A Papered Freedom: Self-Purchase and Compensated Manumission in the Antebellum United States

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A Papered Freedom: Self-Purchase and Compensated Manumission in the Antebellum United States

A Dissertation Presented

by

JULIA WALLACE BERNIER

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2017

W.E.B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies
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DEDICATION

To my Mom, Dad, and
all those who were never redeemed.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor, Manisha Sinha, for her unyielding support over the last six years. I also want to thank my committee members, James Smethurst, Britt Rusert, and Elizabeth Stordeur Pryor. You have been invaluable guides through both history and life, if there is any good in my project it is because of time spent learning with all of you. I also want to thank Trish Loveland, the real brains behind the Du Bois department and Bill Strickland for all the company, dinners, and sage advice given from Amherst to Austria.

In addition, I would like to thank the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, The American Antiquarian Society, The Library Company of Philadelphia, and the University of Massachusetts Graduate School for their generous funding and support for researching this dissertation.

To all my friends, you helped me find words when all I had were ideas and helped me form ideas when all I had were words. I share this accomplishment with you. To my Mom and Dad, this project would have never been possible if you did not always, always, let me go wherever I thought I wanted to until I ended up here. I love you.

And last, I want to express my gratitude to all those whose stories found their way into my hands. It is the deepest honor I can imagine to have been able to think with you and your lives and I hope I have handled your stories with care and done some justice to your incredible quests for freedom in a world that was so unjustly opposed to your liberation.
ABSTRACT

A PAPERED FREEDOM: SELF-PURCHASE AND COMPENSATED MANUMISSION IN THE ANTEBELLUM UNITED STATES

MAY 2017

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“A Papered Freedom” is a systematic study of how enslaved and self-emancipated African Americans engaged with compensated manumission to become legally free. To do this, I address fundamental issues related to compensated manumission within the United States from the founding era to the fugitive slave crisis of the 1850s. The project works to give voice to the concerns and problems that African Americans faced in their attempts to buy freedom by analyzing how they interacted with different kinds of networks, both social and economic, in the interest of liberation. By accruing different kinds of capital within these networks, African Americans who paid for freedom worked to reject the very economic and social thought that worked to keep them enslaved. The project also looks at how African Americans connected with the abolition movement worked to theorize compensated manumission and legal freedom within the broader movement.
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INTRODUCTION

Orlando Patterson, the eminent historical sociologist, has argued that manumission was an “integral and necessary part of the process of slavery” and that through it the “incentive problem [of slavery] was solved.” Legal freedom was undeniably, and quite obviously, an incentive for those who were enslaved. However, stories of compensated manumission in the antebellum United States show that in no way did all forms of manumission “neatly” resolve slavery’s “contradictions.” In fact, through their efforts to buy freedom African Americans worked to call further attention to some of these contradictions as they resisted the system’s capacity to control their economic activity, devalue their kinship bonds, and commodify black life.¹

In recent years, historians have tracked the role played by African Americans in the expansion of manumission in the decades following the American Revolution but have yet to place the full importance of compensated manumission within the context of the nineteenth century. The study of self-purchase in the decades before the Civil War is essential to truly understanding the black experience of freedom and the struggle against enslavement during this period. Looking specifically at self-purchase and compensated manumission can tell us how manumission and legal freedom were utilized by black communities in the United States in more nuanced ways. Crucially, this study shows how those who used this process to become free both resisted and undermined some of American slavery’s fundamental ideologies. This dissertation argues that each of the men

and women who bought their freedom and that of loved ones did more than play an ambiguous role in undermining ideas of race and enslavement in the United States in the antebellum era. Free African Americans, and those who would be free, dangerously blurred lines, softening and eroding the dichotomy between slave and free and white and black upon which racial slavery in the United States depended. 

Throughout this dissertation I will use the terms self-purchase and compensated manumission to describe the act of buying freedom. I apply self-purchase to indicate instances in which African Americans bought themselves. Compensated manumission, a term that presents itself in the sources, will be used more generally to describe a case in which someone, or a group of people, paid for the manumission of another person. I use both terms because I believe that although self-purchase is compensated manumission, there is a distinction between buying oneself and buying a loved one or having someone else buy your freedom. This difference is also evident in the language used to describe instances of both self-purchase and compensated manumission in the archive. I try to reflect this difference throughout the text although, for stylistic reasons, self-purchase may, at times, be used more broadly.

Both theoretically and practically, African Americans who gained their freedom through paying for it threatened ‘the domestic institution’ of the southern United States by valuing freedom and their humanity against systems which attempted to control ideas of both. Buying your freedom was a markedly active form of manumission, especially within the legal context of the United States in which free and enslaved African Americans often had severely circumscribed rights and where there was no standard

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recognition of the right to contract, nor to purchase oneself through laws of coartación as in other slave societies. Compensated manumission depended, then, not only on the good will of the slaveholder but, more importantly, on the skill and determination of the enslaved themselves.

While this project wrestles with the issues and complexities presented by purchasing one’s freedom, it will concentrate on how the will of African Americans to be free worked to undermine ideas of race and enslavement. Historian Mary Beth Corrigan states that “more than any other activity, the purchase of freedom attested to the success of slave families and communities…to balance their own economic needs, their masters' demands, and their thirst for freedom.” By understanding the experiences and motivations behind the actions of African Americans who looked to buy freedom, this project complicates arguments that ultimately focus on manumission as a technique of management and dangerously negate the black experience of the process. Manumission was a broad categorization of many different ways in which African Americans could legally transition from enslavement to freedom. Through concentrating on the efforts of African American communities towards compensated manumission this dissertation reimagines legal freedom as more firmly in the tradition of resistance to slavery.3

By studying self-purchase and compensated manumission in a sustained way, this dissertation argues three main points. First, it centers the importance of legal freedom and what it meant to African American communities. In doing so, the project highlights the call for a more practical understanding of the need for legal freedom from African

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Americans as a constant throughout the abolition movement. It also grounds African American influence, activism, demands, and legal thought across both first and second wave abolition and within the movement’s relationship to the law through the lens of self-purchase. By looking at how those who bought their freedom worked to influence abolitionist discourse around compensated manumission throughout the movement, we can better understand connections between African American communities and abolition.4

Networks, like those made within the abolition movement, were crucial to the success of African Americans in gaining freedom through purchase. Recognizing that “buying oneself was generally a collective effort of many individuals,” Ira Berlin has argued that the support of community and family was the most important resource that African Americans had in negotiating the “complicated business” of freedom. There were a number of different connections African Americans could make in order to expand the networks that could help them buy their freedom. This project will discuss how African Americans groomed relationships across racial lines, gaining the support of abolitionists, but also with local whites within the South who could support their efforts in a world that was legally and economically precarious for African Americans, both enslaved and free. But, it will also concentrate on how black communities worked to support their own members in buying freedom.5

Thus, in looking at how African Americans forged the circumstances under which they could buy freedom, this dissertation seeks to understand the importance of networking and the accumulation of a range of different kinds of capital. As scholars like Calvin Schermerhorn and Walter Johnson have argued, slavery’s economy depended on social capital and networks. Through their economic activities and investments in a range of different types of capital African Americans entered into networks of trust, credit, and exchange that would have been familiar to many in the period. Through their economic and social action, African Americans groomed relationships that could serve their attempts to invest in freedom and liberation. In doing so, they found ways to participate in economies that were built to exclude them as people and mark them as chattel to be free.

The slave trade played a crucial role in the creation of not only the economy of slavery, but also its social order. Those who bought their freedom worked to use these same systems of commodification that turned human beings into property towards their advantage as they denied slavery’s ability to devalue their bodies and familial connections by purchasing their liberation.⁶ Although any free African American threatened the ideological basis for slaveholding, those who worked to buy their freedom also undermined the social systems of slavery in other, more distinct ways. Slaveholders may have benefited from compensated manumission, as they were benefitting from the continued labor of their enslaved people in addition to being paid the price negotiated for freedom, yet African Americans continually chose to become free through this process. By doing so, African Americans, in the very act of buying themselves and loved ones,

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entered into markets in which they were always already assumed to be excluded from, at least in theory, if not in always in practice. Through their independent labor those who bought their freedom also undermined racist pro-slavery arguments about African Americans being incapable of succeeding in freedom. Their work proved, against the propaganda of slaveholders, that they could be dedicated, industrious, self-sufficient, and innovative workers who could labor beyond their master’s requirements and negotiate their own demands with those who owned them. Self-purchase worked to repudiate the market of slavery as the enslaved were able to buy themselves into personhood, if not full citizenship, just as their enslavers could make human beings into slaves through their own economic investments. In doing so, African Americans attempted, in whatever way possible, to realign the systems of capital that threatened black freedom and family in the favor of their liberation.

Therefore, this dissertation also concentrates on what this act of buying freedom can tell us about the law and economies of slavery, the commodification of enslaved peoples, and how African Americans attempted to value themselves and their freedom simultaneously within and outside of these systems. It works to query the broader issues of what it meant to set the price of something as invaluable as liberty and to become free by meeting the demands of slavery's economies and the market in one’s body. I demonstrate that in buying their freedom these individuals undermined the most basic logic of slavery and its law, for through their enterprise they were able to use the market system in order to free themselves from their strict legal and ideological categorization as

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property. The study of African American interactions with capital towards freedom and familial reunion adds a crucial dimension to recent studies that attempt to center the relationship between capitalism and slavery by historians like Edward Baptist, Sven Beckert, Johnson, Schermerhorn, and Daina Ramey Berry.8

Lastly, I ask how our ideas of manumission as a means of management under American slavery change when we study compensated manumission in its own right. In highlighting the importance of legal freedom, it becomes evident that one of the most forceful arguments for buying freedom, despite whatever theoretical arguments might be made against it, was its ability to allow family groups to stay together as the changing economic and territorial landscape of slavery threatened their bonds. In this way, it was a tactic that was often a communal form of resistance as the enslaved, self-emancipated, and free set out to raise the money to purchase the freedom of those they knew and loved.

Legal manumission was crucial to the security of African American communities. For many, self-purchase was the preferred method of becoming free, and only once their attempts to do so had failed did they choose to run away. For others who had already emancipated themselves, it became a necessary step in protecting and maintaining their self-won freedom. Although an interest in legal freedom was constant, it certainly became more important after the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Being legally manumitted helped African Americans not only protect their freedom, but could also help them

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remain close to home, or at least not have to worry about capture to the same degree as
the self-emancipated. The fugitive slave crisis of the 1850s did much to shift abolitionist
recognition of compensated manumission and the dire necessity of legal freedom. Yet,
African Americans throughout the antebellum period looked to free themselves and loved
ones through compensated manumission. What was most important was freedom, not so
much how someone had wrested it from the slave system which looked to make it an
impossibility. Self-purchase must therefore be seen on a continuum of resistive efforts on
the part of the African Americans as they worked to turn both slave law and economy
into sites of further contest.

As African Americans worked to ensure the freedom of their families and foster
kinship bonds outside of slavery they denied the right of slave law and social custom to
decimate their family ties. This, of course, was no small feat. For many, the work they
did daily while the sun was up and long after the sun had gone down was dedicated to
familial liberation. They fought against the power of slavery to devalue the black family
as they worked to reunite with loved ones and protect their family units from the
auctions, markets, and trade routes that attempted to separate them across the ever-
expanding territory of American slavery.

Through this process many came to a deep understanding of how slavery worked to
limit freedom and access to it across legal, social, and economic landscapes. In response
to their experiences, many looked to ensure that slavery would be abolished across the
nation once they became free, or as they worked as free friends and family who either
remained enslaved or were threatened by capture as fugitives. While manumission itself
may not have ultimately destroyed American slavery, it left menacing loopholes which
were not only used by African Americans as escape routes, but also as examples of how freedom could be obtained by those who were still enslaved. In the case of more noted fugitives who had bought their freedom after emancipating themselves, compensated manumission also allowed them to fight against slavery nationally as abolitionists and activists more safely and with unique experience of slavery’s economy and law.

This dissertation covers topics within, and issues related to, compensated manumission and self-purchase. It mostly focuses on self-purchase through the lens of abolition, but also looks to what those African Americans who worked within their own communities can tell us about the broader story of compensated manumission. It seeks to understand how this strategy may have functioned differently for those with relations to the abolition movement and those with limited contact to communities outside of their own. Much, but not all, of the source material comes from the movement. Because of this, I read the sources not only as examples of how the people within them worked to become free, but also how the stories enter into debate over compensation and legal freedom within the movement itself.

The dissertation works to tell thematic stories in chronological fashion. Chapter One grounds the dissertation historically by looking at compensated manumission and the activities of black communities in relation to the work of early anti-slavery groups like the Pennsylvania Abolition Society and the New York Manumission Society. This chapter highlights the continual influence of African Americans and their desire for legal freedom on the abolitionist movement. Chapter Two broadens our scope by looking at how African Americans in the nineteenth century became free through purchasing the
liberty of themselves and/or loved ones. It looks to answer how and why African Americans utilized compensated manumission in the mid-century amid the changing social and economic landscape of American slavery, including the rise of the domestic slave trade and the birth of second wave abolitionism. This chapter shows what legal freedom meant and how it was obtained, paying special attention to issues of networking, kinship, and opportunity. It also asks what conditions made self-purchase more possible for certain African Americans depending on their skill set, social standing, and the economic conditions of their location. While still relying on abolitionist materials, this chapter, in particular, attempts to look beyond the movement strictly speaking, in order to give a more comprehensive story of the lives of African Americans in relation to compensated manumission. But, it also seeks to understand why and how they looked to the abolitionist movement for support.

Chapter Three looks closely at abolitionist debate over compensated manumission and self-purchase and how those who bought their freedom influenced the movement. It studies how the debate took shape from the founding of the American Anti-Slavery Society until the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Chapter Four expands upon Chapters Two and Three by looking at how African Americans viewed the legal freedom that compensated manumission provided. It works to understand all the ways in which the security of legal freedom affected black life. But, more specifically, it attempts to place purchased freedom more directly into the historiography of resistance by better understanding black legal culture of the period. It will focus on what resistance through legal means meant for the anti-slavery movement on both individual, communal, and
ideological terms. Importantly, it will also look at how purchased liberty worked within abolitionist rhetoric against the law of slavery and U.S. law more broadly.

Chapter Five takes up the issue of self-purchase and compensated manumission within the slave narrative genre. Although freedom narratives make up a crucial source of information for the entire project, this chapter takes a literary studies approach to the selected narratives. It will provide a deeper understanding of what buying freedom meant by close readings of narrative descriptions and rhetoric around compensated manumission. It works to highlight what arguments these authors are making about self-purchase and compensated manumission within mid-century abolitionist print culture, but also what work self-purchase does as a trope within the genre. Finally, Chapter Six looks at how compensated manumission and the necessity of legal freedom were viewed within black communities and the abolition movement after the enactment of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which drastically transformed the power of both slavery and legal freedom.

In an 1834 letter Theodore Weld tells Lewis Tappan of the men and women he met in Cincinnati’s African American community who worked day and night to secure the freedom of themselves and loved ones through compensated manumission. According to Weld, the majority of the city’s African Americans had some connection to buying freedom. Weld’s letter highlights the investments in freedom being made by black communities across the nation. Surely the vast sums spent on freedom could have aided many in a world in which black economic success was precarious and often limited by law and social custom. Buying freedom may not have been perfect, but for so many it meant the critical difference between slavery and freedom and the separation of family
units. Weld recognizes the uses of these stories and communities to the abolitionist cause, yet even if they were not connected to the movement, African Americans who bought the liberty of themselves and loved ones worked against slavery’s capacity to destroy the bonds they tried to maintain and rebuild in freedom.

In *The Sovereignty of Quiet*, Kevin Quashie looks for an understanding of black resistance that goes beyond the relationship between public expressiveness and resistive black culture. He looks to the idea of quiet as a “metaphor for the full range of one’s inner life—one’s desires, ambitions, hungers, vulnerabilities, and fears.” This “inner life is not apolitical or without social value, but neither is it determined entirely by publicness.” The scale with which we judge the resistance of African Americans in the antebellum era has worked to limit how we view self-purchase’s importance in the lives of African Americans, and, also, in undermining slavery. It has also left us with a facile understanding of the lives of African Americans during this period, and how they understood both slavery and freedom. Quashie’s interventions work well for a more nuanced understanding of the personal nature of the work African Americans did to buy their friends and family out of slavery.⁹

The work these African Americans did to turn their labor into liberty may have been quiet, but they toiled for the promise of reunion and sold their labor to expand the boundaries of freedom. Not only did their example of black excellence and entrepreneurialism work against pro-slavery arguments, as Theodore Weld and other abolitionists suggested, but committing their freedom to saving friends and families also

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allowed African Americans to oppose the ways in which slavery attempted to threaten the deep bonds they made in more private ways. For the woman Weld describes in his letter who laundered clothes at night after coming home from her daily work to raise the money needed to buy her husband, her laundering, done alone at night in the privacy of her home, was the quiet work of resisting slavery. This work was done by hundreds, if not thousands, of other African Americans throughout the country who worked to buy their loved ones out of enslavement. The work done to secure the freedom of loved ones, or the possibility of it, was central to African American communities throughout the antebellum era. As this dissertation will show, to understand the role compensated manumission played in their daily lives, as well as how it influenced how freedom was imagined, is crucial to understanding the experiences of African Americans during this period.
CHAPTER 1

“KNOW ALL MEN:” COMPENSATED MANUMISSION, LEGAL FREEDOM, AND ABOLITION IN THE EARLY REPUBLIC

This chapter concentrates on the work of early manumission groups in the United States and their relationship to compensated manumission and self-purchase. It will look at how groups like the Pennsylvania Abolition Society (PAS) and the New York Manumission Society (NYMS) interfaced with African American communities around issues of buying freedom. As Eva Sheppard Wolf argues the needs, desires, and negotiations of African Americans were central in the push towards broader manumission in the period after the Revolution. This chapter looks to extend Wolf’s argument, as I believe that these ideas are also applicable to the formation of the techniques of early abolition societies like the PAS. African Americans, both enslaved and free, continuously demanded that the abolition movement support efforts towards self-purchase and compensated manumission, whether planned or in emergency situations. Looking at the efforts of early abolitionists to assist African Americans in buying freedom will give us new ways to think about continuities within the abolition movement and the ability of African Americans to network and negotiate with their allies. It will also anchor self-purchase historically within the dissertation.\(^\text{10}\)

It has often been argued that early abolition and manumission groups were far more conservative than their second wave counterparts as represented most commonly by William Lloyd Garrison and the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS). While this is true in many ways, looking at compensated manumission shows that, at least in some places, African American demands also influenced the actions of first wave groups like

\(^\text{10}\) Wolf, *Race and Liberty*, 81, 238.
the PAS. Concern for the law among early abolitionists and black desire to be legally free coalesced in endeavors to buy freedom. Stories of the assistance that PAS men like Thomas Shipley and Isaac Hopper gave to help African Americans purchase their freedom complicate our understanding of the work that first wave abolitionists did to secure black freedom. They also highlight the flexibility and ingenuity of African Americans and their communities as they strove to become legally free and protect their hard won, and often stolen, liberty.

Abolitionists like Hopper and others offered intricate understanding of the laws that attempted to limit black freedom. In so many ways it was the law of slavery, especially after the passage of the 1793 Fugitive Slave Law, that daily threatened African Americans who had already emancipated themselves. Using abolitionist allies, who studied the law and how to expand its support of freedom, for assistance in negotiating with enslavers over the terms of self-purchase was, quite obviously, an excellent strategy. In a world in which African Americans, especially fugitives, were not only financially insecure, but often unable to legally contract, abolitionists could, and often did, act as crucial support in critical moments in the process of buying freedom. As the men and women who ran away worked to make slave property unstable in freedom, men like Hopper labored to find new ways to make the law support their extralegal actions.

In many instances, the strategies of black fugitivity in concert with the legal efforts of abolitionists worked to expand not only who could lay claim to the law but also to lower the price paid for the legal freedom offered by self-purchase. PAS members sought to use the law to give sanction to the lives that African Americans had started for

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themselves in freedom. This is why self-emancipated African Americans continued to look to white men like Hopper and Shipley, and all those whose creative legal imaginations could envision and secure black freedom, for support in protecting their freedom through purchase. Thus, by examining the phenomena of self-purchase and compensated manumission in the early national period, we can better understand how the needs and demands of black communities and abolitionists influenced the tactics of early groups in previously overlooked ways. It also allows us to better trace the continuities within the American abolition movement and its interactions with African Americans in their attempts to become legally free, as both individuals and as a group dedicated to the final emancipation of all enslaved African Americans.

On November 23, 1836, Robert Purvis, a prominent African American abolitionist and leader of Philadelphia’s free black community delivered a “Tribute to the Memory of Thomas Shipley, the Philanthropist” at St. Thomas’s Church. It had been decided after Shipley’s funeral by a “numerous and respectable meeting” of black Philadelphians including James Forten, Reverend Charles W. Gardiner, and Bishop Moses Brown, that such a tribute should be performed by Purvis. The meeting wished to honor Shipley as “our sincere and active friend…whose unwearied exertions have contributed much to the melioration of the long neglected condition of our people.” Thomas Shipley had died as president of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully held in Bondage, and for Improving the Condition of the African Race. Originally founded in 1775, the PAS was reconstituted in 1784 after the interruptions of the Revolutionary War and the business of
founding the new nation. Started by a group of white Pennsylvania Quakers to “use such means as are in their power, to extend the blessings of freedom to every part of the human race,” the PAS was the nation’s first abolition group.12

Among their activities to promote the extension of the “blessings of freedom,” the PAS employed lawyers, who also counted among their membership, to “explain the laws and constitutions of the states” relative to emancipation and to “urge” claims to freedom “when legal, before such persons or courts as are authorized to decide upon them.”13

While their declaration to work within the law to obtain freedom may not have made them the most radical group of abolitionists the United States has ever known, the efforts of men like Thomas Shipley to gain the freedom of enslaved and wrongfully held free African Americans clearly made a lasting impression on the black community of Pennsylvania, as witnessed by Purvis’s memorial for Shipley.

One aspect of the PAS’s work that was appropriate to their mission to work within the law, which was also a crucial means to freedom in African American communities throughout the nation, was their support of compensated manumission. The records of the PAS show that this early society assisted in many cases in which enslaved African Americans bought the freedom of themselves or loved ones, or in which members themselves were involved in the manumission process. Beginning with the declaration “KNOW all MEN,” these legal documents go on to describe the terms, almost always unique in some detail, that brought a long desired freedom to the African

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American(s) named. While the PAS was not the only early manumission society to promote freedom in the early republic, the Pennsylvania group took the lead in American abolition during this period. Most other groups, including the New York Manumission Society to be discussed later, looked to the PAS for direction and support, including their leadership in convening the national meetings of delegates from state and local abolition societies. The activities of the PAS will therefore form the main concern of this chapter but will be placed alongside the work of other early abolition and manumission societies.

Many historians have concentrated on the second wave of the American abolition movement, spurning groups like the PAS as conservative, cautious, and too dependent on legal avenues. Nevertheless, the manumission documents recorded in the PAS logbooks and abolitionist memoirs, and what they reveal about the work of the PAS and the actions of African Americans to find freedom, suggest taking another look at the early national abolition movement and how its members interacted with black communities. Although African Americans undoubtedly had an influence on those second wave abolitionists who formed the AASS and their calls for immediate and uncompensated emancipation, this should not preclude the influence of African American demands on earlier abolitionist groups.14

In The Transformation of American Abolitionism Richard S. Newman compares first and second wave abolition as represented respectively by Pennsylvania and

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14 Paul Polgar in a 2011 article also suggests that “Newman’s dualistic framework leaves unexamined key elements of early antislavery such as the emphasis placed on public persuasion, black education and civic integration, and the joint evolution of an abolitionist ideology between African American activists and their white allies.” I would also argue that second wave abolitionists were also highly concerned with the law and its venues. Paul J. Polgar. “‘To Raise Them to an Equal Participation:’ Early National Abolition, Gradual Emancipation, and the Promise of African American Citizenship,” Journal of the Early Republic. Vol. 31 (Summer 2011): 229-258. 232.
Massachusetts anti-slavery activists. He states that the PAS was a “prestigious organization of politically oriented strategists” who “advocated gradual abolitionism by means of painstaking legal work and legislative action.” While Newman does admit that the PAS “achieved a national reputation as blacks’ legal representatives” through interaction with local African Americans including Richard Allen, who acted as liaison between threatened African Americans and the PAS’s white lawyers, Newman ultimately concludes that the PAS “operated in a rational, enlightened, and highly dispassionate manner.” For Newman the group was made up of “elite white males who could bolster the group’s legislative strategy and tactics, lawyers who could manipulate legal codes, and wealthy benefactors who could fund legal work,” making for a group in which “abolitionism operated like a sober business.”\(^\text{15}\) A similar sentiment could be applied to the NYMS, who even let slaveholders join their ranks.

A large part of the activity of early abolition groups was concerned with the law, and for good reason. The law was, and in many ways continues to be, one of the greatest threats to black freedom. It was the law that restricted manumission and enabled slaveholders to chase their so-called property across the legal lines of the slave south into the North. It was also a lack of equal access to the law, specifically being denied the right to contract, that made African Americans extremely vulnerable in cases of compensated manumission. And, even when free, the lack of clear access to the full rights of citizenship still put African Americans at risk wherever they travelled. The PAS meticulously recorded, updated in their records, and published local laws concerning slavery and manumission throughout the South. The NYMS did similar work. They not

only did this for the broader record, but so that their lawyers had a reliable source to consult in their fight to protect and gain the freedom of African Americans who came to them looking for assistance. The group knew that the law and its relationship to freedom mattered dearly to African Americans. They also shared this knowledge with abolitionists in other cities who will be discussed below.  

While it is not to be disputed that the make up and tactics of groups like the PAS and NYMS were not as radical as the AASS, it is also important not to lose sight of the interaction between early abolitionists and their black counterparts, something that following their efforts to support compensated manumission and self-purchase illustrates. If African Americans found their work lacking, then why did they continue to utilize their services? Surely, at least in their legal support, the PAS offered a resource that blended into the needs of the ever growing newly free African American community in Philadelphia, and those beyond. The city’s black community was relatively strong standing on its own terms in the early republic period.

Black Pennsylvanians, especially those in Philadelphia, had access to a number of indigenous societies to support them. In fact, as early as 1787, members of the city’s free black community came together to form the Free African Society, a “quasi-religious benevolent association.” Not long after, men like Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, who had both bought their freedom, founded the nation’s first independent black churches in the city. Allen, in his 1833 *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labors of the Right Reverend Richard Allen*, tells the story of the purchase of the freedom of his brother and

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16 It should also be remembered that throughout the new nation African Americans and their allies made very real and meaningful gains by challenging slavery in legal venues, most notably in Massachusetts where emancipation was enacted statewide due to a 1783 court decision.
self, as proposed by their master, who had become unsatisfied with holding slaves due to a new religious awareness. They hired their time and paid £60 in gold and silver, or two thousand dollars in continental money. Allen’s manner of fact manner of telling this part of his story perhaps reflects the common nature of self-purchase as a means to freedom in the period and area. It might also suggest that he wished to concentrate on more important things in his narrative, as shortly after he declares that he had “reason to bless my dear Lord that a door was opened unexpectedly for me to buy my time, and enjoy my liberty.”

Philadelphia was also a community whose activist roots were well-situated to lead the national fight against the colonization movement, which, after the founding of the American Colonization Society (ACS) in 1816, was a scheme that quickly grew in popularity with many white Americans, north and south. Pennsylvania’s free African Americans were thus highly organized in many of the aspects of community building that helped to define and protect freedom. By 1838, the PAS’s Committee to Visit the Colored People reported that there were some eighty beneficial societies for African Americans in the city including the Citizen Sons of Philadelphia, who were the most successful at raising funds to support their members.

By the end of the century, Pennsylvania’s free African Americans were also petitioning the national and state governments along with the PAS to push for full

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emancipation. Beginning in 1797 the Pennsylvania legislature looked to a scheme of compensated emancipation in order to enact an abolition of slavery that would free some 2,000 African Americans who were still held as slaves according to the terms of the 1780 gradual emancipation bill. The costs of paying for a final emancipation were to be paid by taxpayers. Even though it was determined that it would only cost a few dollars for each taxpaying family the bill did not pass and was not taken up again until 1799. The PAS continued to lobby the legislature for the passage of an abolition bill. By 1800, however, the state’s African Americans had grown tired of waiting and offered to pay a special tax in order to gain the full emancipation that they, and their allies, had been working for. The tax, which would compensate the state’s slaveholders after an assessment process, was to be levied on the free African Americans of the state. The legislature took up the bill again and, with the inclusion of a tax of $10 for each free African American entering the state, passed the act in March.19

The PAS, believing that for African Americans to agree to compensate slaveholders was to recognize their right to property in people, decided that they could not support the bill. They thought that to pay for emancipation was to admit that slavery was constitutional and they refused to become “instrumental” in compensating enslavers for something that they believed was “incapable of purchase or sale.” The group also saw that the willingness of the state to tax only free African Americans could become a precedent for future discrimination. Ultimately, the state senate decided against the bill, believing that to tax only one section of the population would have gone against the

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19 Compensated emancipation was often looked to as a compromise between the revolutionary ideas of the enslaved’s natural right to freedom and the slaveholder’s natural right to property. Polgar, “To Raise them,” 235. Gary Nash, Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia’s Black Community, 1720-1840 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 133.
principle of “equal liberty” assumed in the constitution. Thus, although the PAS was actively assisting individual African Americans in gaining their freedom through purchase, they would not support a broad plan for compensated emancipation.

This scheme was a collective effort on the part of black Pennsylvanians to buy a mass freedom, gaining a final liberty for their brethren who were still enslaved. Through this communal action they also stood apart from the PAS’s plans for legislative lobbying and created their own response to the state’s abolition quandary in the hopes of breaking the long standstill. As many had done in their private lives, the state’s free African Americans worked to negotiate a practical and lasting freedom at any cost. Perhaps taking into account their own experiences in buying freedom on an individual level, a number of the state’s free black people offered to make that sacrifice on the part of others. As a group, then, it appears that black Pennsylvanians came together to effect a plan that, although it was discordant with their allies in the PAS, would have provided not only immediate individual freedoms but also the final abolition of slavery in the state, goals that only those within the community could ever truly understand the full urgency of.

The black community of Philadelphia clearly recognized the shortcomings of the PAS and took the lead in creating their own institutions and taking their own actions that would directly respond to the needs of their communities. Gary Nash reminds us that from the “beginning free black Philadelphians understood that the only secure foundation upon which to fashion their lives was one constructed of independent organizations…rather than on white benevolence.” However, they were also able to

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strategize when and where the expertise and connections of the PAS could be utilized. Thus it was Philadelphian free blacks who set out to a “create a rich and varied relationship” with the PAS rather than the other way around. Undoubtedly, African Americans recognized that in certain venues, especially in legal matters like manumission, the PAS could act as an “extension of their own voices.” If indeed the PAS was made up of socially conservative and dispassionate white men then, at the very least, the fact that African Americans continued to look to them for assistance, in the face of their own varied self-help outlets, shows how versatile black communities were willing to be in order to obtain their own ends in searching out legal freedom.

Calvin Schermerhorn, in his book on how networking worked for the enslaved in the changing landscape of the Upper South, reminds us that the “primary endeavor was to construct networks to protect families in the middle of one of the most destructive and sustained devaluations of kin and affinal bonds in the history of the world.” This form of networking also pertained to free African Americans who looked to form connections with the PAS and other early abolition groups, many of whom were only one step removed from the enslaved discussed by Schermerhorn. Early abolitionists were a crucial link in the networks through which African Americans sought to become and remain free and to protect their freedom against kidnapping and other devious schemes to (re)enslave them.

Often, as Schermerhorn also shows, those who worked to buy their freedom looked to connections outside of their immediate community to not only negotiate terms, but also to seek retribution if something went wrong in the process. African Americans in

the South looked to their white allies whom they had searched out and groomed to be of assistance in times of emergency, as when a master would default on their agreement to compensated manumission. This skill in networking is apparent in the connections made between Pennsylvania African Americans and PAS members, but also in the fact that enslaved people from the surrounding slave states were able to make contact with the PAS, whether through their own networking, or through their free relatives.22

Compensated manumission and self-purchase were central to the arsenal of tools that African Americans used to gain their freedom. Ira Berlin finds that this may have been especially true in the post-revolutionary era when the cost of enslaved people was relatively low, while “expectations for freedom high and white attitudes flexible.” Thus, he believes that the percentage of slaves buying freedom was “probably higher than at any time thereafter.” Often, both enslaved and free African Americans had no qualms about using whatever techniques would gain their freedom and that of their families. In many instances black communities used escape and purchase in tandem. The necessity of fluidity and the liberty to define and create the means to be free were central to African American needs and they expected their abolitionist allies to recognize this and give assistance where, and however, possible.23

Self-purchase, unlike other forms of self-emancipation gave something to be prized and attained at all costs, a legal form of liberty. The technique therefore meshed


well with the legal strategies and concern for the law of the PAS and other early societies who followed their direction. Looking at compensated manumission in abolitionist circles and African American communities can show us that, if less radical, early abolitionists also looked to the needs and demands of black communities to chart their course of antislavery action. In addition, African Americans took their attempts to be free to their abolitionist allies and called on them for assistance. Without these cooperative efforts and communication, the American abolitionist movement could not have had the successes it did.

Throughout the history of slavery in the United States it benefitted African Americans to obtain their freedom through legal means. Of course, nothing compared to the infamous Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, with its outrageous demands on both citizens and states throughout the country. But, the much earlier 1793 Fugitive Slave Act also gave a legal apparatus to the Constitution’s fugitive slave clause, and threatened the liberty of any escaped slave and encouraged the kidnapping of free African Americans, if to a lesser degree than its later incarnation. In this way, the goals and beliefs of the PAS, NYMS, and other early groups aligned themselves with the desires of African Americans to obtain a freedom that could outwit both state and, after 1793, national law. Indeed, as a practical matter, attempting to follow state laws of manumission to ensure a lasting freedom for those African Americans they were working to protect was not altogether an unsound course for abolition groups to follow in the years of slavery’s legal and geographic expansion.

Undoubtedly the PAS’s concern for fighting slavery and obtaining its abolition was mostly, at least officially, filtered through legal avenues. The techniques of the PAS
have come down through the historiography as reserved, conservative, and paternalistic. Although its membership was extremely exclusive, made up of mostly professional white men after 1784, the nation’s first abolition group took up important causes that affected the daily lives of African Americans. In the case of making possible legal manumission by compensating owners, the PAS worked within an already standard operation for African Americans. Further, they worked to record all manumissions of those who asked for their legal aid and those who simply wished to have their freedom reinforced by having their previous manumissions recorded by the PAS secretary of the legal committee. In a period when many Southern states required manumissions to be recorded in town or county law books, by offering a place to recognize manumissions of those formerly enslaved who had left behind their homes and all who might know their current legal status, the PAS helped to protect Pennsylvania’s free blacks from re-enslavement and legal jeopardy or limbo.

PAS members were not content to just compile slave laws, manumission records, and indentures. Like their later counterparts who are deemed more radical, the PAS constantly petitioned the state and national government to not only change laws concerning slavery and the slave trade, but also to enforce the ones already on the books. The PAS and other early abolition groups petitioned for a ban on the slave trade as early as the 1790s. After the 1808 national ban on the slave trade, they went after cases in which they suspected ships of illegally importing slaves. Local members petitioned the state constitutional convention to not define state citizenship as a right for whites only. In

24 Andrews, “Reconsidering the First Emancipation,” 234. Andrews highlights this period as a “daily struggle...dependent on the audacity and courage of civil rights claimants (in this case slaves, servants, and free people) and their advocates.”
addition, they used the cases of individual African Americans to push constitutional questions over citizenship and black rights within Pennsylvania itself. 25 They also worked to stop kidnappings of African Americans who were rightfully free and took on the cases of individual African Americans who sought to buy their freedom.

As mentioned previously, self-purchase and compensated manumission were essential tools for African Americans to gain their freedom. Black Philadelphia was no exception. A Statistical Inquiry into the Condition of the People of Color in Philadelphia and its surrounding districts called for in 1847 by the Society of Friends states that in the city of Philadelphia alone some 194 of 604, or around 32%, of legally manumitted African Americans had bought their freedom. It also records that they had spent $45,751 to do so. Compensated manumission and self-purchase clearly played an important role in the city’s black population and their quest for freedom. It also consumed what was likely a significant portion of their funds. A large number of manumitted Philadelphia African Americans had gained their freedom through purchase by 1849 when the Inquiry was published. One can only guess at the number of those Philadelphians who were also working to gain the liberty of family members through purchase. Whatever the statistics that the Society of Friends failed to gather that may have been valuable to the modern scholar, African Americans throughout the city had connections to those who bought their freedom. Many probably knew someone who could suggest that the process be undertaken for family members, or who might know to search out the support of the PAS in effecting their goals. 26

26 A Statistical Inquiry into the Condition of the People of Color, of the City and Districts of Philadelphia (Philadelphia: Kite and Walton, 1849), 12.
One of the very first cases taken on by the PAS when it was “simply a small group of men, mostly Quaker artisans and small retailers, who had imbibed the humanitarian message of Woolman, Benezet, and others” culminated in the purchasing of a woman and her children in order to set them free. Dinah Nevill, an Indian being sold from New Jersey to Virginia via Philadelphia, declared herself to be a free woman. Two members of the PAS, Thomas Harrison and Israel Pemberton, took her case to court. The court ruled against her, but after appeals and delay, Thomas Harrison bought Nevill and her three children and set them free. In fact, both Harrison and Pemberton were “Quakers who for years had been quietly aiding blacks in purchasing their freedom.” Gary Nash claims that Harrison, who clearly supported compensated manumission and self-purchase, was a central figure in connecting the work of the PAS with the African American community. As the early work of the PAS became known to free blacks, they “came in a steady stream for help, especially to the shop of tailor Thomas Harrison on Third Street near Walnut.”

From the beginning of its organization then, the PAS and its members worked to secure the freedom of African Americans from a number of different positions, including through buying it, even as a last resort.

After the reformation of the PAS following the Revolutionary War, one of the most common and every day functions of the PAS was to record manumissions and indentures for African Americans in Philadelphia and the neighboring regions. This was to ensure the safety of free African Americans and to protect against the unlawful holding

of indentures that were already completed. Scattered among the manumission records in
the PAS papers, beginning in the late 18th century, are stories of self-purchase and the
purchase of family members facilitated by the PAS. Most of these records of
compensated manumission were already completed and function as an added security in a
new world in which the formerly enslaved left behind their past for the free state of
Pennsylvania, and their legal records in the courthouses of slavery’s cradle. Notable for
our purposes are the documents that include the names of PAS members as party to the
proceedings.

In these instances Thomas Shipley features prominently. In 1823 a Daniel
Erickson released to Shipley Jonathan Pease for $100 “paid in hand” and a note from
Pease payable in six months’ time. The next entry recorded reads “Know All Men by
these presents that I, Thomas Shipley, the purchaser of the said negro or mulatto man
emancipate [unreadable] hereby fully releasing him from all slavery, or servitude to me
and my heirs.” In 1825 Solomon Brown was “assigned” to Shipley for the “unexpired
time mentioned in his emancipation.” Once a Benjamin Cooper had repaid the amount
listed on the bill of sale, Shipley, in “consideration of his right to be free” and the
repayment, relinquished his right to Solomon and warned against anyone “molesting or
hindering him from enjoying all the rights of a free man.” As it turned out, Brown’s
owner had written his son giving permission to sell Brown, who he claimed ran away
from him in April 1823. The father tells the son that “if you can obtain such sum of
money or cash with balance well secured…as in your judgment will justify such sale,”
Brown was to be sold.28

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28 The Papers of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society (Philadelphia: The Society and Historical Society of
The PAS clearly negotiated both with slaveholders and with the African Americans who sought assistance, as witnessed by record notes on repayment. As shown in the case of Solomon Brown, there must surely have been lengthy negotiations back and forth between each set of parties. Although who brought the case to the PAS and who was originally made aware of the owner’s offer to sell Brown even if the result was the runaway’s final liberation, remains unknown, the PAS’s involvement seems crucial to the deal throughout. Whether Brown wished to finally obtain his legal freedom and stop living as a fugitive, or if the owner’s son contacted the abolitionists first, someone had to choose to get the PAS involved. Otherwise, perhaps Benjamin Cooper, who repaid the purchase price releasing Brown from Shipley, could have bought Brown outright from his former owner. The case of Jonathan Pease also shows that Shipley and the PAS also stood in as guarantors, backing the promise of future compensation. This crucial role surely would have helped to facilitate and finalize the purchase agreements in a world in which economic independence and legal recognition was difficult for many African Americans.

In another instance, an attempt was made to secure the freedom of the three children of Philadelphia resident Hannah Marvel. The estate executor of a deceased Delaware slaveholder agreed to sell the three children once $300 had been raised for the purchase price. He then sold two of Marvel’s children to his brother on the condition that they be released if paid for. The PAS sent one of their members to “receive and pay [the money] over and bring the children to their mother.” However, the new owner refused to release the two children despite having his “honor and humanity appealed to.” Only the
child who had not been sold was redeemed and returned to Marvel.\textsuperscript{29} Since the PAS member who set out to secure the deal was to receive the money and pay it out, it would seem that perhaps the money itself had been raised by Marvel and her community. If so, this would suggest that the PAS at times served only as a litigating, and white, representative for the black community.

Lastly, and notably recorded after 1850, was the case of Stephen Bennet who was arrested as a fugitive slave in the state. Bennet’s case was brought before Commissioner Edward Ingraham who was appointed solely to deal with cases surrounding the Fugitive Slave Law. The PAS wrote out a writ of habeas corpus and petitioned to remove the case from the U.S. Circuit Court to one under the command of a Judge Kane. The legal technique failed and Bennet was given up to the claimant. Bennet’s “friends” immediately raised the funds to purchase his freedom for $700, and Bennet was able to remain free, this time under legal terms. All of these cases typify the most vulnerable moments for African Americans who were, to use David G. Smith’s term, on the edge of freedom. They also show that PAS lawyers understood, at least on legal terms, the experience of those who came to them for help, and lent their expertise in crucial moments in which legal aid meant the difference between familial reunion and freedom, and perhaps permanent separation and enslavement. Despite their attempts to appeal to the law, the actions of the PAS and the black community surrounding Bennet and Marvel show that both recognized the importance of the law and the necessity of being flexible.\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Five Years’ Abstract of the Transactions of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage, and for Improving the Condition of the African Race} (Philadelphia: Merrihew & Thompson 1853), 6.

Like those cases recorded in the PAS papers, many of the stories of buying freedom from this early period come from the papers and publications of white abolitionists. From Lydia Maria Child’s *Isaac T. Hopper: A True Life* (1854), we can gain further insight into how African Americans in Philadelphia and beyond worked with their abolitionist allies to gain legal freedom. *A True Life* recalls numerous stories of African Americans who worked with Hopper and others from the PAS to find freedom. Some of the stories, and many similar ones recounted in Child’s book were told by Hopper himself in his “Tales of Oppression,” published in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* from 1840-1842. Child, who along with her husband, edited the *Standard*, had requested that Hopper publish his stories in the newspaper. Child published her “remodeled” version of Hopper’s tales two years after his death. Of the total eighty-six tales, including the “Tales of Oppression” and those that prefaced them, around 30 cases involved the buying of freedom in some fashion. There were 8 cases that involved women. Amounting to around 35% of Hopper’s stories, the number of cases involving compensated manumission reflects the calculations provided by the previously discussed *Statistical Inquiry* by the Society of Friends published in 1847.\(^3\)

What becomes clear from the numerous instances of compensated manumission recorded by Child and Hopper is that enslaved and free African Americans continually looked to men like Hopper, Harrison, and Shipley because of their legal, social, and political connections. For these reasons, the members of the PAS were known by both slaveholders and fugitives and both parties also looked to them for assistance. As is

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\(^3\) Daniel E. Meaders *Kidnappers in Philadelphia: Isaac Hopper’s Tales of Oppression, 1780-1843* (Cherry Hill, NJ: African Homestead Legacy Publishers, 2009) xiii-xiv. 3. Meaders also relates that the *Tales* have been verified through court records, PAS papers, and minutes of the Acting Committee, 6-7.
shown in the sometimes severe difficulties faced by those who wished to buy their freedom, the process of negotiation was often fraught with obstacles. What these abolitionists offered was an intricate knowledge of the law and the process of negotiating with their white slaveholding counterparts.

In the case of Mary Holliday, who had escaped from Maryland when she was 24 years old, Hopper looked to put as many legal obstructions as possible in the way of Holliday’s former owner, a Mrs. Sears, as she sought to reclaim her. Once Sears had refused the original offer from Holliday’s employers to buy her freedom, Hopper worked his standard magic on the legal proceedings, proving that “no man understood better than Friend Hopper how to multiply difficulties.” To ensure that the case would be tested in a higher court, rather than with the city’s mayor who was known to be unfriendly to African Americans and the abolitionist cause, Hopper served a writ of homine replegiando, the legal meaning of which he then had to explain to all those present.

Hopper kept the case pending in the state’s higher courts for several years. The tactic eventually worked, and Sears became “exceedingly weary of the law, the trouble and expense of which had far exceeded her expectations.”

Thus, Sears directed her lawyer to work out a compromise with Hopper, who offered to pay $250 for Holliday’s freedom if Sears would pay the legal costs. Holliday’s employer, Isaac W. Morris, paid Sears and Holliday received her final freedom. Holliday later paid back the cost of her freedom and some of the remaining trial expenses by day labor and collecting money from friends, paying Morris about $300 in small sums. Although Holliday’s emotional journey through the years her case lingered in court are

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not described by Child, we can only guess that they must have been terrifying. Yet, Holliday chose to remain in Philadelphia rather than moving farther out of the reach of Mrs. Sears and put her faith in the law and Hopper’s access to and knowledge of it.\(^{33}\)

In addition to stories of legal battles undertaken by Hopper like in the case of Mary Holliday, *A True Life* includes many instances in which fugitive African Americans purposefully made their value as slaves so insecure, through hiding, continued escape, outwitting slave catchers, and other methods, that they were finally able to buy their freedom and often at reduced prices. Sometimes, as in the case of Thomas Cooper in the early 1800s, freedom could be had for a “sum so small, that it was merely nominal.”\(^{34}\)

These tactics helped not only to make the value of human property insecure but also worked to control price during negotiations, showing that running away and purchase worked together in a number of complicated ways to the benefit of the formerly enslaved. In the tales told in *A True Life* of Hopper’s assistance to self-emancipated people we see just how self-purchase worked to complement and aid fugitive slaves in finding a true and lasting freedom, sometimes at bargained prices. They also highlight the success of African Americans and their communities in influencing the tactics of anti-slavery activists like Hopper.

