multidisciplinary Undergraduate Research Institute at Indiana University Indianapolis, is a program that gives undergraduate students an opportunity to gain research experience in several disciplines—in this project’s case, the historical field. Working closely with faculty advisors Jack Kaufman-McKivigan and Jeffery Duvall, Williams and Lester were originally tasked with chronicling Frederick Douglass’s whereabouts—day by day—throughout the year of 1857. A lack of primary sources, such as correspondence or newspaper reports, detailing Douglass’s location persisted in each of the year’s twelve months.

This changed when Williams rediscovered an issue of *FDP* from April 1857. This issue contained a letter from a “Philadelphia Correspondent” called “Normal,” in which the author

¹ Derrick R. Spires, “Alienated Americans: Pseudonymity and Gender Politics in Early Black Social Media,” *African American Review* 55, no. 1 (Spring 2022), 33, Doi.org.

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provides detailed descriptions of Douglass’s trip to Philadelphia in February 1857.² The details in the letter caught Williams’ attention; “Normal” remarked on seemingly banal items including Douglass’s appearance and the day’s weather. When Williams inquired to Kaufman-McKivigan about the identity of the letter’s author, Kaufman-McKivigan explained he was not sure either—it has been a question eluding historians for decades. After discussion with Williams and Lester, Kaufman-McKivigan elected to have his research assistants explore the identity of “Normal” intensively.

The Contents of the Letters

To assess the identity of “Normal,” we will first explore the contents of the twelve known letters, as their details might potentially provide insight into their sender’s identity.

The earliest letter, dated 3 April 1857, reports on disagreements at a Philadelphia abolitionist meeting in the aftermath of the Dred Scott decision—a landmark Supreme Court ruling that denied citizenship to Black Americans and declared Congress unable to prohibit slavery in U.S. territories.³ A week later, this is followed by a letter from 11 April; “Normal” recounts Douglass’s rainy arrival in Philadelphia, noting his tired countenance compared to the healthier appearances of his companions, William J. Watkins and J. P. Morris. “Normal” uses this dichotomy as potential evidence that Douglass was clearly overworked.⁴

Several weeks later, on 27 April, “Normal” penned a letter to Douglass, now apparently moved on from Philadelphia, that reported a recent three-day debate at an antislavery meeting in the city.⁵ The main topic of this debate was the U.S. Constitution and its perception: should it be viewed as proslavery or antislavery? This was an ongoing rift among abolitionists of that era and one of definite interest to *FDP* readers.

The next surviving letter comes a month later, on 30 May. In this one, “Normal” writes about themselves and provides clues to their identity, a rarity in his correspondence with Douglass. “Normal” elaborates on the mistreatment they faced upon entering a lecture hall that was reserved for White people, thus indicating that “Normal” was Black. The letter goes on to explore Philadelphia’s pervasive racism at public venues.⁶ So much so, that it even starts off with “Normal” writing that Philadelphia is “the most intensely negro-hating city in the Union.”

Nearly a month later, we encounter an unusual interruption in the correspondence. On 19 June, Douglass wrote in *FDP* that a letter from “Normal” had been misplaced, making it impossible to publish in time for that week’s issue.⁷ Despite promising to publish the letter in the following week’s paper, the 26 June 1857, edition of *FDP*, has not survived and the fate of the letter remains a mystery.

Unfortunately, there are additional missing issues of *FDP* in the second half of 1857. The surviving “Normal” correspondence does not resume until 14 December. In that letter, “Normal” discusses how the “colored men” of Philadelphia were not willing to meet for military drills unlike the Boston Liberty Guard militia who had recently marched in a parade. “Normal” doubts that a comparable Black militia could operate publicly in Philadelphia, regardless of its ability, because of local racism. Despite this, “Normal” seems to actively support such an initiative. “Normal” also states that Black men have the same right to bear arms and join militia units as White men do; “Normal” uses the words “we” and “us” in this sentence, thus indicating he is male as well as African American. “Normal” elaborates on the status of various Blacks in

² Although this was the first issue discovered by Williams, this is the second confirmed “Normal” letter.

