Introduction

On the weekend of June 8–9, 1844, the slaveholding class of southern Louisiana found itself absorbed by the excitement of the upcoming presidential and congressional elections. Just a week earlier in Baltimore, the Democratic National Convention had nominated former Tennessee Governor James Polk for president, a compromise candidate who nevertheless unabashedly embraced westward expansion and the immediate annexation of the neighboring Republic of Texas. The news – just now trickling into the southwestern states – raised serious concerns about a looming war with Mexico but also sparked renewed enthusiasm for the expansion of the slave South all the way to the Rio Grande and beyond.[1]

As their masters reveled in visions of a vast slaveholding empire and furiously debated the merits and wisdom of a possible war with Mexico, dozens of enslaved people from the region were attempting to liberate themselves from the suffocating institution of slavery once and for all. *The Daily Picayune* – one of over a dozen newspapers published in New Orleans at the time – advertised no less than eleven runaway slaves on its two-page print that weekend. One freedom seeker, a twenty-year-old named John ("calls himself JOHN HUNTER") who had "some marks of

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[1] *The Planters' Gazette*, June 8, 1844 (quote); *The Daily Picayune*, June 8, 1844, June 9, 1844; William Dusinberre, *Slavemaster President: The Double Career of James Polk* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Steven E. Woodworth, *Manifest Destinies: America's Westward Expansion and the Road to Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 2003); Andrew J. Torget, *Seeds of Empire: Cotton, Slavery, and the Transformation of the Texas Borderlands, 1800–1850* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), ch. 6; Matthew Karp, *This Vast Southern Empire: Slaveholders at the Helm of American Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

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the whip on the back of his neck" and was considered "very likely and intelligent," was presumed to have false papers and be hiding within the city of New Orleans itself. John's owner had "no doubt" that he was being "harbored by some one," and that he had "a pass in his possession that enables him to keep out, as there was one taken from him a short time before he left with the signature of Cuyler Jauncey to it, and he may have another." The slaveholder warned residents of the city that "all passes or papers, if he should have any in his possession, are unauthorized by me." Another runaway named "Catherine or *Cassey*," aged forty to forty-five and known as a "*Marchandé*" in the city, left fewer clues as to her whereabouts, but her owner clearly worried that she intended to smuggle herself onboard one of the northbound steamers that crowded the city's harbor in a bid to make it to a free state. He issued an explicit warning to "captains of steamboats," whom he "cautioned not to harbor said slave, under penalty of being prosecuted according to law." Meanwhile, a group of "EIGHT NEGRO SLAVES," all of them river pilots owned by the Louisiana Pilot's Association, were advertised as having stolen the vessel upon which they worked, the *Lafayette*, and headed out from the South West Pass into the Gulf of Mexico, "with the wind from the South-Eastward." Their intention was to flee the United States altogether, as their owners "presumed that they will make for the coast of . . . Mexico."[2]

The presumed destinations of the runaways were remarkably diverse. They included places where slavery was unequivocally the law of the land but where sizeable free black populations made it possible for runaways to navigate city streets anonymously and undetected, or even "pass for free" (New Orleans); places within the United States where slavery had been abolished but where fugitive slave laws called for rendition and criminalized assistance to runaways, including by unknowing steamboat captains (the Northern United States); and places beyond the borders of

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[2] *The Daily Picayune*, June 9, 1844 (quotes). For recent scholarship on escapes to and from New Orleans, see for example S. Charles Bolton, *Fugitivism: Escaping Slavery in the Lower Mississippi Valley, 1820–1860* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2019), esp. 97–148; Viola Müller, "Cities of Refuge: Slave Flight and Illegal Freedom in the American Urban South, 1800–1860" (PhD diss., Leiden University, Leiden, the Netherlands, 2020); Rashauna Johnson, *Slavery's Metropolis: Unfree Labor in New Orleans during the Age of Revolutions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 24–54; Thomas Mareite, "Conditional Freedom: Free Soil and Fugitive Slaves from the US South to Mexico's Northeast, 1803–1861" (PhD diss., Leiden University, Leiden, the Netherlands, 2020), 69–71.

the United States where slavery had been abolished but where no fugitive slave laws or extradition treaties applied (Mexico).