The story of one man, who remains nameless in Child’s account and is unfortunately known only as “Colonel Ridgeley’s Slave,” makes clear how the tactics of fugitivity with the support of PAS men like Hopper worked to legally free self-emancipated individuals. The man, who had escaped from Virginia, had been in Philadelphia for several years, and had “never [been] quite free from anxiety” of being

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\(^{34}\) Child, *Isaac T. Hopper*, 80.
caught and brought back to slavery. When he had saved enough money he went to Hopper for help in “buying the free use of his own limbs.” The enslaved man’s master agreed to take $200 and made plans to take care of the business in Philadelphia.

Ridgeley, however, arrived before planned, searched out his slave, seized him, and went to Hopper to begin negotiations in a better position. Hopper again offered the man $200, which he refused claiming this man was his best servant and could be sold for $1000 in Virginia. Ridgeley now demanded $500.35

Unable to raise the ransom in time, Hopper arranged an alternative scheme, as the man claimed that he would “never go back into slavery.” When Hopper was to give the man over to his master, the man was to escape Hopper’s house by running through the parlor to the back yard. He was to climb an eight-foot-high wall, complete with spikes, with the assistance of a clothes horse that he was to kick down behind him. Once he got to the other side he was to follow meticulous directions through alleyways and streets to the house Hopper had arranged as his refuge.36

Once the man had successfully escaped, Hopper admitted to his enslaver that it was an “intentional trick” since he had not agreed to keep to the original deal. Hopper reveals that the slave was Ridgeley’s son, and claims that anyone who would “make traffic of his own flesh and blood, deserves to be tricked out of the chance to do it.” The man must have shared this intimate knowledge with Hopper while looking to him for help. Ridgeley is then unable to find his slave anywhere in the city and returns to Hopper, offering to sell the man’s freedom for the original $200. Hopper rejects the offer, whether

35 Child, Isaac T. Hopper, 179.
36 Child, Isaac T. Hopper, 180.
he did this with the permission of the enslaved or not is unknown. In fact, Child often leaves unclear the extent to which Hopper acted of his own accord in situations like this or to what extent he continued to closely consult with those he negotiated for. In addition to rejecting the offer, Hopper has Ridgeley taken up in a case against him for damages by the African Americans whose homes Ridgeley had searched while looking for the man. As Ridgeley was scheduled to appear in court to answer the charges, his lawyer advised him to agree to manumit the man for $150. After the sum was paid, Ridgeley agreed to pay $150 to have the charges against him dropped. Thus, after damages were repaid, and other expenditures taken out, “Colonel Ridgeley’s Slave” had won his final freedom for some $50 with the help of Hopper and Philadelphia’s black community.37

In this case we see that the techniques of fugitivity, here represented by yet another escape from the slaveholder’s grasp and choreographed by Hopper and his connections (most likely from the African American community, as evidenced by Ridgeley’s destruction of black property), put Ridgeley at a disadvantage in negotiations. In addition, Hopper used the legal case that African Americans had brought against Ridgeley for the destruction of their property to destroy the last connection Ridgeley had to property in the form of his escaped slave. That he could not find his slave and had charges brought against him for his actions during the search made him have to negotiate at a disadvantage, lowering the price that the man eventually paid to gain a legal manumission and hopefully to be free from anxiety over his freedom. This story also shows that not only did Hopper act on this man’s behalf but that it is likely that the case brought against Ridgeley was an attempt by the self-emancipated man’s community to

rally around him and support his efforts to be free, even if they had not been able to do so monetarily.

It was not just individual masters like Ridgeley who came after their human property in Philadelphia. Child claims that it was a “common thing for speculators in slaves to purchase runaways for much less than their original value, and take the risk of not being able to catch them.” In the “language of the trade, this was called buying them running.” What is clear from the stories in A True Life is that there was a clear geography to the buying and selling of those who ran. Slave traders who had bought the rights to runaways in the South made the journey to Philadelphia to search out their property and often their first stop was to call on men like Isaac Hopper to inquire after fugitives and offer to negotiate terms under which the enslaved could buy their freedom. In most of the incidents recorded by Child, these financial speculations in the market of absconded human flesh ended in the enslaved being able to purchase their freedom, once they were found in ‘free’ territory. These arrangements, clearly, were an easy way for slave traders to recoup their investment, an investment whose price had already been reduced via the actions of the self-emancipated, as they had a captive audience with whom to broker a settlement. Nonetheless, slave traders and speculators who bought men and women “running” came up against formidable negotiators in the likes of abolitionists and African Americans who had already self-emancipated themselves but who perhaps wished the further freedom of their manumission papers.38

Once such spectacular case from 1806 involved a runaway man named Ezekiel who had been bought by Daniel Godwin in Delaware. Godwin had “made a business of

38 Child, Isaac T. Hopper, 83.
buying slaves running.” After purchasing Ezekiel, Godwin went directly to Philadelphia to visit Isaac Hopper because if Hopper knew where the man was, he would be happy to allow him to “have his freedom secured on moderate terms.” While Godwin talked with Hopper a black man came into Hopper’s shop and asked Godwin if he recognized him and claimed to be Zeke’s brother. Godwin failed to recognize the man and inquired if he knew where Zeke could be found. The man responded that he did know where Zeke was but that he was “sorry you’ve bought Zeke. You’ll never make anything out of him.” The man went on that Zeke was a “bad speculation” as he had gotten into “bad company” and would never do Godwin “one cent’s worth of good.” Godwin asked if the man did not wish to buy his brother, offering to sell him low. The man, again claiming that Zeke was good for nothing, hesitated and then wondered if “perhaps he would behave better if he was free.” Remaining doubtful, the brother inquired, “if” he decided to buy Zeke’s freedom, what he could be bought for. When Godwin asks for $150, Zeke’s brother again starts up his assertions about his brother’s worth. Once the brother’s declarations made Godwin believe that his case was hopeless, he offered to sell Zeke for $60.39

The brother returned quickly with the sum and Hopper wrote out the deed of manumission. The man, asserting that Zeke’s new identity outside of slavery be recognized legally, requested that Hopper include the information that Zeke was now called Samuel Johnson. After making sure with Hopper that the business transaction was completed and that Zeke was a free man whom no one could take, the man made a bow and exclaimed to Godwin, “I am happy to see you, sir. I am Zeke!” Being outsmarted by his now former slave infuriated Godwin, who grabbed Zeke and threatened to abuse him.

Zeke, or Johnson as he now wished to be called, declared, “If you don’t let me go Mr. Godwin, I’ll knock you down. I’m a free citizen of these United States, and I won’t be insulted in this way by anybody.” With Hopper’s interjection, Godwin agreed to take the case before a local magistrate who declared the former master outwitted and that Johnson was a free man. After having his freedom declared in yet another legal venue, Johnson asked the judge to take out a warrant against Godwin who had committed “assault and battery on a free citizen.” Here, however, Hopper intervened and suggested that Johnson be satisfied with his successes and let Godwin go on his way. Thus, Johnson understood not only how to use the slave market’s social conventions of worth to his advantage, he also directly associated his only minutes old freedom with the protections and rights of citizenship.40

Johnson’s ingenuity, trickery, and performance of value, or devaluing, in order to lower the price of his freedom in the safe space provided by Hopper’s shop demonstrates that the self-emancipated and their PAS allies could, at times, successfully work their knowledge of the terrain of the marketplace toward their favor. Like Ridgeley’s enslaved man who, with Hopper’s help, mastered the underground geography of Philadelphia to gain some control over the price to be paid for his freedom by making himself unable to be found, Johnson’s mastery of the language of price, market, and demand allowed him to buy freedom at a sum that was already readily available to him. In both cases, a further, or second evasion, of the master’s right to property was made possible in conjunction with abolitionist planning or assistance. Although Child does not make clear what exactly may have transpired between Hopper and Johnson before Godwin found

40 Child, Isaac T. Hopper, 136-137.
himself in the abolitionist’s shop, in Hopper’s version of the story, he refers to Zeke as a “black man,” perhaps suggesting that he did not know who he was. However, at the very least, Hopper supported Johnson’s actions to gain his legal freedom through the deception of Godwin and the concealment of his identity in the moment of the ruse. This also calls for it to be noted that Johnson knew that his new master would be unable to recognize him in spite of the fact that he had already gained enough information about Godwin, perhaps from the past or from his surrounding community, to enable him to outwit him. Thus, although Godwin was knowable and therefore malleable, Zeke, self-emancipated as Johnson, was not.\footnote{Meaders, \textit{Kidnappers in Philadelphia}, 59. A further discussion of the importance these techniques and skills played in how self-purchase troubled the marketplace of slavery will follow in later chapters.}

Obviously, with the various threats and mishaps catalogued above, for a Philadelphia fugitive who had already taken their liberty, the constant risk of recapture was often too much to bear. We see this in the case of the free wife of the fugitive Ben Jackson, whose “health was greatly impaired by the fear and anxiety she had endured on his account.” Even after Hopper had helped in gaining Jackson’s manumission for $150 she continued to be “prey to melancholy, and never recovered her formal cheerfulness.” The negotiations of men like Hopper and Shipley towards supporting compensated manumission and self-purchase gave the formerly enslaved and their loved ones the opportunity to be more secure in their freedom.\footnote{Meaders, \textit{Kidnappers in Philadelphia}, 55.}

For all their desire to be free, without a legal manumission many continued to live in a state of liminal freedom, one that was constantly at risk as they strove to build new lives for themselves. Compensated manumission allowed families to remain intact and
worked not only toward the general principle of liberty but also towards a more secure individual freedom. What the African Americans who ran away and started lives in Philadelphia began outside of the law, their abolitionist allies worked to give legal sanction. It is in these ways, that were extremely meaningful to black life in the antebellum era, that African American desires and PAS action coalesced. It is also why, although some may wish to view their concern for the law as conservative, African Americans continued to call on the imaginative legal action of the PAS to support, and so often ensure, their original will to be free. William Still declared of Hopper that “no man at that day, not even eminent judges and advocates, was better acquainted with the intricacies of law questions connected with slavery…his accurate legal knowledge, his natural acuteness, his ready tact in avoiding dangerous corners and slipping through unseen loop-holes, often gave him the victory in cases that seemed hopeless to other minds.”

In addition to working to protect the lives that African Americans had already worked to create in freedom, that Hopper pushed the law to work even for those who were indeed fugitives and had little claim on it, shows that he and others who did similar work had an expansive idea of what the law could do and who could lay claim to it. In this way, their legal action mirrored the beliefs of African Americans as they attempted to use the law to their advantage. Most often they chose to place themselves on the “side of freedom” even if that meant that at times the connection between the “legal work of the PAS and the illegal work…of assisting fugitives” was not completely clear. What also

44 Christopher Densmore. “Seeking Freedom in the Courts: The Work of the Pennsylvania Society for promoting the Abolition of Slavery, and for the Relief of Free Negroes unlawfully held in Bondage, and for
becomes obvious through these stories is that through their legal maneuverings, in combination with the actions of African Americans, Hopper and his colleagues helped to make slave property less secure. They used the law to push towards freedom, even if the original claim might have been suspect, by wearing down both state officials charged with the duties of fugitive slave laws and enslavers who were reluctant to allow their enslaved to purchase freedom. By attempting to make Southern slaveholders realize that it was best to cut their losses and sell their property into freedom, the PAS worked to expand the boundaries of the law and freedom even in the face of federal acts that supported slaveholders’ claims to fugitives.

   It should also be noted that following in the style of early and revolutionary minded manumissions in which owners declared their humanitarian feelings in legal documents, Shipley’s records state that he does not believe in slavery, despite his participation in the buying of human beings. The language of Shipley’s manumissions maintain his incapacity for holding another human being in bondage and states outright that his purpose in buying is solely to set free. This method is most clearly seen from the record of the purchase and manumission of George Davis in 1824 in which he states that, “In consideration of the iniquity of holding people in slavery [I] have purchased the within named slave for the purpose of setting him at liberty and releasing him from slavery do hereby fully emancipate and set free the within named George Davis from any service.”45 The emancipatory and abolitionist rhetoric of Shipley as purchaser of slaves is

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not to be mistaken and sets these PAS manumissions apart from the everyday market and trade in human flesh which the organization set out to abolish.

David G. Smith’s book on the fugitive slave issue in Pennsylvania, reminds us that for many of the PAS’s most active years the “region was part of a vital borderland where pre-war conflicts over issues such as slavery and fugitive slaves were contested in the legislatures, in the courts, town hall meetings, and in the backwoods, back roads, and back rooms.” Importantly, Smith also recognizes the political intent of the many petitions PAS lawyers crafted to send to their state and federal government. It was the combination of these techniques that the PAS specialized in that led to the protection, although not always successful, of African Americans in Pennsylvania. The work they did to protect individual freedom through manumission cases, to protect the rights of free black Pennsylvanians, and to cordon off the growth of American slavery was visionary. These activities also mattered practically to the lives of African Americans. The PAS’s “success and experience in the courtroom made an appeal to the law an effective tactic for friends of the fugitive and abolitionists throughout the antebellum period.” Thus, the individualized legal activities of the PAS discussed above offered important practical assistance to those African Americans at the crossroads of enslavement and freedom at the same time their lobbying and petitioning worked to draw the borders of slavery more clearly.

Like Philadelphia, New York had both an active manumission society and black community. The New-York Society for Promoting the Manumission of Slaves, and

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*Smith, On the Edge of Freedom, 89, 1, 73.*
Protecting Such of Them as Have Been, or May be Liberated, or the New York Manumission Society (NYMS), was founded in 1785 to “further the humane intentions of the legislature, by aiding the operations of the just and salutary laws passed for the gradual abolition of slavery in this state.” The group included some of nation’s most famous men, including John Jay and Alexander Hamilton, and many of the city’s most important members of the professional class. These men believed that it was their “duty as both free citizens and Christians” to work to “endeavour by lawful ways and means to enable [the enslaved] to share, equally with us, in that civil and religious Liberty…to which these, our Brethren are by nature, as much entitled as ourselves.”

The work of the NYMS followed a similar logic to that of the PAS. They petitioned legislatures in support of the passage of gradual emancipation laws and against the slave trade. In 1785 they had “drawn up a petition to the legislature of the state praying an act for the gradual abolition of slavery in the state” and “procured a great number of respectable persons” to sign on. They also tried to strengthen laws to protect free African Americans from kidnapping. In fact, a number of “violent attempts lately made to seize and export for sale, several free negroes who were peaceably following their respective occupations in this city” who pushed them to form the society. The group hoped to work to protect the freedom of the city’s free African Americans by making kidnapping a crime in which the “hope of impunity” would no longer be an “invincible temptation to transgression.”


The New York legislature approved a gradual emancipation plan in 1799. For many in the state it “did not end slavery, but rather initiated a new struggle for freedom.” Although their legal work was often slow, early abolitionists worked with African American communities to try to expand the rights of those who would be free and limit the power of masters. In 1817, at the urging of abolitionists and under the leadership of the Governor, himself a member of the NYMS, the state promised freedom to all those who were entitled to liberty under the original 1799 law but had not yet been manumitted. Even still, that step left many African Americans in bondage. All gradual emancipation legislation marked a type of compensated manumission as additional years of service helped to offset the supposed costs of emancipation for enslavers.

Thus, it was often a compromise between the right of the enslaved to freedom and the property rights of owners. The enslaved paid for this compromise with years of their lives. However, gradual abolition laws also left room for negotiation by making slavery uncertain and its future gains precarious. As in other places, while gradual emancipation measures were limited, New York’s abolition legislation “signaled an eventual end to slavery” that allowed many African Americans to better control negotiations over their freedom. In New York “masters and slaves negotiated nearly every facet of bondage and freedom.” Between 1783-1801 the Office of the Register in New York recorded 300 manumissions in the city. In this liminal space, African Americans set out to buy freedom for themselves and loved ones.49

In 1785, the NYMS recommended that all members and persons who wanted to manumit the enslaved have their names and ages registered by the society so that they would be able to recognize attempts to “deprive such manumitted persons of their Liberty.” Thus, like the PAS, the NYMS recorded manumissions in order to protect the freedom of black New Yorkers. The manumission records of the NYMS generally lack the detail of those for the PAS. This is partly because many of the record pages are printed with a standard manumission statement in which only the details of the case are filled in by hand. In these forms there is not a blank space for details about exchange so surely some information about self-purchase has been lost to history because of the use of this standardized form. The use of the form, probably meant to ease the process of manumissions, ironically has left historians with less information about what was likely one of the most important moments in any enslaved person’s life.  

Like many other abolition groups, the society appears to have not to have generally, nor broadly, supported black efforts at compensated manumission, at least as an official tactic. One historian claimed that the “society’s financial resources were used to levy war on slavery as an institution” but not to “purchase directly the freedom of individual blacks.” He goes on to say that “their judgement was sound, for vast sums could have been spent in that manner without making much of an impression on the whole system of slavery.” Like many abolitionists of the time, and later historians, this judgement on the actions of the NYMS does little to take into account what individual freedom could mean to African Americans and their families, and also how important

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those who bought their freedom could be in their communities and in fighting slavery on the national stage as a “whole system.”\textsuperscript{51}

However, while we cannot follow the connections between the NYMS and African Americans in New York who set out to buy their freedom in as rich detail as in Pennsylvania, the records make clear that black New Yorkers did buy their freedom. Even under Dutch rule in the 17th century New Yorkers, or rather New Amsterdamer, looked to compensated manumission as an option to reunite families in full freedom. In 1643, William Keift, the director of the Dutch company running New Amsterdam, decided to grant land to black soldiers to create a buffer zone to protect the settlement from Native Americans. In return for annual payments the soldiers would be free. Women and children were not free outright. The families petitioned with the company to win full freedom for all members of their families, even offering to buy their children’s freedom.\textsuperscript{52}

The manumission books of the NYMS also record a number of instances of self-purchase and compensated manumission. What is also common in the manumission records of both the NYMS and the County Registrar is freedom being exchanged for a further number of years of service. These are cases where, in lieu of cash, the enslaved bargained for their freedom through what they could offer- their future service. From these entries it is clear that the gradual emancipation law was working to help end permanent enslavement for many New Yorkers. The slow but legally certain demise of slavery allowed some enslaved people to better negotiate the end of their servitude.


One interesting case involves three men listed as members of the NYMS. Harry was purchased by John Franklin in 1810 “for the purpose of effecting his manumission after a short period of service.” At some point Harry was given to Thomas Walden for an “indefinite term.” Walden went on to settle accounts with John and Abraham Franklin by paying their estate $50. In August 1815 all parties agreed to no longer lay claim to the services of Harry. Also worth noting here is that John Jay, the society’s early president and one of the nation’s founding fathers, apparently purchased slaves in order to, as he claimed, “manumit them when their faithful services shall have afforded a reasonable retribution.” Jay calculated that a man named Benoit would have repaid him a “sufficient” sum after eight years of service. Of course, the information we have about Jay’s activities come from his records. We do not know what negotiations Benoit might have gone through to get Jay to purchase him from his former master to be guaranteed freedom, or a shorter term of service. It is also possible that Jay forced this compensation on those he bought to manumit.53

The 1793 case of Het acts as an example of a sort of hybrid between delayed compensated manumission through service expectations and the possibility of buying freedom. A John McKnight, listed as a member of the NYMS in 1798, paid Jeremiah Clark 45£ for twenty-six further years of Het’s service. In 1806 McKnight claimed that if Het would serve two more years she would be free. He also wrote into the manumission instrument that if Het’s husband should want to purchase the rest of her term that it would

be “granted for a reasonable sum.” In another case, a man named Joseph Everitt paid £50 for his liberty in 1810. The money was advanced by a man named Hendricks who Everitt was to pay back through his labor. Neither of these men seem to appear in NYMS membership lists. These cases exemplify the mix of techniques and circumstances that New York’s system of gradual emancipation and its economy of slavery worked to create.54

Many African Americans also bought their freedom outright. In 1800 John Merritt agreed to free Mary after the payment of 40£. A John Merritt is listed as a member of the NYMS beginning in 1801. At least one, and probably more, of New York’s leading free African Americans bought their freedom and that of their families and went on to use that freedom to build and support the black community of the city. The New York County Office of the Registrar records the path of the Moranda family took to find freedom through purchase. John Moranda bought his freedom in October 1795 for $200 which was paid by Samuel Jones, Jr. an attorney who went on to become an important force in the American judiciary. Just a few months later he bought his 4-year-old daughter for $50. In 1798 he succeeded in purchasing his wife and son for $160. Except for his wife and son, the Moranda family all had different owners as was typical of New York City enslavement. Moranda went on to become one of the founding members of the New York African Society for Mutual Relief, formed in 1808. There is no mention in the records of Moranda receiving any assistance in gaining the rest of his family’s freedom.55

From these examples it is clear that, as many were slaveholders and ex-slaveholders themselves, the relationship between NYMS members and the enslaved was more complex than in Pennsylvania. Unlike the PAS, NYMS members actually owned some of the enslaved whom they allowed to buy their freedom and those for whom they negotiated delayed emancipation terms. As the work of the PAS and their records make certain, there was often direct assistance given to support African American efforts at compensated manumission and self-purchase. From the conditions of slavery in New York, the fact of slaveholding members, and the lack of any clear record, this does not seem to have been the case for the NYMS to the same degree. Nor is it clear from any of the records involving NYMS members what role the enslaved had in negotiating the terms of the manumission. It is probable that the enslaved played a key role in the transfer of their services to another master who was more willing to manumit them after they had served their term or after the required sum had been paid. Still, the direct buying of enslaved people to clearly manumit them or the advancing of funds, work that Thomas Shipley and others did in Philadelphia, does not seem to have happened with the NYMS.

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As the slaveholding roots of some of some members of the NYMS makes clear, there were certainly limits to early Republican abolition. While this chapter does intend to argue against a strict dichotomy between early and later American abolition, it does not intend to overstate the case for the radicalism of early abolition groups. The socially moderate nature of the PAS and NYMS, which made their work so dependent on the law, also shaped the broader character of the organizations and the work of abolitionist lawyers. Despite the fact that their work did in some ways intersect with the desires of
African Americans, these groups were indeed more conservative than those who would take over the abolition movement. While they worked with African Americans, and towards many of the same ends, the official membership of the PAS was solely made up of white men. Even if there was no official exclusion of African Americans from the membership, and the work of the PAS still managed to be vital to black freedom, its lack of interracial membership and leadership was a serious flaw compared to the make up and community of second wave abolitionists. In fact, Purvis was the only black member in the group’s history. And, as mentioned before, as many as one fifth of the NYMS’s members held and even bought slaves in the 1790s.56

The conservative qualities of the early movement also show in the minutes of their yearly national conventions. The 1797 convention includes an address to the “Free Africans and other free People of color in the United States.” This was a yearly event as 1797’s address only added a request to stay away from the “most pernicious evil” of gaming to the previous year’s address. Delegates urged African Americans to the “strict and faithful observation” of the “paths of virtue.” In case they did not already know, the address informed African Americans that schools and churches had been established for them in various states. The convention applauded black communities for the “prudent and moral conduct” that helped to prove African Americans were “not unworthy of the freedom [they] enjoy.” Also, the address reminded African Americans that their perseverance in the “paths of virtue” “would justify the solicitude and labors of your

friends in your behalf, and furnish an additional argument for the emancipation of such of your brethren as are yet in bondage in the United States and in other parts of the world."57

To ensure the morals of free African Americans, the PAS’s activities included committees of Inspection, Guardians, Education, and Employment. The NYMS for its part, spent much of its time and resources running the New York African Free School. Inspecting the morals and conduct of African Americans, assuming they needed assistance and instruction in making their own moral decisions, and placing out children to learn trades speak to the conservative features of the early abolitionist movement, even if they had the best of intentions. And, of course, assistance in finding employment and furthering education did work to support the aspirations of many in African American communities. Activities of the NYMS also looked to keeping the free black population of the city under a “watchful eye” to keep them from “running into practices of immorality or sinking into habits of idleness.” Some of this work may be seen as more complex if one takes into account contemporary ideas about environmentalism and virtuous citizenry.

Despite the fact that the PAS and NYMS “took the societal orthodoxy of post-Revolutionary American citizenship as their guidepost,” through these more paternal avenues they created a movement in which abolition and “the cultivation of African American citizenship were inextricably interwoven.” Through their moral policing and work in education they hoped to create moral citizens who could actively participate in

American society and prove that African Americans were fully capable of being virtuous citizens.\textsuperscript{58}

There were also sometimes disturbing limits to the kind of cases that some early abolitionists who wished to work within the bounds of the law would take up. Elisha Tyson, a Maryland Quaker who was a founding member of the Maryland Abolition Society, recalled a man who once came to him for assistance. Tyson also had connections with Hopper and his “character for benevolence was well-known in Baltimore.” The man Tyson described had entered an agreement with his master that if he paid $500 within six years that he would be free. He had already paid half of the amount owed but was to be sold to Georgia, well before the six-year term had expired. The man had come to Tyson to ask what help Tyson could give him to force his master to recognize the verbal agreement that they had made for the terms of self-purchase.\textsuperscript{59}

Clearly then, the lines of communication between white abolitionists and African American communities were open in the early period even in the slave states. This man had found some way to the door of Tyson anticipating that he could be of assistance. The fact that Tyson had gained a reputation that would lead this man to his door tells us that, in all likelihood, he had been able to help others from within this enslaved man’s network. If he was known to enslaved African Americans, or perhaps this man had friends and family who were already free, Tyson must have been known as an ally who had been able to assist the enslaved in prior cases in which a negotiation over freedom had gone awry.


\textsuperscript{59} Meaders, Kidnappers in Philadelphia, 73.
Yet, when Tyson found that the man had no receipt for the money he had already paid his master and that no one had witnessed the payment except the master’s wife, Tyson told the man that “the law was against thee and thou must submit.” Tyson believed that there was nothing he could do for the man who had already bought half of himself. Similar to the reasoning of Tyson, the PAS also advised their members to concentrate on cases that could be won. Tyson claimed that he would never forget the “desperate resolution” of the man when he claimed with “clenched fist, his eyes raised to heaven, his whole frame bursting with the purpose of his soul” that he would “die before the Georgia man shall have me.” Resigning himself to tears, the man cried that he could not live away from his wife and children.60

Not long afterwards a man’s body was found drowned in the basin near Baltimore. Tyson, hearing of the drowning, identified the remains as those of the man who had come to him for help. Despite the man’s pleas and the verbal contract made, Tyson clearly thought that because the man had a questionable right to protest his owner’s breach of contract there was nothing he could do to assist the man in obtaining his right to remain in Maryland to continue to pay off his freedom. While Tyson was not a member of the PAS or NYMS, he was active in Maryland’s abolition community and its short-lived society. His actions in this case clearly reflect the very real limits of a conservative belief in the law as it related to emancipation, manumission, and the rights of property and contract.

One can only speculate, however, as to what other actions may have been possible for Tyson to undertake in the life and death situation that this man had faced. Was it

possible that neither Tyson, nor the man himself, had known any links to the underground? Did he go to Tyson because he was looking solely for legal aid and did not wish to escape slavery and leave his home and loved ones? Did the man wish to discharge his contract dutifully with a fair master to remain with his family, choosing to face death over an impossible and lonely fugitivity? Unfortunately, we are only left with Tyson’s memory of the predicament of this man, so we cannot be informed of all there is to know of the story. But, for each side, there were dangers to allowing the law to dictate the extent to which one would go to fight slavery.

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While there were, no doubt, very real hazards in a conservative reading of the law and in deciding who was deemed worthy of assistance, including death and enslavement, early abolitionists worked to change the society in which they lived. They worked to free enslaved African Americans and to protect the rights of those who were already free. In many cases, their actions aligned with those of African Americans who were also working diligently to become free. Often these actions overlapped through concern with the law and legal freedom. Looking at early abolitionists’ connections to compensated manumission and self-purchase, how they interacted with and responded to the desires and demands of African American communities, how they used the law, and their practical actions, one must question the stark divide created in the historiography between what has traditionally been seen as the conservative first wave of abolition and the more radical second wave of the Garrisonians. The demand placed on the abolition movement by African Americans to support attempts at self-purchase and compensated
manumission, whether premeditated or in emergency situations, was a constant in the movement.

Supporting compensated manumission in cases that were cautiously planned and in those in which emergencies arose, brought the white abolitionists of the PAS closer to their African American counterparts. It is not merely coincidence that men like Thomas Harrison, Hopper, and Shipley were trusted allies of the black community. In cases of compensated manumission necessity and political action met to the benefit of both parties. African Americans continued to come to PAS members for support because, if not in every case, in many, it worked to their benefit. African Americans connected with the PAS because there were material benefits to doing so. In this way African Americans brought their demands and ideas to a growing movement which on the surface seemed rather too exclusionary. The law, and how to work through it or circumvent it, brought two different societies together. Both early abolition groups and African Americans sought to utilize the law to favor their ends and through their legal battles, whether to obtain freedom or change the laws themselves. Through these struggles, very real connections were formed as is attested to by Purvis’s tribute to Shipley with which we began.

These connections would undoubtedly expand with the growth of abolition and the new sentiments of a later generation, who as John Stauffer claims, “offered an alternative to an American dream that privileged white men over almost everyone else.” Of course, this radical transformation of race was a pivotal shift in the history of the United States. Yet, if in different form, these connections began in the early republic under the charge of the PAS and Pennsylvania’s African American communities. If the
members of the PAS were not full blood revolutionaries, they were diligent. If they did not challenge slavery with violence, they did so in courts of law and in the halls of government, much more than can be said for most non-slaveholding white Americans. If the laws that buttressed slavery’s power in the United States were one of the chief threats to black liberty, then working to change them was no small endeavor.61

Both black and white Americans looked to broad changes in the law and the possibility of winning single cases to accomplish their abolitionist goals, both collectively and individually. The ears of white abolitionists did not suddenly perk up to the needs of African Americans with the entry of William Lloyd Garrison into a black church. Black voices had always been central to abolition. When one takes the long view of African American connections to the abolition movement, a perspective provided by the study of compensated manumission, it becomes clear that African Americans were effective in communicating their needs throughout the movement’s history. It also places African Americans back into the center of the struggle against their own enslavement and shows that they were politically and socially adept at negotiating to meet their ends.62

A memoir of Thomas Shipley published in 1838 recalled that African Americans “constantly solicited his advice on questions touching their happiness” and that the “knowledge he thus acquired, together with his practical acquaintance with the business and decisions of our courts” led him to be one of their staunchest protectors. But, as the memoir makes clear, it was the combination of black action, in advising men like Shipley and Hopper on their most pressing concerns, and their legal capabilities which led to

62 Sinha, The Slave’s Cause, 1.
successful action. Thus, the ability of at least some early abolitionists to hear and incorporate black demands into their society’s actions is clear. It was enough for Robert Purvis to call out for his people to “Mourn ye who can, for in the death of Thomas Shipley, the great sentinel upon the bulwark which the laws of our state have formed, and who has so long protected us by his unceasing watchfulness from the man-destroyer, has fallen.”

Purvis and the others who had gathered together after Shipley’s funeral were leaders of the black community in their own right. Yet they chose to remember Shipley, one of the most radical and active members in the legal concerns of the PAS, as a great protector of their people. Shipley’s legal actions in support of Philadelphia’s black community called for this great honor. The final metaphor, then, of Thomas Shipley, someone who assisted black Philadelphians in buying their freedom, standing as a lookout for African Americans on a fortification built of the laws of Pennsylvania is especially apt.

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CHAPTER 2

“TO LAY UP MONEY ENOUGH:” PURCHASING LIBERTY IN AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITIES

Throughout the nineteenth century, until the Civil War ended slavery in the United States, the domestic slave trade forced approximately one million enslaved African Americans into the deep South. This movement traced slavery’s vast territorial expansion and economic opportunities created at the expense of the lands and lives of the region’s indigenous peoples and African Americans. The domestic slave trade was rooted in the commodification of enslaved people and the economic interests of those who owned them. To counter this violent forced migration, which separated them from families, friends, and places they knew, African Americans used wide-ranging techniques to escape the trade’s grasp. Many chose to emancipate themselves from the slave system altogether by escaping and creating new lives in southern cities, within maroon communities in the South, and also in the North. Others attempted to use the same networks of exchange that facilitated their sales in the name of freedom and kinship in order to buy themselves and loved ones out of slavery altogether.64 This chapter concentrates on how African Americans gained access to the funds needed for compensated manumission and how they built and utilized social, economic, and political networks to support their efforts to become free through purchase.

Calvin Schermerhorn, looking at the networks made by African Americans in the upper South in order to protect their family units against the threat of the domestic slave

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64 Sinha, The Slave’s Cause, 92-93. Throughout this dissertation the terms family and loved ones are meant to encompass a wide variety of familial relationships, including “persons related by conjugal, consanguine, fictive, abroad (off plantation), extended, or polygamous connections.” Daina Ramey Berry, “‘We’m Fus’ Rate Bargain,’” in The Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Trades in the Americas, Walter Johnson, ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 64.
trade, claims that people were “prime commodities” in the antebellum upper south and that the “primary endeavor was to construct networks to protect families in the middle of one of the most destructive and sustained devaluations of kin and affinal bonds in the history of the modern world.” Most interesting for our purposes are Schermerhorn’s concern with networking and how African Americans used the changing economy to resist their sale by buying each other and attempting to maintain the family ties that were ever more threatened by the expansion of slavery. While the conditions of slavery differed throughout the South, African Americans attempting to engage in self-purchase throughout the region looked to make connections that would help them secure freedom and protect their families.  

Scholars have argued that the expansion of credit and finance capital in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was in part due to the exchange of enslaved people across continents and states. The domestic slave trade certainly helped shape the economy of the United States. In his later work on the slave trade and its influence on American economic development, Schermerhorn claims that, “American capitalism hinged on an economy of knowledge.” To be a successful “interstate slave trader meant leveraging knowledge of local and distant markets and mastering the complexities of negotiating prices of human beings with other human beings.” American trade, not only in enslaved people, but across sectors, increasingly depended on credit. Credit, in turn, depended on trust and ways of knowing both the quality of the product, but also the reliability of fellow traders, a process which Schermerhorn describes as an “economy of

65 Schermerhorn, Money Over Mastery, 4. Eva Sheppard Wolf’s Almost Free does an excellent job at following the networks and maneuverings of Samuel Johnson in Virginia as he attempted to gain the freedom of his family and provide for their success in freedom. Eva Sheppard Wolf, Almost Free: A Story about Family and Race in Antebellum Virginia (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2012).
knowledge.” Slavery’s economy depended on social capital and networks, but it was not only white slaveholders and traders who could traffic in them. Through their investments in social capital, African Americans entered into networks of knowing, trust, debt, credit, and exchange in order to secure their freedom that would have been familiar to any business person of the period.66

The same credit and economic systems that allowed the enslaved access to money and trade were at the root of the threat to their families, and the enslaved family broadly speaking. Despite arguments made by contemporaries, as well as some historians, that compensated manumission helped shore up the institution of slavery, the capacity to buy freedom was not solely a matter of padding the pockets of slaveholders and ensuring the continuation of the slave system.67 If imperfect, freedom mattered, and so did family. African Americans who paid for freedom did not just pay into the slave system for their liberty, but through their accumulation of these different types of capital crucial to the American economy, also worked to reject the very economic and social thought that worked so hard to keep them enslaved.


67 Schermerhorn, *Money Over Mastery, 66, 79*. Speaking of Maryland, Whitman claims that “manumission had an ambiguous role in preserving, modifying, and destabilizing both the relations of masters and slaves and slavery itself.” While self-purchase may not have marked an end to slaveholding, and may have marked a shifting strategy, it still resulted in actual freedom for the enslaved, who could then secure family members, or live as an example of freedom, these things mattered. Whitman, *The Price of Freedom, 5, 161.*
In *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market*, Walter Johnson argues that studying this market offers a critical view into the world of American slavery. Johnson discusses not only how the slave market functioned in the lives of the enslaved, but also how it worked to create, and continuously reproduce, a slaveholding society on a fairly stable set of imperatives. Johnson describes the negotiations which took place as the enslaved worked to influence both their current and potential masters. While this process undoubtedly took place, with the enslaved being able to read their slaveholders and use this knowledge to try to secure what they saw as the best position according to their needs, my understanding of the process of self-purchase gives Johnson’s ideas broader application. The moment of sale in cases of self-purchase were often the culmination of years of negotiation between the enslaved and those who were deemed their owners. Similarly to the slave auctions described by Johnson, the capabilities of the enslaved to know their enslavers were of the utmost importance. Bond people had “a keen understanding of their value,” and “went to great lengths to negotiate their sale in such a way as to maintain family ties.” They also used this understanding to buy freedom. When an African American purchased freedom there was more at stake than any average slave sale. The deal ended not between two slaveholders who traded in people but with an enslaved man or woman becoming free through their own dealing.68

If, as Johnson argues, the “slave trade also played a crucial role in the reproduction of the slaveholding regime over time” and helped to reproduce the “southern social order” of slaveholding, then to buy oneself out of slavery disrupted the social order that Johnson sees being reinforced and constantly born in every slave sale.

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68 Daina Ramey Berry, “‘We’m Fus’ Rate Bargain,’” 55.
Like Johnson’s market slaves, those who bought their freedom “performed their commodification” and “shaped their own sales,” yet in the end gained their freedom and became their own masters. The mastery of freedom was of course the ultimate threat to the world of whites who traded in humans and sought to establish an order, as Johnson describes, in which they could know each other as men and their enslaved as property. Thus, the ideas laid out by Johnson reinforce the importance of self-purchase as a threat to the social and ideological foundations of slavery, which in turn formed the foundation of southern society.69

Self-purchase worked to repudiate the market of slavery as the enslaved were able not only to participate in the market of their own propertied flesh but could also buy themselves into personhood, if not full citizenship. They did this in the same market in which their enslavers worked to make human beings into slaves. While manumission itself may not have ultimately destroyed American slavery, it left menacing loopholes that were used by African Americans as escape routes. As Juliet Walker has argued, African American commerce posed a constant threat to slavery. As the enslaved entered into the cash economies that were deemed the realm of whites, they stood to “improve their material life, but also to further their hope of purchasing their freedom.” Walker argues that “southern whites felt threatened by slaves as independent economic participants as much as they feared the threat of slave resistance.” Of course these two dangers were inextricably linked through self-purchase. In addition, the manumitted

69 Johnson, Soul by Soul, 216, 17.
themselves were also used as examples of a life of freedom to be attained by those who were still enslaved.\textsuperscript{70}

Highlighting these interventions, this chapter looks at how self-purchase functioned in the everyday lives of African Americans and their communities. It will be the particular concern of this chapter to discuss the practical issues raised in the buying of freedom. Who was more likely to enter into negotiations for purchase? What were the conditions of place and how did regional differences enter into the equation? How did the laws of manumission and slavery work to define the terms of buying freedom? What did the legal freedom provided by self-purchase offer to African Americans who may have otherwise looked to running away to escape slavery? The physical conditions of slavery and the ways in which they differed according to region, gender, and time’s effect on prices and access to legal manumission are crucial to understanding buying freedom. One critical aspect to cases of self-purchase and compensated manumission, besides access to cash, was the ability to create a network of support. Understanding how African Americans formed these networks and amassed social capital will be central to this chapter. It will also consider the importance of kinship and how families worked together to become free and ensure that investing in freedom provided generational rewards.

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Enslaved people in the antebellum United States did not only provide the labor needed for the economic system of slavery to thrive. They also labored for, and within, their own markets which provided them with things that their unfree and unrequited daily labor did not furnish. Some labored in order to provide subsistence for their families, who, under the watch of slaveholders, were not given enough food and clothing to survive. Enslaved people and slaveholders battled over access to time and markets. What was deemed privilege and what was considered right continuously shifted over time and place.\(^1\) Through these hard won opportunities, enslaved people accumulated a variety of property including personal goods, livestock, and cash. Still others labored to participate in the ultimate market of slavery, the trade in human beings, in order to become free. While some labored to wrest smaller freedoms from a world that strove to dehumanize them, others labored to buy themselves out of that system altogether.

In *The Slave’s Economy*, Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan remind us that slavery, was, “first and foremost an institution of coerced labor.” Slaveholders undoubtedly made sure that “work necessarily engaged most slaves, most of the time.” But, to understand the full labor of the enslaved one must also understand the work they did for themselves. The “slave’s economy” was an “exemplar of the continuing struggle between master and slave and a portion of the terrain on which that struggle was fought.” The enslaved economy had “far-reaching consequences” for “when, where, and especially how they worked determined, in large measure, the course of their lives.” This was obviously the

case for those who looked for opportunities to buy their own freedom and that of loved ones.\textsuperscript{72}

African American communities living throughout the slave south worked in many different ways to finance compensated manumission and self-purchase. The Slave’s Economy, which looks at how the enslaved in various regions of the United States functioned as participants in multiple markets, is important for its emphasis on the real physical work that the enslaved did, both for their masters and for themselves. The level of skill and sheer labor it took to enact self-purchase can only be understood from a similar focus on the daily labor of the enslaved. Many African Americans who bought their freedom raised money through business ventures and work outside of laboring for their slaveholders. How ideas of black economies emerged and functioned in slave societies and how business related to freedom is crucial for understanding the experiences of African Americans in the antebellum South.

In much of the upper south throughout most of the nineteenth century, enslaved people took advantage of changing economic conditions to finance compensated manumission. The conditions of slavery in the upper south created a special set of circumstances for the enslaved. As the economy shifted slaveholders adapted by finding new strategies to make slavery work. Similarly, the enslaved looked to find new opportunities to participate in the economy and seek out liberation. Hiring out, access to urban work and living, and relationships with free African Americans allowed enslaved

\textsuperscript{72} Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan, eds. The Slave’s Economy: Independent Production by Slaves in the Americas. (Portland, OR: Frank Cass and Company, 1991), 1. Penningroth is also careful to caution against understanding the enslaved’s economy solely through the lens of the master-slave relationship, and warns that this understanding “shifts attention away from viewing black people’s lives on their own terms.” Penningroth, Claims of Kinfolk, 7.
people to amass cash and property. Urban living also influenced trends in self-purchase and compensated manumission as many urban enslaved workers did not live with family members.73

The shifting economy in the upper south, along with the expansion of slavery and the domestic slave trade, made enslaved people in old south states like Maryland and Virginia extremely vulnerable to sale. The slave trade that wreaked havoc on black families also opened opportunities for the enslaved to use the same market that threatened them to become free. T. Stephan Whitman claims that for enslaved people in places like Baltimore, “hard labor and its earnings became tools with which to carve out autonomy within slavery and, ultimately, to propel themselves out of [it].” According to Schermerhorn, through their efforts to save their kinship bonds through purchase the “same [enslaved] families making possible the “capitalist revolutions in that environment of commercial intensification” worked to buy into an “asset and legacy-based interest in the people to which they were related, engaging in a practice that formerly only the wealthy had.”74

As slavery expanded throughout the century so too did the types of labor performed by enslaved people. In the low country and deep South enslaved people living on large plantations growing cash crops like rice worked in a task system which allowed them time for their own labor whenever they finished their daily tasks. Enslaved people

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were thus able to use their free time to raise their own crops and do other work that they could possibly be paid for. The “practice of organizing labor by task rather than by time was the taproot of property ownership by Low Country slaves.” Even those enslaved in areas where gang labor prevailed were able to carve out their own time to labor, or get paid for overwork, by taking advantage of hard-won privileges like having Sunday and perhaps Saturday afternoons off. And, enslaved people in most places were sometimes able to finance compensated manumission by using their special skills to fulfill the needs of their community.\textsuperscript{75}

There were a number of ways enslaved people were able to access the time needed to labor independently and gain access to the money needed to escape enslavement through compensated manumission. Just how common economic activity was for enslaved people is recorded in the laws that attempted to control their access to markets throughout the slave south. In 1818 Mississippi regulated the right of slaves to raise cotton for their own gain. From 1787-1846 nine southern states prohibited self-hire for enslaved people. And still others, like Virginia in 1792 and South Carolina in 1834, restricted trading with enslaved people.\textsuperscript{76}

As mentioned, one of the most common ways enslaved African Americans got access to cash was through being hired out, either by their slaveholders, or on their own terms. Self-hiring existed throughout the South but it was most common in urban areas and among those who were skilled workers. In many cases, those with these work

\textsuperscript{75} Penningroth, \textit{Claims of Kinfolk}, 47.

arrangements were responsible for paying for this privilege and had to take care of the needs of themselves and dependents. Often these arrangements were made at the distinct disadvantage of the enslaved and could also wreck “vast mischief” on their personal lives. Frederick Douglass famously decried the unfairness of this system of labor in his 1845 narrative. As a ship caulker in Baltimore who made his own work arrangements, Douglass was skilled enough to get paid the wages of an experienced worker and took home a dollar and a half a day. Yet he was forced to pay Hugh Auld six to nine dollars a week. Many hired people “counted their earnings in nickels, not dollars.” Despite the pitfalls of being hired out, some saved substantial sums of money.77

Moses Grandy had a long history of being hired out and attempting to buy his freedom with his earnings. His narrative, published in 1843, tells the story of how Grandy was forced to buy his freedom three times before finally being manumitted. When his master came of age, Grandy was given a pass to find his own work. Grandy rented canal boats and ran freight along North Carolina canals during the War of 1812. He gave the owner of the boats, Mr. Grice, half of the freight earned, paid for manning the boats and feeding the crew out of the other half, and was entitled to whatever was left over. Grandy also had to pay for his own keep and gave his master “twenty or thirty a year more than that.” Eventually he was “advised” to try to purchase his freedom by Mr. Grice and his

wife as, despite costs, he was “getting money fast.” Grandy’s enslaver wanted $800 for his freedom, however, with the prodding of Grice he finally agreed to take $600.\footnote{Moses Grandy, \textit{Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy} (London: C. Gilpin, 1843), 13-14.}

In addition to being hired out, enslaved people also grew their own cash crops and traded other goods where possible. Between 1787-1795 a slaveholder in the Piedmont area of Virginia bought chickens and handicrafts from twelve different enslaved people owned by ten different slaveholders. Also in Virginia, slaveholder Catlett Conway bought over 300 pounds of tobacco from his slaves in 1840. In 1840s Louisiana on the Gay Plantation, records show that the plantation had a set price it paid out for hay, poultry, hogs, and eggs, showing that this kind of economic activity was fairly common. In Louisiana, an enslaved woman named Mathilda made $10 for seven hundred pumpkins she sold to the estate of her enslaver in 1858. Another plantation in St. James Parish paid out $1,000 for cutting wood in 1859. William Porter, interviewed in the WPA’s Slave Narrative Project, recalled that his father was working to buy his freedom when the Civil War ended. Porter’s father worked “at night for himself” by splitting rails and raising watermelon.\footnote{John T. Schlotterbek, “The Internal Economy,” 174-175. “William Porter.” Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 5, McClendon-Prayer. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material, 362.}

Over work and incentive pay were other common ways that enslaved people made money throughout the South. In South Carolina, enslaved people could be paid for cotton picked above their work quota. Others were hired out on days that they customarily did not have to work for their masters. Some slaveholders, who wished to hire enslaved people from outside their plantations, had to compete with the daily wage of fifty cents.
that was common in both upcountry South Carolina and the rural Piedmont region in Virginia in the nineteenth century. Coopers on the Nottoway Plantation in Louisiana got incentive pay for their work. In December 1857 Henry got paid $18.50 for making twenty-six extra barrels and thirteen hogsheads above what was required of him.

