

A CITY DIVIDED: DEBATES OVER SLAVERY IN ANTEBELLUM PITTSBURGH

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ABSTRACT

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Although much attention has been paid to the influence of southern slavery on the secession crisis and subsequent Civil War, far less has been spent analyzing the complexities of how northern communities in the antebellum period addressed questions over the peculiar institution. Northerners were not simply opposed, or perhaps ambivalent, to slavery during this period. Rather, individuals and groups had various responses when confronted with the institution. This study attempts to shed new light on the various reactions to slavery from one antebellum city: Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Antebellum Pittsburgh provides an excellent case study for examining diverse northern reactions to slavery, as well as how those reactions developed and changed over time. The presence of various groups, each with their own unique responses when presented with questions over slavery, allows the city to act as a microcosm for the diverse antebellum North. Pittsburgh was home to many prominent white abolitionists and a free black community, both of which contributed significantly to the western operations of the state's Underground Railroad. Additionally, the city's geographical location, on the forks of the Ohio River, promoted southern trade. This left many businessmen and entrepreneurs in the growing industrial city sympathetic to the struggles of southern slaveholders. Each of these groups provides a unique component to a larger, more complex, story of slavery in early America.

A large quantity of primary and secondary sources demonstrates the diverse reactions to slavery in antebellum Pittsburgh, yet each fails to fit these perspectives into a

larger context. To date, no major work seeks to examine these diverse voices in the Pittsburgh area nor analyzes the complex societies within which they collectively existed. This research project is an attempt to do just that. By analyzing the writings of prominent individuals in Pittsburgh, as well as speeches, newspapers, and court cases, a more coherent understanding of the community and their reactions to slavery are outlined. Although this thesis examines slavery debates in only one community, the complexities of reactions and the existence of various groups can, in some ways, reflect the northern half of the antebellum American nation.

KEY WORDS: African Americans, Allegheny City, Allegheny County, Antebellum United States, Pennsylvania, Pittsburgh, Slavery, Underground Railroad.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
DEDICATION.....	iii
ABSTRACT.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	vi
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vii
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION	1
The Underground Railroad.....	4
White Supremacists	6
White Abolitionists.....	11
African Americans.....	16
CHAPTER II: THE POLITICS OF SLAVERY	22
Slavery and Emancipation in Pennsylvania.....	23
Rights of Free African Americans.....	28
Challenging the Rights of African Americans.....	37
CHAPTER III: WHITE SUPREMACISTS	49
Economic Factors	50
Colonization Efforts.....	59
Sectional Strife.....	67
CHAPTER IV: WHITE AND BLACK ABOLITIONISTS.....	73
Abolitionist Teachings.....	74
African American Influences.....	80
Slavery's Impact	89

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION.....	104
A Complicated History	105
Antislavery Influences	114
Pittsburgh’s Legacy	118
REFERENCES	122
VITA.....	129

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Debates arising over slavery in the United States played a significant role in dividing North and South in the decades leading to the outbreak of the Civil War. This understanding, however, oversimplifies the complex realities of the time. It presupposes that all northerners were ambivalent, if not outright opposed, to the peculiar institution, and nothing could be farther from the factual narrative. Location, particularly in relation to the Mason-Dixon Line, as well as the cultural makeup of one's community often weighed heavily on individual perspectives regarding slavery. Whites living relatively close to the southern states often showed sympathy for the slave owners' desire to protect their interests in human property, yet frequently grappled with the moral dilemma of whether or not to assist a fugitive slave. This conundrum was further complicated by the racist ideology that presented African Americans as inferior beings and which promoted the subjugation of all blacks, whether free or enslaved. This philosophy had long been prevalent in white communities both north and south and presented, in many cases, insurmountable economic, social, and political obstacles for a growing free black population. African American communities, many made up of former slaves, also had a significant role in influencing their white neighbors' outlooks on slavery, as well as promoting black education and political rights. It is with these complexities in mind that comprehensive examinations must be made of local communities to best understand the effects slavery had on the North prior to the Civil War.

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, an industrious city located at the forks of the Ohio River, and its surrounding communities, provides an excellent case study for such an

analysis. Here, complex realities erase the generalizations associated with the typical northern city in antebellum America. The Pittsburgh region is unique in its location, divided from the eastern half of the state by the Appalachian Mountains and connected to the southern Mississippi River Valley via the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers.¹ Adding to the region's unique environment were the diverse populations within, and around, the city, which affected how individuals responded to the slavery debate. As Pennsylvania gradually abolished the institution within its own borders, many white citizens, including some from the Pittsburgh region, began to push for the colonization of free blacks. These African Americans also witnessed the elimination of their political and social rights within the state, the same state that ironically provided the birthplace for the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution. The promoters of colonization and the reduction of rights for free blacks often sympathized with the property rights claims of southern slaveholders and encouraged the return of fugitives. Most other whites were more likely to openly, or secretly, support abolitionist efforts and fought for more fair treatment of blacks in general. African Americans, another influential group in the Pittsburgh region, created numerous institutions to promote education for free blacks and assisted in managing one of the largest branches of the Underground Railroad operating in the western half of the state. These groups, and their interactions with one another,

¹ Like most areas with complex geographies and interconnected communities, it can be challenging to determine where the boundaries of the "Pittsburgh region" actually lie. Most of western Pennsylvania was, and still is, connected to Pittsburgh through a vast network of rivers, but communities further from the city itself tend to show more diversity and, therefore, must be given separate attention. For the sake of this research, the "Pittsburgh region" shall generally consist of the communities within Allegheny County, particularly centered on Pittsburgh and Allegheny City.

provide unique insights on one region's struggles over slavery, but also reflect the complexities of a nation divided.²

The purpose of this research shall be to examine these various groups and their connections to one another via their debates over slavery. In order to best understand how they developed and thrived in the Pittsburgh region prior to the Civil War, three main arguments will be presented. First, the institution of slavery was slow to die out in Pennsylvania, and more particularly in southern and western Pennsylvania, despite the passage of an early emancipation law. Second, the gradual abolition of slavery throughout Pennsylvania can be juxtaposed to the elimination of social and political rights of free blacks living in the state in the early nineteenth century. Finally, to assume that northerners were strictly opposed, or strictly ambivalent to slavery, is to make a critical error. Fueled by increasing abolitionist pressures, a growing sectional divide, and the presence of fugitive slaves in the area, the debate over slavery survived in northern regions like Pittsburgh until the eve of the Civil War.

Although vast numbers of scholars have dedicated their professional careers to studying some aspect of the slavery debate in the Pittsburgh region, no complete analysis exists to place these pieces into an appropriate context. This missing connection leads to popular generalizations of history and inaccurate understandings of the local forces at play during such a critical period. It is for this reason that a brief overview of the various topics and groups in question must be made, along with an up-to-date bibliographical sample of existing research.

² Catherine E. Reiser, "Pittsburgh, The Hub of Western Commerce, 1800-1850," *The Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* 25, no. 3-4 (1942): 121-22, 127-28, 130; Gary B. Nash and Jean R. Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees: Emancipation and its Aftermath in Pennsylvania* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 167, 170, 172-75, 181-83; William J. Switala, *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2008), 88-89.

The Underground Railroad

It is impossible to discuss the debates over slavery in northern communities prior to the Civil War without addressing the Underground Railroad. The influence of this vast network stretches as far back as the history of slavery in America, for as long as there has been slavery in America, there have been slaves attempting to escape their conditions of servitude. The tensions created by increased levels of slaves escaping their masters in the South by the middle of the nineteenth century even prompted Congress to further expand their authority over such matters with the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850. Though the law sought to provide a framework for assisting masters in reclaiming their human property, it simply forced agents of the Underground Railroad to adjust how they provided assistance to fugitives.