The runaway slave ads published in the *Daily Picayune* on that single weekend in 1844 illuminate the complicated geography of slavery and freedom that existed in North America in the decades preceding the US Civil War. For enslaved people seeking to flee bondage in the antebellum South, freedom from slavery could be found in virtually every direction and in a wide variety of geographical, political, and social settings. Freedom could be forged by crossing state or international borders, or by remaining within the slaveholding states; it could be attained by disguising one's true identity or by openly claiming asylum with a friendly government. Reaching and navigating different destinations required different strategies of absconding and entailed different types of risks and obstacles, and no destination constituted an ideal sanctuary for runaways by any stretch of the imagination. Yet, however imperfect, North America provided enslaved people with various *spaces of freedom* to which they could flee to try to escape slavery in the half-century before emancipation in the United States. Sustained slave flight in turn contributed to the further development and defense of these spaces as potential beacons of freedom for those still trapped in bondage.

How was slave flight in North America characterized? How and why did enslaved people flee to – and navigate – different destinations throughout the continent, and to what extent did they succeed in evading recapture and reenslavement? *Freedom Seekers* examines the experiences of permanent runaways from southern slavery – those who had no intention of returning to their owners – between the end of the American Revolution and the outbreak of the Civil War. Taking a broad and continental approach, this study highlights the diversity of slave flight in North America by conceptually dividing the continent into three distinct (and continuously evolving) spaces of freedom for runaway slaves. First, it explores the prevalence of slave flight to spaces of *informal freedom*. These were places within the slaveholding states where enslaved people attempted to flee slavery by trying to disguise their identities and pass for free, especially in urban areas with relatively substantial free black communities such as Baltimore, the District of Columbia, Richmond, Charleston, and New Orleans, but also in a myriad of smaller towns scattered all across the South. In spaces of informal freedom, runaways had no legal claim to freedom or protection from reenslavement. Their successful navigation of freedom and evasion of recapture was based almost exclusively on their ability to hide their true identities,

often by employing strategies aimed at achieving anonymity, integrating into free black communities, and procuring false documents (especially passes and freedom certificates).[3]

Second, this book explores the phenomenon of slave flight to spaces of *semi-formal freedom*, or places where slavery was abolished according to free soil principles, but where the precise status of fugitive slaves, as well as the conditions for their potential reenslavement, was contested by different legal authorities representing overlapping jurisdictions. In spaces of semi-formal freedom, slavery either did not exist or was on the path to destruction, but asylum for refugees from slavery was not guaranteed. The concept refers specifically to the northern states in the antebellum period, where slavery was abolished (either gradually or immediately) but where overarching federal fugitive slave laws, enshrined in Article IV of the US Constitution as well as the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 and its amended version of 1850, theoretically allowed for the rendition of runaway slaves to their owners in the southern states. Conflicting interpretations of federal fugitive slave laws and constitutional protections of due process, as well as state anti-kidnapping and personal liberty laws, however, often resulted in serious challenges to fugitive slave renditions, including legal disputes and mass civil disobedience. Refugees from slavery in the antebellum Northern United States enjoyed more protections from reenslavement than their counterparts passing for free in southern towns and cities, but their freedom nevertheless remained precarious, highly dependent on the compliance of sympathetic members of the community (including local authorities), and subject to conflicting interpretations of the law.[4]

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[3] For slave flight within the urban South, see for example: Müller, "Cities of Refuge"; Damian Alan Pargas, "Seeking Freedom in the Midst of Slavery: Fugitive Slaves in the Antebellum South," in Damian Alan Pargas, ed., *Fugitive Slaves and Spaces of Freedom in North America* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2018), 116–136; Viola Franziska Müller, "Illegal but Tolerated: Slave Refugees in Richmond, Virginia, 1800–1860," in Pargas, ed., *Fugitive Slaves and Spaces of Freedom*, 137–167; Bolton, *Fugitivism*, 117–148; John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 124–148; Amani Marshall, "'They Will Endeavor to Pass for Free': Enslaved Runaways' Performances of Freedom in Antebellum South Carolina," *Slavery & Abolition* 31, no. 2 (2010): 161–180.