Jonathan Thomas from Kentucky entered into an agreement with his master, Henry Beale, to purchase his freedom for $1000. It was agreed that the sum would be paid over time through small sums raised by “over work” which would be deposited with Beale. Thomas, who was a millwright by trade, managed to pay almost $400 by the time he was thirty-three.80

Enslaved people found ways not only to join the labor market through over work and hiring, but also sought to fulfill the needs of their communities with business ventures of their own, when allowed. They “developed skills that fit the demands of their locale and used them to accumulate property.” Lunsford Lane, whose narrative is discussed more fully in later chapters, raised the money to purchase his freedom through this type of entrepreneurial enterprise. In early republic era North Carolina, Lane, with the help of his father, came up with a way to process tobacco unlike others being made at the time. They also created a special pipe for smoking it. Eventually, after being allowed to hire his time, Lane’s pipe and tobacco business expanded across the state. After purchasing himself, Lane would go on to buy the freedom of the rest of his family. In Chapel Hill, North Carolina, George Moses Horton used his skill at poetry to write and sell poems while he worked at the state university. In 1829, Horton, with the help of

supporters, published a book of poetry entitled *The Hope of Liberty* which he sold to raise money for his freedom. Unfortunately, Horton did not become free until the Civil War. Harriet Jacobs’ grandmother used her talent as a baker to make the money she saved with the dream of being able to purchase her children and grandchildren. Perhaps of necessity those who were successful in buying their freedom often possessed special skills such as these that they leveraged into freedom.\(^{81}\)

The enslaved worked to find opportunities to finance buying freedom wherever and however possible. Denmark Vesey, leader of the would-be 1822 rebellion in South Carolina, purchased his freedom with money he won in a lottery. In Vesey’s case, and others that will be discussed later, we see how self-purchase could work in tandem with other, illegal, forms of resistance. In the early 1850s, Alvin Coffey, who had already been cheated out of his purchase money by one owner, was allowed to follow the gold rush to California where he made the $1500 necessary to pay his new master for his freedom. He then purchased his wife and daughters.\(^{82}\)

While enslaved people across a wide spectrum of experiences throughout the South were able to amass property, it remained more rare for self-purchase to occur despite widespread economic activity. Of course not all the enslaved people mentioned above made enough to purchase their freedom, nor, perhaps, was that central in their minds as they partook in their local economies. Some enslaved people sought to better the material position of themselves and their families and to “possess and assert greater

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control and independence, create and strengthen social relationships among themselves and with non-slaveholding whites” and “challenge the interests and power of slaveholders.” For many, this meant the ability to purchase goods they were not provided by their enslavers, such as luxury items, fabric to make clothes that would protect them against the elements or better denote social standing and individual identity, more nutritious and enjoyable food, or items that were just for their pleasure. But, for others the ultimate challenge to the world of whites that traded in their friends and family lay in using the money they made to buy their freedom.\textsuperscript{83}

Of the many enslaved people who had property, only some were able to use it toward securing their freedom. Thus, we have to ask what, besides money, enabled some to successfully engage in compensated manumission. Scholars note that as participants in markets “slaves temporarily experienced one of the central attributes of freedom: the purchase and sale of labor power and the enjoyment of its fruits.” That exchange “empowered slaves” as they met slaveholders as “bearers of commodities, stripped of social dimensions.” Of course, we know that this trading was not completely absent of the racial social dimensions that permeated everything about American law and economy. This does not mean, however, that the enslaved were incapable of challenging their position through trade, as many did. This is especially true of those who wrung freedom from the markets of those who enslaved them. In many cases the slave’s economy certainly “contradicted the very premises of chattel bondage.” Those who used that economy to wrest their liberation from the same markets that sought to enslave them

were the pinnacle of this contradiction. This is not to say that those who worked independently had a special claim on desiring freedom.\textsuperscript{84}

While self-purchase may have occurred with some frequency, it was by no means accessible for everyone. It is hard to say whether the ability to participate in markets in the ways discussed above led enslaved African Americans to envision their lives free of slavery through purchase. It is possible, too, that these privileges were won by men and women who already had a certain entrepreneurial spirit that may have landed them in the position to hire their time or enter into trades that allowed them access to cash to begin with. Perhaps their skills were noticed by local whites and their work gained them a reputation that made it socially easier for them to negotiate over the terms of self-purchase. It is also possible that their access to the market and bargaining with people over their labor better positioned them to successfully negotiate business transactions. All of these skills, gained through the ability to participate in local markets, would have likely assisted African Americans in making self-purchase possible.

As will be discussed below, those who bought their freedom further groomed their economic relationships towards supporting their liberation. But, more generally, did their access to markets expose them to certain ideas of freedom that led them to pursue compensated manumission in the first place? What did this economic independence, no matter how limited, do to influence the lives of enslaved people and how they decided to become free? Perhaps access to these markets made the desire for full legal control over their own labor stronger. When Frederick Douglass began to hire his own time, he recalled that as his “condition was improved, instead of increasing my contentment, it

only increased my desire to be free.” While Douglass had been released from the
dangerous position at Gardner’s shop, where he was threatened and beat up by white
workers, he also had free time when he could get no work of his own choosing. This time
for thought, as well as his unjustly requited semi-independent labor, connected for
Douglass in ways that further dissatisfied him.

Douglass’ use of a free labor argument in discussing the injustice of his position
as a hired enslaved worker clearly relates to one of the abolition movement’s core
tenants. As is well understood, Douglass juxtaposes freedom with the ability to reap the
full rewards of one’s labor. He believed that to make a “contented slave, it was necessary
to make a thoughtless one,” to “annihilate the power of reason” and “make him unable to
detect inconsistencies.” Douglass, then, links these inconsistencies to his understanding
of free labor ideologies as he discusses the ways in which enslavement deprived him of
the money that he had “contracted for,” “earned,” and been “paid for.” It was “rightfully”
his own, and yet he was forced to “deliver every cent of that money to Master Hugh,” not
because he had had “any hand in earning it,” nor because he “possessed the slightest
shadow of a right to it,” but “solely because he had the power to compel me to give it
up.” This is the final straw for Douglass, who, in the face of this outrage, began to plan
what would become his final and successful escape from slavery. Douglass, therefore,
directly relates the “inconsistencies” inherent in being forced to turn over one’s earnings
as an unfree laborer to planning his second attempt at escaping slavery. Of course, we
know that Douglass chose not to purchase his freedom, but to run away. But, for how
many others did the predicament that Douglass described foster the desire to invest their
earnings in a final escape from slavery by buying their liberation? For many who worked
for themselves, and may have thought similarly to Douglass, their economic investment took the ultimate form of ownership - the ownership of self.\footnote{Douglass, \textit{Narrative}, 99. It is possible that Douglass made this decision because he did not have the same family connections that compelled others to stay put. Eva Sheppard Wolf. \textit{Almost Free: A Story About Family and Race in Antebellum Virginia}. (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2012), 129.}

Although Douglass did not buy his freedom, others who did connected their labor with freedom in ways that would have been familiar to Douglass. Lunsford Lane directly connected his economic capability with the capacity to become free through purchase. As a young man he contemplated his enslavement and the limits it placed on his free will. Lane tried to “plan in my mind from day to day, and from night to night, how I might be free.” While “in this state of mind,” Lane’s father gave him a basket of peaches which he sold for the first money he had “ever had in my life.” After a few other small sales, “the hope that then entered my mind of purchasing at some future time my freedom” made Lane “long for money.” Lane’s economic activity allowed him to envision how he could finally be free.\footnote{Lunsford Lane, \textit{Narrative}, 8. Lane’s narrative will be discussed in greater length in Chapter 4.}

Access to independent labor was no guarantee of success in attempting to purchase one’s liberty nor was it necessarily an easy process, even for those who had access to the funds to become free. The author of Jonathan Thomas’s story, discussed earlier, calculated that if he had continued in the “same ratio” Thomas would not have raised the whole sum needed to become free until he was 52. With interest Thomas would have ended up paying $930 more, amounting to $1930 for a man of 52. In addition, after Thomas’s owner’s son took over the estate he decided to liquidate some of the assets. When Thomas told the son about the agreement to purchase his freedom, and the amount already deposited, the son said he knew nothing about it and that Thomas must be sold.
Thomas then decided to run for Canada, leaving his investment behind to enhance the wealth of the Beale family. Eventually his wife, who was already a free woman, and their two children joined Thomas in Canada.\textsuperscript{87} Although still alive and well, Moses Grandy’s enslaver did not keep his word either. Through a series of mishaps and repeated cheatings Grandy was forced to pay for his freedom three times over.

Isaac Hunter from Raleigh, North Carolina had made $1,200 to purchase his freedom as a shoemaker through “night working” and had made another $432 to purchase his wife and six children when he was forced to leave the state and his family. In less than a year away from North Carolina he had raised the remaining $1,335.60 needed to free his family through supporting contributions. Although his family was eventually reunited in Brooklyn, New York, the fear of losing them and the pain of missing them probably made the months he worked to save them anxious for Hunter. As the stories of these families show, in the slave south, to own one’s self required not only access to work and cash but a complex network of connections and support.\textsuperscript{88} Douglass’ outrage and the stories of Grandy and Thomas remind us of the realities of the social and legal lives of the enslaved and “what bargains with whites entailed for people without rights.”\textsuperscript{89}

Even Lane, who used his business savvy to become free, could not ultimately translate that acumen into the rights of a free white man. He was forced out of North Carolina, despite the intervention of notable local men on his behalf. While his entrepreneurial spirit brought him freedom, it was purchased at a great cost. Like Isaac Hunter, Lane was forced to leave his family behind while he struck out beyond his home

\textsuperscript{87} Edmund Jackson. “The Fugitive.” \textit{NASS} (December 31, 1846).
\textsuperscript{89} Schermerhorn, \textit{Money over Mastery}, 79.
state to raise the money to purchase their freedom. In his travels he garnered the support of another network of men and women, abolitionists. Lane ultimately succeeded and the network he had built up across the nation eventually saved his life and allowed him to finally reunite with his family in freedom. Lane’s story shows that while the “network of associations that conferred status did not amount to legal personhood,” his community connections were key to the success of reuniting his family. The enslaved, and even free African American’s, legal predicament under slave law made reliance on networks even more key to their successful attempts at buying freedom.90

None of the ways in which enslaved people accessed labor or commodity markets were free and clear of slavery’s influence. In discussing early national Maryland, T. Stephen Whitman declares that self-purchase and other forms of delayed manumission were attempts, from the slaveholder’s point of view, to “retain control of their labor supply.” Therefore, the actions of African Americans to become free “played a more complex part in the fate of slavery in the city than the overused word ‘resistance’ can capture.” In this manner he suggests that various forms of manumission, self-purchase included, worked to spread slavery to urban areas and assisted in making it a more

90 Calvin Schermerhorn, Money over Mastery, Family over Freedom: Slavery in the Antebellum Upper South. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univeristy Press, 2011), 160. Like Schermerhorn, Barbara Fields claims that for free African Americans living under the law of the slave state of Maryland, the “best form of social protection a free black person could have was the patronage of a white citizen of substance.” But Fields also claims that this patronage was a constant and “galling badge of subaltern status.” This formulation, of course must have entered the minds of men and women like Lane as he faced expulsion from his home state and separation from his family. However, the language of networking employed by Schermerhorn seems more appropriate to the experience of southern African Americans who sought out opportunities to become free. While African Americans may have been forced to rely on white southerners for support at times, they also depended on each other, and constantly looked to use their position to the best advantage. These networks and communities were often purposefully built over long periods of time, and were not only existent at the whim of whites. Through their networking, during negotiations, African Americans were able to influence the actions of those who had claim over them. Even if limited by slave law and social conventions, African Americans found ways to multiply their power through networking, in ways that were much more complex than the formulation of patronage suggests. Fields, Slavery and Freedom, 36-37.
flexible institution, perhaps delaying its final destruction. In addition, the accumulation of property was often technically illegal in much of the region, as were work arrangements like hiring out and trading goods at market. Enslaved people who worked for themselves often had to take artificially low prices for their goods and labor, or owed the majority of their earnings to their enslavers. Independent work and its relation to gradual emancipation and term slavery provided opportunities that the enslaved could “exploit to gain autonomy” and freedom. However, delayed and compensated manumission still provided years of additional labor that benefitted slaveholders, even as African Americans worked to become free. In these ways slave labor, even when independent, helped slavery’s economy and further greased the pockets of slaveholders. Even when ready and positioned to purchase their freedom, the enslaved were still at risk of failing based on their enslaver’s needs and desires.91

Unlike places that operated under laws of coartación, enslaved people in most of the United States were legally denied the right to contract and were without secure property rights. Only Delaware, Tennessee, and Louisiana recognized the capacity of enslaved people to contract for manumission during the early republic. African Americans who sought to buy themselves or loved ones had to depend on the honor of their enslavers and seek assistance when those plans went awry. They could not rely on the law despite the fact that they may have sought redress through it. Men and women who worked to buy freedom had to look for multiple avenues of support to protect their

valuable investment and ensure that their hard work would reward them with freedom.

As the nineteenth century progressed, manumission did not guarantee or automatically bestow on one the full rights of citizenship. Access to property rights, business, and free movement were limited and legally precarious without full rights. The law, then, acted as another obstacle that African Americans navigated to buy freedom. It was yet another space where those who worked to be free had to use their social capital. For many, self-purchase created a liminal state of freedom, often for years at a time, and across generations. Compensated manumission was a type of gradual manumission, a term slavery, and one that was certainly not always guaranteed. Slave law often worked to define freedom, and limit its breadth.93

Both enslaved and free African Americans in the process of buying the freedom of themselves or loved ones were threatened by a plethora of possible disappointments and failures. Without the ability to contract, and therefore to lay claim to the law on the same standing as their white counterparts, free African Americans, and those families in the process of becoming free through compensated manumission schemes “paid heavily for their closeness to slavery and for their detachment from it.” Despite working towards freedom, they “lived with constant reminders of how nearly they remained slaves.” African Americans looked to use the law to their advantage wherever possible to gain their freedom and also to remain free. They often did this through the creation of a network of people who could lend support in times of danger.94

93 The full legal implications of compensated manumission will be discussed more fully in Chapter Four. Myer, Forging Freedom, 52. Schafer, Becoming Free, xiii.
The relationships between enslaved people, who, by slave law were considered property themselves, and their own property and freedom were intricately linked across sites of negotiation. Acting in contentious and threatening landscapes, African Americans who were trying to ensure access to freedom through compensated manumission had to make sure that they had the support needed to accomplish their ultimate goal. The networks they built became a lifeline to liberty. They called on these networks to not only become free, but also to protect that freedom. People who had influence and access to legal recourse acted as security and as an added barrier between slavery and freedom.

Across the South, African Americans, enslaved and free, looked to forge bonds within their own communities and to find people who would support their efforts to buy freedom. As we will see, sometimes this meant coming into contact with abolitionists outside of the South. Much more often, however, support came locally from friends, neighbors, and employers. Sometimes this support came from other white Southerners who also held claim to human property. Through these connections African Americans worked to situate themselves to be able to negotiate for their freedom from the most advantageous position possible. They asked to be allowed the privilege of hiring their time, they borrowed money from someone who was sympathetic to their cause, asked others to intercede on their behalf, or requested access to family members whom they wished to eventually purchase. Often these situations were worked out on the basis of personal relationships and some kind of trust that may have taken years to groom. African Americans who looked to buy freedom had to amass social capital in addition to the actual capital that they paid over for themselves and loved ones.
The majority of enslaved people owned some kind of property. However, few could leverage that property into freedom. No matter what access enslaved people had to money and markets, their understanding of their surroundings also mattered in their ability to become free. Long before they were in a position to buy freedom, enslaved people, or free relatives, had to work towards mastery of their economic, political, and social worlds. Perhaps before even saving their first dollar or coin, an enslaved person might have tested the waters or done research into the likelihood of their master’s willingness to bargain for freedom. Most likely they would have understood slavery’s local market as families and communities were under constant threat of sale. Many knew much about the intricacies of their enslaver’s financial situations. Under conditions that threatened their family and social lives, slave communities were forced to watch for signs of financial instability, or the possibly of sale, which they could at times turn into opportunities for freedom. They also had to groom social connections to support them when these opportunities arose.

Lunsford Lane used the death of his master, and the claim against his estate, to hire his time from his new mistress. Lane declared that although the death of his master “cast a cloud over the prospects of some of my fellow slaves,” it was a “rainbow over mine.” The opportunity to take advantage of his enslaver’s financial uncertainty allowed Lane to expand his pipe and tobacco business. In “some six or eight years” Lane made enough to pay $1000 for his freedom, the price he rightfully assumed his mistress would require. Since by law he could not purchase himself he asked his wife’s slaveholder, Mr.
Smith, to purchase him. Eventually, Lane was manumitted in New York as Smith’s attempts to do so in North Carolina failed.95

John Meachum, who would become pastor of the African Baptist Church in St. Louis, Missouri, lived in Virginia, North Carolina, and Kentucky as an enslaved man belonging to Paul Meachum. Meachum, despite describing his master as a good man, could not feel “satisfied” while still enslaved. Thus, he requested that his aging master allow him the right to hire his time. Taking advantage of his owner’s advanced age, and surely pressured by his impending death, Meachum worked in a saltpeter mine until he was able to buy his freedom.96

Forty-year-old Peter Still, brother of abolitionist William Still, was hired out in Tuscumbia, Alabama in the mid 1840s. Upon saving $75 in one year working at a store and a nearby hotel, Still began to imagine purchasing his freedom. He was afraid to trust anyone with his plan for it might get back to his slaveholder and he could be sold as “unsafe property” for dreaming he could be free. Yet, Still watched carefully during his work around town for someone he could trust. Still settled on a Jewish man, Mr. Friedman, when he heard him make some “chance remarks” that made him believe he could be trusted to support the plan. Still was able to arrange for Friedman to hire him, and after becoming fully acquainted with Friedman’s character, Still was able to rightfully place his confidence in him. Despite Still’s distrust and suspicion, in the ultimate nod to the utility of networks, he realized that he would “never be free without

96 John B. Meachum. *An Address to All the Colored Citizens of the United States* (Philadelphia: King and Baird, 1846), 3-5.
trustin’ some person.” With Friedman’s help in negotiations and financing Still was able to become free for $500, a sum that he eventually paid back to Friedman.97

Using his social knowledge with even broader scope, Still thought that if he could use his freedom to get to his relatives in the North they might be able to help him purchase his wife and children. When Still arrived in Philadelphia, a chance meeting reunited him with his brother and then the rest of his long lost family, including his mother. He could not, however, fully enjoy his freedom without his own wife and children.98 Still’s family thought it would be best for them to plan an escape. Wary of the dangers in having them run, Still “decidedly preferred to purchase them.”

With the prodding of family and friends, who thought raising the money necessary to purchase them would take too long and who could not “bear to give gold to him who has so long defrauded the helpless laborers of their hire,” Still went ahead with the escape, although he did not give up on his plan of buying his family. Seth Concklin volunteered to travel to Alabama and retrieve the family. The $100 Still had raised to go towards his family’s purchase price was now used to pay for Concklin’s expenses. Still’s concern about having his family run away instead of raising money to buy their freedom turned out to be well-founded. His wife, children, and Concklin were caught in Indiana. His family was returned to their master and Concklin was found drowned with his hands and feet bound in chains and a fractured skull.99

Once news of the failed escape attempt reached Still, he looked to his network to find a way to buy his family from their owner, Mr. McKiernan. Eventually the Stills were able to make contact with McKiernan through a Philadelphia merchant and another man in Alabama who had agreed to buy the family for their release. Peter Still traveled throughout the North to raise the $5,000 required for his family’s freedom. As he traveled his network widened, as in each town and city in which he stopped he received new letters of recommendation from abolitionists and other important people to take him to the next place. Through a network of support that stretched from New York and Philadelphia to Cincinnati and Alabama, Still was able to raise the enormous sum. This network, carefully crafted by Still and others who worked to radiate word of his cause, helped extend Still’s power and supported his original will to have his family restored to him in freedom.\(^{100}\)

Importantly, the networks built by African Americans could facilitate communication between relatives and friends who may have no longer been within traveling distance of each other. Like in Still’s case, these connections often served to open negotiations to buy freedom. Writing from Chatham in Canada West in 1854, Robert Brown wrote to Mille. Brown says he addressed the letter to Lander Brown “in the hopes that he will be kind enough” to forward it to Mille, who had been sold and “gone to the Mountains.” Besides telling Mille who he has seen in Canada, Brown requests that Mille give his love to some common acquaintances. Brown closes his letter with a message for his family’s enslaver stating that if he will sell Brown’s wife and child for $750, he would give him the money “willingly.” Brown also requests that the owner

\(^{100}\) Kate Pickard, *The Kidnapped*, 319-338.
of his family reply as soon as possible. Brown’s letter to Mille, then, is addressed to one man, to be read by Mille, who is then to forward his request to buy his family to their master. Brown’s letter and hopes of his family’s freedom followed the path of his life across the connections he had made with people whom he could now call on in hopes of reuniting with his wife and child.101

Besides those relating to his brother, William Still’s, *The Underground Rail Road*, also includes records of letters and stories from fugitives and freed African Americans looking to purchase their loved ones, price negotiations, and other correspondences that passed through Still’s hands. In some cases, enslaved and newly free African Americans who were illiterate had to depend on their supporters to write these letters of inquiry. Writing from within the slave south, or from freedom, communications with lawyers, abolitionists, more sympathetic slaveholders, friends, and family were crucial in assessing the situation back home or wherever loved ones had ended up as families were sold apart. These networks of people and letters were essential in securing the success of compensated manumission. As people travelled, whether as fugitives, slave traders, or those who had been forced to leave home through sale, the networks of African Americans looking to purchase freedom expanded. They used these connections to gauge conditions and levy their power and money, no matter how limited, to work to keep their kin groups together.102

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In these ways African Americans in the midst of slavery looked to invest their capital to the best advantage. Despite not being legally allowed the right to contract, some worked to make sure they had some security in their plans by involving a third party in different ways. They often played on these social connections to secure a fair price. As in the case of Moses Grandy whose employer, Mr. Grice, worked to make his slaveholder, James Grandy, lower the price stipulated for his freedom by reminding him that Moses had been more “profitable to him than any five other of his negroes” and that they had been “playfellows.” When James took his money without setting him free, Grandy, with the support of the Grices, called on an even wider circle of support. Grandy lost the court case that Mrs. Grice brought in his name and was then tricked out of his freedom yet another time by his new slaveholder, Mr. Trewitt, after saving for another two years. Grandy tried again to become free and found the assistance of Captain Minner, with whom he used to do business. Minner offered to lend Grandy the money and to him negotiate. While Grandy and Minner were negotiating with his new owner, Sawyer, they unexpectedly gained the vocal support of others. Two men, including the terrible overseer Wiley M’Pherson, who was “never known to speak in favour of a coloured person,” called on Sawyer to allow Grandy to buy his freedom. Grandy describes M’Pherson’s support as the tipping point and that “after even he had said so, master could not stand out.”103

Grandy’s bad luck preceeded him. But so too did his hardworking and honest reputation. These, in addition to his well-forged connections with the Grices and Minner, helped Grandy to finally become free. From Boston, Grandy worked to secure the

freedom of other family members through an ever-wider network of supporters, finance, and credit. The skills African Americans deployed to become free or to ensure the freedom of loved ones through purchase highlight the multiple forms of capital that African Americans used to their advantage. As Schermerhorn describes in *The Business of Slavery*, for the period’s merchants, traders, and individual buyers and sellers, both personal and professional relationships were utilized to further business interests and ensure the working of credit systems across the nation. For African Americans who used self-purchase and compensated manumission to become free, their relationships cut across strict categorizations of law, economics, and sociality and thus mirrored the connections that were present in the wider markets between Americans, if towards different ends.

Connections made within African American communities were just as important as those formed across racial lines in securing the means and opportunity to buy freedom. Relationships between free and enslaved African Americans also became spaces in which freedom could be negotiated and supported. In some cases this happened through direct blood relationships in which a free family member, or members, would work to secure the freedom of relatives. Enslaved African Americans coming together across other kinship bonds also supported the manumission efforts of their friends, neighbors, and community members.

Throughout the nineteenth century, connections between the accumulation of property and patterns of inheritance “created traditions of property ownership and trade” within African American families and communities. This ownership was, as argued by
Dylan C. Penningroth, essential to the systems through which African Americans understood their enslavement and social, economic, and familial positions in southern society. Property ownership and accumulation “put an unmistakable dynamism into their social ties.” Property was central to family and kin relations, quite literally so in the case of buying freedom. Within some families, especially those who labored to buy kin out of slavery, the relations between property and kinship were represented in the bodies of mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, brothers, and sisters. In some cases, where freedom was stymied by restrictive manumission laws, free African Americans would continue to hold legal title to those they had bought as property to protect them and help them remain close to family and friends. There were a number of ways that enslaved people found access to the markets through which they gained the cash necessary to save money for self-purchase. Enslaved people’s access to property was dependent on “conditions that…varied from region to region, according to geography, the system of labor, and the tolerances of different masters.”

Penningroth discusses the relationship between African American kinship and ideas of property in the nineteenth century American south using the records of post-war claims courts. Penningroth argues that not only was kinship in nineteenth century black America at times “shaped by their interests in property,” but that “property was at the heart of African Americans’ ideas about family and community.” Certainly, how property was gotten, maintained, and passed down through generations and across family groups worked to build and define relationships in enslaved communities. For those who worked

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to ensure the freedom of their families by buying them out of slavery, this relationship between property and kinship became doubly apparent, especially as family members who could not legally be manumitted remained the property of their relatives.¹⁰⁵

Familial life under slavery was shaped in part by the labor of family members. Their gender make-up, what type of work family members did, and what skills they had to provide for their kinfolk outside of their daily labor were important factors in determining the everyday lives of black families. In cases of compensated manumission, these things also mattered in determining the process of how an entire family worked to become free. And, for many who were in family units, it appears that freedom meant more if it could be enjoyed with family who were also free or by working to ensure their freedom.

Many cases of familial compensated manumission left to our records, appear to suggest that men were often responsible for securing the freedom of their families, at least at the beginning of the process. Since slave law determined that children born to enslaved women would follow the condition of the mother, it makes sense that women would have become free first, to preclude the possibility of having to amass the funds necessary to purchase multiple children out of enslavement. Perhaps because of the intersectional precariousness of enslaved women’s access to economic opportunity, the first person to be freed through purchase was often the male figure, who would then work as a free person to secure the rest of his family, although not always alone. The wife was sometimes freed next and the adults would then work together to manumit their children

¹⁰⁵ Penningroth, Claims of Kinfolk, 42-43. Penningroth is also careful to caution against understanding the enslaved’s economy solely through the lens of the master-slave relationship, and warns that this understanding “shifts attention away from viewing black people’s lives on their own terms.” 7. Mary Beth Corrigan, “It’s a Family Affair,” 164-165.
and sometimes grandchildren. Pricing and value, although they differed across period and region, also likely played a role in this process, as “relationships among price, gender, [and] skill,” all helped shaped the decisions made by family units looking to buy freedom, as well as the slaveholders willingness to sell and for what price.106

This was certainly the case for Lunsford Lane, who worked to raise the money to free his entire family. A man known as Free Frank who hired his time and created a saltpeter business in frontier Kentucky, bought his own freedom and then went on to purchase his wife and sixteen family members in total over a forty-year period. Although he spent $15,000 to do so, Frank was still able to go on to be a “land speculator, commercial farmer, stockraiser, town founder, and town developer.” Free Frank eventually founded the town of New Philadelphia in Illinois. By establishing himself in free territory, Free Frank raised enough money to buy the freedom of his entire family. African Americans like Free Frank and Lane took advantage of the small freedoms they were allowed, such as hiring out their time or, in Free Frank’s case, taking on responsibilities for absentee owners in frontier areas, to leverage their way out of slavery. At times self-purchase was necessary to even enter into familial relationships. Joseph Leonidas Star from Knoxville, Tennessee, described in his WPA interview how his father had worked to buy his freedom for “just a little of somethin’” to marry a free woman since, “in them times a slave couldn’t marry a free’d person.” These men all speculated and invested in creating a familial legacy of freedom.107

106 Berry, “‘In Pressing Need of Cash,’” 30, 23.
While there are some general patterns, how families worked to become free through purchase depended on many circumstances, sometimes outside of their control. Family stories were often unique. To ensure the manumission of an entire family was a long and daunting process, especially as family units continued to expand or were separated. In most cases compensated manumission was a gradual process putting it at risk of failure from numerous avenues, the most common of which being theft, trickery, sale, and changes in the law. Despite the best laid plans, families often had to be responsive to whatever circumstances arose. Sometimes they would be forced to buy whoever’s owner would allow them to be sold first, or purchase the freedom of a family member who was at particular risk of punishment, poor treatment, or sale. Women, especially, were at obvious risk not only to sexual abuse and assault, but also to bearing children that would be born enslaved. Black families understood the gendered economies that they lived under and that “slavery and freedom were transmitted through black women’s bodies.”108

While men often had greater access to labor markets and positions in which they made their own money, women also performed labor that allowed them to secure the freedom of themselves and loved ones. Loren Schweninger tells the story of an enslaved woman named Sally who was transferred from Virginia to Nashville, Tennessee in 1818. When she got to Nashville, Sally was hired out as a domestic servant. She soon transformed the front room of her rented house into a laundry business and even made her own soap. She saved her money in a tea jar and hid it in her house with the hope that she would be able to save enough to purchase the freedom of her children. By 1826, Sally

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had saved over $300. Sally had three biracial children with notable white men, including a judge. Her oldest son was emancipated through his father’s will. In 1834, she urged another son to run away in response to uncertainty over the settlement of the estate to which they belonged. For her third son James, Sally requested the support of the lawyer, Ephraim H. Foster, to approach the recipient of the estate to see how much it would cost to free him. Sally was $50 short of the $400 needed and requested that Foster purchase her son and hold the bill of sale until she paid him back, which she did shortly thereafter. In 1851, some seventeen years after being redeemed by his mother, James was finally legally manumitted by Foster with permission from the state. Her sons went onto become successful business men.\footnote{Schermerhorn, \textit{Money over Mastery}, 106. Loren Schweninger, “A Slave Family in the Antebellum South,” \textit{The Journal of Negro History} Vol. 60 No. 1. (January 1975): 29-44.}

The District of Columbia Free Negro Register records that in October 1832, William W. Ramsey of the U.S. Navy had purchased a woman named Winney for $325 with the intention of freeing her once the money had been repaid. The Register entry from October 1835 reports that as the sum had been paid, Winney (about twenty-eight years old) and her son George (two years old) were to be free. While we do not know how Winney raised the money needed to pay for her freedom, it took her three years to do so and her ability to find a willing purchaser surely speaks to her ability to access useful connections. In 1834, Letitia Speake of Washington, in consideration of one dollar, manumitted her husband and daughter. She had bought her husband in 1833 from Prince George’s County, Maryland and had purchased her daughter in 1834 from Charles County, Maryland. In June 1836, Sabra Wise, in consideration of $1 paid by her sixteen-year-old daughter Sarah Ann Wise, set Sarah free. Wise had purchased her daughter a
month before. In 1855, Elizabeth Duncan manumitted her eighteen-year-old daughter, Emily, whom she had previously purchased for $50. The age of these daughters suggest that their mothers had perhaps worked to purchase their freedom in order to shelter them from the gendered threats young enslaved women faced. In looking at compensated manumission in 1850s District of Columbia, Mary Beth Corrigan records that teenage women were three times more likely to be freed, suggesting that enslavers, especially in urban areas, did not want to take on the added burden of caring for enslaved children. The women above certainly may have taken advantage of these coalescing interests to free their daughters.\textsuperscript{110}

Also listed in the Register are the manumissions of an African American woman named Althea Tanner. Tanner, whose District of Columbia market garden business included clients like Thomas Jefferson, bought her freedom for $1400 in 1810. She went on to buy 22 other enslaved people who were manumitted once they had repaid her, as witnessed by the entries in the DC register. In one entry Tanner, in consideration of $250, sold Hannah Ferguson’s four infant children to her. Although the register leaves out much information about how these women purchased their family members and ensured their freedom, it is clear that women were also able to undertake the task of buying their families out of enslavement and that they worked together to ensure familial freedom.\textsuperscript{111}

In her book on African American women in antebellum Charleston, Amrita Chakrabarti Myers proposes that while men had easier access to economic opportunities


that would enable them to buy themselves out of slavery, women were “able to access emancipation by establishing alliances with white men.” In discussing the alliances made by enslaved people in the domestic sphere in the upper south, Schermerhorn also suggests that there was a gendered difference to networking and that “those without the ability to generate cash as a counterstrategy…especially women and children, sought and exchanged human resources instead.” Schermerhorn does recognize that alliances relying on the sexual, “romantic,” or “domestic,” were extremely risky. Although the discussion is not strictly gendered, in the two instances in which Schermerhorn discusses the activities of women to protect themselves and families, including the story of Harriet Jacobs, Schermerhorn suggests that their decisions to utilize specific types of alliances to resist further familial disruption was “not a plan or well-developed strategy,” unlike other cases he discusses. In Jacobs’ “contests with her owner,” Schermerhorn states that “even the short-term outcomes were unintended.” It seems odd to suggest that women who had come of age under slavery would not have known the consequences of the actions they took to protect themselves and their families. Nor does it seem plausible that they were not knowledgeable enough of how southern society and slave law defined and policed their black womanhood to make informed and calculated decisions, even if their options were severely curtailed.  

Despite the terrible decisions slavery forced these women to make, Jacobs’ narrative reminds us of how alliances forged in limited circumstances worked for enslaved women. Jacobs did indeed form a “supple and resilient network of human and material resources” that enabled the eventual freedom of her entire family. Schermerhorn

states that the relationships formed by women like Jacobs were “cemented with sentiment and emotion” and were “just as fragile as those male slaves forged with cash.” Indeed, both cash and sentiment were intricately intertwined for both men and women. It is important to remember that all enslaved people who created alliances to further their freedom were reliant on emotion not just women or those without access to the cash needed to influence the decisions of slaveholders and traders. It was not solely enslaved laborers without access to cash who “manipulated human ties.” As discussed throughout this chapter, the manipulation of emotion and the forging of human connection, no matter how limited, feigned, or regulated by the market, was central to networking and liberation. Access to cash, as well as social and political connections were all necessary to become free through compensated manumission. Both men and women understood this and worked to ensure they secured both.113

It has been well documented that black women were also at the forefront of using the law to become free and to expand the meaning of freedom. Judith Kelleher Schafer records multiple cases of African American women in New Orleans throughout the mid-century who used the courts to protect their purchased liberty or to ensure that the agreements made with enslavers were honored. The cases often involved not just the freedom of individual women, but that of their children as well. In their legal claims making around cases of compensated manumission, these women called on their ability to generate funds and the networks that allowed them to take their negotiations over freedom to the courts. While African American women obviously faced different

113 Schermerhorn, Money Over Mastery, 122, 107, 143, 108.
challenges than their male counterparts, these strategies of freedom were used across gendered lines.\textsuperscript{114}

While it was probably most common for people who were related to work to buy each other, individual enslaved and free people of color also assisted each other where possible. Virginia law forbade enslaved people from purchasing the freedom of someone other than a relative, assumes that this happened often enough for it to be at issue. In some instances free people of color, like in the case of Althea Tanner, acted as intermediaries, using money provided, or perhaps loaned, to buy enslaved people of color from their owners with the promise of future release where manumission was legally allowed. As opportunities for legal manumission became scarcer throughout the region, it became more common for free people of color to hold their relatives and friends as at least nominal slaves. Once he had purchased the freedom of himself and his family through his carpentry and cooper work in Missouri, John Meachum went on to buy twenty enslaved people, “most of whom paid back the greatest part of the money” while some paid back their full purchase price. Meachum reported that all except one man was doing well and some had gone on to purchase other family members.\textsuperscript{115}

Enslaved people also assisted each other by lending money and acting as negotiators. One enslaved man, according to a story told by a “letter from the South” in the NASS, not only loaned another man $50 to help him purchase his freedom so that he

\textsuperscript{114} Schafer, \textit{Becoming Free}, 47-50. Myer, \textit{Forging Freedom}, 2, 8. In discussing inheritance claims of African American women in the nineteenth century, Jeffory A. Clymer looks at the connection between ideas of race and property and declares that through their legal battles these women worked to “transform themselves from commodities to economic agents.” Although people who bought their freedom made deviant use of their commodification, Clymer’s relationship between commodification and economic agency is useful to consider. Jeffory A. Clymer. \textit{Family Money: Property, Race, and Literature in the Nineteenth Century} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 42.

could go with his family to Indiana, but also got the man’s enslaver to provide another $25. This man not only provided monetary support for his fellow bondsman but also worked on his behalf to negotiate with the man’s owner. It is possible that this man had a relationship with this slaveholder that enabled him to better negotiate for the man. Perhaps the enslaver, recognizing the bonds of family, bargained that it was better for him to lend the man money and get at least some in return, than to lose him if he ran away to be with his family. Nevertheless, the man succeeded in raising the funds needed to finance the freedom of his friend and helped to keep the family intact. The article acts as a morality tale for anti-slavery readers and suggests that if an enslaved person was willing to give “probably his all” to assist another then those who were “enjoying all the blessings of liberty” ought to be more generous in lending support for the “liberation of the slave.” Making this tale into a simple moral of charity, however, does not encompass the full complexity of African American communal bonds in the face of enslavement and the liberatory uses of property.116

In August 1846, the “colored persons of Washington” held a fair to raise the $300 needed to buy their preacher who was still enslaved. The community formed in this Washington church, presumably under the guidance of the enslaved preacher, had made itself vital enough that the security of its preacher was valuable enough to church members for them to raise the money to free him. Like anti-slavery fairs of the period, church members likely donated their time, made items to be sold, worked the fair, and even bought items with money that went directly to the fund. They came together not

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116 “Generosity of a Slave” NASS (June 11, 1840).
only to free their preacher but also to secure the community itself by ensuring the ability of their preacher to continue to lead them.  

In April 1855, The National Era reported the excitement in Washington, DC over a “private meeting” by a “number of colored people, most of them free, and all of them of good character” that had been “detected” in the city. The party was broken up and escorted to the “watch-house” where members of the meeting were searched and held for assembling unlawfully. The law in the city, following southern slave codes, prohibited the meeting of people of color, free or enslaved. The party consisted of four enslaved men and twenty free people of color. As punishment, four of these men were sent to the “work-house” while one enslaved man, Joseph Jones, received six lashes. The rest were released on payment of the fine and jail costs, amounting to $111.60 total. The abolitionist Gerrit Smith, anti-slavery congressman Joshua Giddings, and several other “respectable citizens” contributed to the “liberating fund.”

The purpose of this meeting was to raise money to buy the freedom of a young woman, Eliza Howard, whose owner was willing to sell her for $650. A subscription list for her purchase was found among the party’s “private papers,” as well as “scrap of poetry,” the constitution of a benevolent society called the Daughters of Jerusalem, and some “handsome regalia” for officers of the society. Despite their purposes, the men were still punished and the Era reported that the fines that were paid as punishment for this meeting were more than three times the amount that those present had contributed to fund the purchase of Howard. The article brings this case to the public’s attention as a cruel consequence of living under the slave code in the nation’s capital, which was a “disgrace

117 “Buying a Preacher” NASS (August 20, 1846).
to the city and the nation,” in the hopes that the slave code of the city would be brought as an issue before Congress. It fails to mention what became of Eliza Howard’s quest for freedom.118

While the Era uses this story of activity within the black community to deride the slave code of Washington, there is much to be learned from it about how African Americans banded together to support members of their community in their quests towards freedom. As discussed in the last chapter, black communities had access to their own benevolent institutions. These groups were often set up, as this group was, to support the daily needs of community members. In this instance people related to the Daughters of Jerusalem gathered together to support the freedom efforts of Eliza Howard. One might also assume that one or more of the men who joined the meeting had some relation to Howard or had been told of her case by Howard or someone else close to her. They had perhaps been the ones to know to bring her case to these men through their work in the city or through any number of the ways that enslaved and free black communities interacted in Southern cities.

All these men met at grave risk and came together in the name of freedom. Together, they had raised around $30 of the $650 needed of the purchase price of Howard’s freedom. We cannot tell from the article if their endeavor had just begun, if this was the money raised solely by those present at this one meeting, or if the subscription list included donations from others. Indeed, it may be possible that Howard, and other people in her family, had already raised some of the money themselves. What

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118 “The Slave Code in Washington” The National Era (April 19, 1855) Corrigan, “It’s a Family Affair,” 180. As this dissertation expands into a book manuscript, I hope to be able to do more research into Eliza Howard’s story. For now, let us hope that she was still able to raise the money to become free.
we do know is that their efforts cost them a run in with the police, fines, confinement at the work house, and physical torture for the enslaved man Joseph Jones. Even if one worked to become free through legal means, one often needed the support of others, for freedom threatened the law and there were still risks to face.

As self-emancipated and manumitted African Americans left the South to start new lives for themselves in the North, their networks expanded. Abolitionists, free African Americans, and northern whites, were important links in the networks African Americans used to liberate family members, especially as they moved northward. When African Americans left the South, they were often also forced to leave their families behind. Some were lucky enough to bring kin with them, or at least continue to communicate with them through networks that made communication possible. For others, freedom in the North offered the opportunity to labor to raise the money needed to buy loved ones out of slavery and to reunite families in freedom.

In an 1834 letter to Lewis Tappan, Theodore Weld describes the anti-slavery awakening at Ohio’s Lane Seminary. He also excitedly describes the work being done by students and those in the black community of Cincinnati to build day and evening schools, a library, lyceum programs, and sabbath schools. Weld goes on to describe the condition of many of the African Americans living in the city and shows the extent to which black labor was tied to investments in freedom. Weld claims that of a population of almost 3000 African Americans, more than three quarters of the adults were formerly enslaved people who had “worked out their own freedom.” Many others were still paying for themselves “under large securities.” “Multitudes” of others were also “toiling” to
“purchase their friends.” Upon visiting some 30 families, Weld finds that more than half of these families had members who were still enslaved and that the entire family was “struggling to lay up money enough to purchase their freedom.”

Among the men and women Weld meets are a man who had just finished paying for his wife and five children and a man and woman who had bought themselves and were now working “night and day” to buy the freedom of their children. They had paid $1400 total. Another woman had purchased her husband by taking in washing at night after her regular work. Each of these families had succeeded in paying the full amount required to reunite with their loved ones. Weld wishes to make clear to Tappan that these “poor brethren and sisters MUST BE HELPED.” He asks Tappan to raise money to help the efforts of the Seminary students and black Cincinnatians to start schools and other benevolent projects. Interestingly, Weld describes the African American community of Cincinnati as having a “peculiar” claim on the good will of the community, as he believed their efforts could show the nation what was possible when they had ample support and opportunity. Weld believed that black Cincinnatians were their “own letters of introduction on the score of energy, decision, perseverance, and high attempt” since they had “mostly emancipated themselves by their own efforts.” He thought that Cincinnati had the best capacity in the nation to “act upon slavery by a spectacle of free black cultivation.”

In Weld’s letter we get a glimpse into the independent activities of African Americans in freedom to reunite their families through compensated manumission and how their efforts could fit into abolitionist rhetoric.

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119 “Letter from Theodore Weld” *The Genius of Universal Emancipation* (May 1834). This connection between abolitionist rhetoric about African American ingenuity and free labor in the example of those who bought their freedom will be discussed further in later chapters.
Not long after Weld’s letter, Louisa Picquet left the South and settled in Cincinnati, Ohio after being freed by her enslaver in New Orleans. Her story is told in *Louisa Picquet, The Octoroon: A Tale of Southern Slave Life*, an interview of sorts recorded by Reverend Henry Mattison. Notwithstanding Mattison’s voyeuristic preoccupation with pain, color, and flesh, Picquet’s story of how she succeeded in purchasing her mother is useful in understanding the experiences of self-emancipated and free men and women as they worked to bring their families back together in the North.\(^{120}\)

When Picquet arrived in Cincinnati she stayed with a woman, Mrs. Nelson, whom she had known when she lived in Georgia as a child. Nelson was enslaved with Picquet’s mother and her husband had bought her. After becoming free Picquet began to think more and more about her mother who she had not seen in twenty years. The thought of being free while so many others she had known were still enslaved was a “great weight” on Picquet’s mind. Although Picquet had married and had a new family, her freedom was incomplete.\(^{121}\)

Picquet tells Mattison that she then “made it a business for about eleven years to inquire of everyone I saw, almost, about my mother.” Through her husband Picquet learned that one of her clients knew her mother’s enslaver, Mr. Horton. This allowed her to send a letter to her mother through a “kink” which made it possible for mail to “reach a slave.” About three weeks later, Picquet received a letter from her mother, Elizabeth Ramsey. Ramsey states that Col. Horton would sell her for $1000 or for a woman that could fill her place. Ramsey says that she thinks Picquet could “get one cheaper where

\(^{120}\) Henry Mattison. *Louisa Picquet, The Octoroon: A Tale of Southern Slave Life* (New York: Published by the Author, 1861), 23.