The Pittsburgh region, like vast numbers of northern communities, provided various stops along the legendary Underground Railroad. Though the system itself, and its operators, are steeped in legend, many of the myths have been set aside as more local research has been completed on various routes and stops. One recent work that seeks to “fill the gaps found in the other studies [on the Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania] and to expand on and provide visual representation of the escape routes” is William Switala’s *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania*.³ Through detailed maps, photos, and firsthand accounts, this work is able to outline the networks used by fugitive slaves passing through Pennsylvania. Additionally, Switala is able to effectively place Pittsburgh as “a strategic position on the Underground Railroad in western Pennsylvania” due, in part, to its geographic location and its vast number of active agents.⁴ It was likely,

³ Switala, *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania*, v-vii.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 87.

as *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania* suggests, that fugitives seeking freedom from western Virginia or Maryland would have passed through the Pittsburgh region.

Though *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania* traces the networks used by fugitives seeking freedom, it fails to examine the actions of individuals and groups who provided efforts on the ground to ensure that runaway slaves would not be recaptured. “Vigilance in Pennsylvania: Underground Railroad Activities in the Keystone State, 1837-1861,” a paper presented by Matthew Pinsker, analyzes the rise of vigilance committees throughout the state. Using the efforts of Philadelphia’s William Still as a springboard, Pinsker argues that Pennsylvania “offers the best documentation of the Underground Railroad anywhere in the nation,” noting how over two thousand escapes can be documented from various records.⁵ Through a detailed approach, “Vigilance in Pennsylvania” charts the rise of antislavery sentiments in various regions of the state and analyzes the roles of individuals and groups in establishing and maintaining escape routes for fugitives.

African American communities living in Pennsylvania, and more specifically the Pittsburgh region, played a crucial role in Underground Railroad activities, as discussed in Keith Griffler’s work *Front Line of Freedom: African Americans and the Forging of the Underground Railroad in the Ohio Valley*. This effort illuminates the role of African Americans in the operations that assisted fugitive slaves and highlights the Underground Railroad as an interracial effort. *Front Line of Freedom* proves useful for it focuses on the critical Ohio River, which originates at Pittsburgh. By drawing clear contrasts to life

⁵ Matthew Pinsker, “Vigilance in Pennsylvania: Underground Railroad Activities in the Keystone State, 1837-1861” (paper, PHMC Annual Conference on Black History, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, April 27, 2000), 4.

north and south of the river for African Americans, Griffler is able to place the area at center stage for the debates over slavery.⁶

Each of the works mentioned, along with others, seeks to tell a part of the Underground Railroad story. Through overlapping comparisons of the historiography of the Underground Railroad in the western Pennsylvania region, a more comprehensive understanding of the region can be established. By first understanding how and why the Underground Railroad developed in the Pittsburgh region, one can next examine the actions and experiences of the various individuals and groups involved in the network. Once this comprehensive analysis has been completed, it becomes easier to understand the atmosphere created by various debates over slavery in this northern community.

White Supremacists

The first group to be examined in this research is “white supremacists,” made up of individuals who supported the institution of slavery in one way or another. In some cases, members of this group supported the legality of slavery and felt sympathy for the slave-owners’ plight, going so far as refusing to aid fugitives or even working towards their recapture. Though these white supremacists tended to oppose slavery within their own communities, they saw no reason to extend political, economic, or social rights to free African Americans. Many of these white supremacists, as will be shown, favored removing blacks from the area entirely, usually through colonization efforts. Colonization, many white supremacists hoped, would help to alleviate the sectional divide created over questions of slavery while also removing what they viewed as an inferior race from the country as a whole.

⁶ Keith P. Griffler, *Front Line of Freedom: African Americans and the Forging of the Underground Railroad in the Ohio Valley* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2010), xi-xiii, 1-2.

White supremacy in Pittsburgh, which grew substantially as slavery was slowly eliminated in the state, developed, in part, because of the city's geographical location and rivers. With the development of the steamship, costs decreased dramatically in shipping goods like flour, salt, and manufactured products from the Ohio River to the Mississippi. This proved mutually-beneficial, as Pittsburgh businesses found a demanding market for their products and allowed southern states to focus on growing cash crops like cotton. The profits reaped by many in the Pittsburgh region thanks to this southern market can be seen, as one historian notes, by the dedication of some city newspapers, like the *Pittsburgh Gazette* and the *Daily Advocate and Advertiser*, to regularly printing steamship news and market prices as early as 1818. The Appalachian Mountains, separating much of western Pennsylvania from the eastern half of the state, reinforced this southern trade. Technological advancements, and a demanding market, made transporting goods to Pittsburgh and down the river a more desirable alternative than trying to ship goods across the mountains to the eastern markets. This market became so critical for Pittsburgh commercial interests that, by the 1850s, southerners could use it as leverage against northern politicians, many with their own economic ties to the South, when concerns over slavery arose.⁷

Businessmen and entrepreneurs, who saw the Mississippi Valley as an invaluable market, often had little consideration for the South's peculiar institution that they were indirectly supporting. This was, in part, due to the gradual emancipation of slavery within

⁷ Wilber H. Siebert, *The Underground Railroad: From Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1898), 39; Reiser, "Pittsburgh, The Hub of Western Commerce, 1800-1850," 121-122, 127-130; R.J.M. Blackett, *Making Freedom: The Underground Railroad and the Politics of Slavery* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 33; R.J.M. Blackett, "'...Freedom, or the Martyr's Grave': Black Pittsburgh's Aid to the Fugitive Slave," *The Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* 61, no. 2 (1978): 121, 124-25; *Pittsburgh Gazette*, August 18, 1818; *Daily Advocate and Advertiser*, May 18, 1838; *The North Star*, February 11, 1848.

Pennsylvania's own borders. The law itself, which will be a subject of the next chapter, was designed to satisfy both slaveholders and antislavery groups. It would result in the existence of the peculiar institution in the western Pennsylvania region well into the 1830s, over fifty years after the law's initial passage.⁸

This gradual emancipation, and the presence of slavery in places like Pittsburgh well into the 1830s, does not support the view that northern communities were either ambivalent, or outright opposed, to the peculiar institution. In fact, many Pennsylvania Quakers wanted to abolish slavery only to cleanse themselves of its sin, not for any relief on the part of African Americans. To make matters worse, many white Pennsylvanians, even those who supported abolition, did not wish to see blacks remain in the state or hold any rights. Bills were introduced in the state legislature to prevent free blacks from moving into, and within, the state and, at the 1838 state constitutional convention, black suffrage was eliminated.⁹

One solution adopted by some white supremacists to the growing free black population in the Pittsburgh region was colonization. Organizations that supported this concept, like the Pittsburgh Colonization Society, believed that African Americans would never be equal to whites in the United States and should be sent to Africa or Latin America where they could establish their own communities. These organizations often attracted prominent whites, whose membership gave them additional political force. The

⁸ Nash and Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees*, 3-5, 32, 99-102, 137; Edward M. Burns, "Slavery in Western Pennsylvania," *The Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* 8, no. 4 (1925): 204-208; *The North Star*, February 11, 1848.