[4] The literature on slave flight to the Northern United States is vast. For more on the conflicts regarding fugitive slaves in particular, see for example: Andrew Delbanco, *The War before the War: Fugitive Slaves and the Struggle for America's Soul from the Revolution to the Civil War* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018), 2–3 (first quotes); Thomas D. Morris, *Free Men All: The Personal Liberty Laws of the North, 1780–1861* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1999), ix (second quote); Richard

Third, this study examines the increasing popularity of slave flight to spaces of *formal freedom* beyond the borders of the United States in the late antebellum period, especially from the 1830s through the 1850s. Spaces of formal freedom were places where slavery was abolished according to free soil principles but where *no* extradition or rendition agreements with southern slaveholders existed that might theoretically make refugees from slavery vulnerable to rendition and reenslavement. In spaces of formal freedom, asylum for runaway slaves from the United States was unconditional and guaranteed, at least on paper. In the Age of Revolution various spaces of formal freedom developed in the immediate vicinity of the United States and within reach of the most determined of runaway slaves, most notably after abolition policies were enacted in British Canada (between 1793 and 1833) and the Republic of Mexico (1829), but also throughout the Caribbean (such as Haiti in 1804; the British Empire – including Bahamas – in 1833; and the French colonies in 1848). This book focuses in particular on refugees from slavery in British Canada and Mexico, the two most popular and easily reached free soil territories on the mainland to which southern freedom seekers fled in the antebellum period.[5]

The development of each of these three spaces of freedom was inextricably linked with the broader structural changes in the geography of

M. Blackett, *The Captive's Quest for Freedom: Fugitive Slaves, the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, and the Politics of Slavery* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018); John L. Brooke, *"There Is a North": Fugitive Slaves, Political Crisis, and Cultural Transformation in the Coming of the Civil War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2019); Robert H. Churchill, *The Underground Railroad and the Geography of Violence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Oran Kennedy, "Northward Bound: Slave Refugees and the Pursuit of Freedom in the Northern US and Canada, 1775–1861" (PhD diss., Leiden University, Leiden, the Netherlands, 2021), 67–129.

[5] Franklin and Schweninger briefly touch upon Canada and Mexico as destinations for runaways, but do not delve into the legal regimes of freedom in either. See Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 116–123. Jeffrey Kerr-Ritchie examined slave flight to various destinations in North America, including Canada and Mexico, in his seminal article, "Fugitive Slaves across North America," in Leon Fink, ed., *Workers across the Americas: The Transnational Turn in Labor History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Kerr-Ritchie's other work deals more specifically with spaces of freedom in the British Caribbean. See for example: Jeffrey Kerr-Ritchie, "The US Coastal Passage and Caribbean Spaces of Freedom," in Pargas, ed., *Fugitive Slaves and Spaces of Freedom*; Jeffrey Kerr-Ritchie, *Rebellious Passage: The Creole Revolt and America's Coastal Slave Trade* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019). Matthew Clavin similarly examines the post-emancipation circum-Caribbean as a broad destination for runaway slaves from the United States. See Matthew J. Clavin, *Aiming for Pensacola: Fugitive Slaves on the Atlantic and Southern Frontiers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

slavery and freedom that shook the Atlantic world in the Age of Revolution. Put simply, the last quarter of the eighteenth century and first half of the nineteenth century paradoxically witnessed both an unprecedented expansion of black freedom and an unprecedented expansion of slavery. For millions of African Americans, this was an age of emancipation. Whereas prior to the American Revolution slavery was legally sanctioned and rarely challenged throughout the Western Hemisphere, during the second half of the eighteenth century bondage came under increasing attack by prominent thinkers in Europe and America who condemned the institution as immoral, sinful, inefficient, socially undesirable, and politically untenable. Transatlantic discourses and social and political movements had a profound effect upon public opinion and the very status of slavery throughout the Atlantic world. This period witnessed the legal abolition of slavery in various parts of the Americas – starting with revolutionary Vermont in 1777 – and of the transatlantic slave trade. It also witnessed a significant spike in manumissions and self-purchase schemes by slaveholders who for whatever reason – whether ideological, religious, or financial – wished to free some or all of their bondspeople, resulting in the emergence or bolstering of free black communities even *within* slaveholding territories, especially in urban areas.[6]