\(^{121}\) Mattison, *Louisa Picquet*, 25, 27.
you are that would fill my place than to pay him the money” and that she was “anxious” to have her “make this trade.” She said she had not spent “one happy moment since I received your kind letter.” The Colonel was also willing to sell Picquet’s brother for $1500 or for another boy of fifteen.122

Ramsey also tells Picquet that she thinks $1000 is too high a price for her and directs her to write to Horton and get him to drop the price. She says she thinks Picquet can get him to “change his price by writing Kindly to him” to “soften his heart” and asking him to let her have her mother for less. Picquet does not mention any intention of replacing her mother or brother with the purchase of other enslaved people. However, Ramsey’s suggestion that another woman could be bought cheaper than she could be seems to show that she was more concerned with making it easier for her daughter to purchase her than the broader implications of a trade of this nature.123

A series of letters between Picquet and Horton followed but he refused to lower the price of Ramsey or John. In March 1860, Picquet, after Horton failed to respond, wrote to his wife asking for help in dealing with her husband. The next month Ramsey let Picquet know that she had “a talk” with Horton and that he had dropped her price to $900. The Picquets had already begun planning how they might get the money to buy Ramsey before this news was received.124

Like the families discussed in Weld’s letter, by the 1850s and 1860s many African Americans still lived under precarious economic conditions as they worked to take care of themselves and their families’ every day needs. No matter how they planned,

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122 Mattison, Louisa Picquet, 27-29. Picquet did not want this technique to be published as she worried that it would hinder her ability to get letters. (30)
123 Mattison, Louisa Picquet, 30-31.
124 Mattison, Louisa Picquet, 35, 45.
there was very little overhead for those, like the Picquets, who faced the opportunity of saving a loved one from enslavement. They had the understanding that it would take unyielding sacrifice and that, no matter the effort, reunion might remain in the realm of the impossible, a heartbreaking conundrum to be sure.

Although sourced from an abolitionist publication, Picquet’s story gives us a look into what options were available to African Americans who did not have access to or did not want to reach out for the movement’s support in their fundraising efforts. First, the Picquet family thought they might draw on her husband’s wages two years in advance. Not only would they have had to find some other way to live during those two years, but two years of his labor would only amount to some $500, not even enough to purchase of her mother. They also considered selling everything they could do without, but the sale would have amounted to little. Picquet instead worked to save money “even denying herself many of the comforts of life.” Through this “rigid economy,” however, she was only able to save $60.

As she discussed her predicament with friends they counseled her to go out and seek assistance. Picquet was reluctant to search out support in this way, as she had not traveled extensively before except while enslaved, and also worried about the care of her family while she was gone. Picquet, however, was eventually led to the support of a network of churches and abolitionists who helped her to raise the money needed to free her mother. Picquet had the backing of James Poindexter from a local church as well as the abolitionist Levi Coffin. Local newspapers announced Picquet’s appeal and her travels. She travelled throughout the state of Ohio receiving donations from churches as well as private donations. Henry R. Smith of Cleveland wrote ahead to Henry Ward
Beecher and others in New York where Picquet left with almost another $300. At the end of her trip she was only in need of some $150 more. Within only about a month Picquet raised the money needed to reunite with her mother. After her travels she received word that Horton was no longer willing to sell her brother because John had become too valuable to Horton’s interest for him to accept John’s ransom. Ramsey would have to leave her other child behind to reach freedom with her daughter.125

Louisa Picquet’s husband, Henry, also had previous experience with buying freedom. His first wife had been enslaved in Georgia and had been sold as part of the division of her master’s estate. Picquet borrowed money from his father but when he travelled to Macon, GA to see about buying her he found that things were “different from what he expected” and that he could not have her as his wife again, as her new master had “bought her for himself.” Picquet did buy his three-month-old child. In addition, Picquet relates the story of a woman named Lucy, who was a seamstress for her former Georgia owner’s wife. Lucy was sold in Mobile on the same day as Picquet and her family. Picquet recalls that Lucy and her children were freed through a complex set of circumstances and networks, including the white fathers of her children and her own relatives, especially her “sister Judy and Mr. - -, who kept her.” This man seems to have lived with more than one of Lucy’s sisters, including Judy.126

It is not clear from Picquet’s recollection how the white fathers of Lucy’s children came to buy their sons and daughters, nor in what manner the sales were negotiated or completed. What is apparent, however, is that Lucy’s family had enough of a network to

125 Mattison, Louisa Picquet, 36, 37-41.
126 Picquet dared not have Mr. - -’s name published “as the parties are still living, and she fears they might shoot her.” Mattison, Louisa Picquet, 27, 20-21.
find out that she and her children were being sold and one that was strong enough to access the funds needed to free them. It is also clear, as discussed earlier, that intimate relationships between enslaved people and their slaveholders and other white people made for yet another layer in the complex web of southern life that influenced who could negotiate buying freedom.

What quickly becomes apparent in the study of self-purchase is that a variety of networks and connections were often crucial means of support in undertaking, and successfully completing, the process. This is true within the South, but also within broader geographical and political networks. In the later period, which will be discussed more fully in later chapters, it appears that the frequency and urgency with which requests for funds were supported within the abolition movement increased. This, surely, was related to the ease with which self-emancipated people could be caught by their former owners after 1850. It also shows the work that many fugitives did to settle into their new lives. Forging connections with their new communities made for added assurance that they had people to rely on in cases of emergency. African Americans made use of whatever network connections were most accessible. These networks followed the geographical movement of the self-emancipated, the formerly enslaved, and those who were kidnapped or sold through their underground and above ground movements.127

127 Historian Cheryl LaRoche also centers the role of black churches in helping connect the self-emancipated to broader freedom networks. LaRoche, recognizing self-purchase as a crucial path to freedom, also highlights the economic repercussions of self-purchase in relation to the formation of lasting economic successes of the mostly free black towns that she studies. Community remained an important factor in successful cases of self-purchase and compensated manumission outside of the South and freedom often came at the price of extreme labor and economic loss for free African American communities. Cheryl Janifer LaRoche. Free Black Communities and the Underground Railroad: The Geography of Resistance (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 2.
Yet, no matter what lives formerly enslaved people worked to make for themselves outside of slavery, many still worked to recreate the kinship connections that had been forged during enslavement. Stories of compensated manumission show that black networks stretched across the terrain of slavery and freedom. Lines of communication were open between enslaved people and their free relatives and friends who lived outside of slavery’s bounds. These lines often followed the routes that enslaved people were forced to follow as the capital investments and property of others, but also the ones they set out to forge on their own terms as they attempted to use the conditions and theories under which they were enslaved to free themselves and each other.

Often freedom had less value if it could not be enjoyed with family, or dedicated to gaining your family’s freedom. Like the black community Theodore Weld wrote about in Cincinnati, African Americans all over the country worked diligently to purchase the right to free loved ones and bring their families back together. This work, often grueling, helped give shape to freedom and gave it further purpose. African Americans who participated in buying freedom may have participated in slavery’s market but they did so to reconstitute the sanctity of black humanity and kinship in the face of a capitalist system that worked at every level to eradicate both.

As African Americans labored towards freedom they worked against a system that set out to destroy the bonds of kinship through black labor which was, of course, the cause of their enslavement and also their separation. They worked to use the same systems of commodification towards their advantage as they denied slavery’s ability to devalue their bodies and bonds. Despite the fact that they were still, in some way, laboring for the benefit of a system that marked human beings as property, African
Americans chose to buy and invest in freedom again and again. In their own way they fought slavery’s capacity to destroy black families and limit the meaning of freedom. Further, which we will see in the next chapter, as the abolition movement debated self-purchase and compensated manumission as a technique of liberation, these conversations of family, legal freedom, and support were centered by African Americans aligned with the movement who had experienced buying freedom.
CHAPTER 3
“RANSOMED!” ABOLITIONISTS DEBATE COMPENSATED MANUMISSION

As the nineteenth century progressed, southern slaveholders met the threat of abolition and black resistance by attempting to tighten their hold on enslaved people and on the nation and its laws. Abolitionists and African American communities found themselves dealing with a seemingly ever more powerful and dangerous foe. After the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, the laws of slavery extended beyond their physical boundaries more boldly than ever before. Self-emancipated people were no longer even nominally free or physically safe in the North. Though many African Americans had long validated compensated manumission to become free, as the crisis deepened and access for slaveholders expanded across the nation over the century the necessity of purchasing legal freedom became even more pressing. Yet even earlier, faced with the constant pressure of African Americans who refused to give up on self-purchase to resist slavery’s power, the abolition movement had to examine one of its inaugural principles that held that it was against compensation for slaveholders.

As the networks discussed in the last chapter expanded, so too did interactions between abolitionists and those working to purchase their liberty and that of loved ones. African Americans looking to buy freedom traveled through abolition circuits, giving lectures, looking for financial support, and telling their stories in newspapers and narratives. They made use of the movement’s print culture and other social forms and networks in order to gain assistance in their attempts to purchase freedom. As African Americans increasingly became crucial to the movement's success through their participation in abolitionist print and public spheres, they demanded a willingness by the
movement to improvise under force of circumstance and support for meaningful freedom(s) by attempting to expose what life under enslavement and in fugitivity was actually like. For many, compensated manumission was the only way to ensure the lasting legal freedom of loved ones and bring families back together.

This chapter will look at how the founding and evolving principles of the AASS, which had great influence on the abolition movement more broadly, interacted with the lives of African Americans and self-purchase as a path to freedom. There were those in the movement who were willing to support the work of African Americans who wished to reunite with their families in legal freedom. However, as we will see in the discussion of Douglass’ ransom, there were also some abolitionists who refused to bend to the wishes and demands of African Americans for support. Notable cases which caused intense debate within abolitionist circles will be examined, including the purchase of Frederick Douglass’ freedom in 1846 and the efforts to raise money to buy members of the Edmondson family after they were caught attempting to escape on the Pearl in 1848.

In 1846 a group of English abolitionists, led by the Richardson sisters, raised money to pay Hugh Auld £150 to buy the freedom of Frederick Douglass, undoubtedly one of the world’s most (in)famous fugitives.128 Douglass’ manumission caused much debate within abolitionist circles. Pages of anti-slavery newspapers, especially The Liberator, overflowed with letters and reports from Douglass himself and many others discussing whether paying for his freedom was an ethical choice and asking what the implications of that action were. Facing the purchase of a man so valuable to their cause brought up questions as to whether the lofty principles laid out in the AASS’s founding

128 “Letter to Frederick Douglass with his Reply” The Liberator (January 29th, 1847).
document, or the necessity of circumstance, should influence the actions of both abolitionists and enslaved and self-emancipated African Americans in their attempts to escape slavery.

While it was well and good to stand on principle, for Douglass and many others including William Lloyd Garrison, the exigency of obtaining a more indisputable freedom outweighed the moral quandary of being complicit with slavery. As one letter to The Liberator, recognizing the need to consider individual circumstances eloquently expressed, “man is a finite being, of limited powers; and if he cannot do all he would, he ought to do all that he can.”

For many abolitionists the necessity of being legally free made up for any lingering doubts over whether assisting self-emancipated and enslaved African Americans in purchasing their freedom was morally conscionable. Yet there were also abolitionists who refused to bend on this issue and continued to insist, according to their consciences, that buying freedom was an “unwise appropriation of funds” and that the purpose of the abolition movement was strictly the “overthrow of the slave system and the emancipation of every slave,” not just individual manumission.

However, in the same way that abolitionist funding went to assist workers in underground rail road networks in moving fugitives to freedom in the North and Canada, so too did compensated manumission support the liberty of self-emancipated people and their families.

Besides such celebrated cases that gave the impetus for passionate discussions over the direction and ethics of the broader movement, this chapter will look into the

129 “Ransom of Frederick Douglass.” The Liberator (March 5, 1847).
work of abolitionists to understand what was at stake in cases of buying freedom and study how it was debated within the movement. More broadly, it follows how these discussions changed over the course of the nineteenth century up to 1850. Chapter Six will discuss the period after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act. What is clear from the debates is that most abolitionists were willing to deviate from doctrine in emergency situations. Yet, what African Americans in the movement made clear was that for an enslaved family nearly every case in which the opportunity presented itself to purchase a loved one, or face permanent separation, was an emergency.

Central to this chapter will be understanding what the ethics of the abolition movement were in regards to compensated manumission and in supporting men and women who took every opportunity they could to shield their loved ones from enslavement and to be with them in freedom. Thus, it is important to recover the demands African Americans placed on the movement in order to gain support for their efforts to be free. Like the more famous fugitive slave cases, black efforts at purchasing freedom can tell us about the interracial and positional politics of the American abolition movement and how the movement’s relationship to compensated manumission and legal freedom was shaped by the beliefs of those who actually faced (re)enslavement.

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In 1833 a group of abolitionists gathered in Philadelphia to create the AASS. The group was constituted under the Declaration of Sentiments, written by William Lloyd Garrison. For our purposes here, it is necessary to look at how the society’s declaration imagined not only the laws of slavery and property, but also their demands for uncompensated emancipation. The declaration stated that “every American citizen, who
detains a human being in involuntary bondage as his property, is, according to Scripture, a man-stealer:” that the “slaves ought instantly be set free” and that all “laws which are now in force, admitting the right of slavery, are therefore, before God, utterly null and void.” In addition, it claimed that no compensation be given to enslavers since “freeing the slave is not depriving them of property, but restoring it to its rightful owner” and would right the slave by “restoring him to himself.” The declaration also posited that, “Because slavery is a crime” freedom “therefore is not an article to be sold.” Lastly, it stated that if any compensation was to be involved it should go to the “outraged and guiltless slaves.”

Following the 1833 Declaration of Sentiments of the AASS, many abolitionists had long held that it was morally wrong and economically unsound to compensate slaveholders for something which could not belong to them in the first place, the freedom of another human being. Freedom was one of those inalienable rights supposedly guaranteed by the nation’s Enlightenment inspired founding documents that had created the United States. It was not something to be bought and sold. Compensated emancipation was viewed in the Declaration as a “surrender of the great fundamental principle that man cannot hold property in man.” Appealing to ideas of human rights, the AASS believed that slaveholders had no legitimate claim to their property in people, not only because “no man has a right to enslave or imbrue his brother- to hold or acknowledge him, for one moment, as a piece of merchandise,” but also because all slave law went against the enslaved’s inalienable right to be free.131

As the laws of the United States that recognized the right of a slave master to own his enslaved people as property went against the laws of God and nature, it was therefore impossible to consider compensating the slaveholder for the loss of property he had never rightfully owned. Liberty was the natural state of all people and no slaveholder should be paid to restore that rightful condition. The declaration boldly declared that man could not be “merchandise” and freedom was not an “article to be sold.” Thus, for AASS members, compensating enslavers for their theoretically impossible human property was deemed outside of the realm of action and principle ascribed to by members. While some abolitionists believed that this applied to all matters of compensation, there was, for others, a distinction to be made between compensating slaveholders as a class, and the ransoming of individuals.

While many who subscribed to the Declaration could perhaps afford to uphold such lofty and just goals, many African Americans had a practical need to gain legal freedom, even if it meant recognizing, at least in theory, the legal right of enslavers to hold them as property. The law, as written in the United States, recognized the rights of personal property over human liberty. It therefore threatened black freedom in a myriad of ways, causing many African Americans to live under the threat of permanent, lifetime enslavement, or re-enslavement for those who had been self-emancipated but not manumitted. As highlighted in Chapter One, African Americans had long looked to compensated manumission and self-purchase as a way to ensure a lasting and legally meaningful freedom. As the AASS, representing the formulation of a second wave of American abolition and coalesced under the banner of immediacy and uncompensated

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and total emancipation, debated compensated manumission, African Americans worked to center their needs and desire to be free under the law of slavery.

By the mid nineteenth century the number of fugitives and freed people escaping southern slavery had seemingly turned into a flood. Their actual numbers seemed to have not mattered so much as their effect on the abolition movement and national politics. As former slaves became activists in the abolition movement and within their own northern communities, they gave white abolitionists a new perspective on slavery and made their cause more compelling. By telling their stories of the terror and physical and mental violence of enslavement and forcing questions of their status into the politics of the movement, self-emancipated African Americans pushed the nation to grapple ever more dangerously with the question of American slavery. The violence that had been brewing over slavery and abolition became even more pronounced as “cross-border skirmishing” increased due to southern attempts to forcefully return fugitives to slavery and the new, more militant, self-defense of African Americans and their allies in the face of these incursions.133

Abolitionist discussion over compensated manumission came up most frequently over cases in which individuals looked to the movement to support their efforts to buy freedom, either their own, or that of family members. As more and more enslaved African Americans escaped to the North, their influence and importance in the abolition movement grew. As discussed in previous chapters, African Americans used self-

purchase as a way out of enslavement, and others, who had already escaped, purchased their freedom to protect the liberty they had already ‘stolen.’

It was also an important technique to reunite African Americans with their enslaved relatives. As witnessed by stories of fugitivity across abolitionist print culture, freedom was often deemed incomplete without loved ones. This urgency was clearly shown in the ways African Americans discussed and acted around issues of compensation. In 1839, the Pennsylvania Freeman recorded the story of a woman living in Massachusetts who, upon hearing that her enslaved daughter was being advertised for sale in Baltimore among the property of her bankrupt owner, “scraped together her earnings and savings” and returned with her daughter. The woman’s great sacrifice is evidenced by her description in the article as “poor and sick” and deserving of “charity.” 134 As Margaret Kellow argues, “ties of affection and kinship outweighed other considerations” and that any “inconsistency” between principle and action created little problem for black communities when faced with the separation of families. 135

Self-purchase was necessary because it was the only way to effect manumission if not otherwise granted by the slaveholder, or the courts. The movement was frequently forced to deal with the disparity between its principle of not supporting compensation for slaveholders and the reality of the necessity of protecting black life and liberty in a land where the law of slavery was often the law to be reckoned with. When the movement was “faced with choices from time to time that required them to weigh principle against expediency,” many abolitionists sided with those who would be legally free. According

134 “A Mother’s Affection” The Pennsylvania Freeman (March 28, 1839).
to Aileen Kraditor in her classic book on Garrisonian abolition, “Garrison distinguished between principles, which must never be compromised, and policy, which to serve principle must be flexible,” by “enunciating a consistently held tactical theory that reconciled humanitarian feelings with principle.” ¹³⁶ For many abolitionists, the fragile state of black freedom without the sanction of the law led them to support flexible policy in regards to compensated manumission, regardless of the movement’s broader ideals, as laid out in the Declaration of Sentiments.

In the age of moral suasion, printed matter was the lifeblood of the movement’s cultural and political work to end slavery. It also worked as an important intra-abolition site in which to share information and debate ideas. In their introduction to the book Early African American Print Culture, Cohen and Stein describe their idea of print culture as distinguishing between “‘print,’ a technology that fixes impressions, and ‘print culture’ a world in which print both integrates with other practices and assumes a life of its own.” African American and abolitionist print cultures of course intersect in ways that make this description useful. African Americans worked within abolitionist print culture to not only access funds to finance the freedom of themselves and their families, but also to shape the discussion over compensated manumission as a viable means to freedom. As they debated their fellow abolitionists in newspapers, published narratives whose profits would be used directly to reunite families, and advertised their stories, black abolitionists

¹³⁶ Aileen Kraditor, Means and Ends in American Abolitionism: Garrison and His Critics on Strategy and Tactics, 1834-1850 (Chicago: Elephant Paperbacks, 1989), 222. Mellow also sees this as a tension within the movement between “legal and moral” condemnation of enslavement as an institution and an “emotional and humanitarian response to those who were held in bondage.” Mellow, “Conflicting Narratives,” 200.
worked to assert the practical importance of being legally free. Thus, African Americans used the abolitionist print culture and public sphere to not only become free but also to theorize freedom.\footnote{Lara Langer Cohen and Jordan Alexander Stein, \textit{Early African American Print Culture} (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 7.}

From the 1830s, stories of self-purchase and requests and calls for funds frequently appeared in the pages of abolitionist newspapers like \textit{The Liberator} and \textit{The National Anti-Slavery Standard} and were recorded in slave narratives published in the name of full abolition. The inclusion of such stories, even if often just recorded as small miscellaneous pieces, in the most important abolitionist newspapers of the nineteenth century seem to suggest a tacit approval of buying freedom within the movement, broadly speaking. This is also the case for the support some African Americans, as Lunsford Lane and others recorded in their narratives, had from abolitionists in raising the funds needed to free themselves and family members. It is probable that most abolitionists who had contact with African Americans knew the fragile state of life under fugitivity and were willing to lend support wherever possible. We see even early on, that in many instances strict subscription to the principles of the AASS did not preclude assisting African Americans in buying freedom when deemed necessary. It is interesting to remember that the ingenious stories of self-purchase told in Hopper’s \textit{Tales of Oppression} series discussed in Chapter One were being published in the \textit{Standard} in the 1840s.

The pages of abolitionist newspapers are also scattered with stories, advertisements, and appeals of those who had bought, or would buy their freedom. The inclusion of these items make clear that throughout the course of the movement self-purchase was being used and must have been generally accepted, if not completely
favored. In the October 1, 1831 issue of *The Liberator*, notably paged with news of the capture of Nat Turner and the terrifying and violent backlash against African Americans in the aftermath of the rebellion, is an item titled “A Charitable Appeal.” The appeal, made on behalf of John Gustive, states that a “highly intelligent and pious colored man is now in this city, for the purpose of obtaining the charities of our citizens, wherewith to purchase the freedom of his three children who are now in slavery.” The short text goes on to say that with support Gustive had been able to “ransom himself, his wife, and eldest daughter” and that a “little more than $300 remain to be collected.” The sum, Garrison trusted, would be obtained “without difficulty” as it involved the “present and eternal welfare of three poor children, who are as dear to their unfortunate parents as ours are to us and who must be torn from their arms if the money be not speedily raised.”138 Here, Garrison calls on familial feeling and reveals the effects of slavery on the stability of black families to aid Gustive’s fundraising efforts.

Interestingly, given the tone in relation to the fundraising efforts of Gustive, in 1832 *The Liberator* ran an article from Benjamin Lundy’s *Genius of Universal Emancipation* in which Lundy complained about remarks made by Garrison about an article published by Lundy on the subject of emancipation by purchase without having provided the actual piece for proper context. Lundy maintains that *Genius* “NEVER advocated the proposition” as Garrison presented, as it “could not be done without the most palpably inconsistency—the most glaring dereliction of principle.” The article referred to a proposal by Rufus King, in which the proceeds of public lands would be applied to the consensual purchase of enslaved people for their colonization. The *Genius*

suggested that with the addition of a stipulation causing the end of slavery so that the African slave trade would not be extended, the proposition would be hailed, stating, “let the government pay any reasonable sum in the name of compromise…but never sanction the principle that man can be rightfully considered property, by the purchase of a single one, without this IRREVOCABLE STIPULATION.”

Garrison, after dutifully reprinting his mentor’s article, declared that he “must again express our surprise and sorrow” that Lundy would “hail with pleasure” any such project. The Liberator continued that it was an “abandonment of justice” “calculated to divert the attention” from the “guilt of the holders of slaves.” Garrison describes the problem as turning on Constitutional issues suggesting that it is beyond the powers of the government, for if they have the right to be paid, they then had a right to their slaves as property and “ought not to be required to sacrifice their property.” But, if they did not, “we ought not to do evil that good may come.” Garrison further estimated that this scheme would cost some $400 million dollars in 1832. By the time slaveholders would consent, which Garrison projects as 1870, there would be an exponential growth in the enslaved population, and therefore in the cost of emancipation. With this and other problems envisioned, Garrison reminds readers that it was the “duty” of slaveholders to emancipate their “victims immediately” and maintained that they deserved no “remuneration for giving up stolen property.” Using language that he would come to repeat in the Declaration, Garrison demanded that they end their “robberies” and “liberate NOW- to-morrow is too far distant.”

139 “Purchase of Slaves” The Liberator (July 14, 1832).
As these articles show, there was no clear consensus on how to deal with the issue of compensation. Lundy, in reflecting on King’s compensated manumission plan, seems to suggest that if it included an end to slavery it may have found broader anti-slavery support. Garrison, while clearly supporting efforts of individual African Americans in buying their freedom, was not prepared to compensate slaveholders as a class. He not only argues against compensated emancipation as a practical issue but also as a moral question. While Garrison recognized the exigency present in the cases of African Americans like John Gustive, who worked to reunite his family through purchasing their freedom, he refused to admit the right of slaveholder’s to their human property by paying for the full abolition of slavery in the United States.

As argued earlier, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793, if not as outrageous as that of 1850, did put many African Americans at risk of kidnapping and recapture, especially after Prigg v. Pennsylvania, which effectively outlawed northern legal protections for fugitives. One of the first fugitive slave crises that would propel movement discussion over compensated manumission was that of George Latimer who was taken up by his former slaveholder in Boston in the Fall of 1842. Typical legal tactics had not worked in the case to free Latimer. Finally, ample outrage and publicity led to Latimer’s claimant agreeing to sell him. African Americans in the city quickly raised the money to purchase his freedom.¹⁴⁰ As we see in the Latimer case, and as holds true for the later period to be discussed, political climate and exigency mattered in how the movement dealt and discussed issues of compensation

¹⁴⁰ Sinha, The Slave’s Cause, 390-392. Latimer is also known for sparking the passage of the Latimer Law, which forbade the use of state institutions in the aid of the remanding of fugitive slaves. Local and state laws which would later be overturned by the passage of the 1850 Act.
During this same period, the increasing publication of African American narratives helped stories of self-purchase and compensated manumission make their way even further into abolitionist print culture. Through their narratives and activism African Americans increasingly imparted their willingness to improvise and to obtain freedom by any means available to the spirit of the movement. The title page of the *Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy; Late a Slave in the United States of America*, declares that the volume is “Published and Sold for the Benefit of His Relations Still in Slavery.” Grandy, as discussed earlier, had been forced to pay multiple times for his own freedom, amounting to around $1800. Grandy closes his 1843 narrative by thanking those who had helped him “procure” the “blessing of freedom” for himself, his wife, and some of his children. However, Grandy’s freedom remains incomplete as he tells his readers that “whatever profit may be obtained by the sale of this book, and all donations with which I may be favoured, will be faithfully employed in redeeming my remaining children and relatives from the dreadful condition of slavery.”\(^\text{141}\) As Grandy’s narrative exemplifies, many enslaved and self-emancipated African Americans in the nineteenth century sought out compensated manumission as a crucial path to legal freedom, on their own and with the help of their supporters.

Moses Grandy’s narrative, and others like it, combined stories of enslavement with publication as means to finally escape the far-reaching hand of slavery’s law. They are examples of this direct connection between the circulation of books, bodies, currencies, and papers of manumission and sale, often in overlapping markets. Worthy of

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\(^{141}\) Grandy *Narrative*, 72. In June of 1845 Frederick Douglass’ narrative was listed for sale in the PA Freeman for 50 cents. Grandy’s narrative, published two years before Douglass’ and with a less famous author, would have had to sell an enormous amount of copies to enable the purchase of the rest of his family. “Advertisement” *Pennsylvania Freeman* (June 5, 1845).
note is another North Carolinian, George Moses Horton. Horton, the famous poet whose work was published in newspapers in North Carolina and in the North, and his supporters worked to try to gain his freedom. In the late 1820s, the African American newspaper, *Freedom’s Journal*, requested that readers contribute to Horton’s quest for freedom, at the cost of $500. Shortly after the *Raleigh Register* recorded that the Manumission Society of North Carolina was also interested in Horton’s situation. The Manumission Society of North Carolina, in a published address on the evils of slavery from 1830, also made their support of self-purchase known by recommending a law that would “facilitate individual emancipation still further, by authorizing” enslaved people to “make contracts with their masters by which they may purchase their own freedom.” Eventually a book of his poetry entitled *The Hope of Liberty* was published to try to raise enough money for his emancipation.\footnote{George M. Horton. *The Hope of Liberty: Containing a Number of Poetical Pieces.* (Raleigh: J. Gales & Son, 1829). 3. Manumission Society of North Carolina. “An Adress to the People of North Carolina on the Evils of Slavery.” (Greensborough, NC: 1830) Reprint NY, 1860. 67.} The volume was also reprinted by abolitionists in the North. Despite widespread support in abolitionist print culture, Horton was not successful in becoming free through purchase, although he did continue to publish and write poetry as he hired his time at the state university.

William Andrews records that David Walker himself, author of one of the most infamous pamphlets in all of African American letters, donated to Horton’s cause. Andrews even wonders if it was possible that men like Grandy and Lunsford Lane, whose narrative was published in 1842, and both from North Carolina, had sought out self-purchase as a way to become free because of the popularity of Horton’s story and further if they were influenced in their freedom dreams by Walker’s *Appeal* and Horton’s
protest poetry. We know that compensated manumission was well-known to enslaved people from their everyday experiences but it is worth contemplating the possible influence of the printed world on the actions of the enslaved. It is possible that this kind of anti-slavery printed matter related to self-purchase may have made its way into the hands of African Americans or their networks in the South and perhaps helped to push them towards this path to freedom.

In abolitionist George Thompson’s introduction to Grandy’s narrative - Thompson, in addition to the standard recitation of Grandy’s moral character from his letters of introduction, describes his examination of a book “containing a list of the donations made [Grandy] by his American friends” in “aid of his noble design” to “rescue” his remaining family. The record book included the “names and certificates” of people of the “highest respectability,” including Ellis Gray Loring, who would help arrange the redemption of Douglass in 1846. This book of vouchers in itself was enough for Thompson to resolve to commit Grandy's story to “press…as nearly as possible in the language of Moses himself” so that its “sale might contribute to the object which engages so entirely the mind of Moses” and work to increase the “zeal” of others to look towards the “breaking of every yoke.” Thus, Grandy’s book of certificates of financial support for the manumission of his family carried across the Atlantic acts as a catalyst for the writing and publication of his narrative. Grandy’s quest for the liberation of his family, and his reputation, are further collected and bound together in a papered freedom.

At the end of his narrative Grandy discusses the activities of his “many friends” in helping him and “very many other coloured persons” to buy the freedom of no less than

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ten families from slavery. He declares that “this year they are pursuing the same good work” and that “but for these numerous and heavy claims on their means and kindness” he would not need to “appeal to the generosity of the British public.”\(^{144}\) Clearly then, on both sides of the Atlantic there were a number of abolitionists working within the movement to support African American efforts to liberate loved ones. Grandy uses the space of his narrative to celebrate their efforts and describe their importance to families like his.

As so often happened, Grandy’s story also circulated in the pages of abolitionist newspapers. In 1838 an article in *The Liberator* describing Grandy as a “respectable and worthy colored resident of this city” declares that he wishes it to be known for the benefit of “those kind friends who furnished him the necessary means” that he had succeeded in redeeming his son for $450. According to the paper, by 1838 Grandy had paid for the freedom of himself, his wife, and the above-mentioned son, but still had 6 other children in slavery “of whose fate and location he is ignorant.”\(^{145}\) In February of 1844, *The Liberator* also ran Thompson’s introduction as an advertisement for the American edition of Grandy’s narrative, published in Boston.

Abolitionist papers were also happy to print the successes of those whose stories they had covered, or of those who were known to the cause through their appeals for funds. In June 1842, the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* reported the reception of Lunsford Lane at a meeting of the society in which he recounted his trials and tribulations on his path to reunite his family. He recalled the twelve months he had travelled asking


\(^{145}\) “A Ransom” *The Liberator* (January 12, 1838).
for assistance.\textsuperscript{146} In 1845 the paper also printed a report of a man, Carolina Jones, who
“many of our friends will remember,” as he had been “travelling through the country for
a year past, raising funds to purchase his wife and children.” The Standard reported on
the success of Jones for the sake of “those who have contributed to his happiness.” Jones
had called upon the author of the article with his wife and four of his children and seemed
“inexpressibly happy” that he had a “home of his own with nearly all his family in it.”
One son remained enslaved as the price for his freedom, $700, was too high.\textsuperscript{147} Often,
appeals and articles like these make up small news items and leave unanswered many
tantalizing questions about the lives of those on whose behalf the appeals are printed. No
matter what information they fail to tell us, they show that throughout the nineteenth
century African Americans used abolitionist networks in order to raise funds to become
free. Their printed appeals must have helped to normalize the technique for readers of
abolitionist print culture and help them to understand the problem of urgency from the
position of black families.

The work of African Americans, however, failed to create universal acceptance of
the tactic. William Still recorded a story from Lewis Tappan about a mother and father
who came to his office in New York looking for assistance in raising the $2,000 needed
to purchase their sons who were going to be sold in North Carolina. Tappan told them
that he had “scruples about putting money into the hands of slave-holders” but that he
would help them gain their freedom through other means. A few weeks later the sons

\textsuperscript{146} “A Whole Family Set Free” NASS (June 9, 1842).
\textsuperscript{147} “Freed” NASS (October 23, 1845).
visited Tappan to relate the story of their escape. When asked for financial support for compensated manumission, Tappan guided this family towards illegal escape. While the family was eventually reunited, one would assume that the sons were still in danger of recapture as fugitives. This story shows that African Americans often had to negotiate abolitionist ideals to find the support they needed to become legally free through compensated manumission.

Whatever the conjunction between the uses of the stories of self-purchase in the name of the abolitionist cause and that of meaningful freedoms, abolitionist print remained a site for debates over the ethicality of compensated freedom. Pointedly, Grandy tells his readers at the end of his narrative that what he and those allied with his cause had assisted him in obtaining, the final freedom of himself and some of his loved ones, was a blessing that “none can know the value, but he who has been a slave.” Grandy reminds us that in spite of arguments about how freedom should be obtained, what mattered was freedom and family. While he graciously describes the assistance that his “many friends in the Northern States” had given him, he also works to center the black experience of slavery and freedom. Nineteenth century slave narratives played a central role in abolitionist rhetoric and the stories and writings of enslaved and formerly enslaved people filled the pages of the movement’s printed matter. The stories of self-purchase and compensated manumission thus worked on multiple levels to propel the cause of freedom both ideologically and practically, on a deeply personal and national level. They facilitated self-purchase as well as contributed to the cause of abolition.

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Despite the beliefs of abolitionists like Tappan, the movement also produced others who were known within the movement for their support of African Americans who looked to become free through purchase. Gerrit Smith, one of the wealthiest American abolitionists from upstate New York, had established himself as someone who was willing to use his money to fund liberation. Not only did he support African Americans in their efforts to raise money to buy freedom but he also gave parcels of land away to black and poor white New Yorkers. Among other reform causes, Smith was an early member of the ACS and the temperance movement. By mid-century Smith had become known as a philanthropist, responding to twenty-five to thirty-five letters for help every day.\footnote{Stauffer, The Black Hearts of Men, 64. An article in the \textit{NASS} discussing Smith’s role as a “rich philanthropist” imagined his daily life, “assailed by this who solicit his patronage,” and asked if one would really desire to switch places with him for his money. “Gerrit Smith” \textit{NASS} (July 7, 1855).}

Known early on for these efforts, and probably even more widely for his great wealth, Smith received a letter in 1838 from a southern slaveholder who wished for the end of slavery and wanted to move to “some place in the North” and free his six slaves. He worried, however, that the expense of moving would be more than he would be able to handle alone and looked to his “abolition friends at the North” for assistance. The slaveholder suggests that the plan would go through if anyone would “make up” half the value of his enslaved people.\footnote{“Letter to Gerrit Smith” \textit{Pennsylvania Freeman} (October 25, 1838).} He does not specifically ask Smith for support, but one might imagine from the tone of the letter that this is perhaps what he was fishing for. Smith, then, was not only known for his monetary efforts within the movement, but also by those farther afield.
Smith, of course, had the money to make decisions about what he wished to support on his own terms, but he also had his own personal connections to slavery, that he worked to right through compensated manumission. In 1841 Smith worked to redeem the family of an enslaved woman whom Smith’s wife had given to her brother as a young girl. After Smith and his wife had become aware of the “great transgression” of the “crime of slaveholding” they made “continual and earnest inquiry” into finding the woman. She was finally found in Mississippi. Smith engaged a friend to negotiate with the owner to redeem the family of seven at the cost of some $3500. The family returned to Peterboro where Smith and his wife helped them establish a new life in freedom. This restitution on the part of Smith seems to have had general support from abolitionist papers and the “noble and costly act” was lauded by many on both sides of the Atlantic.152

In the aftermath of the Panic of 1837, this was no small financial feat. The panic had brought Smith to the brink of financial ruin. In the aftermath of the panic and personal circumstances, including the death of multiple family members, Smith experienced what John Stauffer has described as a “new birth.” As the panic loosened the “fetters of sin,” Smith worked to internalize “God’s sovereignty” and create a “sacred self.” As he continued to experience his reform work with a new vigor, renouncing colonization for immediatism and encouraging militant black self-defense in the face of enslavement, Smith questioned the threat of the internal wrangling happening within

152 Smith’s father had also been a slaveholder. Stauffer, The Black Hearts of Men, 63, 128. “Samuel and Family” PA Freeman (November 3, 1841). “Gerrit Smith’s Slaves” NASS (February 10, 1842). See also: “Slaves Manumitted- Remarkable Case” NASS (March 14, 1844) Dr. Brisbane, slaveholder from SC who sold his 27 slaves upon moving to OH decided to “redeem and liberate each slave he sold.” Brisbane spent $6000 more than he had gotten for them, in purchasing them back. He wished to allow them to settle on land he had bought in OH. The author believed that his “act of benevolence” commended “itself to the hearts of all.”
abolitionist organizations. Stauffer argues that the more Smith “came to identify with” the oppression faced by African Americans, the more he searched out a new “locus of value.” In the 1840s Smith personalized his abolitionist work by writing to slaveholders urging them to emancipate their slaves and continued to buy the freedom of individuals. He thought that this work could “do more for the cause of the slave than our antislavery organizations have ever done- and they have done much.” Put another way then, perhaps we can view this shifting “locus of value,” and Smith’s relationship to compensated manumission, as an attempt to realign his abolition action more firmly within the traditions of African American communities, in which buying freedom had long been a crucial means of liberation. By 1846, Smith’s vision also included the establishment of black land ownership to secure voting rights, as he planned to give away 120,000 acres of his land through the trusteeship of James McCune Smith, Charles Ray, and Theodore Wright.¹⁵³

Later, in the 1850s, he provided monetary assistance to John Brown for his raid on Harper’s Ferry. He also worked to support the case of William L. Chaplin when he was arrested for aiding fugitives in an escape attempt, spending some $12,000 towards bonds and lawyer’s fees. Chaplin, also from New York and involved with political abolition, worked in the Washington, DC area to assist enslaved people in buying their freedom as part of the work he did with the Underground Railroad. Chaplin, after being exposed to the “agony of black families” in Washington, and assisting many in the purchase of loved ones, looked to create a “bureau of humanity” to “institutionalize” the purchasing of freedom. He believed that the movement should “wholly reject the dogma,

that money is lost which is paid for slaves. Every dollar thus paid is a most effective sermon to the conscience of the guilty.” It is not surprising that the efforts of these men crossed paths quite frequently, as all were active in the Washington, D.C. and New York area Underground Railroad.154

In an 1852 letter in the Standard, Smith complained about Chaplin’s case and the need for more money. For our purposes, Smith also looks back on how he had been “robbed of a great deal from time to time, in the sums, which I have felt myself morally compelled to pay in the purchase of the liberty of slaves.” Smith protests his expenditures on Chaplin as he believed it would have been better purposed “for the cries of our wronged humanity come from numerous directions.” However, he states that he is “consoled” by remembering that he was “better off without this money than they, who got it from me, were with it” and that while the “robbed may feel very sore under his losses: but still he is better off than the robber.”155

The Smiths eventually spent thousands of dollars buying the freedom of enslaved people and assisting fugitives on their way to Canada. In all, the family gave away upwards of a billion dollars in more modern currency to the various causes they supported. While Smith may not have fully achieved the “black heart” Stauffer discusses, like many in African American communities throughout the country, his efforts to buy freedom were mixed with those that assisted fugitives in other, extralegal, ways. In 1846 Smith wrote to a friend that, “I shall have a heart to reduce myself, if not to a poor man- yet well nigh to a poor man- by purchasing the liberty of the enslaved poor.” It therefore

154 Harrold, Subversives, 102-104.
155 Chaplin was no stranger to the connections between underground and legal attempts at freedom. He was also involved in the failed Pearl escape, and redemption of the Edmondson sisters to be discussed below. “The Case of Chaplin” NASS (July 22, 1852).
appears, that Smith, in multiple ways, and across the century, looked to support the cause of freedom. Through a complex vision of slavery’s relation to sin, both personal and national- an idea common to many abolitionists, it also seems like Smith attempted to work out a moral debt with his capital by investing it in freedom.156

Undoubtedly, the most intense debate over compensated manumission within the movement came when the English abolitionist Ellen Richardson succeeded in raising the funds to purchase Frederick Douglass’ freedom in 1846 before he returned to the United States.157 Douglass, one of the most lauded figures and effective orators in the anti-slavery cause, was, of course, a rather special case. As one of the most famous abolitionists of the period, it is, perhaps, unsurprising that many got worked up about the purchase of his freedom by his English supporters. For Douglass, the grave risk of his celebrity was a threat to his continued fugitive freedom. While he was often surrounded by supporters and other abolitionists, his location was almost constantly marked and made known through letters and announcements of his travels and lectures. His very success as an abolitionist, fighting for total emancipation, made it necessary for him to accept, at least on paper, the purchase of his freedom. Yet, as always, Douglass did not shy away from standing up for himself and theorizing the necessity of legal freedom in the pages of The Liberator as he reframed his purchase as ransom. Nor was Douglass alone, Garrison and others who wrote to the newspaper’s editor also defended the buying of this second freedom. As the debate over Douglass’ ransomed liberty is one of the most

extensive records of discussion over compensated manumission in abolitionist print culture, it is important to give it ample space here.\textsuperscript{158}

To fully understand the position of Douglass, it is necessary to discuss some of the events leading up to his transition into legal freedom. Douglass’ \textit{Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass} was published in Boston in the summer of 1845. Douglass biographer William F. McFeely states that by the fall of that same year 4,500 copies were sold, with international editions to follow. Within five years, 30,000 copies of Douglass’ story of his enslavement and freedom had been printed. The success of Douglass as an anti-slavery lecturer soon led the AASS to send Douglass on a tour of the United Kingdom. However, that same success and celebrity, along with the publication of his \textit{Narrative}, also put Douglass at some risk as one of the nation’s most well-known public figureheads of fugitivity.\textsuperscript{159}

The Aulds, Douglass’ enslavers, as one would imagine, were none too pleased at the publication of his narrative, which they, along with the backing of friends, stated was simply untrue. Threats made against Douglass’ freedom made it to the pages of \textit{The Liberator}, which reprinted stories from papers like the \textit{Pennsylvania Freeman} and the \textit{Western Citizen}. The Auld brothers (Thomas and Hugh) were so “bitterly incensed against [Douglass]” that they “openly avowed…in case Frederick ever returned to this country, to spare no pains or expense in order to regain possession of him” and, “cost what it may,” “place him in the cotton fields of the South.” It is clear that Douglass contemplated these threats deeply, even as he basked in the glory of his new and

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\item McFeely, \textit{Frederick Douglass}, 116.
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profoundly different European liberty. In a letter from the *Belfast Protestant Journal*, republished in *The Liberator* in August 1846 Douglass discusses at length the threats made against him by Hugh Auld, to whom his brother Thomas had transferred his title to Douglass. Douglass states that the consequences of publishing his narrative, and “exposing the conduct of my owner” were one of his reasons for leaving the United States. He had wished to be “out of the way during the excitement and exasperation which I had good reason to apprehend would follow the publication of my narrative” and declares that the “wisdom of this course has been fully confirmed” by the threats made by Hugh Auld. This was not the last time Douglass would have to flee the United States in the name of abolition.¹⁶⁰

In this letter Douglass reminds his readers not only of the very precarious position of individual fugitives like himself, but also of the specific threats faced by those who politicized their experiences as enslaved people to fight for the emancipation of all slaves within the movement. Douglass quickly shifts from the direct threats against his freedom by the Auld family to remonstrate the “laws of the land, and the Constitution of the United States.” Douglass declares that despite all the U.S. did to deny him freedom, that “no inducement could be offered strong enough to make me quit my hold upon America as my home,” and it was to the United States he meant to return in the “cause of my outraged fellow-countrymen.”¹⁶¹

It appears that Douglass did have thoughts of remaining in England where he had begun to “live a new life,” experiencing a freedom he had never been afforded in the

¹⁶¹ “Mr. Douglass and the Boston Traveller” *The Liberator*. (August 28, 1846).
United States. McFeely records that Douglass had written his family in Massachusetts in
the summer of 1846 asking if they would perhaps consider moving to England. Douglass
soon reconciled himself to the impossibility of this scheme. Yet while he longed for
loved ones at home, he continued to desire a life of new freedoms like those he had
experienced during his travels in the United Kingdom. While visiting the Quaker
abolitionists Ellen, Henry, and Anna Richardson in Newcastle upon Tyne, Douglass
discussed his concern for his safety if he was to return to America under the watchful
eyes of the Aulds. Ellen Richardson soon decided to raise the funds to ensure that
Douglass could go home as a legally free man. The Richardsons would also raise the
money needed for the freedom of William Wells Brown.162

Richardson secured the support needed to arrange for the purchase of Douglass’
freedom before he was to return to the United States. Douglass, although he would later
claim that he was not involved in the arrangements, apparently wrote to a friend in
Boston who arranged for Ellis Gray Loring, an abolitionist lawyer, to proceed with the
purchase. Loring hired someone in New York (a city that was no stranger to slaveholders
and their business interests) who found a lawyer in Baltimore to contact Hugh Auld.
Douglass’ manumission was secured for £150, reported by the National Anti-Slavery
Standard as $750. In the Talbot County that Douglass had made famous in the opening
lines of his Narrative the bill of sale between Hugh and Thomas Auld was registered on
November 30, 1846. On December 12 the manumission papers for “Frederick Bailey,
otherwise called Frederick Douglass” were registered in Baltimore County, Maryland.
Douglass was now, finally, a free man under the law of the United States. Copies of these

162 “Letter from Frederick Douglass, No V” The Liberator (January 30, 1846). McFeely, Frederick
bills of sale and manumission were published in the *Standard* to gratify readers, “showing how they manage things in the model republic.”\(^\text{163}\)

Douglass’ manumission shows that experience in the world of business and legal matters often, as shown in Chapter One, acted as a crucial means of support that abolitionists could give to fugitives who wished to obtain their legal freedom. While some had money to give freely, in discussing the debates over support for compensated manumission within the abolition movement it is important to note that the vast majority of the abolition movement was working class and did not have access to vast funds. Of course, some abolitionist of means, like Gerrit Smith, supported efforts of enslaved people to buy their freedom. But for many others, it would seem especially wasteful to spend upwards of $1,000 for the purchase of one individual, when that money, in a movement of limited means, could go to more collective work.