⁹ Nash and Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees*, 13, 137; John L. Meyers, "The Early Antislavery Agency System in Pennsylvania 1833-1837," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 31, no.1 (1964): 85; Eric Ledell Smith, "The End of Black Voting Rights in Pennsylvania: African Americans and the Constitutional Convention of 1837-1838," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 64, no. 3 (1998): 279, 282; Nicholas Wood, "'A Sacrifice on the Alter of Slavery': Doughface Politics and Black Disenfranchisement in Pennsylvania, 1837-1838," *Journal of the Early Republic* 31, no. 1 (2011): 79-80; Pennsylvania Constitution of 1838, article III, section 1 (superseded 1874).

Pittsburgh Colonization Society's officer's list reads, as one scholar notes, "like the social register for the city at that time."¹⁰

Research on white supremacists in the Pittsburgh region is vast, yet no study has effectively placed this group into their proper context regarding their relationship to white abolitionists and free African Americans. Rather, each source focuses on one aspect of white supremacy in the nineteenth century. By overlapping a variety of sources, one can witness the forces at work behind the white supremacist movement, whether those forces are political, economic, some other factor, or a combination. It is for these reasons that an examination of the major works relating to white supremacy in nineteenth century Pennsylvania must be taken.

One masterful work that analyzes the gradual emancipation of slaves in Pennsylvania is *Freedom by Degrees: Emancipation and Its Aftermath in Pennsylvania* by Gary Nash and Jean Soderlund. Through careful analysis of existing records and primary documents, this research presents the incredibly slow process slavery took to fade away in the state that ironically had passed one of the earliest emancipation laws. What exactly took slavery so long to be eradicated from the state, particularly the southern and western counties, and what effect this had on attitudes towards slavery in the 1840s and later are the questions Nash and Soderlund attempt to answer. What is clear in *Freedom by Degrees* is that many individuals living in the Pittsburgh region prior to the Civil War did not fit into a category of ambivalence or opposition to slavery as some generalizations may suggest.

¹⁰ Switala, *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania*, 88. The Pittsburgh Colonization Society, a branch of the American Colonization Society, was formed on September 25, 1826 by a number of prominent citizens in the First Presbyterian Church.

The political influences of white supremacists, particularly in the state legislature, are also of critical importance when trying to understand how communities tried dealing with questions over slavery. Two articles, Eric Smith's "The End of Black Voting Rights in Pennsylvania: African Americans and the Pennsylvania Constitutional Convention of 1837-1838" and Nicholas Wood's "'A Sacrifice on the Alter of Slavery': Doughface Politics and Black Disenfranchisement in Pennsylvania, 1837-1838," along with Tyler Anbinder's *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s* tell the story of white supremacists in state politics. The result, ironically running parallel to the final extermination of slavery within Pennsylvania's borders, is the disenfranchisement of free African Americans. Though massive resistance efforts would be mounted, it would not hold up to the power and influence of the white supremacists.

White supremacists would achieve a massive political victory on the national stage with the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Though the law was aimed at the capture and return of fugitive slaves to their masters, all Americans were affected. The federal legislation reverberated across the state of Pennsylvania, and throughout the Pittsburgh region, as new federal marshals were hired to enforce the law. How this was done in the Pittsburgh region is of great importance, since it has already been shown to have been a critical route along the Underground Railroad. Two works, Stanley Campbell's *The Slave Catchers: Enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law* and Irene Williams' "The Operation of the Fugitive Slave Law in Western Pennsylvania," offer unique insights into the legalities of the law, and its implementation. There is no doubt that the law threatened to disturb communities with African American populations, like Pittsburgh, yet Underground Railroad operations would endure.

Those political, and sometimes physical, battles that resulted from disputes over slavery in northern communities seek to dismiss the generalized claims that these areas were passively ambivalent, or opposed, to the institution of slavery. On the contrary, many reasons existed as to why individuals in the North, and particularly in the Pittsburgh region, would show sympathy for southern slave-owners, or refuse to assist fugitive slaves in their flight towards freedom. The mere existence of these white supremacists demonstrates that the nature of these northern communities in the early nineteenth century was far from simple, and that a close examination is required to truly understand the debates that were occurring around the question of slavery.

White Abolitionists

Opposite the white supremacists in Pittsburgh was the group that shall be collectively known as the “white abolitionists.” These individuals were as diverse as their counterparts, yet shared a common sympathy for the plight of African Americans, both free and enslaved. Some white abolitionists, such as Charles Avery, dedicated much time and money for developing educational opportunities for African Americans. Others may not have been so publicly supportive of the rights of free blacks, but was certainly willing to assist a fugitive slave when the call arose. The lack of documented memoirs or records of fugitives, like those kept by Philadelphia’s William Still, makes uncovering the stories of these white abolitionists very difficult. Consequently, a focus on their organizations will be critical to understanding the antislavery operations within the region.

Prior to 1835 the number of antislavery organizations in Pennsylvania was relatively low, and no individuals from the state held significant national positions. This was in part due to the Colonization Society’s efforts. Andrew Buffum, a lecturer sent by

the New England Antislavery Society in 1833 to Philadelphia, was forced to put his speaking tour on hold due to the threat of riots. The following year, Antislavery Society agent James Loughhead held a series of debates against prominent colonization supporters. Loughhead was ultimately successful in his efforts, going on to help establish fourteen new auxiliaries throughout western Pennsylvania and Ohio.¹¹

Antislavery ideology would soon spread across the state. Pittsburgh, in particular, received considerable attention from the American Antislavery Society between 1835 and 1837. Prominent abolitionists, like Theodore Weld, travelled the region and used organized religion to gain new recruits. The city's antislavery population organized a public meeting in the city's Protestant Methodist Church in June 1835, where Weld and other speakers spread their message. This unified message by the various lecturers sent by the American Antislavery Society did not convert the entire Pittsburgh region, but it did provide a foundation for future growth. Early successes resulted in what many consider the first meeting of the Pittsburgh Antislavery Society, a hybrid organization formed in July 1835 that promoted both gradual abolition and subsequent colonization. In preparation for a state organizational meeting in February 1837, local auxiliaries also held their own executive planning meetings. Those in the Pittsburgh region, as one reporter observed, were going "swimmingly" and were expected to produce numerous delegates to the state convention.¹²

In time, the Pittsburgh region would become the location of numerous local initiatives seeking the abolition of slavery. The Union Antislavery Society of Pittsburgh

¹¹ Meyers, "The Early Antislavery Agency System in Pennsylvania 1833-1837," 62-64, 66-67; *The Liberator*, December 14, 21, 28, 1833. Meyers counts six of the two hundred twenty-one auxiliaries of the American Antislavery Society existing in Pennsylvania in May 1835.

¹² Meyers, "The Early Antislavery Agency System in Pennsylvania 1833-1837," 62-64, 68-69, 75-85; Burns, "Slavery in Western Pennsylvania," 208-209.

and Allegheny was created in January 1839 in an attempt to better coordinate these local efforts. Eventually, women of the region would become active, forming the Pittsburgh and Allegheny Ladies' Antislavery Society. Jane G. Swisshelm, a prominent female activist, first published the *Saturday Evening Vistier* [sic], a local newspaper promoting the abolition of slavery and women's rights, in 1847. The effects of the efforts proved minimal at first, as colonization and white supremacist ideologies thrived. Yet, over time prominent figures, both black and white, created a growing shift within the region over what to do about slavery.¹³

One of these figures, Charles Avery, was a leading force in the abolitionist movement early on. In 1812, the twenty-eight-year-old Avery migrated to Pittsburgh where he led a prosperous life. The financial success of his cotton mill and pharmaceutical business allowed the white philanthropist to provide support for the cause he felt most passionately about: the educating of African Americans. His dream was finally realized in March of 1849 when his Allegheny Institute and Mission Church, a school for educating blacks that eventually became Avery College, opened for business. Aside from these philanthropic efforts, Avery also worked towards eradicating slavery. He provided legal assistance for the Africans in the *Amistad* case of 1841 and left \$800,000 in his will to various societies and schools that benefitted African Americans¹⁴

The efforts of white abolitionists, and their black counterparts, in the Pittsburgh region demonstrated a growing wave of antislavery sentiment that would help to agitate

¹³ Switala, *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania*, 88-89; *The North Star*, January 28, March 10, 1848.