Even as significant numbers of enslaved people exited slavery during this period, however, millions more found themselves increasingly trapped in what Dale Tomich has dubbed the "second slavery," a period of intensification and expansion of slavery in regions such as the US

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[6] Steven Hahn, "Forging Freedom," in Trevor Burnard and Gad Heuman, eds., *The Routledge History of Slavery* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 298–299; Christopher Brown, *Moral Capital: The Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Seymour Drescher, "Civil Society and Paths to Abolition," *Journal of Global Slavery* 1, no. 1 (April 2016): 44–71; David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975); David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation* (New York: Knopf, 2014); Robin Blackburn, *The American Crucible: Slavery, Emancipation and Human Rights* (New York: Verso, 2011), 162–169; Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 34–193; Ada Ferrer, *Freedom's Mirror: Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014). For the prevalence of manumissions in revolutionary North America, see Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery, 1619–1877* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2003), 80–85; Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 119–123, 135–150; and Rosemary Brana-Shute and Randy J. Sparks, eds., *Paths to Freedom: Manumission in the Atlantic World* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2009).

South, Brazil, and Cuba, largely as a result of the successful adoption and rapid expansion of American short-staple cotton, Brazilian coffee, and Cuban sugarcane production around the turn of the nineteenth century. Indeed, the entrenchment of slavery in certain regions, even as antislavery scored its first victories in others, constituted one of the great paradoxes of the Atlantic world. While some parts of the Americas (such as the Northern United States) saw their free black populations considerably augmented, others devolved into "freedom's mirror," as Ada Ferrer recently argued.[7]

The geography of slavery and freedom that emerged in North America in the half-century following the American Revolution was messy and exceedingly complicated. The Northern United States, British Canada, and the Republic of Mexico all abolished slavery within their borders between 1777 and 1833. The first strikes were enacted in the Northern United States, where state-level abolition was achieved through a maze of gradual emancipation acts, state constitutional clauses, and court verdicts between 1777 and 1804. By 1804, all of the states and territories north of the Mason–Dixon line and Ohio River had either prohibited slavery or put it on the path to destruction with gradual emancipation policies. Yet, unlike other parts of the continent or hemisphere, northern free soil was severely compromised by its union with the southern slaveholding states. As stated above, overarching federal fugitive slave laws upheld the rights of slaveholders to recover runaways in other states, extending the principle of "extraterritoriality" (whereby state laws that allowed slavery were extended into the jurisdictions of other states) to the North and rendering northern "free soil" theoretically inapplicable to escaped slaves from the South. And although northern representatives to the federal government specifically supported these statutes, ordinary citizens and local authorities increasingly came to view them as breaches of state sovereignty, as they forced northern communities to accept slavery in

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[7] Dale W. Tomich, "The 'Second Slavery': Bonded Labor and the Transformations of the Nineteenth-Century World Economy," in Francisco O. Ramírez, ed., *Rethinking the Nineteenth Century: Contradictions and Movement* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 103–117; Dale W. Tomich and Michael Zeuske, eds., "The Second Slavery: Mass Slavery, World Economy, and Comparative Microhistories, Part I" [special issue], *Review: A Journal of the Fernand Braudel Center* 31, no. 2 (2008): 91–247; Anthony E. Kaye, "The Second Slavery: Modernity in the Nineteenth-Century South and the Atlantic World," *Journal of Southern History* 75, no. 3 (August 2009): 627–650; Javier Lavina and Michael Zeuske, eds., *The Second Slavery: Mass Slaveries and Modernity in the Americas and in the Atlantic Basin* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2014); Ferrer, *Freedom's Mirror.*

their midst. Massive pushback against federal fugitive slave laws – through state-level legislation, legal challenges, and widespread civil disobedience – caused the northern states to essentially develop into a battleground over the meanings of free soil and abolition in the United States.[8]