³ Normal to FD, 3 April 1857, *FDP*, published 17 April 1857, p. 3, c. 3–5.

⁴ Normal to FD, 11 April 1857, *FDP*, published 24 April 1857, p. 3, c. 1–2.

⁵ Normal to FD, 27 April 1857, *FDP*, published 8 May 1857, p. 3, c. 1–2.

⁶ Normal to FD, 30 May 1857, *FDP*, published 5 June 1857, p. 3, c. 5–6.

⁷ 19 June 1857, *FDP*, p. 2, c. 3.

Philadelphia, wishing many more of them would “wake up” by gaining an education, building wealth, character, sensibility, and religiosity.⁸

Eleven days later, on 25 December, “Normal” briefs Douglass on Jacob Dupen, a fugitive slave denied legal representation in Philadelphia courts.⁹ “Normal” notes the irony of Dupen’s arrest, which happened at the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Fair, “one of the longest and most successful of the many antislavery fairs in the 1850s.” The letter then critiques the personal character of specific attendees at the fair such as Calvin De Wolf, Robert Purvis, and Charles Lenox Remond, ruling these men out as “Normal” suspects.¹⁰

The first letter from “Normal” dated in 1858 appears on 11 January. This letter reports on the Black abolitionist lecturer William J. Watkins’ visit to Philadelphia.¹¹ Watkins was also an assistant editor for *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*. Therefore, this letter offers insight into the multitudes of tasks undertaken by antebellum Black American abolitionists; in this case acting as an orator *and* a newspaperman. In fact, it was during this very time in Philadelphia where Watkins would use his oratory abilities to lecture about the Anti-Slavery Movement, specifically the “objections urged against it.” Given that “Normal” mentions Watkins in this regard, and the fact that Watkins seems to have no problem presenting himself to the public, it is reasonable to rule Watkins out as “Normal.”

Approximately two months later, on 5 March, “Normal” travels to New Haven, Connecticut and talks about how the weather is “particularly refreshing to a Philadelphian.” Then he provides readers with an account of political disputes between the supporters of Illinois senator Stephen A. Douglas and sitting President James Buchanan at the Democratic State Convention in the city.¹² The two politicians sparred over how popular sovereignty should be applied to the dispute over whether slaves should be permitted in the Kansas Territory. Perhaps he was originally a Connecticut native or read Connecticut abolitionist newspapers. More than likely, however, it appears “Normal” attended the Convention to observe abolitionist sentiment outside Philadelphia.

A month later, on 17 April, “Normal” describes his perception of the era’s growing political corruption, as well as the mounting hostility towards free Black citizens in Philadelphia. He often quotes Latin phrases and explains religious concepts as well.¹³ On 30 July, the tone of the “Normal” correspondence shifts from the philosophical notes of the previous letters. Here he simply documents the annual commencement ceremony at Yale College in New Haven, Connecticut.¹⁴

The last known “Normal” correspondence appears in *FDP* on 2 October 1858. Within this letter there is another report on abolitionist activities in Philadelphia. “Normal” describes various debates occurring in the city.¹⁵ Importantly, the letter gives no indication “Normal” planned to discontinue contributing to the newspaper. Possibly more “Normal” letters could have been published, however Many *FDP* and *Douglass’ Monthly* issues from 1859 and 1860 have not survived.

⁸ Normal to FD, 14 December 1857, *FDP*, published 25 December 1857, p. 2, c. 5–6.

⁹ Escaping from Baltimore, Maryland, Dupen was caught in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. After failing to provide documentation, he was left without legal representation and lost the case. He was returned to his owner, William M. Edelin. See *The New York Times*, Article 4-No Title, 21 December 1857, p. 3, c. 2., Timesmachine.nytimes.com.

¹⁰ Normal to FD, *FDP*, 25 December 1857, published 1 January 1858, *The Frederick Douglass Papers: Correspondence*, Series 3, Vol. 2: 1853–1865, ed. John R. McKivigan (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2018), 217.

¹¹ Normal to FD, 11 January 1858, *FDP*, published 22 January 1858, p. 2, c. 6.