Many on both sides of the Atlantic criticized Douglass and his supporters. Debate over the ransomed manumission of Douglass filled the pages of *The Liberator* for months to come. Henry C. Wright, who had been traveling in the U.K. at the same time as Douglass, representing the views of many others, took issue with the purchase of Douglass because it went against the ideals of the AASS. Wright, writing to Douglass in a letter published in *The Liberator*, claimed that Douglass, by commodifying himself, had abandoned his “appeal to mankind” which was not against “the grovelling thief, Thomas Auld, but against the more daring, more impudent and potent thief - the Republic of the United States of America” and in the process given up his “truly manly” and “sublime” position of righteousness.\(^\text{164}\)

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\(^{163}\) “Frederick Douglass” *NASS* (December 3, 1846). “Frederick Douglass” *NASS* (November 11, 1847).

\(^{164}\) “Letter to Douglass with his Reply.” *The Liberator* (January 29, 1847).
A letter from Philadelphia printed in the Standard told readers that the purchase of Douglass’ freedom was “exciting a good deal of talk among the Abolitionists of our city.” Sharing the sentiment of a friend, the author believed that Douglass was now on “lower ground” and while free from the “slightest disposition to blame him,” the author was sorry that Douglass “could not dare as he used to do, the malignity of his master and the slaveocracy.” The author thought that Douglass would no longer “move about in the furnace, heated, by his eloquence, “seven times hotter than ever was heated for any other runaway, and yet unharmed, without the smell of fire on his garments, looking upon his persecutors as a superior being under the protection of immediate providence.” The letter suggests that if Douglass had continued to try his luck, it would have led to the ultimate showdown in which, if justice was not done in the courts and if Douglass’ liberty had then been purchased, the money raised would have been indignantly “hurled at the head of the master.” In this way, the “injustice of the demand would be forced upon their consideration, and they would learn to look upon the system in its true light, and come to see and acknowledge the consistency of Abolitionists refusing to give on such occasions.”

The Liberator published a report from a meeting of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, held on March 12, 1847, where resolutions were adopted stating that the “purchasing of the freedom of a slave is an implied acknowledgment of the masters right of property in human beings, and, in our opinion, inconsistent with the principles set forth in the Declaration of Sentiments of the ‘AASS.’” The group reaffirmed their refusal to

165 “Letter from Philadelphia” NASS (February 18, 1847).
support such endeavors and also resolved that although they “appreciate the kind feelings” of Douglass' supporters, they believed the action to be “impolitic and inexpedient” as it took from him “one of the strongest claims to the sympathy of the community,” as it weakened the “bond that connects the suffering slave with the freeman, and as a deviation from anti-slavery principle, which we deem it our duty to condemn.” Evidently wishing to make their feelings on the subject public, they also wished for their resolution to be sent out for publication in the Liberator, the Standard, and Pennsylvania Freeman.166

An article reprinted from the Hartford Charter Oak, maintained that Frederick Douglass “is a man, and by no means a slave; and the act of buying a little ticket with ‘Free’ written on it, at such an enormous price too, is worse than folly; it is mischievous, and virtually an acknowledgment of the traffic.” This writer proceeds to take up the question of value, asking if Douglass was “fatal to the system of oppression by eloquence of only 750$ power?” The author also asks if it was the “market value of the man they cared for, or the assassin slaveholders who made his stay in this country dangerous,” answering that it was not his monetary value, but “the terror of his great speech, his free words of scathing and scalding rebuke of oppression” that the Auld family was after. Believing that Douglass would be no less vocal or “less manful,” the author decided that the South had only gained money, and Douglass and his supporters had gained nothing but the “loss of it.” As Douglass would continue to be a “hope to the oppressed,” the author declares this “idle” “waste” of money too nearly “implied assent to the master’s robber claim, to be good in morals or policy.” The Standard believed that there was just

166 “Ransom of Douglass” The Liberator (March 19, 1847).
as much reason to fear for Douglass’ freedom as before, as his enslavers “want food for their revenge, not his value in the market.” The paper believed that it would be just as easy to kidnap Douglass now as before his purchase.167

For these writers, then, Douglass’ value is not knowable nor marked as commodified. His newfound freedom is deemed worthless as a loss to his standing, as well as to the cause. Neither party to the sale could mark the value of Douglass’ freedom, nor his re-enslavement. Douglass would still continue in his cause and his life would still be at risk. These arguments seem to neglect the fact that under the law, Auld had a legal claim to Douglass without his manumission. It would have been likely, depending on where he was taken up, that a judge would have recognized Auld’s right to remand Douglass back into enslavement. Of course, it does seem rather unlikely that the fugitive Douglass, even if recaptured, would have stayed in slavery long. Surely he would have been freed through purchase, or have stolen back his liberty, alone, or with the help of others. However, that is not to say that even a further minute of enslavement, or separation from loved ones, would have been acceptable to any self-emancipated person.

Regardless of opinion, Douglass, centering the deep anxiety and lived experience of the fugitive, was clear that the “laws of the land, and the Constitution” gave Auld “full power to arrest me anywhere in that country” and that there was “no State in the whole American Union, from Texas to Maine, in which I am not overshadowed with this terrible liability; and this my assailant very well knows, if he be not totally ignorant of the Constitution of the country.”168

167 “Frederick Douglass” The Liberator (January 15, 1847).
168 “Mr. Douglass and the Boston Traveller” The Liberator (August, 28, 1846).
Thus, the most common arguments against the purchase of Douglass’ liberty were threefold. First, many believed that the relinquishing of Douglass’ stolen freedom and the end of his fugitive status would deprive him of the strength of his voice in the anti-slavery cause. The loss of this claim also was often directly related to Douglass’ manhood. Second, buying freedom went against the AASS Declaration in that it rewarded the slaveholder for something he could not in actuality own and therefore could be construed as recognition of the right of property in human beings. In addition, there were many who thought that despite his legal freedom Douglass would still be in danger of being kidnapped, and that therefore, his purchase did nothing but supply Auld with a “donation of $750.”

Others came to the support of Douglass, recognizing that his freedom should be secured in light of his importance to the cause. One letter in support of Douglass against the writings of Lindley Coates, who criticized Douglass in similar fashion to those above, asked pointedly whether, if Coates’

“wife or child was in the grasp of an unprincipled villain of despotic power, and there was nothing but silver or gold would soften his heart, does not everybody believe...that a moment of time under such circumstances would convert him into a slave-buyer?”

The writer claims to recognize the logic of Coates’ arguments that the purchase of slaves goes against abolitionist principles, specifically the Declaration, but he cannot reconcile the logic with the absolute necessity faced by Douglass, and others like him, of securing their liberty. William Lloyd Garrison, always principled in principle but also almost always willing to compromise with necessity, came to Douglass’ defense in a similar

169 “Frederick Douglass” NASS (December 3, 1846).
manner to the writer above. Garrison claimed that individual circumstances must take precedent over abstract principles in Douglass’ case.170

Douglass, for his part, defended his actions by stating that he had agreed to it because it would enable him to do better work as an abolitionist and would allow him to move more freely about the United States. In response to claims that it would “shorn him of his strength” as an anti-slavery activist, Douglass wrote that he would hold his free papers as a “brand of infamy, stamping the nation, in whose name the deed was done.” For Douglass his ransom is juxtaposed with the opportunity it affords him, by protecting both his body and voice, to extend his efforts to actualize the final and full abolition of slavery. Reflecting the deeper argument against the nation made by his detractors and turning it on its head, Douglass turns his free papers not as a badge of dishonor to the cause, but as a place for further critique. As we have seen, besides cases like that of Frederick Douglass, which caused national debate, abolitionists were also constantly faced with local incidents where it became expedient to buy freedom to save a fugitive from being re-enslaved, turning what was a rhetorical debate into a matter of life and death. Douglass not only defended himself, but also all those in his shoes.171

In 1847, Frederick Douglass insisted that after obtaining his legal freedom, “I shall be Frederick Douglass still, and once a slave still. I shall neither be made to forget nor cease to feel the wrongs of my enslaved fellow-countrymen.”172 With this statement, Douglass firmly reminded his critics that, no matter how he won his freedom, he was a human being who had once been enslaved and that no freedom, however secure, could

170 B. Webb. “Ransom of Frederick Douglass.” The Liberator (March 5, 1847).
171 “Letter to Douglass with his Reply” The Liberator (January 29, 1847).
172 “Letter to Frederick Douglass with his Reply.”
make him forget it nor the millions who had not been so lucky. The only thing that had changed about Frederick Douglass was his legal status. Indeed, as he claimed, the business transaction through which he obtained his legal freedom, as papered and recorded, would forever be a blight on the government of the United States and its sanctification of the system of American slavery.

Douglass’ defense, then, in the pages of The Liberator as well as his later autobiographies, works as a theorization of the reconciliation of the necessity of compensated manumission with the abolitionist principles of non-complicity with slaveholders. He deftly lays out its necessity under law, as he masterfully calls out the legal system that made his purchased liberty necessary. Douglass also frames his purchase not as the commodification of his body, but as a ransom payment upon his future freedom. John Stauffer, considering Douglass’ later criticism of self-purchase, believes that Douglass saw the power dynamic between the parties to the sale as important in deciding its ethicality. It was not acceptable to buy oneself but one could allow others, in a better position of power, to do so. This is also, perhaps, why Douglass and others chose to frame compensated manumission, not simply as buying liberty, but as a ransom. Enslaved and self-emancipated African Americans’ freedom was held hostage by both their enslavers and slave law. Indeed, in some ways all African Americans living within the confines of the United States were threatened by the law of slavery.173

By February 1847 Garrison declared that while he would find space for recent communications on Douglass in later papers, he did not “feel disposed to occupy much space on this subject.” Garrison believed that Douglass had “so ably argued” his position

that further discussion was unnecessary. Douglass was now “legally free” and “seeing no violation of principle in the act,” Garrison was willing to “submit the case to the friends of humanity, without any extended defense of the course pursued by our transatlantic coadjutors.” Garrison did suggest, probably with some irony, that it was “gratifying” that so many abolitionists were concerned “lest their principles should be comprised in the doing of evil that good may come.” 174

_The Standard_, reporting on the financial support Douglass received from those in England, also thought that further discussion of the issue could be of “no benefit.” However, they regretted the response of _The Liberator_ to those who did not approve of Douglass’ ransom, being certain that it was “entirely possible to entertain an honest belief that the purchase of Douglass was unwise, or even wrong.” _The Standard_ thought that it was possible for those who believed it to be wrong to still be “faithful and diligent friends of the slave” and that there was no need to deny the “sincerity and intelligence of those who may take either side of a question, on which there may be a legitimate difference of opinion.” _The Standard_ believed that Garrison’s “reflections of such a character could hardly fail to wound some of Mr. Garrison’s best friends.” 175

The opportunity afforded to Douglass by his English supporters was not only the purchase of his liberty, but also support for a newspaper to be published under his name. In addition to the funds raised for his freedom, $2250 was raised to assist Douglass in starting his own paper when he returned to the United States. While severely critical of its necessity, Douglass clearly saw the worth of his purchase in his security to continue working for the total abolition of slavery. Douglass’ freedom, papered as it was, was

174 “The Ransom of Douglass” _The Liberator_ (February 2, 1847).
175 “Frederick Douglass” _NASS_ (April 1, 1847).
ultimately defined by his continued ability to put abolitionist pen to paper and circulate the word of black liberation and freedom. To Douglass, and most African Americans, how one obtained freedom did not matter so much as what one did with it but that did not mean that they could not critique the technique from an intellectual and political standpoint, as Douglass’ response highlights.176

Douglass, of course, was not the only African American in the nineteenth century to have his freedom financed by abolitionists. Nor was he the only formerly enslaved person to discuss his ransom. There are numerous slave/freedom narratives, like those discussed above and in other chapters, in which the authors discuss the process of buying their freedom while enslaved or how they gained the support of abolitionist allies in buying the freedom of themselves or family members. It is important to note that in most public discussions of Douglass’ purchase it was recognized that, if at base still threatened by the same laws, Douglass’ position was unique and in a number of ways different from the vast majority of self-emancipated people.

However, the discussion taken up over Douglass was a moment in which the abolition movement attempted to debate the alignment of their founding principles with a new and ever more dangerous world for fugitives. Douglass’ eloquent and deeply political defense of his actions is one of the most prominent theorizing on compensated manumission and self-purchase with which the movement had to reckon. Not only does Douglass attempt to speak from the position of illegal freedom to those abolitionists who would never experience that liminal state, but he also worked to critique the state of American freedom under slave law.

Douglass’ manumission also came with an expanded freedom within the abolitionist movement itself. When Douglass returned from England he started the *North Star*. The paper gave Douglass’ newfound legal freedom further voice and centered the “fugitive slave abolitionism” that Douglass’ travels in Britain had brought to the international stage. Douglass dedicated his paper to his “oppressed countrymen.” This is also the period in which Douglass began his shift towards political abolition, joining those who believed that the Constitution was anti-slavery and breaking with Garrison. Douglass’ shift brought him closer to New York political abolitionists like Gerrit Smith. Smith supported the *North Star*, and eventually in the early 1850s, Douglass merged his paper with the *Liberty Party Paper* and created *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, which supported the Liberty Party. The purchase of Douglass’ freedom, in addition to the later passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, gave Douglass and the movement a new push to envision the law’s role in abolition. Eventually, Douglass would formulate a constitutional anti-slavery argument that stated that the nation’s founding document would “afford slavery no protection when it shall cease to be administered by slaveholders.” The discord over this question within the abolition movement cut across lines of race and legal status. However, in Douglass’ vision of the role and nature of American law one can imagine how his personal experience with fugitivity functioned in his concern with the question of legal administration.\footnote{Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause*, 492-493, 426, 495. Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men*, 163-164.}

Not long after the Douglass controversy had died down, another crisis centered the efforts of abolitionists on buying the freedom of some of the enslaved people sold in
the aftermath of the failed escape attempt on the ship the *Pearl*. In April 1848, almost eighty enslaved people attempted an escape from Washington, D.C. The mass escape was organized by local African Americans and abolitionists in DC, including William L. Chaplin, and was probably financed in part by Smith.\textsuperscript{178} Weather slowed the ship and it was eventually captured by authorities. The owners of many of the captives proceeded to sell the escapees to slave traders who would take them further South as punishment for their attempted self-emancipation. Abolitionists, friends, and family worked to raise the money to redeem their loved ones from these sales. Many of those who escaped on the *Pearl* did so in family groups. Chaplin returned to New York and sought out aid towards the purchase of the Edmonsons and other families from the *Pearl*. While some money was raised, it was nowhere near enough. John Jacob Astor donated $900 for the purchase of one Edmonson brother. Other enslaved people who had been on the *Pearl* were also freed, including the wife and youngest child of Daniel Bell who had bought his own freedom. Like the Edmonson family, the Bells looked to abolitionists and travelled the nation to try to raise enough money to buy their loved ones.\textsuperscript{179}

Three other Edmonson brothers did not escape the slave market and were sold in New Orleans. Sisters Mary and Emily were also brought to New Orleans for sale, but were returned to Washington, DC because of an outbreak of yellow fever allowing family and friends another opportunity to attempt to redeem them. The Edmonson family was no


\textsuperscript{179} Ricks, “The 1848 Pearl Escape,” 199-201.

The Edmonson sisters and family undoubtedly became the cause célèbres of the *Pearl* escape. There was little debate over the purchase of their freedom. This is perhaps due in part to the nature of the case and the specter of the sale of two young Christian women to New Orleans and the fancy girl trade.\footnote{Kellow, “Conflicting Narratives,” 209.} In response to requests from their father Paul Edmonson and others, New York churches and abolitionists took up the call to raise the funds for the redemption of the women with alacrity. In a crowded October meeting at the Brooklyn Tabernacle the $2000 needed was raised “without difficulty.” Henry Ward Beecher gave a speech in which he questioned whether “although we may have generous sympathies, ought we not to act on some principle?” Agreeing that it was not wise to “become purchasers of slaves, as a general practice” as not enough money existed in all the “coffers of the North,” Beecher claimed that this was an “essential case” and that he must “plead it.” The threat to these “Christian girls” was too grave. Beecher attempts to portray the indescribable “interior of Slavery” as he implies the fate of the sisters by describing the uses of beauty and refinement of enslaved women in the slave market. *The National Era* was more forward in stating that the alternative presented was their “redemption by purchase, or their prostitution in the slave market of New Orleans.”\footnote{“The Sum Subscribed- At the meeting held at the Tabernacle” *The National Era* (November 16, 1848). The *Era* also includes an article from the *Louisville Journal* reflecting worry that the purchase of the sisters would give a bad example to other enslaved people, who, knowing if they failed in running away, would “expect to be bought and set free by the Abolitionists.” The author was of the opinion that “the owner of the slave girls should refuse to part with them to these New Yorkers upon any terms.”}

Beecher also called on familial feeling by calling attention to Paul
Edmonson, who was in the audience, by asking those present to “do unto others as you would that others should do to you.”

William Chaplin took charge of the money raised and ensured the purchase and manumission of Emily and Mary. Writing for the Edmondsons, Chaplin assured the public that they wished to thank their supporters with “all they have to give” and were “entirely sensible that the interest felt for them in New York is far beyond what they had any just reason to suspect.” Yet like Douglass, they also stated that although they were now free, they could “never forget that other fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters are equally exposed with themselves to the surrendering of the tender ties by the ruthless demands of Slavery, and that they are no less entitled to human sympathy, and the assistance of their fellow-men.” Here, the family centers the broader experience of those who were not able to gain the support of the movement as successfully. The family remained close to the abolition movement. Emily Edmondson, even more well-known after her inclusion in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin, would later travel to raise funds to redeem her brother. In addition, the Emily and Mary studied at Oberlin College and participated in the Fugitive Slave Convention at Cazenovia. Eventually another Edmondson brother escaped from New Orleans.

Those involved in the Pearl escape, and their supporters, used multiple techniques to find freedom. While those who tried to escape slavery on the Pearl took the radical step of running away, once caught they also looked towards other methods to become free, like buying their liberty. The threat of re-enslavement and further separation from

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183 “The Edmonson Girls” NASS (October 26, 1848).
184 “Edmonsons” NASS (November 30, 1848).
their families worked to make varied methods necessary to seek liberation, as well as to make the movement recognize the necessity of such action. The saga of the Edmondsons illustrates how contesting freedom affected families whose members were of mixed legal status. Their story shows that African American families turned to compensated manumission in varied circumstances and although it was sometimes the first and at other times the last choice, it was a central tool in the arsenal of freedom and familial reunion.\(^{186}\)

Compensated manumission was generally accepted as a viable means to freedom in African American communities. By the time Douglass received his free papers, he joined the ranks of thousands of other formerly enslaved people who had bought freedom. For many African Americans, both the enslaved and self-emancipated, self-purchase was a practical means to obtain legal freedom. While it was far from a foolproof method, as the attempts of men like Moses Grandy make clear, it did offer those who succeeded a way to escape slavery in relative security. Through their involvement in the abolition movement and agitation for full emancipation they helped center the black experience of slavery and freedom. The role played by men and women in the abolition movement who had worked extra hours, scrimped and saved, lectured, and sold pamphlets to buy themselves and others out of slavery, was essential in securing the freedom of all African Americans.

According to Manisha Sinha, during the feud between Douglass and Garrison, Garrison once claimed that “fugitive slaves had no special insight into abolition.” What

\(^{186}\) Pacheco, *The Pearl*, 188.
the experience of Douglass’ purchased freedom, and the debates around it, showed was that fugitivity was indeed an experience of which not all could understand the full demands. Douglass, the Edmondsons, Grandy, and every other person whose stories of compensated manumission in some way affected the abolition movement worked to bring to the forefront of the movement the special concerns of illegal freedom and its effects on African American communities. By attempting to both recenter, and alter, the movement’s relationship to the law and questions of principle and necessity, those who bought freedom helped refine abolitionist ideology and expand tactics.187

While those who bought their freedom became leaders in black communities and the abolition movement obtained their freedom by whatever means available, many important activists had bought their own freedom, or that of family members and friends. Those who worked within the system of slavery to gain their freedom by purchase did not prove any less willing to condemn it once they were free. In fact, as we see in Douglass’ defense of his purchase, participating in the market of slavery in this way gave many first-hand experience to critique not only the system, but also the depths of cruelty to which some masters would go. Whatever qualms some abolitionists may have had with the practice, those who had bought their freedom were in a special position to expose the base inhumanity and injustice of slavery and its relationship to the nation’s law. In addition, as shown in the last two chapters, legal freedom was incredibly important to African American communities in the nineteenth century. While legal freedom allowed abolitionists like Frederick Douglass added protection in their work to end slavery in the United States, many other African Americans bought the freedom of themselves and

loved ones in order to end slavery’s threat to their familial connections. As will be discussed in the next chapter, the movement’s relationship with the law shifted over time and place, what did not change, however, was the willingness of African Americans to make use of it when necessary. Resisting slave law did not only happen when one broke it, sometimes one also had to engage with it to find another kind of freedom.  

188 Quarles, Black Abolitionists, 59.
CHAPTER 4

“I AM FREDERICK DOUGLASS STILL:” RESISTING SLAVERY THROUGH LEGAL MEANS

WGN’s 2016 show, Underground, tells the story of a group of enslaved people on Georgia’s Macon Plantation in 1857. The show centers around seven people and their plan to escape slavery. In the first episode one of the show’s main characters, Noah, a blacksmith entrusted with travel beyond the plantation is picked up as a fugitive slave. While being held in jail, he meets a dying man who speaks with him of liberation and shows him a map to freedom, a song, which Noah takes back to Macon. Once he returns, Noah begins to search out people who he believes can be trusted with his blossoming plan of escape. He does not want to escape alone, since, as he reports, everyone who had been caught in the jail had been by themselves. Noah is therefore led to believe that community is central to the escape plan’s success.

While talking through possible co-conspirators with another young man they discuss Sam, the plantation’s carpenter. Despite the belief that Sam’s building skills would be useful for their escape, Noah says that Sam is not to be trusted because he “saves what little they give him in the shop” to purchase his freedom. Noah goes on that Sam was a “fool thinks the master gonna let him buy his freedom.” During this conversation, the camera is focused on Sam receiving pay for his work in the shop. The master, Tom Macon, runs his hand over Sam’s work and hands him a coin. Sam looks at the coin, holding it in his hands with a mix of what appears to be adoration and excitement. He tosses it into the air as if to test its weight, as if he is also testing his
chances at freedom. When the scene returns to Noah and his friend he declares that since Sam plays “by the rules” they “may not be able to trust him.”

In this scene, the show sets up a dichotomy between working within the law and outside of it to achieve freedom, making each path appear to be mutually exclusive. One who works towards legal manumission by paying for it is not to be trusted in the planning of a fugitive escape. These imagined visions of the gulf between the uses of extralegal and legal forms of resistance have led to discussions of self-purchase and compensated manumission that fail to fully account for the understandings and actions of African Americans and their communities towards buying freedom. This has happened not only in popular culture, as shown by this scene from *Underground*, but also in the historiography of slave resistance. However, recent scholarship on the enslaved legal culture shows that, historically, rarely were such issues so clear cut.

This chapter will look at self-purchase and its relationship to slave resistance. It will focus in on what resisting slavery through legal measures like self-purchase meant for those who fought slavery on individual and communal terms. While it will deal with opposition to slavery on a national level, it will also look to the everyday lives of African Americans who bought their freedom to understand what they thought about the process through which they became free. Self-purchase and compensated manumission were central in the arsenal of tools through which African Americans sought to become free, protect their family bonds, and make lives for themselves outside of slavery.

Those contemporaries who questioned the viability of purchase as a way to escape slavery, and looked upon buying freedom as unethical, rarely faced the daily dangers of

fugitivity and familial separation. Nor were those separated from the necessity of compensated manumission’s benefits the only ones who questioned its validity. As we saw in the last chapter, there were also many who participated in buying freedom that did not willingly wish to become complicit with slavery’s market in human beings. But many, in the abolition movement and beyond, continued to recognize the security provided by legal freedom under a national system that consistently protected the rights of slaveholders to their property more than the rights of other Americans.

Unlike escape, compensated manumission sometimes allowed African Americans to remain near their families and homes. To escape slavery and face the life of a fugitive, away from the land and people that were considered home, was no easy decision to make. Self-purchase could offer an alternative to the form of alienation that self-emancipation often encompassed. As has been discussed in more detail in other chapters, it offered the valuable protection of legal freedom in the face of the fugitive slave acts which threatened all forms of black freedom, but especially the self-emancipated who had made new lives for themselves in the North and West. Compensated manumission also offered those who had already escaped slavery a way to reunite with family and fill their freedom with purpose. Many free African Americans resisted slavery through compensated manumission by refusing to allow slavery to permanently threaten the integrity of their families. In this way, their daily existence, the jobs they held, the work they did after they had finished their day’s labor, the demands they placed on their masters and social networks, and their personal determination to become free worked to undermine slavery.

This chapter sets out to question the value placed on what are often deemed individual and public forms of resistance and those forms like compensated manumission
that frequently enacted a more communal, if quiet and complex, form of resistance. The varied means that African Americans used to gain their liberty challenges the hierarchy of resistance that has tended to focus on extra-legal freedom and activity, sometimes casting aside the other means that African American communities used to become free. Those who purchased their liberty labored independently, sought to amass capital, and through their understandings of the laws and markets of slavery attempted to instate an alternative understanding of value. In these ways enslaved African Americans contested their position in their social world, turning even slavery’s economy and law into sites of conflict.190

To understand the power of self-purchase in both the daily lives and imaginations of African Americans one must fully understand the conditions of their enslavement and slavery’s relationship to manumission generally, and compensated manumission specifically. While there is no general historical consensus or monograph on self-purchase itself, there is an overlapping historiography that deals with manumission. It is the conclusion of many historians that deal with manumission in the United States that the phenomenon by-and-large shored up the slave system. The power of these claims, however, is weakened by the same history of manumission which the historiography itself records.

For much of the history of the United States the very existence of free African Americans acted as a threat to fundamental assumptions within the ideologies developed to maintain racial slavery. Eva Sheppard Wolf has closely examined the history of

emancipation and manumission in early Virginia. Wolf follows how ideas of race were intertwined with American idea(l)s of freedom and how liberty was constructed as the terrain of whiteness. Once American culture and law had “forged the link between race and liberty,” the work that African Americans did to become free worked to trouble the boundaries between race and freedom in the dichotomous society in which they lived. Wolf catalogues how not only politics, but religious sentiment, ideas of property, and race’s very central connection to freedom changed over time causing the existence of free African Americans to appear to shake the foundations of racial slavery. While she describes the menace of manumission to slaveholding in the new republic, Wolf does not give this peril its full due.191

What is clear from the history of the early republic is that each period of increased manumission, like that which occurred in the aftermath of the American Revolution, was met with a fierce clampdown on the rights of African Americans as well as the rights of slaveholders to manumit their human property. These regressions in the law of manumission were based on intense white fears of free African Americans and the threat they posed to slave society. In the language of the times, free African Americans were deemed an immediate danger to the institution of slavery. In the new nation, states throughout the South tried to solve the problem of black freedom through the law. South

Carolina banned the entry of free African Americans in 1800, North Carolina and other states passed legislation making it necessary for free people to register, and, as shown in Chapter Two, many states tried to restrict their access to economic activity and markets. Further, seeing the threat of freedom as just cause to restrict the rights of slaveholders for the common good, most southern states limited access to manumission. American colonizationists attempted to answer these related issues of property rights, emancipation, and a white nation through their work. They determined that free African Americans had no place in the United States. In looking at early Baltimore, Maryland, Seth Rockman records that even some colonizationists, recognizing that they lacked the “infrastructure to remove them in any substantial number…discouraged slaveholders from granting freedom” to enslaved people.192

Yet, while relaying these cycles and the impetus behind them, many historians continue to insist that manumission did not threaten racial slavery in the United States. This is in spite of the fact that manumission was a central apparatus to creating legally free African Americans, the very threat that slaveholders and lawmakers of the period sought to control. Many, instead, argue that manumission was a form of labor management, working to strengthen the system by appearing to allow the possibility of freedom to those who worked and behaved exceptionally. Wolf claims that “slaveholders used emancipation or its promise to control slaves and strengthen the system of slavery.”193

193 Wolf, Race and Liberty, 81.
T. Stephan Whitman, discussing early national Baltimore, looks at the economic transformations of the upper south that changed the landscape of slavery as plantation agriculture faltered and urbanization and industrialization grew. Whitman, like Schermerhorn and others, shows how African Americans used the changing economies of slavery to “[wrest] freedom from their masters in a bewildering variety of unequal power struggles.” While Whitman is concerned with the actions of African Americans to effect their own liberty, he also deems “weighing the complexities of slaveholders’ actions…critical” to understanding manumission’s “ambiguous role in preserving, modifying, and destabilizing both the relations of masters and slaves and slavery itself.”

It is suggested therefore that various forms of manumission, self-purchase included, worked to extend slavery’s usefulness in urban areas and assisted in making it a more flexible institution which perhaps delayed its final destruction. In his discussion of term slavery, Seth Rockman notes the advantages for slaveholders in the creation of a “secondary market” that allowed whites to enter the slave market who would not have otherwise been able to purchase an enslaved person for life. He believes that term slavery, under which we might categorize some forms of self-purchase, had a logic that “turned the promise of freedom into a mechanism of greater exploitation.” For Whitman, the actions of African Americans to become free “played a more complex part in the fate of slavery in the city than the overused word ‘resistance’ can capture.” Some also argue, along the lines of Orlando Patterson’s ideas of manumission as gift exchange, that this

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future reward created for slaveholders a more pliant and dedicated enslaved workforce. In
addition, Rockman reminds us of the economic burden placed on black families who
bought their freedom, and that “such slaves funded the purchase of their successors in
bondage...because many slaveholders combined delayed manumissions and self-
purchase as a method of serial labor exploitation.” In these versions, the enslaver ends up
as the main beneficiary of the process of compensated manumission.195

Slaveholders no doubt shaped the transition to freedom and must have found
some gain in the process, but that did not stop people from working to create conditions
under which they could buy their freedom. While discussion of the ambiguity in the
meaning of manumission are useful to understanding what slaveholders might have
gained by their participation, these scholars generally see manumission as a coming
together of forces and desires from a vantage point which make it impossible for them to
explicate what it meant for African Americans to negotiate their freedom through
purchase as a stand-alone issue. Indeed, to do so might alter some conclusions about the
dynamics of manumission more generally. Ultimately, Whitman and others see self-
purchase and other forms of delayed manumission as attempts, from the slaveholder’s
point of view, to “retain control of their labor supply” and that therefore the actions of
African Americans to become free through purchase take on less meaning.196

195 Patterson, Slavery and Social Death, 212, 217, 241. Steve Peraza “Slave Manumission in the Atlantic World
Whitman, The Price of Freedom, 5, 94, 161. Orlando Patterson, in a 2009 collection of essays on manumission in the
Atlantic world, as well as many of the other essayists in the collection, has suggested that manumission was an
“integral and necessary part of the process of slavery,” and that through it the “incentive problem was solved.”
Rosemary Brana-Shute and Randy J. Sparks. Paths to Freedom: Manumission in the Atlantic World. (Columbia, SC:
University of South Carolina Press, 2009), 18. Rockman, Scraping By, 60.
However, as we have seen, the will to be free and the creation of an ever-expanding number of free black people who escaped slavery did more than play just an ambiguous role in undermining ideas of race and enslavement. Black freedom worked to confuse the racially determined social systems upon which white freedom rested, and on which racial slavery depended, as Wolf and others argue. And this, of course, is why manumission was deemed a menace by so many slaveholders throughout the South. Compensated manumission, in particular, undermined slavery’s legal and economic logic. As Patterson reminds us in discussing the conceptual, cultural, and social problems presented by manumission, it created “not just a new person and a new life, but a new status.”197

Remembering his enslavement in Virginia in the years before the Civil War, Duncan Gaines, a Federal Writer’s Project interviewee, recalled that enslaved people were allowed to work on their own time. Duncan described how those he knew earned enough money for small luxuries and that sometimes the more enterprising would be able to save enough to buy their freedom. Gaines also made it a point, however, to state that this was not “encouraged very much.” It can be surmised from this statement that enslaved African Americans and slaveholders understood what was at stake in each instance of compensated manumission. Freedom was not meant to be the luxury of the enslaved. Both theoretically and practically, African Americans who gained their freedom by paying for it threatened the domestic institution of the southern United States. In her later work, Wolf recognizes the important ideological break that self-purchase presented to slaveholding society, in that it “indicated that slaves had a natural desire for

197 Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 210, 240.
liberty and that enslaving them was therefore brutal and unjust.” This is true of any form of slave resistance. Enslaved people who bought their freedom also undermined pro-slavery arguments about the capacity of African Americans for freedom.198

More than this, self-purchase also worked to repudiate the assumptions of non-personhood within slavery through black participation in its political economy. In her work on acts of piracy in Martin Delany’s *Blake, or the Huts of America*, Sharada Balachandran Orihuela argues that the participation of enslaved people in “property ownership, ownership of the self, in particular, will always contest with the state intent on excluding slaves from social, political and economic life.” Within *Blake*, Orihuela assumes that as an “act that tests the limits of ownership and the protections associated with property ownership, namely, the protections of property (and of person) offered by the state,” the idea of piracy is something that could apply to all “property ownership at the hands of enslaved populations.” Further, this kind of property ownership can “unsettle the naturalized relationship between the market and law” and is a site in which the “enslaved subject tests the limits of what kinds of property ownership allow for the creation of the modern subject.” Concerned mostly with illegal acts of ownership, namely theft, Orihuela is interested in property, self-possession, and the competing claims of ownership over the “same body.” She also works to understand how “market exchange becomes the primary means through which to enter into freedom and the possession of self, enabling enslaved subjects to access membership to a politicized, if not civil and political, body.” Considering that there were few legal protections for black economic

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In addition to earlier claims, Whitman and Rockman found that through the complex social conditions made by the Baltimore region’s economy, slavery came to be more a “stage of life” than a permanent institution for many. To be able to view the possibility of enslavement a phase of life was no small feat for people who faced a permanent and inherited enslavement. While of course some of these conditions were outside of their control, African Americans certainly looked to push them towards their advantage wherever possible. One of the ways they did this was through buying freedom. Whitman found that from around 1800-1830, one quarter of manumission deeds in Baltimore involved some exchange of money. In explaining the rather “bland and uniform” nature of manumission deeds, Whitman argues that enslaved people “could not formally participate in the establishment of the actual terms of manumission or insist that they be recorded in the deed.” While this is often true, the transitioning enslaved person had already done the hard work of creating the conditions under which manumission as a legal transaction was even possible. Their silence remains in the legal records in ways that it could not have existed in their lives.\footnote{Whitman, The Price of Freedom, 161. Rockman, Scraping By, 114. Whitman, “Diverse Good Causes,” 340-341, 334.}
Even on the eve of the Civil War, when the slave power had succeeded in consolidating its influence over national law to an astonishing degree, a pamphlet entitled *The Free Negro Question in Maryland*, spoke of the threat that the free African American population presented to the state. The author complained that Maryland had “imbibed the false doctrines of English writers on the subject of Slavery and Emancipation” and that as such, “no State in the Union has the same cause for alarm at the tendency of Free Negroism in our midst.” The results of the “inhuman practice of liberating negro slaves,” and the “errors and destructive influence of this false philosophy and worse practice” negatively impacted not only the “moral and social condition of the liberated slave himself,” but also the “material wealth of the country and the well-being of the white population.” The author goes on to complain about the meddling of the English, abolitionists, and northern states and declares that their interference has no grounding as Maryland has the “right to enslave every free negro amongst us, absolutely and without condition,” to “banish every one of them from the State,” or even to “clothe them with the elective franchise and declare them our peers.” The purely rhetorical use of this last example is clear, as the pamphlet also lays out emancipation as the “greatest possible injury,” since exposure to the “higher cares, duties and responsibilities pertaining to citizenship” were obligations that the author believed African Americans were “never fitted by nature and to which he cannot attain by practice.”

While manumission remained legal in Maryland, in the lower south, compensated manumission had to be even more forcefully wrested from slaveholders. As witnessed by the sentiment of the above pamphlet and in laws enacted throughout the South that

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limited access to manumission and the citizenship rights of free African Americans, white supremacists of the South were concerned with the threat that black freedom posed to the social order. Federal Writer’s Project interviewee, Willis Dukes, who was born in Georgia, told the story of a self-emancipated man who remained in contact with his enslaved family. Dukes recalled that it was “whispered about that he was living very high” and was saving money to buy his family and even going to school. Dukes claimed that these rumors “fired” up the enslaved people with an “ambition” to go to the North and made them “more than usually” interested in the outcome of the Civil War. Even during the war, this man’s example of freedom stood out to Dukes and those who knew his story. It offered them an alternative vision of the worlds in which they could exist. As Dukes’ story shows, as African Americans continued to seek out liberation, for any number of personal reasons, their actions and presence as free people disrupted the logic of both slavery’s law and market. From the moment they began to save the money needed to enter into negotiations for freedom, African Americans who purchased the liberty of themselves and loved ones contested the thought of those who believed them incapable of the “higher cares” of citizenship. In their independent action and labor to become free, African Americans naturalized their claim to freedom through the very systems for which they were so often deemed unfit.  

While manumission itself may not have ultimately destroyed American slavery, it left loopholes, deemed menacing by slaveholders, that African Americans used as retreats from their own enslavement, but also as examples of a life of freedom to be attained by

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those who were still enslaved. As seen in the cases of more noted African Americans, like Frederick Douglass, who had bought their freedom, compensated manumission allowed them to fight against slavery more securely on the national stage as abolitionists and activists. African Americans who became free through self-purchase created new understandings of the law and its social construction as they participated in the market economy, therefore undermining the mutual exclusion of blackness and citizenship in much political thought of the time.

At least in the United States, where manumission was made so difficult by law and custom it was not just the “truly heroic” manumitees who resisted being “co-opted” by slavery. 203 Shawn Cole has determined that while “manumission as an incentive scheme would probably not have brought an end to the American system of slavery…it is incorrect to simply dismiss manumission as a very rare, infeasible, or exclusively urban phenomenon.” It was not the incentive scheme of manumission that threatened slavery, so much as the actions of the enslaved who imagined they could be free and worked towards achieving their liberation. It is perhaps easier to believe the general sentiment that manumission lacked the power to threaten slavery when one does not focus in on self-purchase. Buying your freedom was a markedly more active form of manumission that depended not only the good will, or greed, of the slaveholder, but most importantly on the skill, power, and determination of the enslaved themselves. Once the efforts of African Americans to secure manumission through purchase are fully understood as part

\[\text{203 Brana-Shute and Sparks, Paths to Freedom, 20.}\]
of the legal and economic culture they helped shape, we must reevaluate the focus on manumission as a technique of management.  

Beyond the fact of their legally free state, enslaved and formerly enslaved people who bought freedom did not only resist slavery in these nominal ways. Throughout the history of new world racial slavery, enslaved people made use of the law to become free. While they may have needed the participation of their enslavers in the process of manumission, we should be wary to proclaim that African Americans could gain freedom from enslavement “only at the mercy of their owners,” as Steve Peraza pointed out. What many cases of self-purchase show, rather, was the “ingenuity of slave legal resistance.” In her work on manumission in New Orleans Judith Kelleher Schafer has stated that the “meaning of freedom for [African Americans] was inextricably chained to their ability to defend their liberty at law.” Enslaved and free people realized that “failure to understand and use the law properly could result in freedom forever lost.” Thus, as Schafer has claimed, they found ways to use the law to their advantage, making it “act as an autonomous force in the contravention of slavery.” In doing so, slaves used the law designed essentially to keep them as slaves to win their freedom, and free people of color used the law to maintain and often to fight vigorously to safeguard their liberty.”  

African Americans who purchased their freedom had their own understandings of the law and how to use the systems that oppressed them to make breaks in which they

could work towards alternative modes of encounter. In her work discussing freedom suits in St. Louis, Missouri, Kelly Kennington states that “slaves’ legal culture influenced community norms and legal rules regarding slavery and freedom, shaping the conversations about personal status that took place throughout the antebellum era.” Free and enslaved African American communities used the law to define their freedom while the systems that sought to control them “struggled to keep up with the complexities of individual lives.” This happened as they worked both within the law and outside of it. Self-purchase was often a critical way through which enslaved people and their loved ones understood the transition from slavery to freedom.206

If was slavery was unsuccessful at completely destroying the legal existence of the enslaved as people, it was successful at making self-purchase extremely difficult, since, according to Wolf, “slaves did not have legal personhood and could not legally marry, own property, enter into contracts, or make wills, any arrangements forged between [between slaveholder and enslaved] lacked legal validity.” This is of course why, as shown in Chapter Two, enslaved people and their friends and loved ones relied so heavily on shaping their social worlds in ways that supported the personhood that slave law was written to disavow, at least technically, if not always in practice. Shawn Cole has determined that the number of manumissions in Louisiana were reduced by two-thirds under American rule in comparison to the Spanish period as U.S. law restricted access to all forms of manumission. He also finds that enslaved people in the state paid what he calls, a “substantial manumission premium” after the abolition of coartación practices. Cole notes, however, that the enslaved peoples’ “willingness to pay exceeded

the owner’s valuation of the slave,” as the “slave would gain not only the economic value of her labor, but also freedom.” This is why he found that, despite legal and economic restrictions, under both administrations self-purchase accounted for more than 30% of all manumissions in the Louisiana from 1725-1820.207

Despite difficulties African Americans were still determined to buy their freedom. Beyond working to find allies who would support their efforts when threatened and ways to work through legal restrictions, African Americans who bought their freedom also worked to transcend these limits to the recognition of their personhood. Kennington states that the legal work of freedom suits “meant recognizing a slave’s legal personhood, a rare occurrence in the antebellum years.” If one was not willfully manumitted by their owner, suing for freedom or seeking to purchase it were the only ways to be emancipated by law. Both processes worked to transform one’s legal status from chattel to person.

According to Walter Johnson, manumission law was a “strange place to find a coherent version of master and slave” since it highlighted the signal “philosophical conundrums of the person as thing.”208

In her book on the life of a man named Samuel Johnson who lived in early nineteenth century Virginia, Eva Sheppard Wolf documents the legal and social obstacles faced by Johnson in his attempt to buy and protect the freedom of his family. Wolf uses his story to understand how “race operated in Virginia as something people themselves created and re-created in their multiple interactions with one another” and to show that “race worked differently from what we might expect based on a reading of the laws.” If it

was “one of slavery’s functions to obliterate personhood” Johnson’s experiences with the law, as described by Wolf, show us how the terrain of personhood was negotiated in compensated manumission through a nexus of social obligation, desire, and legal status. Patterson’s condition of social death in relation to slavery has been thoroughly worked over during the last few decades. However, there is a type of rebirth that happens through the process of manumission. Yet, obviously, the social life of the enslaved is shown in the very possibility of buying freedom, a possibility made real by their efforts.209

Like others discussed throughout this project, Johnson faced separation from his family due to the laws that governed manumission and freedom in Virginia. Unlike Lunsford Lane’s North Carolina petition, Johnson’s request to remain in Virginia was allowed by both houses of the state legislature. This was not the end of Johnson’s legal wrangling. Like Lane, Johnson set out to use his freedom to purchase his family and ensure that they could remain together. Wolf goes on to show the numerous ways that Johnson and his supporters used the law to free his family, maintain their status and property, and win permission for them to live as a free family in Virginia. This was especially important while members of the Johnson family were at different stages of freedom. As African American families looked to find ways to live as free persons, they were often forced to recognize the utility in compensated manumission and the necessary mobility and security that it provided. Under the logic of slave law, with the purchase of his freedom Johnson became a legal person. If his rights were still restricted, Johnson’s legal and social standing created a landscape in which he could use the law in a variety of ways to develop what freedom meant for him and his family. As Wolf notes, it is through

209 Wolf, Almost Free, 2. Patterson, Slavery and Social Death, 293-294.
Johnson’s legal action beginning with the purchase of his liberty, his papered freedom, that his story, or personhood, is revealed to us at all.210

African Americans not only worked through complex negotiations with American law, but also understood their legal standing in relationship to other people of African descent throughout the diaspora. Enslaved people learned how to interpret the law from their friends and neighbors, through the example of those they knew or had heard of who had sued for freedom, or through those who had been manumitted through self-purchase. From racial slavery’s institutionalization on American soil, African Americans understood that while the law defined their status, it also offered them opportunities through which to reimagine their standing. They developed a viewpoint of American law that helped them look out from their unfree status to envision and define the ways in which they could make legal freedom.