¹⁴ Switala, *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania*, 93; Stanton Belfour, "Charles Avery: Early Pittsburgh Philanthropist," *The Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* 43, no. 1 (1960):19-20. The school was originally located at Nash and Avery Streets in Allegheny City, across the Allegheny River from Pittsburgh.

both the Colonization Society and the white supremacists. By the 1850s, particularly after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, northern whites who were otherwise indifferent to slavery soon found themselves forced to join a side of the debate. Prominent members of the city gathered for a mass meeting just days after the passage of the law denouncing it as “iniquitous and unconstitutional.”¹⁵ These tensions clearly reflect the complications faced by northern communities and better represent the nation on the eve of civil war.

Research on specific white abolitionists operating within the Pittsburgh region is sparse, due in part to the lack of written accounts by those assisting fugitive slaves. No records have been found documenting any sort of network like those in found in larger cities like New York or Philadelphia. With a smaller number of fugitives than the coastal cities, a more cohesive network was not needed, or perhaps not practical in Pittsburgh. Despite the limited resources, however, the area is not lacking of individuals and groups that assisted slaves on their way to freedom.

Two articles stand out regarding antislavery operations in the Pittsburgh region: Stanton Belfour’s “Charles Avery: Early Pittsburgh Philanthropist” and John L. Myers’s “The Early Antislavery Agency System in Pennsylvania, 1833-1837.” Belfour’s examination of the rise to prominence of Charles Avery, the most prominent abolitionist in the area, sheds light on the economic and social conditions of the city. Avery’s ability to use his vast fortune to promote the antislavery cause, and establish educational opportunities for blacks, was centered on his financial successes in Pittsburgh. Myers’s article, on the contrary, focuses on the larger movement of antislavery ideology into Pennsylvania over the course of the 1830s. Relying heavily on various Antislavery Societies’ records, Myers is able to effectively map the expansion of the growing

¹⁵ Burns, “Slavery in Western Pennsylvania,” 210.

movement in the state. This work is useful in understanding how the central beliefs uniting white and black abolitionists developed in Pennsylvania.

One of the most useful works on the rise of antislavery ideology in the United States is *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery* by James B. Stewart. Through meticulous research, Stewart is able to trace the earliest developments of antislavery sentiment, primarily in New England, and follow its path as it spread across the northern population. Additionally, the author discusses reactions to this movement by southerners and northern white supremacists and attempts to reflect on how attempts to eliminate the slavery debate, particularly on the national level, only fueled the fires of sectionalism further.

A final source that provides unique insights into the ideology, and organized efforts, of the antislavery movement is Dwight L. Dumond's *Antislavery, The Crusade for Freedom in America*. In his analysis of the peculiar institution, and the backlash received by the South from its northern neighbors, Dumond holds nothing back in stating the effects slavery had over dividing the nation in the antebellum period. Important to the study of rising antislavery sentiments, according to Dummond's work, is the analysis of its counterpart: the slave power. By examining both movements simultaneously, *Antislavery, The Crusade for Freedom in America* is able to effectively place into context the debate around slavery and the sectional divide created as a result.

Although these works are described under the heading of "White Abolitionists," it is critical to understand that few organized (or unorganized) efforts in the Pittsburgh region were specifically operated by white abolitionists alone. Each of the sources mentioned above, as well as numerous others, highlight the role that African Americans

played in developing antislavery ideology, assisting fugitive slaves, and serving in organizations like the various anti-slavery societies. Therefore, any of these works could have been equally effective under the final heading, “African Americans.”

African Americans

Alongside white abolitionists, numerous African Americans worked in the Pittsburgh region to not only assist fugitive slaves but to also provide educational opportunities for free blacks. The earliest of these educational organizations, the Theban Literary Society, was organized in 1831 at the request of Reverend Lewis Woodson of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The society’s goal was to provide a gathering place for young men to discuss their literary interests. The following year also saw the creation of the African Education Society, dedicated to educating blacks of all ages. This organization’s officers list held some of the most prominent African Americans living in Pittsburgh at the time, including: John B. Vashon, president; Reverend Woodson, secretary; and A.D. Lewis, treasurer.¹⁶

Martin R. Delaney, an African American physician and writer, proved crucial to Pittsburgh’s antislavery efforts. Having arrived in Pittsburgh in 1831 from the Chambersburg area at only nineteen years old, Delaney benefited from the African Education Society and went on to become a practicing doctor. In 1843 he began to spread his abolitionist ideas through his newspaper, *The Mystery*. Delaney would eventually rise to national prominence, co-editing *The North Star* with Frederick Douglass by 1847. Despite his ability to promote antislavery ideology and assist fugitives, Delaney struggled

¹⁶ Dorothy B. Porter, “The Organized Educational Activities of Negro Literary Societies, 1828-1846,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 5, no. 4 (1936): 557; Switala, *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania*, 88, 91-92; Smith, “The End of Black Voting Rights in Pennsylvania: African Americans and the Constitutional Convention of 1837-1838,” 285.

with the idea of blacks ever receiving true equality in the United States. It is for this reason that he became one of the few African Americans in the Pittsburgh region to actively promote colonization of free blacks outside of the United States.¹⁷

Most African Americans living in the Pittsburgh region opposed the concept of colonization. John Vashon went so far as to write a letter to the Pittsburgh Colonization Society, condemning it for attempting to send African Americans from their homelands where they had lived and work their entire lives. Other blacks throughout the state tended to support Vashon's views over Delaney's. An Annual Convention of the People of Color was held in Philadelphia in 1831, heavily criticizing the Colonization Society, yet promoting movement to Canada. The following year almost saw the end of the convention entirely as the group divided over whether it would be acceptable to purchase land in Canada for African Americans to settle on. Yet despite attempts by Delaney and others to encourage colonization, most blacks chose to remain in the United States. This was, after all, the only home most had ever known and there was still a strong connection to enslaved family members who would be left behind.¹⁸

Although some African American leaders in the Pittsburgh region disputed the question of colonization, an earlier attempt proved what efficient coordination efforts these men could utilize. As previously mentioned, the state constitutional convention of 1837-38 eliminated the right of African Americans to vote. This change, however, did not occur without a fight. When the idea of eliminating black suffrage was introduced by

¹⁷ Switala, *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania*, 88, 92; Pinsker, "Vigilance in Pennsylvania: Underground Railroad Activities in the Keystone State, 1837-1861," 38; *The North Star*, January 28, March 31, 1848.