¹² Normal to FD, 5 March 1858, *FDP*, published 19 March 1858, p. 3, c. 2–3.

¹³ Normal to FD, 17 April 1858, *FDP*, published 23 April 1858, p. 3, c. 4–5

¹⁴ Normal to FD, 30 July 1858, *FDP*, published 6 August 1858, p. 3, c. 3–4.

¹⁵ Normal to FD, 2 October 1858, *FDP*, published 15 October 1858, p. 3, c. 2–3.

The Remaining Candidates

One of the obstacles encountered in investigating the identity of “Normal” is that he does not provide many clues in these letters regarding his personal life—leaving historians with little to go on. We can infer, from the contents of the letters, that “Normal” possessed an elevated vocabulary and presumably was educated (albeit, perhaps, self-educated) as well as being male and Black. By 1860, 20,000 African Americans resided in Philadelphia, comprising nearly four percent of the city’s population.¹⁶ Given that a sizable portion of the city’s Black population was illiterate, however, our “Normal” search has taken us into the world of Philadelphia’s male “Black elite.”

When examining this “elite” circle, most roads usually lead to the Institute for Colored Youth (ICY), the only private school in Pennsylvania with an all-Black faculty.¹⁷ Since its founding in 1837, several notable Black Philadelphians passed through the Institute’s halls, either as an educator or a student. One of these men was Charles L. Reason, who served as the school’s first principal—but he returned to his hometown of New York City in 1855, two years before the first “Normal” correspondence.¹⁸ This fact alone rules him out as “Normal.”

Ebenezer Bassett (1833–1908), an educator, is another story. Born in Connecticut, Bassett was admitted into the Connecticut Normal School in 1853 and began teaching after graduating at the ICY. He had extensive knowledge of mathematics and the classics.¹⁹ By 1856, at the age of twenty-three, he became the principal of the school, replacing Reason. If Bassett is “Normal,” it has been theorized that Bassett used his Connecticut roots and connections while reporting on conferences at Yale College (there are two “Normal” letters on this subject). He also had two children by 1858; but a dead end begins, however, when looking into Bassett’s career post-1860: throughout the 1860s, Bassett began delivering public addresses.²⁰ He does not appear to have written into any publication. Apart from his erudition and connection to Connecticut, there is not much indicating that Bassett is our man (the “Normal” School connection seems more of coincidence than an implication as a Normal school is merely a place for people to be educated in the ways of teaching others). More noteworthy are his two children: Bassett would probably not have found time for extensive correspondence with Douglass if he was a new father.

Another potential suspect was one of Bassett’s brightest students: Octavius V. Catto (1839–71). Catto had lived in Philadelphia since he was five.²¹ He graduated from the ICY in 1858 but returned to the school the next year as a teacher.²² It is clear that Catto was well-educated, but, again, a roadblock presents itself: letters from “Normal” appear from 1857–58, while Catto was still a student in school. His age probably makes him too young to be a viable candidate for “Normal.” Catto would have a successful career in education and civil rights activism. Sadly, he was murdered in 1871 while attempting to exercise his newly won right to vote.²³

Another possibility for “Normal,” of a more appropriate age, is Isaiah C. Wears

¹⁶ Christopher Teal, *Hero of Hispaniola: America’s First Black Diplomat, Ebenezer D. Bassett*, (Praeger, 2008), 39.

¹⁷ Teal, *Hero of Hispaniola*, 41.

¹⁸ *Encyclopedia of African American History 1619–1895: From the Colonial Period to the Age of Frederick*.

¹⁹ Teal, *Hero of Hispaniola*, 37, 41.

²⁰ Teal, *Hero of Hispaniola*, 48.

²¹ Harry C. Silcox, “NINETEENTH CENTURY PHILADELPHIA BLACK MILITANT: OCTAVIUS V. CATTO (1839–1871),” *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 44, no. 1 (1977): 54.

²² Silcox, “OCTAVIUS V. CATTO,” 57

²³ Silcox, “OCTAVIUS V. CATTO,” 53.