Abolitionist and African American print culture also helped black communities comprehend slave law within the United States and in the broader Atlantic world. Discussion of the law in these spaces, in addition to the actions taken by African Americans in their daily lives, shaped black legal culture. We have seen in previous chapters how African Americans made use of print culture to assist them in their attempts to buy freedom and to shape ideas around what that process meant. In her book on the nation’s first African American newspaper, *Freedom’s Journal*, Jacqueline Bacon describes the importance of print culture in black understandings of the law in the early republic. Bacon states that African Americans were “interested in and informed about the intricate and at times contradictory decisions of judges and lawmakers.” Articles in

"Freedom’s Journal" “educated readers about the legal manifestations of slavery, linked free African Americans to slaves, and demonstrated how the meaning of freedom and the status of people of color in the nation were shaped by the intersection of slavery and law.” The “law, readers learned, could be at once a tool of oppression and a weapon in the hands of the oppressed.” This is true not only of Freedom’s Journal, but also discussions of the law that are found throughout abolitionist print culture.211

From 1827-1828 the Philadelphia monthly, The African Observer, published a number of articles discussing slavery in a transnational context. The paper compared the laws of manumission across Spanish, Portuguese, and English colonies. The Observer declares that the “treatment of slaves among the Spaniards and Portuguese of the western world is generally admitted to be much more humane than among the English and Dutch.” The piece goes on to note that “among the Spaniards, previously to the late revolutions, manumissions could not be refused, on the payment of a sum fixed by the law.” In addition, it is remarked that enslaved people are allowed to “purchase their freedom for a day in the week” and through “industry and economy” their freedom could be “redeemed.” Responding favorably to the Spanish law of coartación’s support of compensated manumission, the paper notes that the “policy as well as humanity of such a provision, requires only to be intimated in order to be seen.” In January of 1828, The Observer again returned to the topic in an article entitled “Slavery in Cuba,” this time going into some detail over the rights granted to enslaved people in the colony in the process of manumission.212

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Published in 1836 Lydia Maria Child’s, *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans*, contains a comparative chapter on slavery in “different ages and nations.” Child compares American slavery to other slave systems from ancient times declaring that, “modern slavery unquestionably wears its very worst aspect in the Colonies of England and the United States of North America.” In detailing slave law in the United States, Child states that “the laws greatly obstruct the manumission of slaves, even where the master is willing to enfranchise them. Childs describes peculium, the system of slave property, practiced by Romans and ancient Greeks, through which enslaved people were often able to purchase their freedom. According to Child in ancient societies both law and public opinion compelled enslavers to allow self-purchase. Her example of ancient civilizations revered by both popular neoclassical culture as well as in the democratic tradition, makes a special point about the supposedly brutal nature of American slavery. Like *The Observer* Child also explains the similar systems of more “liberal” manumission law in other contemporary slaveholding societies especially those colonies under Spanish and Portuguese rule.\(^{213}\)

What this interest in comparative slave law tells us is that the broader world of Atlantic slavery offered alternative precedents for compensated manumission and legal means of achieving freedom that African Americans and abolitionists leveraged toward their own freedom struggles. Whether or not they portray a completely accurate vision of the lives of enslaved people who worked to become free in Latin America and the Caribbean, these discussions of coartación do important work. One, in commenting on

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\(^{213}\) Lydia Maria Child. *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans* (New York: John S. Taylor, 1836), 39, 47, 55-56. The pointed nature of this comparison in terms of broader popular culture of the era comes from a conversation with Robert Williams, UMass Amerhst, January 2017.
the right to contract for freedom and the process through which the money to pay for manumission could be obtained, these examples help expose the complexity of the experiences of African Americans whose tenuous legal position made self-purchase an extremely difficult and risky endeavor.214

In her concluding remarks on American slave law Child asks, “shall I be told that all these regulations are necessary for the white man’s safety? What then, let me indignantly ask, must the system be that requires to be supported by such unnatural, such tyrannical means?” She goes on that the “very apology pronounces the condemnation of slavery- for it proves that it cannot exist without producing boundless misery to the oppressed, and perpetual terror to the oppressor.” Child calls out the ways that the legal tradition in the U.S. sought to define the terms of whiteness and regulate blackness. The argument has been made by many that the Spanish legal tradition did not recognize slavery as a the “natural condition” of human beings. Thus, comparing the American legal code to one in which, whatever its flaws, recognized some general rights held by enslaved people, the works cited above attempt to describe a legal system which on a theoretical level did not do the same work to collapse race and unfree status in the same ways as American slave law did.215

Radical legal thought allowed African Americans to undermine slave law as they simultaneously sought out ways to use it to become free. Unlike those who looked to manumission from an interest in gradual emancipation and a fundamental belief in the

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214 In describing the historiography of comparative analysis, Rebecca Scott discusses a similar interest of post-WWII American scholars in understanding the legacies of slavery in “segregation, black disenfranchisement, and racialized violence.” Scott argues that in “recognizing that things were different elsewhere did make the racial order of the U.S. South seem less natural and less timeless.” Rebecca Scott. Degrees of Freedom: Louisiana and Cuba After Slavery (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 2005), 5.
right of slaveholders to hold property in humans, African Americans and abolitionists saw the law as a site of contestation even as they used it towards certain ends. Groups like the American Colonization Society, for example, also assisted African Americans with manumission but because of the group’s general political stance and insistence on not just manumission, but colonization, the legal work was dissimilar. In doing this work African Americans and abolitionists imagined, or reimagined, a racial legal structure in which the relationship between freedom and race was not based in such polarities.216

If racialized freedom was one of the cornerstones of American legal thought, thinking with other systems in this way disrupted its codification in U.S. law. Praise of these visions of Spanish law challenged the cultural institutions that created the racial order of American law. Thus, these legal conversations with other racial systems, like the action of buying freedom, worked to interrupt the rationale of slave law within the United States by exposing the fictions of the connections between race and freedom. Some abolitionist thinkers, including Frederick Douglass, would continue this work until they came to believe that the Constitution was a pro-freedom document and worked to make sure the nation’s legal institutions enacted it as such.217

Alejandro de la Fuente has cautioned against creating stark divides between the legal and social experiences of enslaved people in the United States and Latin America. Rebecca Scott’s work tells us that the right to self-purchase granted in Cuba was “barely discernable” in the country while “frequently invoked” in urban areas. These comparative discussions of manumission laws, however, assume a relative ease in buying freedom in

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the regions discussed. And indeed, looking at Louisiana, Shawn Cole did find through economic analysis that coartación was effective at keeping costs down and providing opportunities for manumission. This was, of course, against the general experience of African Americans within the United States. While enslaved people in Cuba and other places in the Spanish world worked to make their right to contract to buy freedom into a fully recognized legal process, as shown by de la Fuente, African Americans who lived under a legal system that refused to recognize their rights to contract and often the right to be manumitted at all, still looked to shape their legal world towards freedom. As they became free through court challenges, freedom suits, and compensated manumission, the actions of African Americans certainly “cast doubt on prevailing notions that manumission unequivocally strengthened slave regimes.”

And as argued by Scott, in some places like central Cuba, manumission, even though backed by the state, did work to destabilize the slave regime as the population of free people of color created a society in which people of different legal status would have frequent “occasion to encounter each other.” For Scott the result of these connections was “further chafing at the bonds of slavery- and further ingenuity in finding ways out.” In addition, de la Fuente makes the important point that through the legal rights guaranteed by systems of coartación in Cuba, “manumission was imposed on masters by entrepreneurial slaves not given to slaves by God-fearing and humane masters.” This action, taken up by the enslaved first through customary rights and then fully

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implemented in the Reglamento de Esclavos of 1842, was frequently attacked by slaveholders. They recognized and feared what this infringement on their rights could do to undermine their individual authority and that of the entire slave system. This space helped enslaved people create what Michelle McKinley has termed “fractional freedoms.”

While some enslaved people in Cuba may have had the backing of the law in their efforts to purchase their liberty, African Americans had to make use of their networks and social knowledge to enter into legal negotiations with their enslavers. African Americans who set out to purchase their freedom not only acted as though they could be free, but many also broke the law as it was written as they engaged in the very economic activity that made self-purchase possible. Their legal culture existed both within and outside of the law of slavery. Acting on their knowledge of the law, the markets of slavery, and as they created freedom networks, African Americans who participated in compensated manumission and self-purchase resisted the very systems that vied to keep them in bondage.

Slavery’s influence on American law had no small effect on access to the rights of citizenship for free African Americans. Despite arguments made by abolitionists over both the constitutionality and morality of slavery, in reality, slave law worked across the

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219 Scott, Degrees of Freedom, 18, 20, 26. Alejandro de la Fuente. “Slaves and the Creation of Legal Rights in Cuba: Coartación and Papel” Hispanic American Historical Review Vol 87, No 4 (2007), 665, 669, 684. Michelle McKinley suggests a similar interference with the rights of slaveholders in colonial Lima, where the “overlapping jurisdiction created opportunities for enslaved litigants and other dependents to appeal directly to metropolitan sovereigns to adjudicate their complaints.” Here, she argues that enslaved people not only made use of the space made for freedom in the Siete Partidas, but also ecclesiastical courts to create “fractional freedoms.” Michelle McKinley. “Fractional Freedoms: Slavery, Legal Activism, and Ecclesiastical Courts in Colonial Lima, 1593-1689.” Law and History Review, Vol. 28, No. 3, (August 2010),754, 756.
century to increasingly threaten the scope of black freedom. Although Douglass would
shift his thought on the nature of the law during his turn toward political abolitionism, he
recognized the power of slave law to determine his status throughout the United States. In
discussing his stay in England after the publication of his narrative, Douglass contended
that the “institutions of this Country do not know me-do not recognize me as a man.” He
went on to state that he was “not thought of or spoken of, except as a piece of property
[as] the religious institutions and political institutions of this Country alike pronounce me
a Slave and a chattel.” What kept Douglass connected to the nation, rather, was his family
and the “painful consciousness” of the oppression faced by so many other African
Americans.220

Like Douglass, the self-emancipated were often at the forefront of debates over
the legal issue of freedom. While nothing compared to the provisions of the Fugitive
Slave Act of 1850, the 1793 act also made extra-legal freedom risky for the self-
emancipated. Manisha Sinha reminds us that as the nineteenth century progressed the
“lines between illegal kidnapping and legal rendition of fugitive slaves became
increasingly blurry as southern laws of slavery came into conflict with northern laws of
freedom.” As these legal lines between the jurisdiction of slavery and freedom became
less and less clear, it became even more important for African Americans to do what they
could on their end to protect themselves by ensuring their status as free people. The
connections made between free people and runaways as well as jobs, property, and other
ways through which the self-emancipated settled into new communities gave added
reason to protect their freedom through purchase. For many who were self-emancipated,

220 “Reported for the National Anti-Slavery Standard” PA Freeman (May 20, 1847). “Reported for the
National Anti-Slavery Standard” PA Freeman (May 20, 1847).
and therefore technically still enslaved, self-purchase was the only path to freedom that allowed them to become officially manumitted by their former enslavers.221

Kidnapping, the term abolitionists used to describe both “actual instances of kidnapping of free blacks” and “to the recapture of fugitive slaves” presented a danger to black communities. Responses to the ease with which slaveholders and traders took up African Americans they claimed as fugitives took multiple forms. Some called for black communities to “look to our own safety and protection from kidnappers! Remembering that self-defense is the first law of nature.” Supporters of self-defense claimed that “peace and justice” could not dwell under such circumstances. These problems would only increase later in the century.222

In 1836 a man named Severn Martin was “decoyed” from his home in Burlington, New Jersey and claimed by a man from Virginia. Within only two hours of being taken from his home Martin was proclaimed a slave by the local magistrate and given up to his claimant. Martin had lived in Burlington for more than sixteen years and his arrest “excited both the sympathy and virtuous indignation of every one acquainted” with him. A successful “attempt to rescue” him was made by town members and $800 was raised to purchase Martin’s freedom. Martin’s captor had sent a representative to New Jersey to suggest that he was willing to sell Martin for $800. Despite his claimant trying to squeeze another $200 from Martin’s supporters his freedom papers were executed and Martin returned to Burlington a legally free man. 223

221 Sinha, The Slave’s Cause, 382.
*The Pennsylvania Freeman’s* language in describing his purchase as a successful rescue is of note. Just as abolitionists may have refused to recognize the validity of any fugitive recapture, labelling all as kidnapping and therefore marking them as outside of the law, in using compensated manumission they also realized that they had to sometimes work within the law to save African Americans from enslavement. Despite the magistrate’s decision, whether Martin was actually a fugitive is not fully clear. What is clear is that his legal status mattered little to Martin’s friends and allies who set out to buy his freedom and ensure its safety through facilitating his official manumission. While the law had failed to recognize Martin’s freedom those who knew him worked quickly to restore it. They used the technique of compensated manumission to return Martin to liberty in a fashion that would be fully recognized by the law.\(^{224}\)

Not everyone wished to protect their freedom through purchase, however. *The Pennsylvania Freeman* also recorded the story of Samuel Sewall who had run away from Maryland to New York. In the thirteen years Sewall lived as a self-emancipated man he had amassed around $5,000 worth of property. He was also married and had two children. Sewall, born Walter Chaney, and sometimes known to use the alias Smith, was taken up by slave catchers in 1838. While being held in the city jail Sewall’s lawyer, Mr. Shaler, drew up a writ of habeas corpus which was a common first step in any legal contest over fugitive status. During the proceedings, Sewall’s former owner offered to manumit him for $1500. Shaler worked the price down to $900. Sewall, however, would

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\(^{224}\) We can perhaps assume by the purchase of his liberty that Martin was a fugitive since there are other cases where abolitionists and friends worked to return kidnapped African Americans by setting out to prove their free status through the law. One such case was of three men who had been sold into slavery in New Orleans from Pennsylvania. When word got out that they had been taken, the *PA Freeman* ran a request for donations to assist the agent who was to travel to the South and “furnish proof of their title to freedom.” “Money Wanted.” *The Pennsylvania Freeman* (August 30, 1838).
pay no more than $400 for his freedom. Shaler offered to make up the difference. Sewall also refused this offer and the magistrate postponed the case. Sewall was then held in the debtor’s department of the prison which suggests an interesting intersection between his legal status as fugitive property and his unwillingness to purchase his freedom for such a high price. Sewall escaped the prison shortly after and was never found.225

There are a number of interesting things about Sewall’s case that can tell us about his way of navigating the law and slavery’s market. For obvious reasons it benefitted the self-emancipated to take new names and create new identities for themselves after their escape. Sewall’s new identity was complicated by the use of another alias, Smith. This further level of complexity to Sewall’s self-making suggests a fluid understanding of identity and its relation to freedom and, also, perhaps, to the law. In addition, although Sewall had established himself quite well in New York, and no mention is made of whether Sewall was eventually reunited with his family, he still refused to protect the freedom he had created by paying his former owner for his manumission. It is possible that his family had been a part of the plan or that he remained in the city undetected, yet the choice between leaving behind his property holdings, and possibly his family, to spare his freedom speaks to the crisis of illegal liberty. As absconded property himself, Sewall may have grown used to the insecure nature of black property. While he had offered to pay $400, Sewall refused to take the remainder of the purchase price as offered by his lawyer. Perhaps he had not wanted to be in debt to anyone. It is possible that his escape plan had already been decided upon. If this is the case, Sewall made use of the law to the extent that it could delay both the purchase of his freedom and his re-enslavement.

Sewall decided not to give his freedom the backing of the law. Instead, he chose to escape slavery’s grasp once again, showing that he was not interested in legal freedom on another’s terms. For whatever reasons, Sewall wished to remain outside of slave law’s jurisdiction. Both Sewall’s actions and the determination of African American communities to protect themselves against the kidnapping of free people and fugitives alike show that they made use of the law where it benefited their freedom struggles. When their attempts to become free through the law failed, or did not meet their expectations or desires, African Americans like Sewall worked through other channels. Sewall’s ultimate rejection of compensated manumission show us the varied ways African Americans understood not only legal freedom, but the ways in which the law could be used on a number of planes to support the actions of those who would be free. Sewall’s case reminds us, too, that use of the law did not necessarily mean that one had to agree with its premise. As proclaimed by those who believed that self-defense was the “first law of nature,” competing visions of how to make the best use of the law and what law to uphold were put forward by African American communities.226

In response to fugitive slave cases a series of legal decisions worked to limit the rights of African Americans claimed as fugitives and limit the legal support provided by personal liberty laws enacted by some northern states to stay the power of slaveholders. In 1842 the Prigg v. Pennsylvania Supreme Court decision upheld the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 and invalidated personal liberty laws. In making the enactment of the 1793 law the responsibility of the federal government, however, the decision left some leeway for northern states to continue to resist the law. The decision was a blow to self-emancipated

communities and the anti-slavery forces who supported them. The *Jones v. Van Zandt* decision in 1847 further reinforced the legal danger of assisting fugitives. This series of decisions made in the 1840s worked to make fugitivity an ever more legally precarious state. African American and abolitionist communities responded to these decisions with renewed vigor through the law and on its margins. Compensated manumission was often a part of a continuum of legal action through which African Americans ensured their freedom. As shown earlier even the infamous legal and extra-legal work abolitionists did to free George Latimer ended in money being raised to buy his freedom. Importantly, Latimer’s experience helped change Massachusetts law and prevent the use of state facilities in the capture of fugitives.\(^{227}\)

In 1843 a man named James Johnson was arrested in Princeton, New Jersey. He had lived there for several years, making himself a “great favorite of the neighborhood” when he was arrested as a fugitive slave. Johnson’s counsel requested a jury trial under state law. But, citing the *Prigg* decision, the claimant’s lawyer objected to the request. The judge decided to go ahead with the trial and the jury decided in the claimant’s favor. While being taken away there was an attempt at a rescue that was stymied by proslavery forces who were armed with “knives and dirks.” After this escape attempt failed, $600 was paid to ensure Johnson’s freedom. Johnson was to work for five years to repay one woman who had put up $500 for his cause.\(^ {228}\)

However, when first arrested, Johnson and his legal counsel had also decided to test the law to see if it would decide in favor of his freedom. The first legal question of


\(^{228}\) “A Fugitive Slave Case” *NASS* (August 19, 1843). This issue of debtorship or indebtedness, highlighted by both Sewall and Johnson’s stories, is something I hope to take up in more depth in later work on this project.
this case, in requesting to be tried by jury, was whether state or national law would take precedence. In deciding that he “would not set aside a law of the State” the judge initially went against the Supreme Court’s decision. It is possible that Johnson’s lawyer pressed for a trial because he thought the sentiment of the area would work in Johnson’s favor or because the trial would work to buy Johnson’s supporters time to proceed with a rescue plan. When the jury ultimately decided in favor of the right of the slaveholder to his property, Johnson once again worked through extra-legal channels to protect the freedom he had created in Princeton. When his attempt to escape slavery failed yet another time Johnson and his community turned back to the law, compensating his owner for his legal freedom. Despite the fact that Johnson’s freedom was now tied to the reimbursement of his emancipation costs, Johnson’s manumission, paid for by his friends and neighbors, allowed him a final escape from slavery that was recognized by both state and national law.

Although not everyone arrested as a fugitive slave was actually a runaway, if we assume that Johnson had escaped slavery due to the result of the jury trial we can learn more about the myriad ways that African Americans encountered the law. At some point in his life as an enslaved person Johnson had decided to emancipate himself through escape. He settled in New Jersey and, based on his description as a “great favorite” and the support he was given during his legal troubles, had made a new community for himself outside of slavery. Johnson’s original escape and the attempt to rescue him from having to return to bondage were both extra-legal activities that Johnson and his allies used to work against his enslavement. Yet when those attempts failed Johnson looked to the law for his ultimate freedom.
The stories of Martin, Sewall, and Johnson show that black relationships to the law and legal action reflected the lived experiences of the enslaved, self-emancipated, and free. Often, the fluidity with which many African Americans understood their actions and relationships to the law reflected the frequently mixed legal status of families. Slavery as a system worked to undermine black kinship. The sale of loved ones, plantation management, labor, and hiring out all caused the physical separation of family members. Relationships built between free and enslaved African Americans as well as those in various stages of transition to freedom also complicated the experience of kinship. Buying freedom was often the path that families chose to realize their communal liberation to ensure that all family members had the same free status.

In states across the South constriction on the rights of slaveholders to manumit their slaves, and the rights of African Americans to remain in the region once free, added another layer of complexity to the transition to legal freedom. We have already seen how restrictions on manumission in North Carolina worked against Lunsford Lane after he had paid his owner. Lane was ultimately forced to leave North Carolina after being manumitted out of state, despite his attempts to use the law to gain permission to stay near his family. This was also the case for Isaac Hunter who lived in Raleigh. As discussed in Chapter Two, both men eventually raised the money to purchase the freedom of their families. Yet, obviously redress through the law was not always guaranteed success. African Americans in every stage of freedom were subject to extreme risk. The risk of separation faced by families with members of differing legal status was grave in both the South and the North. One can imagine that the uncertainty of fugitivity would have led many to try to purchase their freedom and use the technique to save loved ones.
Self-purchase and compensated manumission worked against the uncertainty of fugitivity, but also to secure kinship bonds of those families who lived in differing stages of liberation.

Not everyone was able, or perhaps willing, to take such risks as those discussed here. For whatever reason, some enslaved people who sought out self-purchase did not seek out other ways to become free even when their work to buy their freedom had failed. In 1852 the NASS ran a story from Kentucky’s *Louisville Journal* reporting that an African American man had committed suicide after being sold to a trader despite the fact that he had already paid several hundred dollars towards the price of his freedom.

Without laws to protect the rights of enslaved people there was no guarantee of recourse through the law for those whose plans got jilted. As this man’s tragic story, and *The African Observer*’s interest in the laws of coartación show, African Americans in the United States lived in legal limbo. While they worked towards freedom where they could, African Americans had little opportunity to win restitution when plans went awry and had to depend on their networks and multifaceted understandings of the law and how it influenced their capacity for action in the transition to freedom.\(^\text{229}\)

While so many who ensured their legal freedom through compensated manumission worked against slavery as abolitionists, using the public sphere to decry the oppression of their enslaved brethren, others worked against it in more quiet ways. In the work that African Americans did across the nation to raise the funds needed to buy reunion with family members we see how ordinary people enacted freedom. The daily work, which so often came with economic precarity, that free and formerly enslaved

\(^{229}\) NASS (August 12, 1852). Kennington, “Law, Geography, and Mobility,” 596.
people did as they set out to buy the freedom of loved ones constituted resistance to slavery. The value they placed on familial freedom carried with it a rejection and a threat to slavery on both theoretical and practical terms. As Mary Beth Corrigan has argued, "purchase of freedom represented the most effective legal means for free blacks and slaves to liberate their entire community." In purchasing loved ones African Americans brought their families together in legal freedom and protected them against separation. When African Americans worked to liberate their loved ones and ensure the free status of their families they prioritized their familial bonds in ways that the law and market of slavery refused to do.

Black freedom was circumscribed by the law whether it was that of the plantation, the state, or the nation. Freedom, like the law, was a constant site of contest. Enslaved and free African Americans made use of the law in ways that were relational to their daily struggles. While recognizing the uses of the law and legal freedom, African Americans created a legal culture that often worked seamlessly to understand the connections between legal and extra-legal techniques used to expand the borders of freedom. Many recognized the ways in which their freedom was influenced by multiple sources and how, no matter their actual status, “a piece of official paper could thus be nothing or everything: superfluous for documenting ownership, sufficient to establish slave status, indispensable for proving freedom.” Used as a mechanism against the uncertainty of fugitive freedom, compensated manumission, while by no means foolproof, offered a liberation that was recognized across the legal intersections of these interests. In buying freedom African Americans, whether enslaved or self-emancipated,

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attempted to ensure that they could stay in their homes, employment, and with their families and friends, or that their loved ones could join them without the threat of being taken back into slavery. This was a security that only legal freedom, or the legalization of ‘stolen’ freedom, could provide.\textsuperscript{231} 

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From the very beginning of the movement abolitionists had to argue against slavery across multiple fields of knowledge by using religious, legal, and scientific arguments. Because of slavery’s very real influence on American law, the abolition movement had to reckon with the nation’s legal system in multifaceted ways. Abolitionists also had to contend with the ways that enslaved people were held as property and use the law as it stood to expand the juridical possibilities of freedom in the daily lives of enslaved people and free people of African descent throughout the Americas. The abolitionist legal imagination also worked to envision the ways that the movement could overturn the systems of knowledge upon which slave law was based. As Enlightenment thought helped shape the rationale of racial slavery, abolitionists made radical use of reason in order to attempt to undo slavery’s legal and social foundations.\textsuperscript{232}

As highlighted in Chapter One, the activities of early abolition groups were often based on readings of the law that supported black freedom and antislavery action. By ensuring gradual emancipation laws were upheld, supporting cases of those wrongfully enslaved, petitioning campaigns, and fighting against the illegal slave trade, abolitionists


in the PAS required that the full scope of the law be followed. They worked with African Americans within the context of early American law to uphold the bounds of freedom as they existed, but also to expand them. African Americans also paid close attention to their legal position in the new nation. Their legal action in places like Massachusetts worked to transform state law leading to the end of slavery in 1784. African American women, doubly burdened by slave society, were central in these legal struggles and brought many early suits. As suggested earlier, these legal actions did both immediate work by freeing African Americans and limiting the rights of slaveholders but also questioned slavery’s long term legal viability within American constructs of freedom and rights.233

Despite calls for non-complicity with slavery and no compensation for slaveholders, second wave abolition still contended with self-purchase and legal freedom as they affected the daily lives of African Americans. For second wave abolitionists slaveholders had unjustly turned their “countrymen” into “marketable commodities.” Returning to the ideas laid out in the AASS’s *Declaration of Sentiments*, slavery was a crime that was not to be rewarded through compensation but resolved by the immediate restoration of the natural rights of enslaved people to themselves. This was a signal shift within the movement, yet the *Declaration* also recognizes state sovereignty to legislate slavery, and by suggesting that people in the free states work to end slavery by “moral and political action, as prescribed in the Constitution.” Garrison, of course, would later criticize the Constitution as a “covenant with death” for what he believed to be its proslavery nature. Others, moved by what they instead believed to be the Constitution’s fundamental antislavery nature disagreed with Garrison’s formulation and believed that

political involvement could ensure slavery’s demise. Whatever their constitutional disagreements, interest in creating a more just legal system was an important call to action. The fluid connections between legal and extralegal resistance remained constant as each suited the immediate needs of the self-emancipated or the enslaved who were so often subject to the same laws as slavery worked to circumscribe freedom.234

Abolitionist activity after the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850 highlights further the connection between legal and extralegal liberation techniques, as the act called upon the “Northern people back to their Constitutional duty of slave catching.” The Pennsylvania Freeman asserted that the act would “bring new trials and duties to the friends of justice, freedom and order.”235 Just as the act changed the legal landscape for African Americans, both within and outside of the courtroom, calls for self-defense as the “first law of nature” and new responsibilities for “friends of justice” display a deepened resistance to slave law. There were many ways that abolitionists declared themselves as at variance with these new encroachments.

In the aftermath of the Anthony Burns case, E.H. Gray, pastor at a Baptist church in Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts, declared that the “Fugitive Bill is at variance with, contravenes, scorns and overrides the law of God.” Gray believed that to obey the act was to “disobey God.” Thinking further about natural law in regards to the question of human property W.H. Furness argued in 1859 that the basis of all property rights began with “every man’s inalienable right to himself.” Furness reasons that the right to hold property in human beings “annihilates the very idea of property” and “exterminates society.” Slavery and laws that recognized the rights of slaveholder’s were a “giant treason to the

235 “The Revival of Kidnapping” PA Freeman (September 12, 1850).
liberties of the human race.” Not only were abolitionists arguing for self-defense and an activist politics that weakened the possibilities of the 1850 act, they were also still working towards a legal theory that limited the power of slavery over the nation’s legal systems.236

While many second wave abolitionists appealed to the morality of higher law against the proslavery laws of the nation the movement still worked to protect the freedom of African Americans caught up in the laws of man. These activities seem to have only increased despite calls for resistance to the law like those above. In each of these eras African American influence on movement tactics and legal thought is clear. There were, of course, many who were uncomfortable with paying for freedom. But, what those who bought their freedom and worked within the movement made clear was that legal freedom did not have to assume a recognition of slave law.

Like Douglass suggested in countering those who questioned his ability to fight slavery because he had participated in its market and ended his claim to fugitivity, those who bought their freedom were in a special position to denounce the institution and its daily economic operations that equated human beings with dollar values. When Douglass insisted that after obtaining his legal freedom, “I shall be Frederick Douglass still, and once a slave still. I shall neither be made to forget nor cease to feel the wrongs of my enslaved fellow-countrymen,” he highlighted a shift in status which could mean the difference between life and death and freedom and enslavement for those on the most

vulnerable front line of the fight against slavery.\textsuperscript{237} Douglass, like many others who bought their freedom and worked within the abolition movement, thought that being forced to pay for his liberty allowed him to further decry the criminal nature of slavery and the national laws which helped sanction it. He argued that this shift in his legal status did not assume a change in his politics but was solely born of necessity under the law.

In the last count, all methods of liberation added to the numbers of free African Americans who could work to gain the freedom of their enslaved brothers and sisters, through both literal and figurative kinship. Slaveholders made clear, over-and-over again, that they found black freedom threatening to the institution of slavery. African Americans who had legal freedom were not necessarily any different from those who had resisted their enslavement through escape. They could labor to spread the seed of liberty by working as a living example of freedom and how to obtain it and assisting in buying their friends and families, or by joining the abolition movement. The question of what it meant to follow the laws of the nation or the higher law of what was just, right, and moral is also appropriate to this discussion. For African Americans living under the legal shadow of slavery, ideas of higher law were represented in both their extralegal and legal activities that pushed towards freedom.

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In a later episode of the show Under\textit{ground} with which we began, Sam, the carpenter on Macon Plantation who was not to be trusted because he was saving money to buy himself, tries to pay for the freedom of his younger brother, James, to save him from a life in the fields. James had recently been assigned to this work as retaliation for

\footnote{\textsuperscript{237} “Letter to Frederick Douglass and his Reply” \textit{The Liberator} (January 29th, 1847).}
the actions of his sister who violently resisted rape and then ran away. Sam offers his entire savings of $100 to protect his brother. When Macon unconvincingly tells Sam that he will consider the proposal Sam runs away. Despite being ridiculed by his fellow slaves for trying to become legally free, Sam does not hesitate to resist his enslavement and the power of his enslaver who refuses to allow him to use his money to save his brother using legal means. Nor does Sam attempt to “play by the rules” save him from the full force of slavery. When Sam is eventually caught he is hung for running away. The ultimate price Sam pays to escape his bondage is his very life.238

What the story of Sam, portrayed in a popular television drama, highlights is that legal freedom was to be valued for obvious reasons but that attempting to buy freedom was often just one point on a spectrum of ways to resist slavery. African Americans who looked to self-purchase and compensated manumission were not naïve, nor willing participants in the systems that oppressed them, but had complex understandings of the world around them. They knew what the process could provide but also what it might lack. Importantly, Sam’s storyline shows how compensated manumission was so often used towards communal ends to help family members and friends protect each other and keep kin groups together.

Compensated manumission was a central technique in the black legal tradition, through which African Americans looked to become free. Its practical utility as a legal strategy has been shown throughout this dissertation. Its basis in the economy of slavery certainly made it a more attractive option for slaveholders as it gave slaveholders access to the labor of the enslaved, often over an extended period of time, and as they also

recouped the market value of the enslaved. In that sense, owners got reimbursed twice for the loss of their property to freedom. But it is precisely this loss that was important on multiple levels. While it is easy to assume that compensating slaveholders for something they had never rightfully owned held with it an inherent acceptance of slave law, we have to also think about the ways that African Americans worked to contend with slavery on a day to day basis. Their ideas about American law and the legal culture they created influenced the nation and its understanding of itself. In a land where the social contract was simultaneously racial and legal these things mattered. As Sinha has shown, abolitionist action was radical because at its heart abolition was also about the “conflict over the contours and nature of American democracy.” These conflicts were, at root, about “black freedom and rights.” The work of freedom had to be done on both a philosophical and practical level.239

It was a given for most African Americans and abolitionists that the nation’s law, and its support of the rights of slaveholders, was fundamentally flawed. Self-purchase was an ameliorative measure. But it marked both a compromise and a conflict within the American legal system’s attempt to fashion freedom as the estate of whiteness. Those who bought their freedom contended with the law’s ability to mark them solely as property. Their transition from chattel to person through the act of buying oneself frustrated the coherence of slave law. In the present in which they lived, compensated manumission allowed African Americans an opportunity to make a freedom that was recognized by law. In a legal world that worked to restrict opportunities for liberation, this was crucial. In addition, the ways that African Americans enacted their purchased

liberation had concentric effects as they accumulated of property, negotiated with those who were supposed to be their masters, entered markets, and created networks and alternative modes of commodification and value.

In *Freedom as Marronage*, Neil Roberts discusses what is gained when we think about freedom not only as an abstract political theory, but also as praxis, a state of being that is continually being sought. Roberts exhorts us to consider slavery and freedom as more fluid concepts. The process of transition becomes central to the idea of understanding their “relational nature.” While the full implications of Roberts’ work are myriad, his ideas about the “liminal and transitional social space between slavery and freedom” and interest in how people experience the process of emergence are useful for thinking about what histories of manumission look like when viewed not only from the slaveholder’s point of view, but also that of the enslaved. This conception would have certainly been familiar to the enslaved people who have been discussed here as they transitioned to freedom through compensated manumission, tried to move their kin groups onto the same legal plane, and as they continued to face the legal challenges of racial slavery as freed people. Freedom was a world in which many African Americans lived both within and outside of as they worked to shape its meaning. For, as Roberts reminds us, slavery was not a metaphor, millions of people lived enslavement every day. How this experience shaped their ideas of freedom and how to achieve liberation is, then, of the utmost importance.240

In the “complete confusion” of the law of slavery, confusion that was made by the actions of enslaved people, African Americans set out to create legal traditions that would

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help them define freedom for themselves and others. For Johnson, much of this confusion in the relationship between slavery and the law was called forth by the actions of the enslaved. Crucially, through their legal action they kept open the question of “What is slavery?” Self-purchase and compensated manumission, as they resulted in legal freedom, were ways that African Americans took the “master languages of slavery” and “shaped and reshaped [them] into meaning and argument around local events and everyday life.” Neither slavery, nor freedom were static or stable conditions. Self-purchase and compensated manumission challenged the racial logic of both slavery’s law and market by making them fields of action on which some were able to achieve their freedom. Of course, this path to freedom only worked for some individuals and the terrain on which they worked remained racialized and unequal for the vast majority of African Americans no matter what their legal status. What this chapter seeks to have done, then, through a complex understanding of freedom as a constantly contested legal category and as a state of being, is to see the ways in which undertaking self-purchase was still immensely meaningful, even while representative of the unequal power struggles between master and enslaved. In as much as compensated manumission represented the contestation of so many of the modes through which slave law attempted to create racial boundaries around both slavery and freedom, the lives of those who experienced the complexity of buying freedom worked to undo these boundaries and expand them towards freedom.241

CHAPTER 5

“THESE CURIOUS PAPERS:” BUYING FREEDOM IN THE SLAVE NARRATIVES

*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, the 1861 narrative by Harriet Jacobs, closes with the purchase of her freedom by her employer and friend Cornelia Willis. Jacobs, while thankful to her friend for helping remove the dangers of fugitivity and the constant threat of re-enslavement, wavers in her acceptance of how she comes to freedom. Indeed, hearing that her final freedom was to be found in the bill of sale strikes Jacobs “like a blow.” Although now legally free from Dr. Norcom Jacobs was a “human being sold.” Jacobs clearly saw the purchase of her freedom as yet another illustration of the ties that bound even those who had emancipated themselves to the continual subjection of the laws of slavery. Jacobs’ true freedom could not come with escape for, after 1850, it was impossible for her and thousands of other self-emancipated African Americans to ever truly escape the legal boundaries of slavery within the country of their birth. The conclusion of Jacobs’ infamous narrative, the terror of her enslavement, her harrowing escape, and the ever-present menace of being returned to slavery therefore ends with a reflection on the “bit of paper” that was the material representation of her liberty and its commerce.²⁴²

As evidenced by antebellum American slave narratives, an archive of both enslavement and freedom, many African Americans were forced to recognize the value in the bit of paper which gave Jacobs the freedom she had so long desired and worked to create through escape. As we have seen, in some instances the very narratives themselves as bound bits of paper circulated for sale reflected the desire and need for the author to

raise the funds to buy the freedom of themselves or loved ones. The phenomenon of self-purchase while in slavery, or the retroactive buying of freedom for those who had already run from it, manifests itself in the genre to an extent that clearly calls out for examination.

It is not possible to do justice to black ideas of this path to freedom without studying how self-purchase is enacted in the archive of the slave, or freedom, narrative. Slave narratives were some of the most important publications of the abolition movement and the most enduring source of black memory of slavery. It is necessary to look at how compensated manumission and self-purchase are dealt with in this narrative tradition to fully understand its function not only in the lives of African Americans but also within the world of abolition and its rhetoric. The stories of compensated manumission in the genre write against slavery and, more particularly, its market in human flesh and soul. They also write into the ongoing debate within abolitionist circles over the ethics of gaining freedom through trafficking in this market.

In the spirit of Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection* this chapter will take a closer look at self-purchase and compensated manumission in the narratives of Lunsford Lane, Harriet Jacobs, and Frederick Douglass to question what these often overlooked scenes can tell us about the dynamic relationship between “volition and violation.” The motif of self-purchase is related in the narratives as a way of dealing with the problems of stolen liberty and complicates our understanding of the emotional effects of buying freedom. In the relation of self-purchase to self-liberation we find ways to discuss the “absence of a consummate breach” between slavery and freedom. The buying of oneself, especially after escaping the physical boundaries of the South through flight, muddles the distinction between a free North and a slave South. Yet while the authors of the works to
be examined here recognize the vulnerability of their freedom without the sanctification of purchase, they do not allow themselves to be fully subjected but rather use this further proof of the mastery of slavery over freedom to indict the economic and legal systems of the nation. By doing this work, they further expose the crimes of the nation and substitute the national crime of slaveholding for the supposed crime of the fugitive in the imaginations of their readers. 243

The record of self-purchase and compensated manumission held within the narratives does not just serve as a critique of slavery but also reveals a fashioning of identity and personhood through economic and social astuteness which other scenes in the narratives cannot do in the same manner. For those, like Lunsford Lane, who bought their freedom while still in the South, we see the enslaved scheming and maneuvering through economic markets, law, social mores, and networks to manufacture situations in which they could buy liberation. In this context while the value of their bodies had an exact, if fluctuating, material worth that showed the subjection of enslavement, it also had a symbolic and invaluable one. Valuing freedom in these ways worked as a rejection of, and threat to, slavery. 244 Unlike Lane, Douglass and Jacobs had their freedom bought for them. Both Douglass and Jacobs therefore experience the process of compensated manumission differently than Lane. All three work to expose the physical and emotional process of becoming free for their audiences.


The scenes of self-purchase in the slave narrative tradition perform many functions. They show how the enslaved saw themselves discussing the terms of their own humanity by negotiating its price with those who not only owned them but also refused, in theory, to even nominally accept them as other than property. The necessity of buying one’s freedom also served to expose a nation where one was subjected to the law of slavery wherever one travelled, questioning whether one could ever truly escape the bonds of enslavement. The impotence of higher, or even state, law in the face of slavery and the deficient morality of the nation is clearly represented in these portrayals of freedom as an inscribed paper. The narrative discussion of these bills of sale, or “curious papers” as Douglass would call them, reflects on the troubling nature of the materiality of freedom.

The depth of personal experience and reflection displayed in the freedom narrative scenes to be discussed here offer us insight into buying freedom that few other abolitionist materials or other historical records can. Therefore, this chapter will depart slightly from the others that are based more narrowly within historical frameworks. While the use of narratives as historical sources also forms a significant portion of primary material for the rest of this dissertation, studying the rhetorical purposes and political work of buying freedom as a trope in the narratives of Lane, Douglass, and Jacobs in a more thorough manner is crucial to understanding the phenomenon as a whole. For, as much as self-purchase is to be viewed here as an important historical phenomenon, it also served as a highly stylized and politically charged form of black abolitionist rhetoric in the space of the narrative tradition. These scenes also worked to
shape the discourse around the economic, social, and legal injustices of slavery within the abolitionist public sphere in a way few other narrative events could.

The tools of literary analysis will allow for the type of sustained reading and further illumination that is necessary for comprehending the myriad complexities of compensated manumission and self-purchase and their effects on those who would be free. It is only through closely examining the record left in the narratives of the enslaved who bought their freedom that we can attempt to answer some of the crucial questions that compensated manumission has raised throughout the rest of the project. Therefore, the ultimate word on becoming free through purchase will come from those who knew what being unfree truly meant.

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The great story of the slave narrative, or narrative of the narratives, is the transition from enslavement to freedom, to see, in the oft-quoted words of Frederick Douglass, “how a man was made a slave” and “how a slave was made a man.” Freedom is often viewed as a mythical and commonly masculine journey that starts with the violence of slavery and ends with a free life in the North. Yet in the scenes of self-purchase that are found in the narratives to be discussed in this chapter, we meet a roadblock to this linear and progressive formulation of the journey from slavery to freedom. Self-purchase begs the reader to question the nature of freedom and those who control it. By looking at the circumstances surrounding the act of buying freedom in the context of the slave narrative genre we see that for many there were multiple moments of release. Freedom was part of a process for many enslaved people. Questions therefore

remain as to what the moment of escape (the mental escape and the physical are two
different points on this continuum) means for freedom when the enslaved attempted to
liberate their bodies through self-emancipation but not the legal title to themselves.\footnote{Gates, \textit{Classic Slave Narratives}, 389, 395.}

The invaluable freedom recorded in hundreds of slave narratives was in fact
valuable and measurable in concrete, if fallible, terms, for each person who purchased his
or her freedom had a market value as a slave. Those who bought their freedom while in
slavery used their position as marketable property to their advantage, offering money in
exchange for emancipation. While they may have thought it unfortunate that self-
liberation had to come through engaging the business of slavery, many enslaved African
Americans were prepared to contract with slavery to create a new life outside of it. Like
running away, buying one’s freedom was also a performative action. In order to succeed
it was necessary to play to the desire and whim of the slaveholder while also clearly
establishing the right to engage in and complete the transaction as a willful being. As will
be discussed later, self-purchase works to complicate, if subtly, some of the aspects
through which Hartman describes the “agency of the enslaved” as “only intelligible or
recognizable as crime.”\footnote{Hartman, \textit{Scenes of Subjection}, 62.}

The history of the slave narrative genre is marked by examples of self-purchase.
Early writers like Venture Smith and Olaudah Equiano bought their freedom and
discussed their economic activity and manumission in their narratives. Like Lane, Smith
also worked to buy his family members and even supported a number of others in doing
so. While Smith’s narrative was published some forty years earlier, there are many
similarities between the economic activities of Lane and Smith. Smith was able to

“marshal his personal resources and successfully shape the course of his life.” His “determination and entrepreneurial savvy” helped Smith raise the money need to buy the freedom of himself and others. Smith seems to have been particularly proud of these achievements. Even Smith’s gravestone reminds readers of his accomplishment. It reads, in part, “kidnapped & sold as a slave but by his industry he acquired Money to purchase his Freedom.” Throughout the genre we meet industrious slaves, a vast array of allies, and duplicitous and cunning owners. But we also see the enslaved meeting the challenges of raising and successfully utilizing funds to become free. Their relationships with outsiders are often marked by commercial or interpersonal connections that allow for the enslaved to undertake self-purchase. In navigating the economic and social landscapes of slavery we witness black communities believing freedom to be concurrently priced and priceless across the centuries.248

The *Narrative of Lunsford Lane* concentrates heavily on Lane’s market activity which affords him the opportunity for liberation. Early on in the narrative Lane states that he “used to plan in my mind from day to day, and from night to night, how I might be free.” Lane does not therefore dream about an abstract freedom, rather he plans how to obtain it. One day while in this “state of mind,” as he calls it, Lane’s father gave him a basket of fruit that he then sold, making the “first money [he] ever had in [his] life.” Lane quickly recognizes that making money in various ways could add up to his ultimate goal of freedom. This realization made Lane “long for money; and plans for money-making took principal possession” of his mind. From this moment on we see Lane engaged in all

sorts of sundry entrepreneurial activities and “laboring at the dead of night” after the “long weary day’s toil for my master was over.” Here Lane describes the multiple masters that the labor of enslaved African Americans often contended with. There was the labor that served those who legally owned them, and that other labor undertaken in the “dead of night” for the benefit and care of the enslaved and their families.249

Eventually with the help of his father Lane finds a new method for creating smoking tobacco of a quality which gave him an advantage over the local competition. Lane and his father create a completely new way to process the tobacco through which they created a “good article out of very indifferent material.” He then designs a pipe that would cool the smoke as it passed through to enhance the experience of smoking the specially flavored tobacco. Always a savvy businessman, Lane later recognizes an opportunity to hire out his time while his newly widowed mistress was financially vulnerable over the debt of her recently deceased husband. During the period in which he hired out his time Lane “commenced the manufacture of pipes and tobacco on an enlarged scale.” He even opened a “regular place of business” and labelled his “tobacco in a conspicuous manner with the names of "Edward and Lunsford Lane." Not only does Lane engineer a new way to process the tobacco and a specialty pipe but he was also able to produce on such a scale that he engaged people to sell the tobacco for him in other parts of the state. Lane also sold his “articles” on commission in other stores.250

Such a flourishing and public venture for an enslaved person is hard to imagine in the nineteenth century South for, as Lane records in a footnote, it was illegal for the


250 Lane, *Narrative of the Life of Lunsford Lane*, 9-10, 15.
enslaved to sell goods and participate in markets without license in North Carolina. The enslaved were also not allowed to hire their own time in the state. Lane, however, takes advantage of the fact that this practice was “sometimes winked at” as long as the slave was “orderly and appears to be making nothing.” Lane was clearly adept not only at economic practices and invention but also social conventions. In describing how he conformed to Southern social mores so that his business venture would be “winked at” Lane states that he found it “politic” to be poorly dressed and to pay his mistress on time and hide his money from the public. His choice of the word politic is clearly appropriate as Lane’s skill in navigating social custom and law, while at the same time defying them in the name of freedom, is displayed throughout the narrative.251

Eventually Lane saves enough money to buy his freedom for $1,000. The master of Lane’s wife, Mr. Smith, takes his money and buys Lane’s “freedom” from his mistress. Lane was not allowed to do so under state law. Both Smith and Lane attempt to legalize his manumission but the court judged that Lane had not done anything worthy of meritorious emancipation which was the only kind of manumission allowed under North Carolina law. Therefore, Lane technically remained the property of Mr. Smith. Feeling “unsafe in that relation” Lane eventually accompanied Smith on a business trip to New York where he was “formally made a freeman.” Through his enterprise Lane had officially foreclosed on the possibility that anyone could lay claim to his body as chattel.252

252 Lane, Narrative of the Life of Lunsford Lane, 15-17.
The logic of slavery determined that the enslaved could not amass property as they were themselves considered the property of their masters. Often, however, enslaved people maintained the privilege of holding some property even if they did not exactly hold legal title to what they owned. Thus, at least in theory, the laws of North Carolina mentioned above and under which Lane worked sought to control the enslaved’s access to markets and their ability to hire their time. Both laws limited the slave’s capacity and potential for earning and accumulating excess of wealth. In most places, as evidenced by Lane’s story, involvement in the economy was often overlooked. We have seen the many ways that the “slave’s economy” flourished and worked to “challenge the interests and power of slaveholders,” as John Campbell claims in his essay on the South Carolina Upcountry. We certainly see this in the fact that accumulation of property allowed enslaved people like Lane to negotiate in the most powerful market in the South—the trade in that most peculiar species of property who could buy itself. In cases of self-purchase the enslaved’s ability to act as economic agent and direct that activity towards freedom doubly exhibited the threat of the slave’s entry into the market.253

The economic practices through which Lane worked to become free were in fact illegal according to North Carolina statues. This made Lane and his actions criminal through a literal reading of the law. Hartman claims that “criminality is the only form of slave agency recognized by law” and that the “fashioning of the subject must necessarily take place in violation of the law.” In looking at the relationship between subjecthood and subjection, she claims we must more thoroughly investigate the “constraints of agency”

in the actions “undertaken with the acknowledgement that conditions will mostly likely remain the same.” These are the actions that the enslaved took up to “restore the disrupted affiliations of the socially dead, challenge the authority and domination of the slaveholder, and alleviate the pained state of the captive body.” Importantly, Hartman also asks “how does one enact resistance within the space of the permissible or exploit the ‘concessions’ of slave owners without merely reproducing the mechanisms of dominance?” Clearly, Lane, as Hartman suggests, was engaging in economic activity in a space negotiated with the consent of his mistress and those who bought his goods as they turned a blind eye to the law. This happened often in the slave south as the enslaved constantly fought to turn privileges into rights and keep them as such. All parties transgressed the law, but it would be Lane who would bear the brunt of fundamentally objecting to the law through his actions. Thus, Lane’s freedom is created outside of the law, but it is also the law that eventually marks his status as free.254

Lane’s narrative is punctuated with the law. He reminds the reader, either within the text or in footnotes, of the law’s standing on his actions throughout the narrative. It becomes almost another actor that one must consider in the path of his life. The contradistinction between his actions and the letter of the law works to acknowledge what Hartman describes as the constraints of his action. By doing this Lane works to show the reader not only the nature of slave law under which millions of enslaved people lived but also to highlight the meaning of his ability and determination to transgress its boundaries in the name of freedom. The legal information Lane includes is often subordinated not only through his in-text discussion of it, but also, when footnoted, through its literal place

254 Hartman, Scenes of Subjection, 54, 41, 51, 63.
on the page. With the inclusion of these legal discussions, Lane highlights not only the space between the law as written and lived but that the enslaved had a legal culture through which they understood the law’s effects on their lives.