¹⁸ Smith, "The End of Black Voting Rights in Pennsylvania: African Americans and the Constitutional Convention of 1837-1838," 285-286; Louis R. Mehlinger, "The Attitude of the Free Negro Toward African Colonization," *The Journal of Negro History* 1, no. 3 (1916): 277-279, 290-292, 296-300. Pittsburgh blacks had little influence at this convention and did not attend the meetings in 1834 or 1835.

former Democratic congressman John Sterigere, community leaders were quick to act. Pittsburgh blacks including John Vashon, Reverend Woodson, and seventy-seven others added their names to a petition entitled *Memorial of the Free Citizens of Color in Pittsburgh and Its Vicinity Relative to the Right of Suffrage*. This petition, often called the *Pittsburgh Memorial*, sought to appeal to the delegates of the constitutional convention to protect African American voting rights. It used political arguments to defend black voting rights and referenced the Declaration of Independence, the state's gradual emancipation law, and its two prior constitutions. The document then went on to present a report "concerning the moral, social, and political condition of the colored population of Pittsburgh," discussing details ranging from church attendance and education rates to property owned and amounts of taxes paid by individuals.¹⁹ The *Pittsburgh Memorial* was sent to the convention in haste and, on July 1, 1837, Vashon and Woodson attended as observers to note the outcome.²⁰

The petition caused a rift between convention delegates when it was first introduced. Some argued that blacks should speak only through their elected representatives; other went further to say that blacks should have no political voice at all. Despite some support to have the *Pittsburgh Memorial* assigned to the committee on Article III, dealing with elections, a majority declined to even have it mentioned in the convention's proceedings. Many Pittsburgh citizens were outraged, with the *Pittsburgh Gazette* stating how there was no visible "justice of excluding native born freemen of this

¹⁹ Eric Ledell Smith, "The Pittsburgh Memorial: A Forgotten Document of Pittsburgh History," *Pittsburgh History* (Fall, 1997): 110-111; Smith, "The End of Black Voting Rights in Pennsylvania: African Americans and the Constitutional Convention of 1837-1838," 288-289.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 288-289.

commonwealth from this privilege [voting], merely because their skins are a little darker than of some of their neighbors.”²¹

The efforts of African Americans, alongside white abolitionists, in the Pittsburgh region prior to the Civil War demonstrated a growing wave of interracial antislavery sentiment. By the 1850s, particularly after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, northern whites who were otherwise indifferent to the slavery question soon found the debate forced upon them. Prominent members of the city gathered for a mass meeting just days after the passage of the law, denouncing it as “iniquitous and unconstitutional.”²² The act also forced many former slaves living in Pittsburgh, most fearing recapture or kidnapping, to leave for Canada. City newspapers noted how just days after the enactment of the law saw the departure of seventeen African Americans headed for Canada, with smaller parties leaving regularly after that.²³

Many accounts have been made analyzing the experiences of free blacks in northern communities. Many, like Leonard P. Curry’s *The Free Black in Urban America, 1800-1850: A Shadow of a Dream* and *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860* by James O. Horton and Lois E. Horton, present the struggle of the black experience even after the abolition of slavery at the state level. Additionally, each notes the perseverance of black communities to stand up to threats against their freedoms and liberties. In addition to the two works mentioned, *The WPA History of the Negro in Pittsburgh* by J. Ernest Wright and Laurence A. Glasco is able to apply these themes specifically to the Pittsburgh region.

²¹ Ibid., 295; Smith, “The Pittsburgh Memorial: A Forgotten Document of Pittsburgh History,” 108.

²² Burns, “Slavery in Western Pennsylvania,” 210.

²³ Ibid., 211; *The North Star*, October 3, 1850.

Aside from the experiences of African Americans chronicled in monographs, there are vast arrays of articles that help fill the gaps in the general research and provide a more coherent understanding of various parts of the slavery debate in the Pittsburgh region. Louis R. Mehlinger's "The Attitude of the Free Negro Toward African Colonization" presents the various responses of individual African Americans to the rising pressures of the Colonization Society. Although most blacks opposed the idea, some gave it serious consideration as the best way to live free from white subjugation, greatly complicating the general beliefs about attitudes of blacks regarding colonization. Another useful article for examining the black experience in Pittsburgh is R.J.M. Blackett's "...Freedom, or the Martyr's Grave': Black Pittsburgh's Aid to the Fugitive Slave." Perhaps no work better illustrates the levels of organization and sacrifice made by blacks in, and around, the city to support the Underground Railroad.

Studies have also been made regarding leading black individuals, and their roles in both promoting black rights and assisting fugitive slaves. Catherine M. Hatchett's "George Boyer Vashon, 1824-1878: Black Educator, Poet, Fighter for Equal Rights," discusses the rise of one of Pittsburgh's earliest advocates for black rights. Vashon's efforts helped in providing freedom to individuals escaping slavery and educational opportunities for those free blacks hoping to improve their own conditions. Martin R. Delaney, perhaps Pittsburgh's most famous pre-Civil War African American has also been the subject of historical research. As early as 1883, *Life and Public Services of Martin R. Delaney* by Frank A. Rollin appeared in print. Delaney would work hand-in-hand with Frederick Douglass to end slavery, and even entered service for the Union Army during the Civil War. Martin Delaney leaves a legacy of astonishing commitment

to the advancement of blacks all across the country. Without men like Vashon and Delaney leading the charge for educational opportunities and political rights, Pittsburgh could not have played the role it did in confronting the slavery debate and challenging southern leaders on what they deemed an immoral and unjust system of slavery.

CHAPTER II

THE POLITICS OF SLAVERY

In order to best understand the context of the slavery debates that occurred in the Pittsburgh region prior to the Civil War it is critical to examine the history of the peculiar institution throughout Pennsylvania as a whole. Analyzing the region's relationship with slavery as an institution is necessary when trying to understand the influences it had on the people living there, particularly before the implementation of the state's gradual emancipation law. By studying the complicated history of slavery in Pennsylvania, as both a British colony and later as a state, one begins to understand why most residents were not ambivalent to the institution prior to the 1860s. Many individuals had come in contact with slavery at one point or another, while some went on to own slaves through at least the 1830s.²⁴

Pennsylvania's gradual eradication of slavery did little to end the racial tensions between some white residents and a growing population of free African Americans. These tensions are reflected in the various political debates, court rulings, and legislative measures appearing between the 1820s and 1860, which will be the major focus of this chapter. Through each of these various factors an interesting correlation appears regarding slavery and liberty. As gradual emancipation worked its way across the state, a growing wave of racial tension followed. Bills were introduced in the state legislature to limit particular freedoms for blacks. The state constitution was amended in 1838 to disenfranchise African Americans, some of whom had previously participated in the

²⁴ Bureau of the Census, *Negro Population in the United States, 1790-1915* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1918, Reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1969), 57; Burns, "Slavery in Western Pennsylvania," 207. No slaves appear in Allegheny County after the 1830 census or in the state as a whole by the 1850 census. Burns notes, however, that no other records are available to show exactly when slavery ceased to exist within the state.

voting process. These reactions to slavery's disappearance within the state, coupled with an increase in the free black population, once again presents a people not ambivalent to the institution of slavery, but rather a population with great concern over what effects universal emancipation could have on the country as a whole.