(1822–1900). Wears, a freeman born in Baltimore in 1822, moved to Philadelphia as a child.²⁴

Wears' family soon became regular attendants at the Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church; this was the largest Black church in the city, and it was where Wears' "family life was centered," according to one historian.²⁵

The only clues we have regarding Wears possibly being "Normal" comes from the correspondence to Douglass in April 1857. There, "Normal" refers to A.M.E. Church as "old Bethel."²⁶ The use of "old" here carries a connotation of familiarity, which Wears certainly was with the Church. However, this is a weak link at best.

After reading about the aforementioned candidates, if you are feeling frustrated at the lack of evidence in the search for "Normal," you are not alone; historians do not have concrete evidence to base their claims for any of the above-mentioned suspects. This lack of evidence changes, however, when examining our final potential candidate: one of the most well-known Black abolitionists in Philadelphia, William Still.

An Underground Correspondent: The Case for William Still

The son of escaped slaves, Still was born free in late 1821 in New Jersey. He grew up performing agricultural duties for his father's forty-acre farm, and he even contracted his labor to neighbors. Early on, Still devoted himself to expanding the abolitionist cause. A formative experience occurred while living in New Jersey: the young Still witnessed a band of slave catchers trying to track down a runaway slave. When they found the slave and began attacking him, Still's Quaker neighbor, Thomas Wilkins, flung hot embers from a shovel at the catchers. This action bought enough time for the runaway to escape.²⁷

Busy working in the fields, Still, along with his seventeen siblings, did not find time for education.²⁸ Still moved to Philadelphia at twenty-three years old, however, and soon became literate.²⁹ After arriving in the "city of brotherly love," Still worked odd jobs to support himself. He eventually made the acquaintance of James Miller McKim, the White editor of the abolitionist newspaper, the *Pennsylvania Freeman*.³⁰ McKim recommended that Still apply for a job at the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society (PASS) office. He was hired in September 1847.

In early 1849, the PASS office (located at 31 North Fifth St.) received a large wooden crate in the mail. Having shipped himself from Richmond, Virginia, an escaped slave named Henry Brown was inside.³¹ This appears to be one of, if not the first, experiences Still had working with the Underground Railroad. He would continue sheltering runaway slaves for the next several decades. In 1872, he published a book of collected stories and interviews called *The Underground Rail Road*.³² After its publication, Douglass was upset that Still had not

²⁴ Teal, *Hero of Hispaniola*, 42; Harry C. Silcox, "The Black 'Better Class' Political Dilemma: Philadelphia Prototype Isaiah C. Wears," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 113, no. 1 (1989): 47, Jstor.org.

²⁵ Silcox, "Isaiah C. Wears," 51, 47.

²⁶ Normal to FD, 3 April 1857, *FDP*, published 17 April 1857, p. 3, c. 5.

²⁷ William C. Kashatus, *William Still: The Underground Railroad and the Angel at Philadelphia* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2021), 23.

²⁸ Kashatus, *Still*, 13, 22.

²⁹ Kashatus, *Still*, 23. This claim is disputed by Still's daughter, claiming he was reading and writing as a child.

³⁰ Kashatus, *Still*, 27.

³¹ Kashatus, *Still*, 29.

³² Its full title was longer: *The Underground Rail Road: A Record of Facts, Authentic Narratives, Letters, &c.; Narrating the Hardships of 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 the Largest Stockholders, and Most Liberal Aiders and Advisers, of the Road* (Porter & Coates, 1872).

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acknowledged him sufficiently. Indeed, Douglass is only mentioned in Still’s book in passing references.³³

Recollecting the situation twenty years later, Douglass wrote to historian Wilbur Siebert explaining he took umbrage with Still’s treatment of runaway slaves on the Underground Railroad; the specifics of this situation are not known.³⁴ Retrospectively, Douglass claimed this was the reason for his exclusion in the book.³⁵ When this falling out with Still occurred, again, is not known; although it most likely occurred in the late 1850s and early 1860s (the period Still wrote the book). Still died in 1902 at the age of eighty.³⁶

Like other “Normal” suspects, there is no smoking gun linking Still with the correspondent’s identity. However, we have numerous clues that pinpoint Still’s likelihood. The most apparent element in “Normal”’s correspondence to Douglass is the scale of detail included in the writing. “Normal” includes information on the weather in Philadelphia, calling 20 February, the day Douglass arrived in the city for a speaking engagement, a “rainy and disagreeable day.” He goes on to describe Douglass’s appearance: “Frederick Douglass . . . accompanied by his friends . . . looked especially hale and hearty.”³⁷ Attention to detail is a hallmark of letters from “Normal.”