The enslaved were legally outside of the boundaries of state subjects who had the capability to either amass or hold property or the fruits of their labor. If this was the case why did slave owners--owners of both the enslaved and their ‘borrowed’ goods--accept compensation and assume it to be independent from their holdings of the enslaved themselves in order to create legal acts of manumission? In fact, Lane reminds his reader that “legally, my money belonged to my mistress; and she could have taken it and refused to grant me my freedom.” But he claims that as a ‘very kind woman,” she would “scorn to do such a thing.” Surely in Lane’s payment of $1,000 he was forced to recognize his legal status as chattel, as an object that could be bought and sold. But by his rejection of slavery through buying his liberation Lane’s story points to the radical possibilities in the economic loopholes of retreat that, like Jacobs’ grandmother’s shed, were never far from the actual fact of enslavement.²⁵⁵

What might be considered as Lane’s “minor transgressions” ended with his legal transition to personhood. This process of course also forced him to have to leave the state. While partaking in the crime of amassing property and being in the illegal, or rather legally illogical, position of being a slave who held property, Lane changes his condition and his legal status. Although the transition is ostensibly undertaken through the largesse of his enslaver who even travels to New York with Lane to legally manumit him, Lane is

²⁵⁵ Hartman claims that “even labor is not considered agency because it is the property of another, extracted by coercive means, and part of the bestial capacities of the black; it simply personifies the power and dominion of the owner.” Hartman, Scenes of Subjection, 62. Lane, Narrative of the Life of Lunsford Lane, 16.
still able to become a free man through his economic and social successes. As proprietor of Edward and Lunsford Lane he is able to translate his “politic” acumen into a path to legal personhood.²⁵⁶

Upon returning from New York to North Carolina as a free man to raise the money to buy his family Lane was finally forced to face the law he had evaded for so long. Lane’s presence as a free black man was illegal in North Carolina. Thus, we see Lane transform to the status of a criminal in his free condition. Confronted with this danger Lane attempts, once again, to rely on his social acumen. He decides to petition the state assembly with the assistance of white supporters to get permission to stay long enough to buy his family. When his petitions fail he is arrested for “delivering abolition lectures in the State of Massachusetts” and then tarred and feathered. Lane escaped with his life through the assistance of friends and others in his extensive network. While his network of supporters could not save him from the hand of the law, these connections work to save his life and later help him arrange to buy his family members who are still enslaved.

As we have seen in earlier discussions of Lane’s life, he had connections both within the South and the North. In May 1842 Lane addressed a meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society with his family who were now all free. Lane described to the audience how after he had raised $620 towards the $2500 purchase price for his family he had been forced out of North Carolina. Lane leaves no emotion to the imagination and recalls how he thought that his “money was lost; my bright expectations were lost—my family was lost; and I was lost of course.” He goes on to describe how he had since

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²⁵⁶ Lane, Narrative of the Life of Lunsford Lane, 16.
traveled for a year going from “house to house, and from place of business to place of business, to tell my story, and ask for help.” Lane was eventually able to raise $1400 to redeem his family. These fundraising activities were the basis for the accusation he faced of “delivering abolition lectures.”

Through circuitous means and in the face of no small danger to his life, Lane eventually succeeds in the “redemption by purchase” of his entire family. Lunsford Lane’s narrative documents how he, literally and figuratively, manufactured his freedom. His business ventures in tobacco and pipes made him well-known throughout North Carolina. Lane’s skill, ingenuity, and daring made slave owners and those who legislated the very laws that attempted to keep him enslaved participate in his efforts to free himself under the guise of seemingly simple business exchanges. It might also be assumed that those who supported him during his arrest and trials were some of his former customers. Lane complicates the relationship between the enslaved and the law and illuminates the possibilities that could exist for maneuvering towards a greater freedom in the space between how the law worked on the ground and how it was written. That Lane sold his products “considerably” to members of the legislature shows his ability to take advantage of multiple markets in order to effect his eventual freedom. Not only did he negotiate with the law in selling goods that were illegal for him to vend without proper license, and nowhere in the narrative does Lane suggest that he was licensed to trade, but he also bargained with the makers of those same laws as they bought his tobacco.

Lane’s narrative frames his shrewd and innovative business sense as partly indicative of his capability to be free. Lane’s story of making the funds needed to

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257 Lane, Narrative of the Life of Lunsford Lane, 38, 46-48. “A Whole Family Set Free.” NASS (June 9, 1842).
purchase his freedom is central to the way he discusses liberation. Moreover, it works to show his agility to succeed in freedom and his ability to negotiate his transformation into what we might call manhood, as Douglass formulates it. In planning for his future Lane, like Douglass, centers himself within the world of bourgeois economic and entrepreneurial self-making. Certainly, this expression of autonomy, business acumen, and agility mirrors the classic process of Douglass’ procurement of a more traditional literacy in his narrative. For both men these forms of literacy allow for greater freedom within slavery, and eventually freedom from it, both mentally and physically. Douglass’ obsession with learning to read and write dictate the terms of his manhood while for Lane his ability to make products and sell them work to write him into a similarly gendered and classed manhood in terms of the nineteenth century man. Although both Douglass and Lane’s experiences were limited by society on racialized terms, it is important to note the discourse of success and self-making that enter Lane’s narrative through his astute business sense.258

Lane’s self-making is quite literal as his ability to conduct business and work outside the terms of his master show him as industrious and allow him to become free through his own making. While Lane undertook this economic activity which may have made any man of the day proud, his participation in the market economy was directly related to this goal of liberating his family. Lane chose to invest his earnings in the invaluable asset of familial freedom. At the end of his address to the AASS meeting,

Lane declared that “I have not a dollar in my pocket, yet I think there is not one here who feels richer or happier than I.”

In Lane’s narrative we have an answer to one of the many questions raised in Hartman’s work. In her discussion of what she calls “minor transgressions,” Hartman asks what type of resistance could be carried out “within the space of the permissible...without merely reproducing the mechanisms of dominance?” In fact, we see Lane amassing property, often seen as a ‘minor transgression’ and a practice generally ignored or tolerated by white Southerners, to enact a more meaningful form of resistance in making the money he required to obtain his freedom. By taking advantage of his ability to exploit the sometimes inconsistent and incoherent nature of the law of slavery, Lane furnishes the means to escape his enslavement. Of course, Lane does have to participate in the market of slavery by buying his body. However, it should not be overlooked that within this market, the fact that the enslaved could at times negotiate terms to own themselves was a powerful enactment of agency in a system which decided almost all the limits of freedom.

After his “banishment from the place of his birth for the crime of wearing a colored skin” Lane finds that freedom was something that could not be described, except that it “seemed as though” he “was in heaven.” Unlike the narratives of retroactive purchase to be discussed below, the reader finds a more meaningful portrayal of freedom

259 William L. Andrews. *To Tell A Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 123, 127. Valerie Smith. *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991),112-114. Lane, *Narrative of the Life of Lunsford Lane*, 34. Lane, *Narrative of the Life of Lunsford Lane*, 1, 10. Lane states that “As the Legislature sit in Raleigh every year, I sold these articles considerably to the members so that I became known not only in the city, but in many parts of the State, as a tobacconist.” Lane’s customers seem to adequately represent the confused state of slave law which he uses to his advantage. “A Whole Family Set Free.” NASS (June 9, 1842).

in Lane’s narrative. In describing his family’s final passage into freedom Lane states that when his “feet struck the pavements in Philadelphia” it was as if he had “passed into another world.” Despite being punished solely for being a free African American in the wrong place and time, Lane does not dwell on the legal limits of freedom. In the North, Lane thoroughly believed he had found a home for his family where the “stern, cruel, hated hand of slavery could never reach us more.” For Lane, the freedom that he had constructed with his own hands was to be found in a space where his family could be together. Singing the praises of his new northern home, Lane closes his narrative in a way that supports a meaningful separation of slavery and freedom along the traditional north/south border.  

William Still’s *The Underground Railroad*, tells the stories of hundreds of fugitive slaves and acts as a sort of communal narrative of fugitivity. Still records numerous instances of compensated manumission proving that both escape and self-purchase often worked in tandem and that even the ‘underground’ recognized the necessity of above ground tactics like those utilized by Lunsford Lane. The cases where an enslaved person emancipated themselves and then retroactively purchased the freedom they had already stolen or later bought their loved ones out of slavery to join them are perhaps the most interesting. While these cases often involved the most famous American fugitives, like Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown, and those with particularly perverse owners like Jacobs, Still’s tome makes clear that this was also a course of action that many ordinary African American men and women undertook to ensure the freedom

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261 Lane, *Narrative of the Life of Lunsford Lane*, 1, 17, 51.
they had created outside of the law by running. Reading Still’s archive of fugitive slave experiences and the relationship between running and buying puts the purchases of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, two of the most prominent examples of compensated manumission in the slave narratives, into better context. Unlike Lane’s seeming satisfaction with the liberty of his family, Douglass’ and Jacobs’ stories of purchased freedom leave a critical lack and evidence a deficient and obstructed freedom.

To frame the rhetorical function of Jacobs’ and Douglass’ discussion of the purchase of their freedom it is necessary to put their stories in the context of the passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act and the role of national politics in changing the standard depiction of the transition from slavery to freedom within the narrative genre. William Andrews describes the authors of later narratives, like Jacobs and Douglass, as “liminal autobiographers.” He looks to Incidents and My Bondage and My Freedom as examples of narratives that broke with the genre’s earlier attempts to create strict boundaries between the experience of slavery and freedom towards one in which black authors began to “increasingly depict their fugitive careers as a lingering limbo of dreams deferred, not as a linear quest leading to a new world.”262

These narratives were written after Douglass’ famous split with Garrison and his time abroad and after both he and Jacobs had spent ample time in the North experiencing the political and social influence of slavery on the entire nation. Most importantly, both Incidents and My Bondage and My Freedom were published after the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 which created such a deep crisis in the lives of so many free African Americans who lived in a seemingly ever more fragile space of liminal freedom.

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262 Andrews, To Tell a Free Story, 179.
The dangers of fugitivity increased greatly with the passage of the enhanced act, making true freedom out of reach for those who did not sanctify their stolen liberty with legal purchase or manumission. At the same time, changes within the abolition movement and black activism allowed ever increasing opportunities for the formerly enslaved to tell their stories outside of more traditional abolitionist narrative conventions. As black abolitionists worked to expand the terrain of freedom to include greater access to rights and the ability to labor in the public sphere, they also looked to tell stories that better reflected their life experiences and concerns. Both narratives, but especially Incidents which is one of the most encompassing discussions of the experience of African American women under enslavement in abolitionist print culture, reflect these broader changes within black activism.

The constant risk of recapture worked more than ever to police the boundaries of how freedom could be experienced by slavery’s fugitives. Andrews notes that both Douglass’ and Jacobs’ writings attempt to re-inscribe the journey to, and through, freedom with more personal and reflective detail. Freedom’s arrival ceases to complete their stories. What American liberty lacked and how it remained, if personally sacred, politically threatened becomes of greater importance in these later narratives. Both authors now included more detail on how one lived, or was forced to live, in an unfinished freedom. The scenes relating to the buying of the freedom in Douglass’ and Jacobs’ narratives make visible the process and failings of liberation under slavery’s continued interference with American law and freedom throughout the nation.  

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263 Andrews, To Tell a Free Story, 179.
In his *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass claims that the plans to purchase his freedom occurred “without any solicitation” from himself and that his supporters “placed the papers of my manumission in my hands before they would tolerate the idea of my returning to this, my native country.”\(^\text{264}\) Douglass’ disapproval of the exigency of his purchase is evidenced in the description of his freedom papers which he also reproduces in the narrative. He enters his “curious papers” as proof of his “transfer from Thomas to Hugh Auld, and from Hugh to myself.” Thus, the process is not described by Douglass as granting him freedom outright. Instead, Douglass is first sold as a slave to Hugh Auld who then relinquishes his property in Douglass to Douglass himself.

Douglass’ use of the term “transfer” to “myself” implies a more complicated process. He must first become master of himself, which from Douglass’ dismissive description suggests something other than outright freedom. Also telling in this regard is the way Douglass divides his narrative. The second part entitled “Life as a Free Man” begins with his arrival in the North indicating that he had found his freedom long before it was paid for. The moment of purchase, while recognized as providing legal cover, is clearly not the ultimate moment of freedom for Douglass. This is also the distinction Douglass makes in discussing his legal status and framing his purchase as a ransom in the debates over his redemption.\(^\text{265}\)

\(^{264}\) Douglass discusses the purchase of his freedom in his later narratives *My Bondage and My Freedom* and *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. Douglass had not yet become legally free when his first narrative was published in 1845. In fact, as discussed previously, it was partly the publication of his first narrative and the following threats to his fugitive freedom by the Auld family that convinced Douglass to allow his English supporters to buy his liberty. As the description is almost identical in both of his later autobiographies a discussion of the account in *My Bondage and My Freedom* will suffice for our purposes here.

While Douglass’ description of his liberation recalls the arguments he made in the pages of abolitionist newspapers as he spoke to his supporters and detractors, he does recognize its importance. Douglass’ “friends in England” had not yet finished furnishing Douglass with the opportunity to have his freedom recorded on paper. Douglass goes on to describe how his English supporters also planned to raise money to buy Douglass the materials to start a new paper upon his return to the United States. Whatever reservations he may have had, Douglass found the true power of the purchase of his freedom in his ability to “return to my appropriate field of labor” in the land of his birth. The opportunity afforded to him by English abolitionists was the double purchase of his liberty and also of an outlet for the exploitation of this freedom, a newspaper that would spread his now legally secure voice. In this fashion Douglass clearly saw the worth of his purchase in the security to continue “wielding my pen, as well as my voice” to “send slavery and oppression to the grave” for every African American.266

Yet by purposely separating slavery and oppression in this phrase and in later stating that he had suffered with his people as both a “slave and as a freeman,” Douglass makes evident that freedom, whether legal or fugitive, was not all encompassing for African Americans. This is exactly why he desired to continue to labor in abolition. Through this work he hoped to make release from enslavement ever more significant and to ensure that there could indeed be a “city of refuge” within his “native land” where one would not have to enter the realm of personhood by “commercial transaction” or by “establishing” one’s self as a free man in another country.267 It should not go unnoticed

266 Douglass, My Bondage and My Freedom, 392.
that Douglass obtains his final freedom from American slavery while evading it in an external space.

Douglass closes his “21 Months in Great Britain” chapter with a telling scene that can be read to say even more about his newfound legal freedom. As he turns his “face toward America,” an action which will be mirrored by Harriet Jacobs as she unveils her face, Douglass meets “something which painfully reminded [him] of the kind of life which awaited [him] in his native land.” The moment Douglass bares his face towards America he is drawn back into all that that entails. Douglass finds that his first-class berth on his journey home has been given to another (read white) person and that he has been regulated to be “cooped up in the stern of the Cambria, and denied the right to enter the saloon, lest my dark presence be deemed an offense.”

In the aftermath of this affront, Douglass declares that the “lash of proscription, to a man accustomed to equal social position, even for a time, as I was, has a sting for the soul hardly less severe than that which bites the flesh and draws the blood from the back of the plantation slave.” The merging of the lash of social exclusion and the lash of the plantation as merely different forms of discipline towards the same end, keeping black bodies in their inscribed place, is an inscription which Douglass sees as reaching both the enslaved and the nominally free simultaneously. This scene undoubtedly reveals that Douglass knew that even legally free from enslavement he would still be subjected to the law of slavery which bound not only bodies to labor, but also minds to ideas of racial

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inferiority and exclusion. These ideas worked to create a liminal space of black freedom even for those, like Douglass, who had the insurance of a papered freedom.269

In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs, like Douglass, is limited in her involvement in the purchase of her freedom. She is also secluded from the reach of slavery when her freedom is being negotiated, having been sent away from New York for her protection. Despite Jacobs’ disapproval of having her freedom bought, Cornelia Willis pursued the negotiations to buy Jacobs’s freedom anyways. Thus, in similar circumstances to Douglass, Jacobs find herself free but this time not of her own making and under conditions outside of her control.270

We see the language of value and commerce entering into Jacobs’ discussion of family from the very beginning of her story. Of course many narratives open with a discussion of family that is highly engaged with the slave market and the absence, abuse of, or sale of loved ones vis-a-vis the trafficking of human property. Yet here Jacobs does something different as she weaves the hope money engenders in her family, and its let downs, into a way to tell us about and describe the members of her family. Access to money and its possibilities become a part of her familial legacy, although it is not always a positive one. There are numerous times throughout the text in which Jacobs’ grandmother looks to resolve a situation by attempting to buy a family member’s freedom, like when family friends are sought out to assist in schemes to buy Jacobs away from Dr. Norcom.

Within the first two pages of the narrative the reader hears of the abilities of both Jacobs’ father and maternal grandmother to make their own money through negotiating over access to their skills and time to raise their own capital. Jacobs also tells her readers of their dreams to use the funds amassed to buy the freedom of their families. Here, we see both the industry and ingenuity of Jacobs’ family members, but also the value they placed on their familial bonds and freedom. Anne Bradford Warner has argued that the focus on family in Jacobs’ narrative “shows the dialogue of those struggling to understand the moral condition of slavery through the embrace of family and faith in the midst of decisions about risk and separation.” In doing so, Jacobs “provides a window into the moral and intellectual life of the African American slave family.” However, the value of white comfort and economy continuously attempt to devalue and destabilize the black family that Jacobs represents as very clearly valued outside of their legal status as property throughout her narrative. Jacobs thus attempts to identify competing ethics of value under American slavery. Jacobs marks familial freedom as invaluable yet, because they are marked as property, she is also forced to reckon with their value as chattel.271

One place that Jacobs focuses on this kind of discourse around value is in the discussion of her grandmother. Jacobs’ grandmother, Molly Horniblow, plays a central role in Jacobs’s life especially after the death of her mother. Jacobs declares that she had a “great treasure” in her grandmother to whom she was greatly “indebted.” Jacobs highlights the need for relationships, community, support, and all the bonds that made it possible for women to survive and resist the issues of enslavement that were particular to

African American women. According to Jacobs, the enslavers of her grandmother also found her to be “valuable” as a “piece of property.” Here, Jacobs sets up the complex relationships of competing value within slavery. She juxtaposes the internal value of people within the black family and community and those imposed upon them from the white world. Jacobs’ grandmother is deemed her treasure but is also marked as valuable property.272

Despite the fact that Jacobs attempts to ground black value through the lens of family connections, the value of white comfort and economy continuously attempt to devalue and destabilize the black family in her text. As mentioned before Horniblow’s baking was a “profitable” business and she worked to put money aside in a fund to purchase her children. Horniblow ran the town’s only true bakery. From her experience working at the local tavern, Jacobs’ grandmother supervised the construction of an oven for her bakery. Just like Lane, Jacobs’ grandmother creates a market for her business through social networks and economic savvy. When her grandmother’s master dies her youngest son is sold so that “each heir might have an equal portion of dollars and cents.” The rest of her children were “divided” evenly among the master’s children. The language of numbers and finance that Jacobs employs here, marking the white use of black bodies, clearly contrasts with her discussion of the internal value placed on her family and its security. The sale is a “terrible blow” for Jacobs’ family and her grandmother sets out to work with “renewed energy” in the hopes of being able to purchase her children and save them from her son’s fate.273

Eventually Jacobs’ grandmother saves $300 which her mistress then “begged as a loan.” Horniblow lends the enslaver her “hard earnings,” trusting her “honor” to repay the money. Jacobs here, like Lane, notes that a “slave, being property can hold no property” and that no promise is “legally binding.” Jacobs’ grandmother never sees the money again. When Horniblow’s mistress dies she requests repayment for her loan from Dr. Norcom, the executor of the estate. He denies the her claim because the estate was insolvent. However, Jacobs notes, they retained the “silver candelabra, which had been purchased with that money.” Jacobs assumes that the candelabra would be “handed down in the family, from generation to generation.” Thus, like her earlier discussion of the sale of her family member to divide the master’s estate evenly among his descendants, the money raised by Jacobs’ grandmother in an attempt to ensure a secure and generational freedom within her family, also finds itself turned into part of the white family’s inheritance. The parallels between Jacobs’ family and the silver candelabra, who are both property capable of bestowing white wealth and affording continued familial comfort, contrast vividly with the ways Jacobs describes the economic activities within her community and their attempts to secure the ultimate legacy--freedom.274

After Jacobs finally escapes the South she remains subjected to the machinations of the Norcom family and the continued harassment of Dr. Norcom in his attempts to re-ensnare Jacobs and her family. Even before 1850 Jacobs felt that she could “never go out to breathe God’s free air without trepidation at my heart.” Yet even living under these conditions, when the Norcoms eventually offer the opportunity for Jacobs to purchase her freedom she states that she “could not possibly regard myself as a piece of property.”

Jacobs deemed it incredibly unjust to have worked for so many years without wages while relying on her grandmother, rather than the Norcoms, for most of her family’s comforts and still have to be forced to pay for her legal freedom. Norcom had also already been compensated for her children. Under the circumstances it seemed “not only hard, but unjust, to pay for myself.”

By framing her discussion of compensation in this way, Jacobs enters into the ever growing abolitionist and Republican discourses of labor, value, and compensation. Jacobs had been denied the rewards of her labor and had also worked to meet her own needs. Norcom had not acted the part of the paternal master whose care would in any way make up for the theft of her labor as suggested by slaveholder propaganda. Following her concern for familial freedom throughout the narrative Jacobs describes her desire to spend her hard-earned money on the “education of my children, and to secure a home for them.” Yet despite all this she knew the “law would decide that I was his property, and would probably still give his daughter a claim to my children; but I regarded such laws as the regulations of robbers, who had no rights that I was bound to respect.” Here Jacobs flips the language of crime and, more specifically, Chief Justice Taney’s decision in the Dred Scott ruling.

After the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act Jacobs described herself as, “in fact, a slave in New York, as subject to slave laws as I had been in a Slave State.” She finds this to be a “strange incongruity in a State called free.” Jacobs describes the passage of the act through the lens of black womanhood and family by describing the “many a poor washerwoman, who, by hard labor, had made herself a comfortable home” and “obliged

275 Gates, Classic Slave Narratives, 452, 657.
to sacrifice her furniture, bid a hurried farewell to friends, and seek her fortune among strangers in Canada.” She focuses the effects of the act in the “humble homes” of black women who worked to protect their families and make a home out of their freedom. Thus, when offered the opportunity to buy her freedom Jacob rejects the possibility as morally incongruous with how she views her liberty and the value of her labor. She refuses the offer to become free under a legal system that continuously worked to devalue the black family.276

After the death of Dr. Norcom, his daughter and her husband come to New York “short on funds and in need of [Jacobs’] value” and attempt to put Jacobs in their “pocket,” liquidating her value into cash. Under this threat, Jacobs was once again sent “flying from pillar to post.” Jacobs’ employer, Willis, tells Jacobs that she wishes to buy her freedom to end her “persecution.” Despite Jacobs’ protest that she did not wish to be merely “sold from one owner to another” as it seemed “too much like slavery,” Willis concluded the negotiations on her own. In this process we see the slave market exposed and supported under national law as Jacobs’ value as a slave is debated between a “gentleman in New York” and the Messmores, her current owners. The value of her body as a slave is what determines the value of her freedom, which is set at $300. Disappointing Jacobs even further was the involvement of the Colonization Society who facilitated her manumission. Jacobs also bore the burden of the additional $150 that remained to be paid.277

Jacobs, no matter how she may have felt about her freedom being inscribed upon an object, a piece of paper, no doubt recognized the practical function of having her freedom

276 Gates, Classic Slave Narratives, 648, 655.
277 Yellin, Harriet Jacobs, 115-116, 118.
bought. As Jacobs returns home she claims that she was “no longer afraid to unveil my face and look at the people as they passed.” Her legal freedom had given her the opportunity to show herself to the world and to look back upon it with security. Her freedom also calls for Jacobs to reflect on the legacy of self-purchase that punctuates the story of her family. She reflects on her father’s and grandmother’s loving attempts to buy her out of bondage and hopes that her father’s spirit would rejoice over her final escape. She also imagines the “loving old heart” of her grandmother jumping for joy as she looked down upon her free family.278

For Jacobs, who had been under the constant threat of her former master’s sexual advances, the purchase of her freedom comes with other gendered dimensions. Dr. Norcom had long attempted to make Jacobs into his concubine. He had valued her as his slave under conditions that had threatened to devalue her claim to true womanhood. Norcom attempts throughout the narrative to use the possibility of special treatment and favors in return for Jacobs’ submission to his will and desire. He attempts to ‘buy’ Jacobs favor and purity through his control over her body, as her enslaver and legal owner. This threat also carried through to her daughter who Norcom threatened to raise to “sell well,” a sinister suggestion when framed by Norcom’s continuous sexual advances towards Jacobs herself. Thus, for Jacobs, who infamously describes Norcom’s advances and how he caused her to become “prematurely knowing in evil things,” there is a connection between the trade in human chattel and trafficking in enslaved women for a variety of unmentionable labors that also shadow her final sale. Even when the free man that she

loves attempts to buy her freedom and marry Jacobs early on in the narrative, he is turned down by Norcom who refuses to relinquish his title to Jacobs’ body.279

When Willis meets Jacobs after her purchase she exclaims, “O...I’m so glad it’s all over!” But was it actually over for Jacobs herself? Was this bestowal of legal freedom all that was needed for Harriet Jacobs to live, in her own consideration, a free life? In the way Jacobs describes her newfound liberty as being as “free from the power of slaveholders as are white people of the North” it is clear that she does not see this as an unbounded freedom but rather a particular and limited kind. Jacobs goes on to say that while this was an improvement in her lot it was “not saying a great deal.” There is plainly something incomplete in her deliverance from slavery, especially as the nation remained beholden to its economic and legal logic. In fact Jacobs claims that the “the dream of my life is not yet realized.”280 For Jacobs freedom would come not from that which was already granted to her, but from that which she wished to still obtain—a space for her family. This is a space of freedom that is left incomplete at the close of her narrative. In this moment we see Jacobs in some ways reflecting Douglass’ scene of coming back to the disappointing reality of race when he describes the instance of discrimination in closing his discussion of his time in England.

While she appreciated the legal unburdening of having her freedom purchased by her friend, Jacobs ends her narrative questioning the true value of her papered freedom. As William Andrews claims, what she “longs for is a home modeled on her grandmother’s, where a woman of color retains both her freedom and her privacy and is beholden to no one for her economic welfare or that of her children.” In her discussion of

compensated manumission Jacobs attempts to trouble the meaning of freedom and even the fictions of the freedom to be free. As Jean Yellin has argued, Jacobs is also a hero in her own fashion, but a “hero tightly bound to family and community who seeks freedom and a home for her children.” Ultimately Jacobs recognizes the importance of having legal freedom, even if it comes at the cost of recognizing the law’s sanction of her enslavement. However, as recorded by Amy Post in the appendix of the narrative, Jacobs held that the freedom she had “before the money was paid was dearer to me” because it had not “put God’s image in the scales with the paltry sum of $300.”

Reading Jacobs in concert with Douglass makes visible the fraught relationship that men and women who had made themselves free by physically moving beyond the bounds of slavery had with the necessity of obliging the system they had so strongly resisted by buying their freedom retroactively. Both Douglass and Jacobs represent their freedom as embodied physically and materially in a piece of paper. Lane includes the bills of sale for his family members at the end of his narrative becoming another place where the law interrupts his narrative. The method used by both Douglass and Jacobs to describe their certificates of freedom, as “curious papers” or a “bit of paper,” that bestowed final liberation on both renders a pall of disapprobation upon their legal release from slavery. The quality of freedom is at once diminished in their descriptions of it as being restricted to a tangible article. They become objects that represent not only liberty but also the bind of being free under slave law.

Bills of sale and even freedom papers become legacies of the powerful arm of slavery that could follow the fugitive wherever he or she ran, a capacity both Douglass

and Jacobs were uneasy with. Thus, their inclusion within the texts becomes evidence of a perverse liberty. It marks not a freedom bestowed by birth, but by economic exchange. The papers represent a freedom that must be recorded to be legal. The replication of the bills of sales or manumission papers in the narratives themselves serve to mark their necessity. Lane suggests that his readers, unaccustomed to “trade in human beings,” may be “curious” to see the bills of sale that led to his family’s freedom. Each author describes the materiality of their passage to legal freedom and attempts to restrict the meaning of these papers while at the same time working to highlight their necessity. As curious papers they become intriguing manifestations of the incapacity of American freedom to expand beyond slave law. They also stand as anomalous reckonings with slavery from those attempting to live beyond slavery’s supposed reach. We have seen, however, that whatever freedom lacked did not deter those who sought liberation through either legal or illegal means.282

Jacobs, although she disapproved of having her freedom bought, confesses in her narrative that “once it was done I felt as if a heavy load had been lifted from my weary shoulders.” Jacobs admits that “I well know the value of that bit of paper; but much as I love freedom, I do not like to look upon it.” Jacobs’ depiction of the paper that bestowed freedom upon her attempts to describe its true meaning to her larger life story, offering it as a small piece, moment, or bit of the life she had made for herself. Ultimately, Jacobs knows freedom to be beyond that which can be looked upon. It is something outside the limits of a piece of white paper scrawled with black text. By the end of her narrative she had already spent the majority of her life acting on her desire for freedom. Her

282 Lane, Narrative of the Life of Lunsford Lane, 53.
proposition that her freedom papers may “hereafter prove a useful document to antiquaries” relegates the proof of her freedom to the archive not of her present, but rather of the future. For Jacobs the utility of her freedom is not represented by an object, its representation as such only mars its splendor. This is why she does not wish to “look upon it.” At the same time, however, she suggests that at some point others may wish do just that. Jacobs, like Douglass, therefore suggests that the materiality of her freedom stand as a record of the system which called for freedom to be made tangible, to be reduced to a bill of sale.\footnote{Gates, \textit{Classic Slave Narratives}, 663. Jonathan Senchyne, “Bottles of Ink and Reams of Paper: Clotel, Racialization, and the Material Culture of Print,” in Lara Langer Cohen and Jordan Alexander Stein, eds. \textit{Early African American Print Culture} (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 140- 158.}

Nevertheless, Douglass and Jacobs work to expand this limited notion of black freedom. For Douglass, his purchased freedom is juxtaposed with the opportunity it affords him to extend his efforts to actualize the abolition of all forms of enslavement by protecting both his body and voice. Jacobs wishes to construct her freedom through the creation of a home to shelter herself and her family. However discomfiting the necessity of recognizing the system of slavery that had owned their bodies, we see compensated manumission as affording, at base, a security of person that would have otherwise been impossible to achieve in a nation where the law of slavery extended beyond its physical limits. For many enslaved men and women the will to be free overtook questions of how one should obtain that freedom. The necessity of escaping the remnants of bondage, or at least the most threatening ones, made African Americans participate in the market of slavery and warranted the purchase of their bodies.
The narratives of Lane, Douglass, and Jacobs show the ingenuity and commitment of African Americans to achieve freedom by any means necessary. By discussing compensated manumission these texts add to discussions over the technique within the abolition movement against those who continued to believe that purchasing freedom was an “unwise appropriation of funds” and that the purpose of the movement was the “overthrow of the slave system and the emancipation of every slave” more broadly.284 The sacrifice of the men and women who paid for the freedom of themselves and others is undoubtedly a testimony to the incredibly varied methods of African American resistance to enslavement. The discussion of self-purchase and compensated manumission within the narratives examined here attempt to bring black voice to the ethical debates over the buying of freedom within the abolition movement. The majority of abolitionists were willing to recognize necessity and come to the aid of those who wished to become legally free, but that very necessity is eloquently voiced in the stories of Lane, Douglass, and Jacobs.

Those who worked within the system of slavery to buy their freedom did not prove any less willing to condemn it once they were free. In fact, participating in the market of slavery gave many first-hand experience to critique not only the laws of slavery, but also those of the nation that made this participation necessary. African Americans who bought their freedom were in a special position to expose the base inhumanity and injustice of slavery’s law and economy. The necessity of buying one’s freedom served to unveil the face, the first act that Jacobs performs in freedom, of a nation where one was subjected to the law of slavery wherever one traveled. Indeed, to

expose the system of slavery and its grasp on the American government and psyche, which were all in a sort of bondage to it, Douglass, Lane, and William Still replicate bills of sale, letters of price negotiations, and the papers needed to ensure freedom in a supposedly free land in their writings. Even Lane, who decided not to critique the path to freedom that reunited his family includes the bills of sale for those who were not “accustomed to trade in human beings.”

The examples of buying freedom discussed here make clear that each relationship to this piece of paper had a different meaning and purpose for each author. In some cases, like Douglass and William Wells Brown, another famous abolitionist who had his freedom bought by English supporters, purchased freedom allowed them to continue their abolitionist work without the fear that they could be silenced by removal back to slavery. For others, like Jacobs and Lane, it served to ensure safety and worked to bring about a space for familial reunion and a more private sort of freedom. For some this was enough and for others it left as many disappointments as it answered evidencing the “complicity of slavery and freedom.” This is the complicated relationship that Hartman uses to describe general emancipation, but clearly can be traced back to the individual emancipations evidenced in these narratives.

Still, all those who bought their freedom did to a certain extent have that “heavy load,” as Jacobs describes it, lifted off their shoulders. The load that was carried was represented in fugitivity and in the dangers of being taken back into slavery for Douglass and Jacobs. It was also represented by the possibility of being trapped in permanent and generational enslavement for those, like Lane, who escaped slavery through purchase and

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285 Lane, *Narrative of the Life of Lunsford Lane*, 53.
then worked to extend that freedom to their families. Perhaps there can be no consensus for what freedom meant for, and to what extent it was realized by, those who bought their freedom. Furthermore, this may be the nature of freedom, that it means something different to each person that encounters it and that it is perhaps another form of bondage, a servitude to an ideal, to assume that each individual African American should have experienced their bargained freedom in the same way. Each came to their “curious papers” in their own way and each used this foundation, whether they perceived it as hollow or true, to build a “city of refuge,” no matter how liminal, in a land where the capacity to do so were so often determined by powers beyond their control.287

CHAPTER 6

“WHAT COUNTRY HAVE I?” ABOLITION AND COMPENSATED MANUMISSION AFTER 1850

In 1847, not long after the purchase of his freedom, Frederick Douglass asked, “What Country Have I?” This is a question that must have surely resonated with many self-emancipated people. Before his manumission, Douglass’ fugitive freedom, not to mention his work as one of the nation’s most important abolitionists, put him at extreme risk of recapture. Douglass and other fugitives lived with the reality that within the bounds of the United States, their freedom was precarious and came with little recourse to the law. With the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, sweeping legislation which put the freedom of all African Americans at risk and made “every citizen of the free States to be a ‘slave-catcher,’” Douglass’ question was even more pressing than it was three years earlier. As slave law’s extra-territoriality expanded, African Americans and abolitionists were forced to further recognize the necessity of the legal freedom offered by compensated manumission. With slaveholders’ increased freedom and federal support in hunting down the self-emancipated, an increasing number of ‘person(s) held to service or labor’ were caught in free states. Legal freedom within the United States, of course, did not guarantee the foolproof protection of African Americans from kidnappers. At the height of the crisis, knowing that they would now be in an even more vulnerable position, African Americans who had escaped slavery chose to buy the freedom that they had already taken. They also fled to Canada in record numbers.288

288 Philip Foner, ed. The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass (New York: International Publishers, 1950), vol. 1, 236. “At the Tabernacle May 12, 1847.” PA Freeman (May 20, 1847). Quarles, Black Abolitionists., 20, 30. Reprinting a story from the Dayton Gazette, the NASS told the story of two free men from Ohio who had been arrested as fugitives after traveling in the South. One man was to be freed after “friends had paid his jail costs. Another, twenty-two year old Isaac Roberts had been held in prison for
This chapter will look at how compensated manumission worked as a tactic for African Americans in the aftermath of the Fugitive Slave Act. It will also work to understand the ways in which this new legal challenge to black freedom influenced how African American and abolitionists interfaced and answered the needs of the self-emancipated. Both extra-legal and legal techniques of resistance were often seamlessly undertaken by African Americans in order to protect their freedom. The use of a spectrum of resistive efforts blossomed in the aftermath of 1850. African Americans and the abolition movement responded to these circumstances with violent self-defense, but also by ensuring the return of captured fugitives to the North by paying slaveholders for their manumission. Notices of kidnappers, enslavers, and their henchmen looking for the formerly enslaved and stories of movement efforts to raise money to secure the release of African Americans abounded in abolitionist print culture post 1850. The culture of danger experienced by black communities created a new urgency for legal freedom.

From examination of abolitionist printed matter, it appears as though the crisis also led to a more general support of efforts to buy liberty amongst abolitionists, even as their illegal activism continued to work against the Fugitive Slave Act. Many African Americans who had run-ins with their former owners had their freedom paid for by friends and abolitionists instead of being taken back into slavery, or to return them to freedom. When James Hamlet was taken from New York by his former Baltimore owner in 1850, black New Yorkers raised $800 to bring him back to New York as a free man. As would continue to happen as hundreds of northern communities resisted the Fugitive

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nearly four months and the *Gazette* reported that he was to be sold in sixty days if he was not redeemed. “A Hard Case” *NASS* (August 4, 1855). A May 1851 article from the *Springfield Republican*, reprinted in the *NASS* claimed that “all or nearly all” of the fugitives living there had gone to Canada. “Fugitive Slaves Fleeing to Canada” *NASS* (May 15, 1851).
Slave Act, Hamlet’s community worked to reestablish his life in freedom by paying for his return. Whether supported by the work of one’s neighbors and friends or abolitionists, the importance of legal freedom became even more crucial.\(^{289}\)

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In August of 1850 a convention was held in Cazenovia, New York in protest of the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act. The conference was organized by Gerrit Smith. Frederick Douglass and Mary and Emily Edmondson, each of whom had some relationship to compensated manumission, were in attendance. There were probably many others whose experience of fugitiveness included self-purchase, or would now that the Fugitive Slave Act had become national law. The convention approved a collective response to the latest success of the slave power. The letter, written by Smith, declared slavery a state of war and that “by all the rules of war, you have the fullest liberty to plunder, burn [and] kill.” The radical nature of the convention’s message, paired with its interest in the voice of the fugitive, marked a growing turn in abolitionist politics over the course of the mid-century. But, what some of the convention’s most famous attendees and their experience of buying freedom attested to, was that the varied techniques that black communities used to protect freedom were going to become even more crucial to the success of the abolition movement in answering the problem of illegal freedom after 1850.\(^{290}\)

Both violent resistance and compensated manumission, and their discussion in abolitionist print culture, increased in the years preceding the Civil War. Abolitionists

\(^{289}\) *Fugitive Slave Bill: Its History and Unconstitutionality; With an Account of the Seizure and Enslavement of James Hamlet, and his Subsequent Restoration to Liberty.* (New York: William Harned, 1850), 36.

were forced to recognize the urgent necessity of buying black freedom. Despite debate over compensated manumission and the issue of being complicit with slaveholders, black communities looked to buy freedom in order to protect members from the expanded power slaveholders had to recapture their human property. For the black community ideas of higher law and morality, which were constantly discussed within the movement, mattered less than the saving of loved ones and friends from slavery. Survival and meaningful freedoms were the highest law. However, the movement still wrestled with how to frame the philosophical and ethical questions surrounding the purchase of freedom.

An article from the *National Era* from 1851 asked “how can a man buy a slave for liberation, and not be guilty of encouraging slavery?” Like Douglass, the article frames the purchase as ransom, using the example of someone ransoming a brother from a Spanish prison mine in Cuba. It suggests that doing so would not prove that the “Tyranny” of Cuba was not wicked, but evidenced “brotherly love.” In addition, buying freedom is compared to paying extortionist prices for grain, as opposed to starving to death. In both cases, paying the price demanded is “simply evidence of its pressing necessity, nothing more.” As for the purchase of enslaved people, the *Era’s* correspondent suggests that while the “poor slave mother,” faced with separation from her children, would understand if someone told her that they could not afford the amount needed, “but would marvel at the philanthropy of a man who, with plenty of money for luxuries, and plenty of lamentation over her sad fate, should refuse to help her on the ground of principle!” The author closes by putting himself in the shoes of an enslaved
person stating aptly that, “I should pity the necessity but hate the metaphysics that would deny me aid.”

Many agreed with the sentiment presented in the National Era article. William Still recorded the efforts of Abigail Goodwin from New Jersey who “denied herself even necessary apparel” to have money to give for movement work. She worked not only in supporting and raising money for the work of the underground railroad in Philadelphia but also to support efforts for compensated manumission. In a letter from the 1850s, reprinted by Still, Goodwin states that she sent “Esther Moore $41 more by half than I expected” as she thought “abolitionists there are all opposed to buying slaves, and will give nothing.” The money was to go towards the liberation of a family of ten from North Carolina whose enslaver was willing to manumit them for $1000. Goodwin declared that although she did not “like buying them, or giving money to slave-holders either,” “this seems to be a peculiar case” “as they can be had so cheap.” Recognizing the exigency of circumstance, it was not only the low price, but also the fact that there were “so many young ones that would be separated from their parents” that pushed Goodwin to action. Goodwin also continued to raise and donate money, clothing, and other items through her benevolent society to support the escape of fugitives. But, despite her general opposition to compensating slaveholders, Still remembers her as “too tender-hearted to resist the temptation” to assist a family in need and in reach of freedom. There were many others like Goodwin who, when the opportunity presented itself to support those trying to liberate themselves by any means necessary, could not help but support them.

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291 “Questions and Answers” The National Era (September 18, 1851).
The numbers of self-emancipated people looking for support to buy their liberty is mirrored by the presence of stories of impostors throughout abolitionist newspapers in the 1850s. An 1852 news item in *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* reported that an African American preacher, Mrs. Lee, was falsely taking up collections for the freedom of a Mr. Massey. Massey, on the other hand, wished to assure the public that he was a “free man” who could “take care of himself.” In 1855 a Rev. Charles Smith was arrested for falsely presenting himself as a preacher from Washington who was attempting to raise money to redeem some of his family members. While Smith had succeeded in getting money from a “number of our citizens,” suspicions were raised enough to check his accreditations, which turned out to be false. In the same paper “A Word of Caution” was given to readers about a “certain class of men, who are, apparently, growing quite numerous” who worked to “deceive the unwary” by looking for “money to aid them in the redemption from Slavery, of brothers, and sisters, and sometimes, whole families.” Others looked for support to “get an education,” or an “outfit for Africa.” The paper was concerned that these characters were a “serious damage to the Anti-Slavery cause” and thought they should be “taken care of” so as not to “damage the success of the truly deserving.” The article also mentions that two other similar stories were to be found in that week’s edition alone. Further, it goes on to name two other men known to the paper who had adopted the “begging system as a means of ‘getting along.’”