Slavery and Emancipation in Pennsylvania

Slavery had existed in the area that would become Pennsylvania even before the land was granted to William Penn by King Charles II in 1681. The Swedes and Dutch had originally introduced the institution to the area, though determining an exact date of this introduction proves impossible. What is clear, however, is that slavery continued, and thrived, in Penn's colony. Despite some later Quakers abandoning the institution of slavery entirely, most white Pennsylvanians saw no harm in owning human property. Though the region was not suitable for the large cotton plantations of the South, slaves within the state worked in a variety of jobs ranging from mills and shops to forges and farms.²⁵

After the frontier opened to more settlers in the decades following the French and Indian War slavery began to spread to new parts of the state. Though specific numbers of slaves in Pennsylvania during the colonial period are difficult to calculate, it is clear that over 3,700 slaves resided in the state by 1790. Of these, 159 lived in Allegheny County, home to Pittsburgh and Allegheny City. Over time slavery would become more valuable to the western and southern counties of the state, particularly those bordering Maryland and Virginia, as the institution generally declined in the east. One historian calculates that five counties in the western half of the state, including Allegheny, held 44 percent of the

²⁵ Nash and Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees*, 8-11, 20-21, 43.

state's overall population in 1790 and owned 66 percent of the state's slaves. By 1810, this same proportion of the state's population held 94 percent of the state's slaves.²⁶

In addition to census records, various newspapers from the Pittsburgh region help to illuminate the influence of slavery over the local population. A sampling of advertisements from the *Pittsburgh Gazette*, for example, reveals a slave market and notices for fugitives. "A Negro Wench," reads one advertisement placed by a Pittsburgh slaveholder, "She is an excellent cook, and can do any kind of work in or out of doors."²⁷ Another notice, this time calling for the return of a fugitive, reads: "Ran away on the 11th of April, a negro man about forty years of age, has lost two of his fore teeth, speaks middling good English..."²⁸ With advertisements and notices like these it is clear that the Pittsburgh population was well acquainted with the institution of slavery, as well as its resistance, early on. The sentiments that were developed over the years of slavery's existence in the area would extend, with the institution itself, well into the antebellum period. Additionally, these factors would come to influence how individuals from the Pittsburgh region, and western Pennsylvania as a whole, viewed the slavery debate in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Although a slaveholder held the right to manumit his slaves at any time, emancipation by law was not established in Pennsylvania until 1780. The legislation itself, one of the earliest regarding emancipation, begins with an idealistic vision that would eventually purge the state of the institution "to which the arms and tyranny of

²⁶ Bureau of the Census, *Negro Population in the United States, 1790-1915*, 57; Burns, "Slavery in Western Pennsylvania," 204, 207; Nash and Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees*, 4-5, 32, 74.

²⁷ *Pittsburgh Gazette*, May 26, 1787; Burns, "Slavery in Western Pennsylvania," 205.

²⁸ *Pittsburgh Gazette*, May 9, 1789; Burns, "Slavery in Western Pennsylvania," 205.

Great-Britain were exerted to reduce us.”²⁹ It continues by addressing numerous aspects related to slavery including how emancipation should unfold, the required steps an individual must take to secure their current human property, legal procedures when dealing with African Americans, as well as prohibiting “any relief or shelter to any absconding or runaway negro or mulatto slave or servant.”³⁰ Although the law established only a gradual process for the extermination of slavery with the state, it helped to prevent its future growth and, as one scholar notes, “spurred slaves to free themselves, and owners to release their bondsmen and women.”³¹

This gradual emancipation law was not the product of a quick and painless process. Rather, it proved a difficult task with numerous obstacles to overcome. Earlier bills regarding the slavery issue were tabled by the legislature, with most representatives fearing backlash from slave owning constituents or the necessity of providing compensation for the lost property. A bill was finally drafted and presented to the legislature in November 1778, thanks in no small part to George Bryan, a Philadelphia abolitionist who opposed slavery on moral grounds. The bill was initially defeated, in part over a dispute of whether the state’s Supreme Executive Council, of which Bryan was a member, could influence legislation. Despite this initial failure, a similar bill, this time drafted by the legislature, was introduced and passed in March of the following year,

²⁹ James T. Mitchell and Henry Flanders, “An Act for the gradual Abolition of Slavery,” in *The Statutes at Large of Pennsylvania from 1682 to 1801, compiled under the authority of the Act of May 19, 1887*, vol. 10. (Harrisburg: WM. Stanley Ray, 1904), 67. The law places blame on Great Britain for forcing slavery upon Pennsylvania. Ironically, the so-called “freedom principle” had been developed by England’s chief justice, Lord Mansfield, eight years before Pennsylvania’s gradual emancipation law was enacted. This principle automatically freed slaves who were taken into localities where the institution was not legally recognized. For more on the “freedom principle” see Eric Foner’s *Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad*, 37-38.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 71-72.

³¹ Nash and Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees*, 4; Mitchell and Flanders, “An Act for the gradual Abolition of Slavery,” 67-73.

by a margin of thirty-four to twenty-one. This margin of victory demonstrates what the text of the law does not, that slavery was deeply embedded in the minds of most Pennsylvanians and that moral concerns were often trumped by those of property rights claims or other concerns.³²

By analyzing the law itself, and the reactions to it by individuals across the state, it becomes clear that public opinion on the issue was far from sharing the idealistic rhetoric of the state legislature's wording in 1780. The gradual abolition act was a compromise between two growing forces within the state: those who wanted to eliminate slavery from the state and those who wanted to protect their current property rights. The result required freedom for all African Americans born to slave mothers after the passage of the act. It also required that slaves held before the passage of the act be registered through the state. Any slaves found not registered would instantly become "free men and free women."³³ Despite the abhorrence to the institution of slavery projected in the law's preamble, the reality shows a much more conservative document, cautious in its protections of property rights. Even those children born after March 1, 1780, for example, were required to live in a condition of servitude until their twenty-eighth birthday.³⁴

In regards to fugitive slaves, which would prove to be one of the most controversial topics between the North and South in the decades leading up to the Civil War, Pennsylvania's gradual abolition law had much to say. First, individuals who took it upon themselves to assist fugitive slaves, or who simply encouraged runaways, were subject to the same criminal penalties as someone assisting a runaway indentured servant.

³² Nash and Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees*, 101-105; Burns, "Slavery in Western Pennsylvania," 204.

³³ Mitchell and Flanders, "An Act for the gradual Abolition of Slavery," 71.

³⁴ Nash and Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees*, 3, 75, 99-102, 137; Foner, *Gateway to Freedom*, 38; Mitchell and Flanders, "An Act for the gradual Abolition of Slavery," 72.

In addition, the act made it a crime to assist or harbor fugitive slaves escaping from other states. The inclusion of sections addressing fugitive slaves demonstrates once again the conservative nature of the law. In no way was the legislature attempting to violate current property rights or create hostilities between neighboring states where slavery still flourished.³⁵

Reactions across the state to the new gradual emancipation law were mixed, despite the decline in slave ownership in the subsequent decades. Initial backlash to the law presented itself in the 1780 elections, where 60 percent of incumbent assemblymen, many whom had supported gradual emancipation, saw themselves replaced by more conservative politicians. Some of the earliest attempts by this new state legislature were to repeal, or at least amend, the gradual abolition law. These attempts ended in failure, but demonstrate the hostilities shown by many across the state to the idea of a growing free black population. Despite these potential setbacks, slavery would be placed on a long course of extermination in Pennsylvania. The census records of the Pittsburgh region, where slavery had held out longer than most areas in the state, show a decline from 159 slaves in 1790, 24 in 1800, 1 in 1820, and 0 by 1840.³⁶

These records clearly show the decrease in actual numbers of registered slaves in the Pittsburgh region throughout the decades following the passage of the gradual abolition law. It should not be presumed, however, that this law was the only factor in the general decline of slave ownership. If the law would have been enforced exactly as written, slavery could have existed in Pennsylvania until 1847, when the legislature

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Nash and Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees*, 76, 111-113, 137; Burns, "Slavery in Western Pennsylvania," 207-208.

banned the institution entirely.³⁷ Why then does the institution appear to drastically decline in almost every decade after 1790? The answer is simple: a number of other factors influenced this decline, and ultimate elimination, of slavery within the state.³⁸

One reason why the institution declined faster in Pennsylvania than the gradual emancipation law initially required was due to a rise in abolitionist sentiments. Individuals and groups who supported the complete eradication of slavery encouraged those still owning slaves to free them. They also raised funds and provided legal counsel for slaves who had not been properly registered according to the law. This provided an opportunity for some blacks, who would have otherwise been held illegally in bondage, to receive their freedom. Additionally, some slaves across the state took their chances by escaping farther north, where they had less chance of being captured and returned to their condition of servitude. The mere mention of fugitive slaves and defined punishments for those assisting runaways in the gradual abolition law illuminates the challenge faced by many slave owners in the state, and adds to the general decline in the slave population in the first half of the nineteenth century.³⁹

Rights of Free African Americans

The gradual abolition law enacted by the Pennsylvania legislature in 1780 was the first attempt in any state to eliminate the institution of slavery within its own borders.