Still was also a detail-oriented man, honing his skills on meticulous record keeping while working for the Underground Railroad. Historian Larry Gara notes the following:

One of Still’s duties was to ask the newly arrived slaves their names, and the names of their masters and where they had come from, and to question them about their escape experiences and the severity of their servitude . . . Still not only recorded the data but carefully preserved the records. In his book he wrote that he had kept the documents for possible use in helping to reunite relatives and friends.³⁸

Given Still’s ability to document events for private use, it is reasonable to surmise that he could have earlier employed those abilities in potential correspondence with Douglass in *FDP* (there is no surviving private correspondence known to exist between Douglass and Still).

In his correspondence, “Normal” was well spoken, displaying a wide vocabulary in English and Latin. In April and October 1858 letters, respectively, “Normal” uses phrases “*O mores, O tempora!*” (Oh the times, of the customs!) and “*Fiat iustitia ruat caelum*” (Let justice be done though the heavens fall).³⁹ He also used sophisticated English words like “claimant,” “physiognomy,” “direful,” and he described Philadelphia’s press organs as “austral-eyed.”⁴⁰ “Normal” using above-average vocabulary indicates some educational background—whether

³³ E.L. Stevens to William Still, 8 July 1857, in *The Underground Rail Road*, 155; J.W. Loguen to William Still, 5 October 1856, in *The Underground Rail Road*, 158. Still’s book is largely a collection of letters written to him about the Underground Railroad. When Frederick Douglass is mentioned, it is in the context of others writing to Still about him. Still, alone, did not say much about FD. Herein lies Douglass’s reasons for feeling slighted.

³⁴ It has been speculated that Still was charging runaways a fee for room and board, turning escape from slavery into a business. However, this hypothesis has not been confirmed.

³⁵ FD to Wilbur Siebert, 27 March 1893, Wilbur H. Siebert Underground Railroad Collection, ohiomemory.org.

³⁶ Kashatus, *Still*, 218.

³⁷ Normal to FD, 8 April 1857, *FDP*, published 24 April 1857, p. 3, col. 4.

³⁸ Larry Gara, “William Still and the Underground Railroad,” in *Blacks in the Abolitionist Movement*, eds. John H. Bracey, August Meier, and Elliot Rudwick (Wadsworth, 1971), 46.

³⁹ Normal to FD, 17 April 1858, *FDP*, published 23 April 1858, p. 3, c. 5; Normal to FD, 2 October 1858, *FDP*, published 15 October 1858, p. 2, c. 3.

⁴⁰ Normal to FD, 17 April 1857, in *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, Series 3, *Correspondence*, Vol. 2 (1853–1865), ed. John R. McKivigan, 217; Normal to FD, *FDP*, 17 April 1858, published 23 April 1858, p. 3, c. 4; Normal to FD, *FDP*, 3 April 1857, published 17 April 1857, p. 3, c. 3.

that be self-education or schooling. In this respect, Still also possessed a considerable vocabulary. He knew Latin phrases: he used “vice versa” in his book, *The Underground Rail Road*.⁴¹ Still was also described by a patron of his boarding house in 1858 as a “highly intelligent host.”⁴² After becoming literate, Still acquired a reputation as a “great reader of books, especially history and geography.”⁴³ If Still is “Normal,” it is possible he translated his elevated vocabulary into his correspondence with Douglass.