British Canada and Mexico achieved – eventually – less ambiguous and less heavily contested versions of free soil within their jurisdictions, although even their transitions from slavery to freedom were painfully long and complicated affairs. Like the Northern United States, abolition in Canada began at the local level, beginning with a gradual emancipation act adopted by the legislature of Upper Canada in 1793. Additional legislation was subsequently passed to hasten and fulfill legal emancipation in the province, while in the maritime provinces a series of court verdicts in the early nineteenth century rendered slavery all but inoperable in those parts of the dominion as well. By the time the British definitively abolished slavery throughout the empire in 1833, slavery in Canada had already virtually disappeared. Mexico's path to abolition was far more tumultuous and less linear. Ideological opposition to slavery in Mexico emerged as early as 1810, during the advent of the nation's independence movement, but upon achieving independence in 1821 the new republic experienced constant power struggles between different factions that either supported or rejected abolition, resulting in a confusing series of often contradictory decrees concerning the legality of slavery at both the state and federal levels. Only in 1829 did the federal government bring order to the wide spectrum of slavery and freedom throughout the republic by declaring national abolition, a declaration that was heavily contested by American settlers in Texas and that would ultimately lead to Texan secession from Mexico in 1836. The loss of Texas only made the Mexican government more committed to free soil, however. By the mid-

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[8] Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 119–123, 135–150, 159–244; Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 80–85; David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 141–156; Sue Peabody and Keila Grinberg, "Free Soil: The Generation and Circulation of an Atlantic Legal Principle," *Slavery & Abolition* 32, no. 3 (2011): 331–339; Eric Foner, *Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2015), 38–39; Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 65–96; Arthur Zilversmit, *The First Emancipation: The Abolition of Slavery in the North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967); Steven Hahn, *The Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

1830s both Canada and Mexico had developed into uncontested free soil territories that offered asylum to runaway slaves from the United States.[9]

As vast swaths of the continent embraced abolition and a commitment to free soil in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the Southern United States rejected abolition but briefly opened the doors to black freedom by facilitating individual manumission and self-purchase arrangements in the immediate aftermath of the American Revolution. As a result, free black communities, especially in the Upper South, grew significantly between 1790 and 1810. Indeed, by 1810 more than 10 percent of the African-American population of the Upper South was classified as free. Even in the Lower South the proportion of free blacks of the total black population increased from 1.6 percent in 1790 to 3.9 percent in 1810. Cities such as Baltimore, Washington, Richmond, Charleston, and countless smaller towns across the southern states saw their free black populations considerably augmented at the turn of the nineteenth century. By 1810, however, the revolutionary fervor had largely died out; the pendulum began to swing in the opposite direction and manumission became more circumscribed. The swift reversal of legal opportunities for black freedom in the South coincided with – and was strongly influenced by – renewed economic prospects for slavery as a result of the cotton revolution in the southern interior. As the South entered its age of second slavery, southern bondage expanded significantly across the newly acquired territories of the Deep South, fueled by a massive domestic slave trade and a fanatical ideological commitment to retaining and protecting slavery at all costs.[10]