³⁷ “An Act to prevent kidnapping, preserve the public peace, prohibit the exercise of certain powers heretofore exercised by judges, justices of the peace, aldermen and jailors in this commonwealth, and to repeal certain slave laws,” *Laws of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, passed at the session of 1847, in the Seventy-First Year of Independence, Including Twenty Acts passed at the session of Eighteen Hundred and Forty-Six* (Harrisburg: J.M.G. Lescure, 1847), 208.

³⁸ Bureau of the Census, *Negro Population in the United States, 1790-1915*, 57. The number of slaves within the state drops over 50 percent each decade between 1790 and 1810, and drops a further 73 percent in the ten years between 1810 and 1820. After an increase in the slave population between 1820 and 1830 the number drops again by 84 percent by 1840, leaving the last recorded number of slaves in Pennsylvania at sixty-four.

³⁹ Nash and Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees*, 138; Mitchell and Flanders, “An Act for the gradual Abolition of Slavery,” 71-72.

Though this trailblazing effort, which would soon be followed by other northern states, was a conservative struggle to protect the property rights of Pennsylvania slaveholders, it also recognized that certain rights should be extended to free African Americans. Section one begins with a spiritual calling and acknowledgement that, having gained independence from Great Britain, it was now the duty of the state to “extend a portion of that freedom to others.”⁴⁰ This recognition of both a spiritual and moral obligation to uproot the institution of slavery, albeit gradually, was a critical step in the abolitionist movement. For the first time in American history it was officially declared by a democratically-elected legislature that freedom was entitled to all individuals.

Another portion of section one is worth mentioning, as it takes a further step in encouraging abolitionist sentiments. The legislators admit that it is not their station to inquire as to why “in the Creation of Mankind, the Inhabitants of the several parts of the Earth, were distinguished by a difference in Feature or Complexion.”⁴¹ Rather, they must submit to the recognition that God has “extended equally his Care and Protection to all.”⁴² By accepting that various races were created and loved by God equally, the state’s legislature initiated what would become an effective argument for the abolitionist movement. After all, if an individual was naturally free by God’s design, regardless of race, were they not also entitled to certain political and economic rights?

A limited sense of legal equality between people of different races, as stated in Pennsylvania’s gradual emancipation law, did little to address the challenges faced by a

⁴⁰ Ibid. The legislature took the same approach towards slavery that was initially attempted in the earliest draft of the Declaration of Independence: condemning Britain’s tyrannical rule as the cause of slavery’s presence in America.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

growing free black population.⁴³ “As northern slavery ended,” notes one scholar, “an epidemic followed of kidnapping free blacks, especially children, for sale to the South.”⁴⁴ The fear of being kidnapped and sent south to be sold into slavery, regardless of one’s legal status, sent panic through northern free black communities. The chances of successful kidnappings increased in larger cities, like New York and Philadelphia, where the hustle and bustle of travelers and merchants created an often chaotic scene. Kidnappers operated around these populous areas, hoping to stumble upon an unsuspecting individual that could be loaded onto a ship and sent south. By the 1820s kidnapping African Americans to sell into slavery became an organized business opportunity for some. It soon became difficult for African Americans, even those born free, to know who to trust.⁴⁵

One response by whites and blacks alike to combat kidnapping within the state was the development of vigilance committees. Vigilance committees varied from city to city but the primary goals remained the same: assist fugitives and prevent kidnappings. To achieve these goals vigilance committee members worked in very practical ways. First, fundraisers were held and donations were accepted to help fund legal assistance for cases involving suspected fugitives in court. Additionally, vigilance committees worked to promote abolitionist rhetoric and attempted to sway public opinion against the institution of slavery in general.⁴⁶

Two experiences involving community efforts to stop kidnapping in the Pittsburgh region help to demonstrate the power that vigilance committees could have

⁴³ Bureau of the Census, *Negro Population in the United States, 1790-1915*, 57.

⁴⁴ Foner, *Gateway to Freedom*, 50.

⁴⁵ Pinsker, “Vigilance in Pennsylvania,” 61-62.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 17-19, 57, 61.

over a city's population. The first experience, in May 1853, occurred when a large crowd met Thomas Adams of Nashville, Tennessee and his black companion at the city's train station. After an investigation and a filing of a writ of habeas corpus, it was discovered that Adams had convinced the black man to leave his home in Jamaica for promising opportunities in California. Adams's true intentions were to sell the man into slavery in Kentucky.⁴⁷

Another incident three months later, this time in Allegheny City, proved equally troubling. In this case a man was travelling with a black woman and her three small children. Word spread that the man was planning to sell all four individuals in Baltimore. A large group managed to rescue the four victims and the kidnapper fled the area after a warrant for his arrest was issued. Although active citizens were able to rescue the victims in these scenarios, there was no guarantee that once someone had been kidnapped they could be saved. A growing fear associated with kidnapping would push the state legislature to begin extending legal protections for blacks living within the state, as well as define the procedures permitted by slaveholders to reclaim fugitives.⁴⁸

The first action taken by the Pennsylvania legislature regarding the rising concerns over slavery's presence in the state and brought about by such kidnappings was an act passed to explain and amend the gradual emancipation law of 1780. The new law, passed March 29, 1788, made it a crime to kidnap any black person for the purpose of selling them into slavery or to participate in the Atlantic slave trade in any way. Additionally, the act sought to eliminate loopholes in the 1780 law. This original act only

⁴⁷ *Pittsburgh Gazette*, May 30, 1853, August 12, 1853; *The Anti-Slavery Bugle*, June 11, 1853; *Pittsburgh Daily Morning Post*, May 31, 1853; *Pittsburgh Commercial Journal*, May 31, 1853; *Pittsburgh Evening Chronicle*, August 12, 1853; Blackett, "...Freedom, or the Martyr's Grave'," 131.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 131.

permitted federal officials to temporarily bring slaves into the state, so long as the slave's residence was less than six months. Slaves brought into the state and kept over the allotted time would be granted their freedom. As a result, slaveholders began circulating their slaves in and out of the state. The amended law of 1788 denied slaveholders this power. It also prevented pregnant slave women from being taken out of state to ensure that any children would be born into slavery. In addition to these amendments and clarifications, the new law made it harder for immediate families to be separated and required all blacks born free, yet required to work as apprentices until the age of twenty-eight, be registered.⁴⁹

Another problem faced by northern states, which were in some form or another abolishing slavery within their borders, was the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 which permitted planters to recover fugitive slaves in Pennsylvania and outlined punishments for anyone who assisted an escaping slave. Though the law was meant to enforce the so-called fugitive slave clause of the Constitution, it raised more questions than it answered. Which government, federal or state, would enforce the legislation? What power did individual states, particularly northern states, have in regulating how fugitive slaves would be captured and returned? To answer these questions, numerous states passed what became known as personal liberty laws. These laws were, in part, to streamline the process slaveholders would have to take in order to reclaim their fugitives. Additionally, the laws sought to prevent the kidnapping of free blacks.