Canada’s *Provincial Freeman* related the story of a man named William Carter, deemed a “dangerous man,” who was looking for assistance to buy his freedom or that of members of his family, variably. Apparently, Carter was a freeman who also owned

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property in Canada.\textsuperscript{294} He “not only…admitted, that he has begged four hundred dollars in Detroit,” but that he also “contemplate[d] going to England” to raise even more money. Carter was determined to use his pistols if the Editor of the \textit{Freeman} or any other continued to dispute his right to get money “in any way he please[d].” Carter seems to have worked people’s political sentiments against them as one of his tactics to get donations. In one instance he visited a mayor, who after donating, “referred him to an Abolitionist, saying that he would see if those pretended friends would give as much.” The abolitionist told Carter that it was against his “principles to buy slaves” but refused to be “out-done by a slaveocrat.” The abolitionist gave Carter $10. As to the warnings published against him, Carter claimed that they were a matter of “personal dislike.” It was believed that Carter had already amassed $480 and still planned to take his fundraising scheme across the Atlantic. An 1856 letter to the \textit{NASS} described Carter’s appearance and surmised that there were others associated with him in Canada who were working with him to further “this imposition.”\textsuperscript{295}

The motives and lived experiences behind the decisions these African Americans made to attempt to fraud abolitionists out of donations remain silenced here. Certainly, the broader racism faced in the free states made economic stability difficult for all African Americans. Carter’s technique shows an ingenious understanding of what was at stake in the personal and political image of individuals, even causing an unnamed abolitionist to take what they deemed as unprincipled action. That Carter also planned to take his show on the transatlantic abolitionist circuit like others before him shows that he

\textsuperscript{294} “An Imposter” \textit{NASS} (July 12, 1856).
knew the uses of abolitionist geography. And, ultimately, according to *The Provincial Freeman*, he had threatened violence if stalled in his attempts to get money in whatever fashion he pleased. Like Carter’s belief in his right to get money however he saw fit, in each of these cases of imposture there are interesting claims being made to a particular black experience, namely former enslavement and fugitivity. Black fugitivity becomes not only a liminal state of being but also of performance. Those who would be deceived were also in the precarious position of legitimating certain aspects of the black experience in their ordering of potentially false claims, even if they had the best of intentions.

Carter’s case is perhaps more dramatic than most but what these impostor warnings show is that self-purchase was a well-known, and well-supported, technique. Abolitionists were concerned enough about protecting the possibility of support for those who genuinely needed to purchase themselves and loved ones that they attempted to warn each other of false fugitives. These articles also show abolitionists validating compensated manumission as they attempted to invalidate imposters. These discussions suggest the common nature of these appeals and, importantly, the willingness of abolitionists to support them. In this same vein, an 1856 article from *The Provincial Freeman* believed that the “increasing anti-slavery feeling in the free States, together with the sympathy extended to those who have escaped from oppression” had caused a proliferation of “unprincipled” people looking to take advantage of abolitionist support for buying freedom. Quite obviously, this presented a problem for the movement as, over the course of the century, it increasingly had to prove itself against the propaganda of slaveholders. Another issue raised here, and in cases of genuine self-purchase, was how
the technique worked within the broader rhetoric of abolition in regards to the character and ability of African Americans to join the ranks of freeholders and a virtuous citizenry. Notably Mary Shadd ended her letter about Carter by describing his case as a “perpetuated disgrace to the colored people.” There were real repercussions not just for those looking to buy freedom, but also for broader communities.296

As can be imagined, abolitionists probably felt great pressure in cases where it was possible for fugitives to become free through purchase, especially when the alternative was separation from family and permanent (re)enslavement. The newfound ease with which self-emancipated people could be taken up, even if they had made lives for themselves in freedom, probably worked to turn the hearts of many abolitionists on the question of compensation. It also led many African Americans to recognize the necessity and utility of the legal freedom afforded by purchase, even if they had steeled themselves against it. Some enslavers seemed to hope to use this to their advantage, or at least taunt abolitionists with the opportunity to put their beliefs into action.

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The position of fugitives shifted after 1850 for reasons specific to each person’s, or family group’s, individual circumstances. While African Americans tried to secure their free lives with friends and family, slaveholders took advantage of the new benefits afforded them in recapturing the self-emancipated. In one case, a fugitive family from Kentucky was recaptured in the summer of 1851. This case was deemed “peculiarly hard” as the claimant had known where the family was, but had “permitted them to be brought up with all the feelings and associations of free persons, only to be made goods

and chattels of when the market was good.” The market may have been good for the sale of enslaved people, but the new legal procedures most likely played no small role in the slaveholder’s decision to retake this family. The mother had raised the children on her own expense, only to see them taken away because they were worth “some $1800.” After the arrest of her son, the mother fell into convulsions as she pleaded for her child. 297 This heart wrenching scene happened with increasing frequency and the possibility of separation was what led many formerly enslaved people to flee the United States or to buy their freedom.

Violence from African Americans, abolitionists, and slaveholders increased as well. The infamous Christiana, Pennsylvania uprising in 1851 was the result of a group of self-emancipated men and their supporters enacting violent self-defense to stave off the attempts of Edward Gorsuch to re-enslave them. In August of that same year Daniel Davis, a fugitive from Kentucky was captured in Buffalo. Davis was violently kidnapped by a slave catcher sent by his enslaver. He came before the court “bleeding profusely.” Despite his assault, the court decided that Davis was to be delivered to his owner. From the available record it does not seem like Davis was able to negotiate his freedom. The slave catcher was eventually charged with assault and fined $50. 298 We can imagine that this was little solace to Davis, who had been re-enslaved, nor his friends and family who were now living without him.

African Americans and their allies responded to this kind of violence using a variety of techniques in tandem to slow, if not stay completely, the power of slaveholders to infringe upon black freedom. The social, physical, and political violence enacted

297 “Slave Case in Baltimore” NASS (January 9, 1851).
against African Americans by those attempting to carry out the Fugitive Slave Act
required a number of self-defensive techniques. Self-purchase and compensated
manumission were central to African Americans who responded to these freedom crises.
James Phillips, who had been an “industrious and respectable citizen” of Harrisburg, PA
was taken up in 1852. Like Davis, he was taken by violent measures and taken before
Commissioner McAllister in a “state of insensibility.” The sham trial marked Phillips as a
fugitive and he was given over to his captors. The violent case raised much indignation in
Harrisburg and an attempt to raise money to redeem Phillips was made, although at first
the efforts were unsuccessful. The *Harrisburg Standard* published a moving letter from
Phillips to his wife in which Phillips declared that he was in the hands of a slave trader
and would be taken South in August. Phillips states that he “almost rather die than to go
South” and with evident urgency asked his wife to tell “all of the people if they can do
anything for me, now is the time to do it.” Phillips relays that his freedom could be had
for $900 and gives directions as to who his wife should go to for assistance. Phillips
emphasizes that they come as quickly as possible as he wanted to “get back very bad
indeed” and was “almost dying to see you and my children.” The fear of sale and
enslavement permeates Phillip’s pleas for urgency from his wife and the men he asks her
to contact throughout the letter. He tells them to think nothing of the price as he was
worth “twice that amount” and would “make it up” for anyone who would buy him. With
the appeal from the *Harrisburg Standard* Phillips was eventually redeemed by the
citizens of Harrisburg for $900.299

These cases show that in response to the new legal advantages of slaveholders African Americans and their allies formed even more extensive bonds of resistance. The necessity and urgency of legal freedom is made clear in the cries of the enslaved mother in the name of her arrested son and in the letter Phillips writes to his wife in order to move forward the purchase of his liberty. The pain of separation is palpable in both stories. For Phillips, it is also clear that he knew enough about the process of redeeming himself to put the gears of freedom into motion immediately. Those who knew him, and those in Harrisburg who had heard his story, responded in time to save him and reunite his family.

Some enslavers and traders took advantage of the type of goodwill that saved Phillips by taunting abolitionists and those who sought to protect their loved ones. One slaveholder who was to carry his supposed fugitives back from California advertised a sale by stating that while he valued one of his men at $300, he would sell him for $100 “if any or all of his abolition brethren wish to show that they have the first honourable principle about them, they can have an opportunity of releasing said negro slave from bondage.” The slaveholder supposedly wished to “make this great sacrifice in the value of the property to satisfy [himself] whether they prefer paying a small sum to release him, or play their old game, and try to steal him.” The nameless fugitive, on his part, desired to be sold in California rather than be remanded back to Mississippi.300

These circumstances remind us that no matter the actions taken on the part of abolitionists, in many cases it was not only about money and that some slaveholders who held legal title to self-emancipated people had to be a willing participant in the sale.

300 “Slavery in California” NASS (July 22, 1852).
Although abolitionist newspapers had always carried news of famous fugitive cases, the excitement grew as African American and abolitionist communities became more bold in their will to resist the 1850 act, and as courts attempted to carry out new aspects of the law. One case in which the determination of both abolitionists and slaveholders was made apparent was that of Anthony Burns. In 1854 Burns was captured in Boston and given over to his claimant, despite the efforts of abolitionists at an escape attempt and general disapproval of the trial.

Burns was sold by his slaveholder, Suttle, to a North Carolina trader for $700 on the condition that he would not be sold North. Reverend Grimes and other supporters had offered Suttle $1400 in both Boston and Virginia but had been refused. While doubting that “such a fellow as this Suttle would sacrifice $700, from the mere love of revenge” the NASS thought Suttle believed that it was a “point of Southern honor that Burns should never be redeemed from bondage.” Burns remained steadfast and determined to return North. Highlighting the continuum of resistance, Burns claimed that he would return even if he had to “wade through blood to my neck” and become captain in a “general uprising of the slaves.” Supporters finally found Burns in the possession of an enslaver who was willing to allow his sale, although there was still some opposition to his redemption.

In addition to the moral issues personal liberty laws had attempted to respond to earlier in the century, the Burns case brought up questions about the role of the state and local facilities in fugitive renditions. An NASS article reprinted a letter to the editor of a Boston newspaper requesting that members of law enforcement who served during the Burns case vote to reject their pay to “silence any suggestion of blood money, or that they
served as slave catchers.” The author of the letter believed that if they took their pay, the South would have “reason to think and to say that our love of freedom and order is a marketable commodity.” Burns was redeemed partly with donations made to Reverend Grimes by U.S. District Attorney Marshall and others who, according to the Standard, looked to “mitigate the public opinion which brands them as kidnappers.” Of course, as many African Americans understood freedom was in some ways a marketable commodity.

As late as 1858 the South had not given up on attempts to make an example out of Burns. The Standard reprinted an article from the Virginia Herald claiming that he was in the “Penitentiary of Massachusetts for the crime of robbery.” In reality, Burns was at Oberlin College. This falsehood was “adapted to produce the impression that the prominent incident of freedom at the North to those who have been slaves at the South is the perpetration of crime and a home in the Penitentiary.” For abolitionists the ultimate “crime of robbery” had, of course, been that of Burns’s body and labor.

On the other end, many self-emancipated people felt a change of heart as the fugitive crisis heated up. The abolitionist William Wells Brown had once told his owner, Enoch Price, that he would never pay for his freedom and become a “purchaser of my body and soul” for Brown believed, and told Price, that “God made me as free as he did Enoch Price, and Mr. Price shall never receive a dollar from me or my friends with my consent.” By 1854 Brown had had a change of heart. Recognizing the utility of being safe from capture, he allowed a group of British abolitionists that included the Richardson

301 “Anthony Burns” NASS (December 30, 1854). This is an issue that will be discussed further in later chapters. “Anthony Burns a Free Man” NASS (March 10, 1855). “Burns to be Redeemed” NASS (March 3, 1855).

302 “Anthony Burns” NASS (July 10, 1858).
sisters, to buy his freedom. In reaction to Brown’s manumission, it seems as though abolitionists had learned well from Douglass and his supporters years earlier. Although the _PA Freeman_ regretted Brown’s decision, they rejoiced at his return to the U.S. and to the “cause of freedom.” In the same issue the paper also reprinted an article from _The Liberator_ that described the contributions of Brown’s “friends” as “kindly” as they allowed him to “return to his native land without being subject to the terrible liability of being seized as a fugitive and scourged to death on a Southern plantation.” Those, like Brown, Douglass, and even Harriet Jacobs who bought their freedom retroactively, or allowed others to do it for them after they had already acquired it with their feet, paid for the extra safety and reassurance of freedom papers. They had already resisted their enslavement outside of the law but also decided, for practical purposes, to make it legal.\(^{303}\)

There were also those who had paid for their own freedom but had to choose whether or not to do so for the loved ones they had left behind. Josiah Henson, who was tricked by his master into thinking he had bought his freedom later escaped to Canada and returned to Kentucky multiple times, helping some 118 slaves escape bondage. James Pennington, also a fugitive, condemned the “chattel principle” of slavery yet still saw the necessity of purchase. Pennington assisted one man in raising the money to save his daughters by applying to the members of his church. Later in life he decided to attempt to buy himself and his parents out of slavery to “relieve myself from liability.” Pennington claimed that he was willing to do it not because he approved of the “principle involved as

a general rule” but because it was convenient to all involved.304 To raise the money he sold his library and got financial support from as far as Jamaica. His former owner wrote back with just an offer for Pennington and not his parents and accused Pennington of the theft of himself. Pennington wrote back saying that the deal must include his parents and demanded that the charge of theft be renounced, requests to which he never got a response. His father and brothers eventually ended up in Canada after multiple escape attempts. Their story, like that of the Stills, remind us of the extreme dangers of both running away and living as a fugitive during this period.

As Pennington claimed, fugitivty was indeed a liability and many, despite their political stance, chose to reduce their insecurity by ensuring their freedom by buying themselves. Pennington showed that while he was willing to submit to the practicality of having to secure freedom and seeing his parents again after sixteen years, he was not willing to be treated like anything less than a man with rights. As the actions of Still, Henson, and Pennington show, there was no set practice for African Americans in obtaining freedom. They moved fluidly between whatever actions would best suit their purposes at the time and were not preoccupied solely by rhetoric but with family and freedom.305

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In addition to the debates over individual self-purchase and compensated manumission, there was also the question of a national compensated emancipation as a way to abolish slavery in the United States. While obviously viewed as a different issue

305 Still, *UGRR*, 186.
than the private purchase of an individuals’ freedom, it is important to discuss compensated emancipation as an issue related to the abolition movement’s discourse around law and cooperation and how these conversations affected the fight for an end to slavery nationwide. Discussions over compensation in abolitionist circles were continually punctuated by different international and local events.

There had been groups who had advocated compensated emancipation and manumission within the United States from the nation’s founding such as early manumission societies and the American Colonization Society. For many years movements for compensated manumission and colonization were closely linked. Members of the ACS saw compensation as a way to ensure slavery’s demise and also rid the United States of the problem of dealing with an interracial nation. It is also useful to remember the attempt at compensated abolition attempted by the African American community of Pennsylvania as they offered to be taxed to pay for the general abolition of slavery in the state. However, with the advent of the second wave of abolition, compensated emancipation was no longer viewed by most abolitionists as a viable option, despite its success in ending slavery in the British empire. Of course, there were also many who critiqued British emancipation for a variety of reasons.306

The most important example of compensated emancipation in the transatlantic abolition movement was the British Emancipation Act of 1833, which included a measure to compensate West Indian slaveholders for the loss of their property. As the only example of national compensated emancipation that the world’s abolitionists could look to, emancipation in the British empire caused much discussion in the United States.

throughout the nineteenth century. Despite years of attempted reforms meant to ameliorate the condition of the slaves, English abolitionists remained unsatisfied with the state of slavery in the empire. The slave rebellion in Jamaica around Christmas of 1831, combined with the renewed vigor of abolitionists, pushed the British government to finally create legislation for emancipation in the empire.\(^{307}\)

In 1833 the British Parliament had voted to not only enact a gradual emancipation, with a mandatory period of apprenticeship for the newly freed, but also to further compensate West Indian planters. The bill set aside £20,000,000 to pay slaveholders for their losses. The doling out of such a large sum was the result of a compromise over the length of apprenticeship, reducing it from twelve years to six, in order to appease abolitionists who were against the measure. In reducing the apprenticeship period by half, Parliament tacked on another £5,000,000 to satisfy slaveholders and their representatives. The apprenticeship system soon fell apart and a full emancipation was enacted in the West Indies by 1838. The British had managed to end slavery within the empire’s borders as slavery and its influence was expanding rapidly within the United States. Many things made the English example unworkable for the United States, but some did still hold out hope that such a seemingly peaceful and practical emancipation could take place in America. Stauffer records that even Douglass at times wrote favorably of English emancipation, describing how the nation “bore, without a murmur, the additional burden of 20 million sterling” as a moment of “moral beauty and transcendent sublimity.” Douglass also critiqued the relationship between

money and the morality of slavery in the United States, viewing the connections as rather different than how they operated in the English empire.\textsuperscript{308}

It was these debates, as well as the power of AASS members within abolition circles, that those who believed in compensated emancipation had to work against. Despite their uphill battle, there were still some abolitionists who attempted to gain support for a compensated emancipation plan within the United States. There were abolitionists who supported African Americans who bought their freedom by raising funds and writing against critics, but there were also abolitionists, like Gerritt Smith and peace activist Elihu Burritt, who put forward plans for a national compensated emancipation. Indeed, even by the late 1850s the idea of national compensated emancipation for the United States had not died among some sections of the abolition movement.

In 1857 a convention was held in Cleveland, Ohio to discuss a plan for national compensated emancipation. At this convention, The National Compensation Emancipation Society was formed. The movement, led by activist Elihu Burritt and supported by Gerrit Smith, worked on the premise that compensating southern slaveholders for emancipating their slaves would lead to a peaceful end to slavery in the United States. It was a plan which many of America’s most influential and famous abolitionists rejected outright, believing that paying for freedom was an unnecessary and undue reward for those holding human property. However, Burritt, as an advocate for peace, believed that this might be a way to keep the nation from war, a possibility which

\textsuperscript{308} Green, \textit{British Slave Emancipation}, 119. Stauffer, \textit{The Black Hearts of Men}, 218-220.
seemed ever more likely as the fugitive slave crisis increased as a result of the actions of African Americans, as well as their allies.

Despite having to fight against the nation’s main abolitionist groups, schemes for national emancipation through compensation did find some support and were even put forward by the Lincoln administration to arrest the march towards war and end slavery in Washington, D.C. General plans for compensated emancipation in the United States were problematic and were never able to truly please enough factions to gain the momentum needed to overshadow the movement for immediate emancipation or the abolition movement. Compensated emancipation was, however, an issue with which the abolition movement had to contend. From the founding of the AASS and the Declaration of Sentiment’s pronouncement on compensating slaveholders, paying for freedom was a subject of debate throughout the nineteenth century, whether on a national scale, or in individual instances as we have seen.

Perhaps the most committed American in the cause of compensated emancipation was Elihu Burritt. In the 1840s Burritt began his work in the world of reform by becoming an advocate for world peace. Through this peace work Burritt was immersed in the world of print culture in both the United States and England, working on and editing a number of newspapers and journals devoted to issues including abolition, temperance, and peace. He wrote and travelled extensively as a member of the American Peace Society and was editor of its Advocate of Peace and Universal Brotherhood. While in England Burritt helped to form the League of Universal Brotherhood, an international peace group which called for the ‘elevation of man...irrespective of his country, color, character, or condition.” It was also while he was in England that Burritt became
interested in free labor ideologies and workers’ rights. Burritt was especially interested in reaching out to workers to become advocates for peace.  

For Burritt, all the causes he worked for were intricately related. It is not surprising then that Burritt would take the lead in calling for compensated emancipation as the means through which to solve the problem of slavery in the United States, especially as tensions rose in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Abolition was an important issue for Burritt since universal free labor would better the conditions of all working-class people and lessen the possibility of an unnecessary war between the North and South. Using England’s compensation of slaveholders in the West Indies as an example, Burritt saw compensated emancipation as the peaceful resolution to American slavery. Burritt believed that the movement would attract a large group of followers, a following more inclusive than other wings of American abolitionism, including moderates and perhaps even some slaveholders, and that it would ultimately lead to the abolition of slavery without war. 

It was Burritt’s plan that the funds needed for compensating the slaveholders would come from selling off lands in the West. This was an idea that had also been suggested by earlier anti-slavery activists. In the face of another national crisis over the question of Missouri, Rufus King had proposed the sale of public land to pay for emancipation. Burritt never mentioned what would become of the Native Americans who inhabited those lands, however. By the mid 1850s Burritt threw himself full force into promoting compensated emancipation. Repeating a familiar routine from his days as a

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310 Curti, *The Learned Blacksmith*, 119-120.
lecturer for peace, Burritt wrote about his plan and travelled throughout the country hoping to gain supporters in both high and low places. Like many other traveling reformers, he met with varying success. Burritt recalled that at a meeting of the Rochester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society, his proposal for compensated emancipation was denounced with “great and almost bitter energy” by those present at the lecture, including Frederick Douglass, who also gave “testimony against” Burritt but “in a courteous way.” At another meeting in Trenton, New Jersey, Burritt addressed the state legislature and gained the support of many including the Governor. Burritt claimed that this was the most important group he had ever been able to lecture on the merits of compensated emancipation.311

With the assistance of Gerritt Smith Burritt finally convened a meeting on compensated emancipation on a national scale in 1857. Hardly any other abolitionists were interested. The violence in Kansas between anti and pro-slavery forces helped propel Burritt’s interest in a peaceful end to slavery. Claiming that slavery stood in the way of the “glorious consummation” of the union, the convention led to the creation of the National Compensation Emancipation Society. It was the purpose of the society to create conditions under which “the people of the North may co-operate, in a generous and brotherly spirit, with the people of the South, and share with them the expense necessary to the extinction of Slavery.” The plan put forward by the society was that the federal government would provide $25 to each freed slave and no more than $250 for each enslaved person to the owners, an amount to which each state could add to if it so desired out of its own funds. Members of the society were called upon to do whatever they could to “interest the public mind in its favor” and to sustain the movement to bring measures

through Congress in support of this “pacific and generous mode of extinguishing Slavery State by State.”\textsuperscript{312}

In 1859, Burritt tried once again to organize another convention in Albany, NY. This convention also suffered from low attendance. With the nation now on the eve of the Civil War, Garrison believed that Burritt’s plan was hopeless in both a moral and practical sense as it was unlikely for slaveholders to listen to any proposal that asked them to give up slaves. Others agreed with Garrison. The NASS did not think that Burritt could “expect that anti-slavery men [would] have the hypocrisy thus to stultify and contradict themselves, for the sake of making a league with the imperious advocates of human chattel.” While they declared that Burritt may ask abolitionists for money and they “would not object to paying any reasonable amount,” when asked to “give up our principles and subscribe to a falsehood libel upon God and humanity,” Burritt made it impossible for true abolitionists to support his plans. The article requested that the society “abandon its present suicidal position and urge emancipation on ground of principle” not payment. \textsuperscript{313}

A letter published in The Provincial Freeman, questioned, “how Mr. Burritt’s plan can be made practicable.” The author thought that because of events that had led to the “abrogation of the Compromise line,” allowing slavery to spread, and because of the \textit{Dred Scott} decision that had “thrown the aegis of protection around the monster,” Burritt’s plan for compensated emancipation would never be accepted by slaveholders.

Since slavery seemed safer than ever, there was, indeed, little reason to believe that slaveholders would welcome a plan for emancipation even if it included compensation.

Besides questioning whether such a powerful section of the nation would surrender their lucrative way of life while it still appeared that they had little reason to compromise, many also took issue with the details of Burritt’s plan. The Provincial Freeman letter’s author also took objection to Burritt’s intention of raising funds from selling land in the West. From the slaveholder’s point of view, the sale of public lands by the federal government would therefore already entitle the southern states to a portion of the profits and so they would not therefore accept that money as payment to liberate their slaves.

On the other hand, there were also many northerners who would not want to hand over their portion of the land sales to slaveholders who had “already filched fortunes from the labor of the lash driven slave.” Ultimately questions and doubts like these obscured the usefulness that Burritt claimed for his plan for compensated emancipation. Despite the conventions and Burritt’s unceasing work, with immediate and uncompensated emancipation being the demand of abolition’s most vocal activists, it is not surprising that Burritt’s plan failed to gain the support it needed to grow as a movement that could compete with the work of more radical abolitionists.314

Although Burritt was not able to stop the Civil War with his plan for a peaceful solution to the national problem of slavery, schemes for compensated emancipation did not die with the Confederacy’s firing on Fort Sumter. While Burritt’s intention to use compensated emancipation as a way to keep the United States out of war ultimately

314 “Burrit’s Compensated Emancipation” Provincial Freeman (September 12, 1857).
failed, it was a plan put forward by President Lincoln as a way to accelerate the conclusion of the war and save the Union. As tensions between the North and South erupted and pushed the nation into an ever-bloodier civil war, the Lincoln administration considered compensated emancipation to end slavery, the most pressing point of sectional contention, and therefore end the war.

Lincoln would have had the federal government pay $400 per enslaved person. There was no guaranty that slaveholders would have accepted such a low price, especially considering that some of the most valuable slaves were worth upwards of $1,800. One scholar of economic history, Andrew Weintraub, looking into what slaveholders would have accepted based on the value of slaves and the expected reduction in productivity, believes that a compensated emancipation would have cost the government from between six and nine billion dollars, far beyond the estimated three billion dollars representing the total value of enslaved people in the U.S. The Lincoln administration did employ compensated emancipation to end slavery in Washington, DC, a task which was long believed by abolitionists to be within the power of the federal government. The 1862 District of Columbia Emancipation Act, however, included an appropriation of $100,000 for voluntary colonization of the newly freed. It also compensated slaveholders who could prove their loyalty to the Union.315

These measures displeased many including Charles Sumner who, in true abolitionist fashion, referred to the act as a “ransom” and declared that “any money paid belongs rather to the slaves, who for generations have been despoiled of every right and

possession.” Sumner also asked if the nation would “undertake to audit this fearful account, pray what sum shall be allowed for the prolonged torments of the lash?” He asked, “What treasure shall be voted to the slave for wife ravished from his side, for children stolen, for knowledge shut out, and for all the fruits of labor wrested from him and his fathers?” All, he concluded, must go to the enslaved. This was, of course, the ultimate quandary faced by those who would purchase freedom. The debt held by slaveholders in what they owed to the enslaved and the value of liberation were both priceless.316

Ultimately, compensated emancipation was not supported by abolitionists in the majority. This was especially true on such a grand scale where individual need and freedom was not intimately expressed. In addition, the scheme would include compensation from the federal government, further involving the government of the United States with the sin of slaveholding. While compensated emancipation would have led to the abolition of slavery, the general movement could not in good conscience support the final end of slavery within the United States by relinquishing its moral claim to liberty that was free from the taint of rewarding slaveholders. The civil war that Burritt had feared eventually freed some four million enslaved people through their own action. This liberation occurred at great cost of another kind which also held deep repercussions for the nation. As laid out in the AASS’s Declaration of Sentiments in 1833, some would still say today that the “outraged and guiltless slaves” have yet to be adequately compensated.

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While the majority of American abolitionists may have decided against supporting a scheme for compensated emancipation like Burritt’s, enslaved African Americans continued throughout the century to ensure personal freedom through self-purchase and compensated manumission. While many of these people were not abolitionist activists, like those who took the national stage, they looked to gain a personal freedom for themselves and their loved ones. The full stories of how people outside of the movement came to be free often went unrecorded, the path that brought them to their final freedom being reduced to a line in a slaveholder’s bookkeeping journal or in town records of free African Americans and their manumissions. Some details about what must have been one of the most important moments in any enslaved person’s life can be drawn from the glimpses into the process of compensated manumission offered by these records, yet often these entries leave as many questions for the historian as they answer.

In their debates over whether to support buying the freedom of the enslaved and their efforts to record and publish the stories of those at the center of these campaigns, abolitionists helped to not only bring to light how the formerly enslaved viewed their papered freedom, but also the intricacies of the process that those not related to the movement faced. What the stories of the African Americans whose lives sparked these debates make clear is that to be redeemed from slavery was no simple undertaking. In fact, the very language of redemption, used to describe so many of these cases, suggests something otherworldly about these purchased freedoms.

Despite what some had to say about the ethicality of the technique, African Americans continued to buy freedom and center the technique in abolitionist culture.
Black abolitionists included stories of purchase in their narratives, texts that in turn not only influenced the rhetoric of the movement, but also the nation. Enslaved people came to members of the movement to request assistance in buying their freedom and abolitionists, both black and white, worked with them to do so. Obviously, what was laid out in the Declaration of Sentiments was not binding as many decided on a case by case basis to work to reconcile principle with the dire reality of slavery and its law and economy.

If African Americans undertook the process of self-purchase in the nineteenth century, choosing to use their position as marketable property to their advantage, the movement for the final emancipation of slavery certainly could not ignore compensated manumission as a viable way to obtain freedom. No matter how they raised the money, it took a tremendous effort and often years of work to buy one’s freedom. Enslaved people risked losing everything for the chance to have real and lasting freedom. The determination of the men and women who paid for the freedom of themselves and others is undoubtedly a testimony to the incredibly varied forms of African American resistance to enslavement.

While the men and women who escaped slavery had always been in some danger of being apprehended by their owners, after 1850 their security was even more precarious. Freedom became an ever more liminal state across the United States. Facing the threat of, and sometimes actual, recapture many fugitives and their allies looked to compensated manumission to secure legal freedom and permanent safety from being forced back into southern slavery. The seemingly unlimited power of slave law led many to not only buy their freedom to protect themselves and loved ones, but also to question
the fundamental nature of American law. According to John Stauffer, it was in the midst of the fugitive slave convention at Cazenovia that Frederick Douglass came to the full realization of the import of political abolition and constitutional anti-slavery, for if “the Constitution was viewed as an antislavery document, then any law protecting slavery would become null and void.” Thus, not only the Fugitive Slave Act, but also the very laws that made the purchase of his freedom necessary would no longer be able to cast their shadow over the liberty of millions of African Americans. Until that time, however, African Americans had to find ways to protect their freedom under a legal system which severely limited their rights.317

Black communities have always recognized the validity of multiple methods of struggle, often coming out of a process to find what worked best, or as a way of dealing with overlapping imperatives. As evidenced by the buying of freedom, there was always a fluidity to finding freedom. For African Americans in the nineteenth century, self-purchase was just another means to acquiring it on a spectrum of anti-slavery action. Some worked for years while enslaved to raise money and obtained their free papers from reliable owners, some paid for themselves, yet still found it necessary to run away to find freedom, and others turned themselves first into fugitives and only used self-purchase to transition into legally free people. No matter how they viewed issues of abolitionist principles and complicity in the action of purchasing their liberty from those who should have never owned their bodies, the most important and lasting desire of African Americans in the nineteenth century was to be free and they were willing to make any number of sacrifices to make that happen.

317 Stauffer, The Black Hearts of Men, 164.
CONCLUSION

In 1799 an enslaved man in South Carolina won a local lottery. He decided to use his winnings to purchase his freedom. Thus it was that Denmark Vesey, the great black revolutionary, came to be free. With the privileges of the freedom he had bought, however limited by his southern home, Vesey set out to plan what could have been one of the largest slave rebellions in American history had the scheme not been foiled by betrayal. The actions of Vesey, both how he decided to use his lottery winnings and how he chose to use his purchased freedom, tell us much about the economics of self-purchase and the relationship between this kind of black economy and wider American markets and ideals.

Vesey, like many Americans of his time would have done, chose to invest his lottery windfall in something that he believed would increase his standard of living and create further opportunities for prosperity and security. Yet unlike his counterparts, Vesey did not only speculate in land or in business, instead, he invested in freedom. Through this venture into the market of slavery, Vesey had paid a price for something which was, in reality, priceless. He had paid to cease to be property. Vesey had, therefore, gained something that while specifically valued within racial capitalism, was in fact invaluable. Nor was Vesey satisfied with his initial investment, for, from what we know of his plans for rebellion, Vesey skillfully invested his prized asset—freedom—to accumulate more wealth of a similar kind, namely the liberation of other African Americans in his community.

In a pattern that many other African American entrepreneurs would follow, although usually not through attempts at open rebellion but by buying family members
and other people from their communities, Vesey invested in communal freedom. Although Vesey’s gamble ultimately cost him his life, many other African Americans were successful in gaining the freedom of themselves and their loved ones through compensated manumission. By looking at self-purchase and compensated manumission in a sustained way, this dissertation helps show how one type of black economic activity operated with alternative intents, and different markers of success, even while working within the general economy of the United States.

The example of Vesey also highlights that self-purchase was part of the varied set of tools that African Americans understood as opportunities for liberation. As we have seen from the lives of the men and women throughout this project, buying freedom was one path to freedom that existed within a continuum of both legal and extralegal ways to become free. Often, it was used in conjunction with other techniques and used to help address issues like market value and social opportunity, or to legalize a freedom that had already been taken when political climate or direct threat of re-enslavement made it necessary. For, what compensated manumission did offer that many other modes of escape did not, was legal freedom in a nation whose law overwhelmingly recognized the right to human property. Despite arguments that paying for freedom placed undue burden on African American communities while at the same time allowing for the continuation of slavery, when viewed as part of a black tradition that worked to challenge both slave law and economy, it is necessary to reassess narratives around self-purchase to reclaim its importance as a strategy through which so many found freedom.

As can be seen from Vesey’s story, and so many others told here, the possibilities of compensated manumission represented more for those who faced enslavement than it
could ever mean for slaveholders, however much they may have benefitted from it. In discussing his theory of freedom as marronage, Neil Roberts states that “freedom is not a place; it is a state of being,” and that the “flight can be both real and imagined.” Thinking back to Lunsford Lane’s description of the moment he realized that “money-making” could make him free, we can imagine how those who worked to purchase themselves and loved ones both created and imagined their flight from slavery. After coming to this realization, Lane describes how freedom, economic activity, and their interrelation “took principal possession” of his mind. Both Lane’s imagination of freedom through purchase and how he enacted the process daily through his economic activity were powerful ways for him to contest his enslavement.318

At base, American slavery has been deemed an economic system dependent on the unpaid labor of African Americans that was extracted at immense and horrific cost. And yet, within this economy there was seemingly always some room to negotiate, and not just over numbers. Through purchasing freedom, a rather odd species of property who, although human, would be listed as real estate in southern accounting, could transform into a legal person. Black Studies scholar Fred Moten has identified the sound, or sounding, of Frederick Douglass’ Aunt Hester’s scream as evidence towards his claim that “the history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist.” Self-purchase, as related in the narratives and in black life, also has an important correlation to the will of African Americans to reject and resist their objectification and relegation to

the status of property. As I have argued, it is thus a terrain in which to explore how a black “theory of value” was created outside of the enslaver’s market.319

To do buy freedom, property had to accumulate property. The enslaved then had to mediate this transition by negotiating not only the ability to buy and the price to be paid, but also the authority to negotiate their social personhood as they bargained with the slaveholders who legally, if not morally, owned them. Each of these acts were, at least theoretically, deemed outside of the domain of action for the enslaved. We know, however, that enslaved people were never truly outside of slavery’s social or institutional networks. Still, as stated by Orlando Patterson in his discussion of manumission, the “problem of the transition from slave to freed status posed many critical problems for a slaveholding society.” These social, legal, and political problems manifested themselves in each instance of compensated manumission.320

Slavery and its surrounding theories of value and commodification formed the basis of the modern global economy and the world of finance capital that continues to degrade the value of black life. There were, of course, ways that the property regime of slavery influenced the freedom of those who bought themselves and loved ones. As we have seen, the capital outlay to undertake buying freedom was no small task in a world in which most black economic activity was legally and socially precarious. How this investment in freedom negatively affected their financial well-being is something that must be taken seriously. On an economic level, individual slaveholders and slaveholding

319 While Moten is concerned with conceptual ideas beyond the scope of this conclusion, his concern with value and the nature of objects who are also human can serve as a useful point of departure in attempting to answer some of the fundamental questions raised by the interrelated issues of resistance, value, and exchange discussed in this dissertation. Frank Moten. In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 1, 10-11.
society may have benefitted from the necessity faced by black families who bought each other’s liberty. Vincent Brown reminds us that in their resistive efforts the enslaved “performed melancholy acts of accounting.” Brown’s usage of the term “accounting” here is more apt for the history of self-purchase and compensated manumission than he probably could have imagined. In the broader arena of slavery’s legacy on the economic opportunity and advancement for African Americans, some of these acts may have been melancholic. But their economic calculations were not made solely in terms of financial success. Freedom, especially when shared with loved ones and across generations, was a productive investment, if not in an economic sense, then certainly in a social one.321

However, looking at compensated manumission shows the ways that African Americans used these same ideas of value and exchange to effect their freedom and hinder the progress of their commodification through marking themselves, and their relationships to one another, as both valuable and valued. To become legally free, they did this valuing both within the conditions created by the related systems of racial slavery and capitalism, and outside of them. In thinking about the changing shape of slavery,

321 Literary Scholar Ian Baucom, using the case of the Zong massacre examines the “extension not only of commodity capitalism into the domain of the human, but the colonization of human subjectivity by finance capital.” Baucom concerns himself mostly with the transformation of the global Atlantic, but the implications of his argument here and the reduction of human beings into “bills-of-exchange” who held abstract value as tradable and insurable goods had intimate repercussions for enslaved Americans in the nineteenth century. Ian Baucom. Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 139. Both Seth Rockman and Stephan Whitman have focused on how compensated manumission “added further costs to already strained budgets and [created] expenditures unknown to working-class households.” Rockman rightfully argues that the “necessity of purchasing freedom impeded the economic advancement of many African American households,” for they spent their money on each other, rather than on “productive property” such as “real estate, a storefront, or a cart- productive property that would raise household fortunes over several generations.” Instead, “black families were forced to channel all savings toward buying basic human rights for themselves.” The result of this necessity was that “such burdens made it impossible for black families to escape poverty.” Whitman adds that the “overextension of resources and acquisition of heavy debt under uncontrollable terms” created situations where the risk was overwhelmingly borne by African American families. Rockman, Scraping By, 167, 184. Whitman, “Diverse Good Causes,” 348-349. Vincent Brown “Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery.” The American Historical Review, Vol. 114, No. 5 (December 2009), 1235-1236.
Patterson discusses the question of intra- and intergenerational mobility, asking us to consider not only the gains made by an enslaved person in her lifetime, but also how those gains and other changes affected the next generation. As African Americans bought each other out of slavery, they fundamentally shifted the status of slavery’s effect on their families and created an estate of liberty. There was, perhaps, no greater inheritance to be bequeathed under slavery than freedom.\textsuperscript{322}

I do not attempt to conclude that these families and individuals who bought their freedom were somehow completely outside of the control of the systems that had marked them as property, for even once they had come, quite literally, to own themselves, manumitted African Americans still faced the repercussions of slavery’s influence on American society. They had come to their liberation through yet another iteration of ownership. In some ways, we might see that buying freedom did not do much more than liberate one to participate in these other systems. As witnessed by the stories told here, freedom was not unfettered, but it was still the dream that was, to many, worth investing in. As African Americans sought to create economic and social conditions under which they could buy the freedom of themselves and loved ones, they undermined and limited the possibility of racial capitalism to assume their status as chattel. There was, of course, no other form of property that could negotiate to buy itself. In each instance of self-

\textsuperscript{322} In discussing ideas of gift exchange between human beings and gods, Patterson brings up an important point about assumed gain. He states that while both parties may believe they have “benefitted disproportionately” during the exchange, gain must be gauged by “one’s status, aspirations, and needs.” Further he asks, “And who is to say that the person who thinks he has gained has not in fact gained?” This is a useful question in thinking about the unequal position of enslaved and enslaver in the process of compensated manumission. Patterson, \textit{Slavery and Social Death}, 248, 214.
purchase, both the law and economy of slaveholders were forced to recognize the special, and above all, human nature, of the enslaved and their labor.\textsuperscript{323}

As Walter Johnson has recently argued, histories of slavery do not need to continually prove the humanity of enslaved people. Before historians of American slavery attempted to deal with this problem of the humanity of the enslaved, Frederick Douglass answered this debate in his speech, “What to the Negro is the Fourth of July?” Douglass asked of his audience if it was not “astonishing” that while African Americans were “engaged in all manner of enterprises common to other men,” both economic and spiritual, that they were also “called upon to prove that we are men!” Douglass declares that the “point is conceded already. Nobody doubts it. The slaveholders themselves acknowledge it in the enactment of laws for their government.” Their very attempts to control the sentient actions of the enslaved were an “acknowledgement that the slave is a moral, intellectual, and responsible being.” What Douglass argues is that slavery as an economic and social system was very much dependent on the enslaved as humans.\textsuperscript{324}

Recent works in the field of slavery and capitalism studies attempt to answer questions about the fundamental nature of the relationship between slavery and the

\textsuperscript{323} While Berlin has argued that free African Americans in the South lived like slaves without masters, he also makes clear that the “line between slavery and freedom was not imaginary,” and that “no matter how hard whites squeezed black liberty, the irreducible difference between slavery and freedom remained.” Berlin called freedom a “rough and forbidding terrain” and any historian of slavery would be hard-pressed to disagree. And yet African Americans, especially those who worked for years to save the money to buy their freedom, remained dedicated to becoming part of that landscape. Enslavement and freedom can be compared, but they are not interchangeable. Berlin, \textit{Slaves without Masters}, xxv, xxvi. McKinley, “Fractional Freedoms,” 754. Cedric Robinson. \textit{Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition} (London: Zed Books, 1983), 2-3.

economic systems that created the modern world. While they attempt to center the terror inherent in these types of economic calculations, and they were indeed terrible, they work less to find ways of illuminating how enslaved people understood the systems that attempted to normalize their position within them. Of course, the business of slavery was not solely the concern of slaveholders and those who benefitted from its capitalism. This dissertation has worked towards a deeper understanding of how slavery’s capitalism affected the lives of African Americans in the height of its legal, economic, and social power by showing how they interfaced with slavery’s market in order to create the conditions under which they could be free through purchasing their liberation. Those who bought their freedom, as discussed throughout this project, did not experience a fully unbounded liberation. Their purchased freedom was limited by slavery and its social world. Nonetheless, they used all the systems within their spheres of knowing—and their knowledge was deep—to expand the borders of freedom. In buying freedom they did what they could to not only reckon with the world they knew, but also to make new worlds.


326 The focus on slavery as an economic system, as Johnson claims, has often meant that the field has “increasingly dominated by work that does not ask questions about the experiences, ideas, or history of the enslaved (even while it teaches us many new things about slaveholders and their business partners). Let me be clear: it is not only nonsensical but also unethical to continue asking whether slavery was capitalist without asking what that meant to enslaved people- to investigate what Du Bois termed “‘the philosophy of life and action which slavery bred in the souls of black folk.’”’ Johnson, “To Remake the World,” 28.
At the end of his narrative, Lunsford Lane declares that when his “feet struck the pavements in Philadelphia” as a free man in the company of his family who he had freed through purchase, he felt as though he had “passed into another world.” It was a world in which he could “draw a full long breath with no one to say to the ribs, “why do ye so?” The physicality of Lane’s encounter with freedom, his feet striking pavement, the full breath through which he imbibes and experiences his liberation, illustrates freedom as a feeling as much as a legality. Thinking about the 2014 police murder of Eric Garner and his call of “I can’t breathe,” which would become a communal call, breath can also tell us much about unfreedom. Within the space of one page, Lane’s narrative transitions from this long breath of freedom to the archive through which he and his eight family members came to the liberty he has just described. For those who were “not accustomed to trade in human beings,” Lane includes the bills of sale which stand as legal record to the purchase of his family and their papered freedom.327

While reflecting in this way on slavery’s shadow, the liberatory moment Lane’s family experiences in Philadelphia is not overwhelmed by the fact that it was gained through compensated manumission. Nor does Lane seem reluctant to indict the legal and economic systems that made these purchases necessary. Indeed, his very juxtaposition of the joyful feeling of freedom with the paper trail of legal documents which led to it reminds readers of how slavery’s law and economy worked to control even the terms of escape from the system. For Lane though, despite having become free through the purchase of himself and his family, it is the union of legal freedom and family that truly define his liberation from slavery.

327Lane, *The Narrative of Lunsford Lane*, 51, 53-54.
When African Americans looked towards buying freedom, they did not merely pay into the slave system. They entered markets that were supposed to be the territory of whites only in order to be free. They assessed what Daina Ramey Berry has called their “soul value.” To see how African Americans resisted their enslavement and their status as property by valuing their freedom and negotiating their monetary and incalculable worth as human beings is also, then, an essential part of the story of global economic systems and modern capitalism that this project expands upon. Vincent Brown has suggested that “without engagement with the politics of the enslaved, slavery’s history serves as an effective charge leveled against modernity and capitalism,” but “not as an uneven and evolving process of human interaction, and certainly not as a locus of conflict in which the enslaved sometimes won small but important victories.” In discussing Orlando Patterson’s idea of social death in the historiography of slavery, Brown thinks about social death as a concept that, although perhaps apt to describe a theory of slavery and its law, cannot hold up in relationship to the actual lived experience of the enslaved. Rather, he sees the enslaved not as objects whose commodification turned them into “finished products,” but looks instead to read social death as a “receding horizon.” Lane’s story, and others discussed throughout this project, highlight the varied sites of conflict within slavery and that, even in its most base form as an economic system, slavery’s very logic was conflicted. Those who bought their freedom were crucial to African American communities and their social, economic, and political cultures.  

The market systems of slavery and the commodification of its products, including human beings, did much to control and limit the possibilities of expression, freedom, and

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the everyday lives of the enslaved. That modern capitalism in part rests on the valued bodies of enslaved African Americans is, perhaps, not surprising. However, the study of self-purchase clarifies the ways in which African Americans used ideas of value and exchange to become free by using systems of negotiation and capital accumulation to subvert their commodification and to protect their freedom and families. While the enslaved worked towards freedom, they subverted the meaning of their labor and expanded its possibilities. The necessity of compensated manumission certainly was a response to the demands of slavery, yet, those who bought their freedom set out with a clear understanding of both the systems under which they lived, but also of those they sought to create.
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