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[9] Gordon S. Barker, "Revisiting 'British Principle Talk': Antebellum Black Expectations and Racism in Early Ontario," in Pargas, ed., *Fugitive Slaves and Spaces of Freedom*, 34–69; Afua Cooper, "Acts of Resistance: Black Men and Women Engage Slavery in Upper Canada, 1793–1803," *Ontario History* 99, no. 1 (2007): 5–17; D. G. Bell, J. Barry Cahill, and Harvey Amani Whitfield, "Slavery and Slave Law in the Maritimes," in Barrington Walker, ed., *The African Canadian Legal Odyssey: Historical Essays* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 363–420; Sean Kelley, "'Mexico in His Head': Slavery and the Texas-Mexico Border, 1810–1860," *Journal of Social History* 37 (Spring 2004): 711–715; Mareite, "Conditional Freedom," 130–131; Manuel Ferrer Muñoz, *La Cuestión de la Esclavitud en el México Decimonónico: Sus Repercusiones en las Etnias Indígenas* (México, DF: Instituto de Estudios Constitucionales Carlos Restrepo Piedrahita, 1998), 13–15; Jaime Olveda Legaspi, "La abolición de la esclavitud en México, 1810–1917," *Signos históricos* 29 (2013): 8–34.

[10] Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 91–92; Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 80–85; Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 119–244; Müller, "Cities of Refuge," 23–50; Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave*

The changing geography of slavery and freedom not only provided enslaved people trapped in the second slavery with a renewed sense of urgency to flee bondage but also new opportunities to actually do so. Prior to the American Revolution, the possibilities to escape slavery were largely limited to strategies of wilderness marronage; passing for free in port towns that had very small free black populations; and fleeing to the enemies of their masters in specific geopolitical conflicts. None of these options were very reliable or sustainable in the long term, and relatively few enslaved people succeeded in attaining freedom by such means. The expansion of black freedom in the revolutionary era, however – both in free soil territories and in urban areas within slaveholding territories – greatly enhanced enslaved people's possibilities to successfully flee slavery. It disrupted the link between blackness and slavery that had hitherto prevailed (and been taken for granted) throughout the hemisphere. By the early nineteenth century, various parts of North America constituted spaces where African Americans were not – or at least not automatically – marked as enslaved, and where runaways could realistically attempt to live as free people. In spaces of informal freedom throughout the urban South, for example, enslaved people could navigate public spaces in broad daylight, pretending to be members of burgeoning free black communities. In spaces of semi-formal freedom in the northern states, African Americans were presumed free and treated as such unless proven otherwise, and even then the conditions for their rendition were often disputed. And in spaces of formal freedom beyond the borders of the United States, all African Americans were legally free from enslavement, including reenslavement by means of extradition back to the United States. The spaces of freedom that developed in the period between the American Revolution and the Civil War indeed provided enslaved people trapped in the second slavery with *options*. A runaway from the Virginia countryside in the 1840s could attempt to escape slavery in Baltimore, Pennsylvania, or Upper Canada – and, as this book will argue, there were good reasons for individual runaways to prefer certain destinations over others, depending on their circumstances.[11]

Market (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Damian Alan Pargas, *Slavery and Forced Migration in the Antebellum South* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 17–55.

[11] Slave flight in the colonial period will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 1 of the present volume. For overviews of the three strategies of slave flight before the American Revolution, see for example: Sylviane A. Diouf, *Slavery's Exiles: The Story of the American Maroons* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 3; Nathaniel

Freedom Seekers contributes to an ever-growing body of scholarship on fugitive slaves in North America. The pathbreaking publication of John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger's seminal work *Runaway Slaves* in 1999 sparked renewed interest in the experiences of runaway slaves throughout the continent, and recent years have witnessed a surge in acclaimed academic studies on slave flight in particular contexts. Much of the focus has been on northbound runways to the free states and Canada in the age of the second slavery, with a particular emphasis on themes such as the active role that African Americans played in liberating themselves and others, and the political consequences of the fugitive slave issue in an era of rising sectional tensions in the antebellum United States. Sydney Nathan's *To Free a Family* (2012), Richard Blackett's *Making Freedom* (2013), Eric Foner's *Gateway to Freedom* (2015), Andrew Delbanco's *The War Before the War* (2018), and Robert Churchill's *The Underground Railroad and the Geography of Violence* (2020) stand out as perhaps the most well-known works of the last few years.[12]