One of the strongest clues for Still being

“Normal” is Still’s history of corresponding with other abolitionist newspapers. Still authored several articles in the Canadian-based *Provincial Freeman* from 1854 and 1855.⁴⁴ Importantly, in at least one November 1854 article, Still signed his name at the end as “W.S.” not “Normal,” nor is he labeled as a “Philadelphia Correspondent.”⁴⁵ Although the presentation of his name might not help our case, Still’s history of writing into publications does.

Another aspect of this search for “Normal” is pinpointing Still’s home. Still, one of the city’s wealthiest African Americans, owned several real estate properties—all made possible by his successful coal and iron businesses.⁴⁶ Still also kept a boarding house at “374 South St., below 9th, south side;” this address was regularly advertised in *FDP* in 1857 and 1858, corresponding with the same period the “Normal” letters are found. The last known advertisement appears in December 1858, corresponding with the same period the “Normal” letters are found.⁴⁷

In 1860, once *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* changed its name to *Douglass’ Monthly*, there was an October article published “From the Philadelphia press,” not a “Philadelphia Correspondent.”⁴⁸ In it, the author, who never introduces himself, describes an encounter with a “well known colored gentleman” at his home on “South St. near Eighth.”⁴⁹ The author seems to go out of their way to never identify the man by name, instead referring to him as “one of the leading public men among his people, and has much of the ease and polish peculiar to the well bred Caucasian.”⁵⁰ Given the address and noted reputation of the man, it is reasonable to suggest the author is referring to William Still.

The series of “Normal” letters ended abruptly in October 1858. As aforementioned, Still’s falling out with Douglass, which more than likely occurred in the 1860s, could explain the end of the correspondence; perhaps, even, Douglass and Still sparred circa 1859–60, and Douglass did not want to continue printing “Normal” letters—and likewise, Still did not want to continue writing for *FDP*. This is conjecture; however, it is the only explanation we have that could possibly explain the end of the “Normal” correspondence. It should also be noted that the advertisements for Still’s boarding house end the same time as the “Normal” correspondence.

Concluding the Search

We are not alone in considering Still as the most likely “Normal.” Historian Elizabeth

⁴¹ Still, *Underground Rail Road*, 4.

⁴² *FDP*, 12 August 1858, p. 4, c. 5.

⁴³ Kashatus, *Still*, 23.

⁴⁴ Kashatus, *Still*, 310n22.

⁴⁵ William Still, “Welcome to Wm. Wells Brown,” *Provincial Freeman*, 11 November 1854, p. 1, c. 6.

⁴⁶ Kashatus, *Still*, 24.

⁴⁷ *FDP*, 24 December 1858, p. 2, c. 6.

⁴⁸ “From the Philadelphia Press,” *Douglass’ Monthly*, October 1860, p. 347, c. 3.

⁴⁹ “From the Philadelphia Press,” *Douglass’ Monthly*, October 1860, p. 347, c. 3.

⁵⁰ “From the Philadelphia Press,” *Douglass’ Monthly*, October 1860, p. 348, c. 1.

“Who is ‘Normal’? The Elusive Correspondent of *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*”

Varon offers the same conjecture.⁵¹ Nevertheless, all of this remains an *educated guess*. It is crucial to note that we are not claiming that Still is definitively “Normal,” only that Still is the most likely out of the many candidates we have examined. A wider investigation should be conducted to track down Frederick Douglass’s most elusive correspondent. Despite our uncertainty in tracking down “Normal,” we remain confident in the research presented. Regardless of the true identity of “Normal,” this individual contributes greatly to our understanding of Douglass’s travels in 1857–58. Even more so, students or scholars of Philadelphia history can find a treasure of information in the “Normal” correspondence. For now, at least, historians will have to continue to ask: “Who is ‘Normal’?”

⁵¹ Elizabeth Varon, “‘Beautiful Providences’: William Still, the Vigilance Committee, and the Abolitionists in the Age of Sectionalism,” in *Antislavery and Abolition in Philadelphia: Emancipation and the Long Struggle for Racial Justice in the City of Brotherly Love*, eds. Richard Newman and James Mueller (Louisiana State University Press, 2011), 230. Varon only states that it was “perhaps . . . William Still?” There is no greater explanation in the text or footnotes about her hypothesis.