Scholars are also intensifying their research on southbound runaways who fled to Mexico and other destinations in the Caribbean, revealing not only on the nature of slave flight itself but also the domestic and geopolitical repercussions for the region. Alice Baumgartner's recent work *South to Freedom* (2020), James David Nichols' *The Limits of Liberty* (2018), as well as studies by Sarah Cornell, Mekala Audain, and Thomas Mareite, among others, are pioneering new perspectives on the fugitive slave issue in the Texas-Mexican borderlands, while Matthew Clavin's

Millett, "Defining Freedom in the Atlantic Borderlands of the Revolutionary Southeast," *Early American Studies* 5 (Fall 2007): 367–394; Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626–1863* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 21–22, 29, 36–39; Graham Hodges, *Pretends to Be Free: Runaway Slave Advertisements from Colonial and Revolutionary New York and New Jersey* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Jane Landers, "'Giving Liberty to All': Spanish Florida as a Black Sanctuary, 1673–1790," in Viviana Díaz Balsera and Rachel A. May, eds., *La Florida: Five Hundred Years of Hispanic Presence* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014), 117–140.

[12] Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*; Sydney Nathans, *To Free a Family: The Journey of Mary Walker* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); Richard Blackett, *Making Freedom: The Underground Railroad and Politics of Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Foner, *Gateway to Freedom*; Delbanco, *The War before the War*; Churchill, *The Underground Railroad and the Geography of Violence*. See also Graham Russel Gao Hodges, *David Ruggles: A Radical Black Abolitionist and the Underground Railroad in New York City* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Steven Lubet, *Fugitive Justice: Runaways, Rescuers, and Slavery on Trial* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

work *Aiming for Pensacola* (2015) and Jeffrey Kerr-Ritchie's *Rebellious Passage* (2019) have expanded our understanding of escapes from slavery in the circum-Caribbean.[13]

Slave flight within the US South, by contrast, remains a relatively understudied phenomenon. Scholars such as Franklin and Schweninger, as well as Stephanie Camp, explored various aspects of *truancy*, the act of absconding temporarily to borderland wilderness areas or nearby towns, often as kneejerk reactions to (the threat of) punishment, but with no intention of remaining at large permanently. Only very recently have scholars begun to examine internal runaways as potential permanent freedom seekers. Sylviane Diouf, for example, has argued that many "borderland maroons" who escaped to the woodland areas in the immediate vicinity of their farms and plantations in fact intended to stay there permanently, while other scholars, including Charles Bolton, Viola Müller, Amani Marshall, and myself, have in recent years begun to examine attempts by freedom seekers to pass for free in towns and cities across the South. The ongoing collection and digitization of runaway slave ads in the widely publicized *Freedom on the Move* database, meanwhile, is making clear just how prevalent slave flight to urban areas was, and encourages scholars to look more closely at cities as important destinations for freedom seekers in the antebellum South.[14]

Taken collectively, these pioneering works and projects underscore that slave flight in the period between the American Revolution and the

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[13] Alice L. Baumgartner, *South to Freedom: Runaway Slaves to Mexico and the Road to Civil War* (New York: Basic Books, 2020); James David Nichols, *The Limits of Liberty: Mobility and the Making of the Eastern US-Mexico Border* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018); James David Nichols, "Freedom Interrupted: Runaway Slaves and Insecure Borders in the Mexican Northeast," in Pargas, ed., *Fugitive Slaves and Spaces of Freedom in North America*, 251–274; Sarah E. Cornell, "Citizens of Nowhere: Fugitive Slaves and Free African Americans in Mexico, 1833–1857," *Journal of American History* 100, no. 2 (2013): 351–374; Mekala Audain, "Mexican Canaan: Fugitive Slaves and Free Blacks on the American Frontier, 1804–1867" (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2014); Thomas Mareite, *Conditional Freedom: Free Soil and Fugitive Slaves from the US South to Mexico's Northeast, 1803–1861* (Boston: Brill, forthcoming 2022).

[14] Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 124–148; Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 35–59; Diouf, *Slavery's Exiles*; Müller, "Cities of Refuge"; Müller, "Illegal but Tolerated"; Bolton, *Fugitivism*, 117–148; Marshall, "'They Will Endeavor to Pass for Free'"; Damian Alan Pargas, "Urban Refugees: Fugitive Slaves and Spaces of Informal Freedom in the American South, 1800–1860," *Journal of Early American History* 7, no. 3 (2017): 262–284. The *Freedom on the Move* database can be accessed at freedomonthemove.org.

Civil War was a truly continental phenomenon. As various spaces of freedom developed throughout North America, enslaved people undertook daring attempts to permanently break the chains of bondage by fleeing in every possible direction and employing every possible strategy. The destinations of runaways differed by degrees and evolved over time. Indeed, time and space were intrinsically linked with successive flows of slave flight. Towns and cities in the antebellum South drew increasing numbers of runaways as their free black populations grew larger and as the domestic slave trade wrought even more havoc on local slave communities; northern border states received disproportionate numbers of refugees from neighboring slave states as they completed their transition from slavery to freedom in the early nineteenth century; and British Canada and Mexico became even more attractive destinations for runaway slaves after the controversial Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 was passed. The meanings of freedom in all of these different destinations continuously evolved over time as well. As the status of fugitive slaves in the Northern United States became more precarious over time, for example, that of exiles beyond the borders evolved in the opposite direction, as British Canada and Mexico steadfastly refused to extradite fugitive slaves back to the United States.

This book aims to "reroute" and reconceptualize the geography of slavery in freedom in North America. Two methodological elements in particular stand out. First, this is the first study on runaway slaves to make a conceptual distinction between spaces of informal, semi-formal, and formal freedom. This typology does not pretend to be static but rather encourages scholars to consider how various legal regimes affected the strategies and experiences of runaways from slavery. Drawing from a wide variety of source material – including newspapers, court records, legislative petitions, slave narratives, and vigilance committee records, among others – it examines both the migration and settlement processes of runaways in various spaces of freedom, revealing the similarities and differences in their intentions, experiences and vulnerability. It explores enslaved people's motivations for fleeing to certain destinations; the networks that facilitated their escape; their status and the ways they navigated different destinations; and the interconnectedness of different spaces of freedom. Second, this is the first book to provide a continental perspective on runaway slaves in North America. It does *not* constitute a fully comprehensive history of runaways in every corner of the continent, nor does it pretend to. (Notably absent are case studies on runaways among Native American communities, for example.) Rather, the intention

of this study is to zoom out and move away from national and regional paradigms of analysis, thereby broadening our understanding of how runaways viewed and utilized the continuously evolving landscape of freedom to their advantage as they sought to permanently escape slavery.[15]

Freedom Seekers is divided into four thematic chapters. Chapter 1 examines the changing landscape of slavery and freedom that developed in North America in the revolutionary era. It explores how and why opportunities for enslaved people to permanently escape bondage expanded significantly between the colonial era and the early nineteenth century. Chapter 2 delves into slave flight to spaces of informal freedom in the urban South, the most immediate and easily reached destinations for runaways trapped in the second slavery. It considers why enslaved people chose to go to the trouble of fleeing bondage yet remaining within the slaveholding states; the networks that helped them do so; the strategies they employed to hide their identities, sustain themselves, and remain at large indefinitely; and the risk they ran of recapture. Chapter 3 explores slave flight to spaces of semi-formal freedom in the antebellum North. It analyzes why freedom seekers sought to risk their lives to escape the South rather than flee to nearby spaces of informal freedom; how they did so; their settlement processes; and how they fared in the legal quagmire of rendition and reenslavement. Finally, Chapter 4 examines slave flight to spaces of formal freedom beyond the borders of the United States, to British Canada and Mexico from the 1830s through the 1850s. These two destinations for refugees from American slavery shared important similarities but also differed by degrees. The chapter will explore why some enslaved people sought to flee the United States altogether; how they settled into new communities; and the risk of both extradition and illegal recapture by slave catchers and agents from the antebellum South.

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[15] Rachel Adams called upon scholars to "reroute" the geography of freedom in North America by taking a continental approach to research on fugitive slaves. See Rachel Adams, *Continental Divides: Remapping the Cultures of North America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 61–100.