⁴⁹ James T. Mitchell and Henry Flanders, "An Act to Explain and Amend and Act Entitled 'An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery'," in *The Statutes at Large of Pennsylvania from 1682 to 1801, compiled under the authority of the Act of May 19, 1887*, vol. 13. (Harrisburg: WM. Stanley Ray, 1904), 52-56.

Pennsylvania's 1826 personal liberty law required anyone wishing to reclaim a fugitive to provide enough evidence to have a warrant issued for the individual in question. A sheriff or constable would then bring the suspected fugitive before a state judge who would then make a ruling on the matter. This process placed the burden of determining fugitive slave cases in state hands. Many slavecatchers argued that the law placed unnecessary obstacles in the way of slaveholders trying to reclaim their property (i.e. slaves) under federal law. By 1842, a case regarding the state's personal liberty law, known as *Prigg v. Pennsylvania*, landed in front of the United States Supreme Court.⁵⁰

The *Prigg* case, a dispute between a Maryland slavecatcher and the state of Pennsylvania, tested both the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 and Pennsylvania's personal liberty law of 1826. The case revolved around an enslaved woman named Margaret Morgan. Morgan's owner, a Maryland slave-owner, had allowed his slave to live with her husband, a free man, in the state of Pennsylvania since 1832. When the owner died, ownership of Morgan passed to his niece. She then hired a slavecatcher, Edward Prigg, to find and return Morgan to Maryland. Prigg entered Morgan's house in York County late one night and seized her, along with her six children, and returned with them to Maryland. The state of Pennsylvania quickly indicted Prigg, and later convicted him of violating the state's 1826 personal liberty law. The case subsequently went before the United States Supreme Court in 1842.⁵¹

⁵⁰ *Acts of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, passed at a session which was begun and held at the Borough of Harrisburg, on Tuesday the seventh day of December, in the year of our Lord One Thousand Eight Hundred and Twenty-Four...*(Harrisburg: Mowery & Cameron, 1825), 150-152; Foner, *Gateway to Freedom*, 51.

⁵¹ Foner, *Gateway to Freedom*, 108-109; Peter Irons, *A People's History of the Supreme Court: The Men and Women Whose Cases and Decisions Have Shaped Our Constitution* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 151.

After hearing arguments from lawyers on both sides, the justices issued a complex ruling. The question at stake was whether state laws regulating the recapture of fugitives violated the Constitution and federal law. All nine justices agreed on the constitutionality of the Fugitive Slave Act and condemned Pennsylvania's personal liberty law for the unnecessary interference with planters trying to reclaim their slaves, but then the issue became more complicated. Just where was a state's role in ensuring the recapture of fugitive slaves? Seven different opinions were written regarding the topic, with some justices sharply disagreeing over interpretations. The main opinion, written by Justice Joseph Story, discussed the fundamental nature of the fugitive slave clause in the Constitution and condemned Pennsylvania's law for attempting to hinder the recapture of runaway slaves. Justice Story's opinion went further, despite concern from some of his colleagues, that states could not be compelled to enforce federal law.⁵² Though Justice Story encouraged Pennsylvania to assist in the recapture of fugitives so that "the agitation on this subject, in both states, would subside, and the conflict of opinion be put at rest," his choice of wording gave northern states, and abolitionists, an opportunity to further hinder the efforts of slavecatchers.⁵³ By leaving legislation and enforcement on the back of the federal government, states were free to stand by and refuse to offer support to slavecatchers.

The effect of Story's ruling, according to one scholar, "encouraged several northern states to pass laws that prohibited their officials from aiding slavecatchers in any

⁵² Foner, *Gateway to Freedom*, 109; Pinsker, "Vigilance in Pennsylvania," 44-45; "Prigg v. Pennsylvania," Oyez, Available from www.oyez.org/cases/1789-1850/41us539, accessed 13 December 2018; Irons, *A People's History of the Supreme Court*, 151-152. Chief Justice Roger Taney issued a rebuke of Story's words in his own opinion, where he encouraged states to pass laws that made it easier for slavecatchers to track down and seize fugitives.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 152.

way.”⁵⁴ Pennsylvania, recovering from the recent blow by the Supreme Court to its own personal liberty law, took steps to prevent state and local officials from enforcing federal policies regarding fugitives. The state’s new personal liberty law, passed in 1847, made kidnapping of free blacks a high misdemeanor with clear punishments for those convicted. The law additionally limited the jurisdiction of state judges, justices of the peace, and aldermen by prohibiting them from enforcing the Fugitive Slave Law of 1793. By taking Justice Story’s words literally the Pennsylvania legislature was able to benefit from what had seemed like a devastating ruling from the Supreme Court. If states were not able to directly intervene to ensure that the process of fugitive recapture was legal then they would not intervene at all. One thing was clear with the passage of Pennsylvania’s new personal liberty law: slavecatchers and federal law enforcement officials would be on their own when it came to apprehending fugitive slaves.⁵⁵

Aside from eliminating the roles of state and local officials in fugitive cases, Pennsylvania’s new personal liberty law granted some legal rights to African Americans within the commonwealth. The law first granted blacks protection from unlawful seizures. Any slavecatcher that attempted to capture a suspected fugitive in a “riotous, violent, tumultuous and unreasonable manner, and so as to disturb or endanger the public peace” would be charged with a misdemeanor.⁵⁶ Judges, though prevented from overseeing that fugitives were brought to justice, were granted the power to issue writs of habeas corpus, and could inquire into the legality of any arrest made within the state. The

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 152

⁵⁵ “An Act to prevent kidnapping, preserve the public peace, prohibit the exercise of certain powers heretofore exercised by judges, justices of the peace, aldermen and jailors in this commonwealth, and to repeal certain slave laws,” 206-297; Blackett, “...Freedom, or the Martyr’s Grave’,” 120.

⁵⁶ “An Act to prevent kidnapping, preserve the public peace, prohibit the exercise of certain powers heretofore exercised by judges, justices of the peace, aldermen and jailors in this commonwealth, and to repeal certain slave laws,” 207-208.

law additionally repealed parts of the gradual emancipation law of 1780, particularly the section granting temporary visitors a six-month window for keeping slaves within the state and the section preventing slaves from participating in trials. This new law clearly demonstrates a legislature set on obstructing the federal enforcement of the fugitive slave act, and can be seen as a historic step in clearly defining legal protections for African Americans.⁵⁷

The passage of personal liberty laws, coupled with the outlining of legal protections for African Americans, demonstrates only one side of the debate over the future of black rights within the commonwealth. It is clear from the drastic decline in the number of slaves owned across the state that the institution was generally unpopular among whites at home. This did not always reflect an acceptance of African Americans rights, particularly as the state's free black population continued to grow throughout the nineteenth century. In fact, what began to develop across the state was a negative correlation between slavery and liberty. As the number of slaves, and the institution itself, gradually declined, the limits placed on the rights of free blacks in the state began to rise. White supremacists, a complex group that will be discussed further in the following chapter, tended to support the elimination of black rights, even though most opposed the institution of slavery within the state. Various factors explain why the elimination of slavery was coupled with growing limits on black rights. Many feared a growing free black population and the political power such a group could wield. Additionally, the opposition to the institution of slavery, for any reason, did not always coincide with

⁵⁷ Ibid., 207-208.

opposition to racism. Most white supremacists preferred African Americans to leave the state, or at least remain as second-class citizens.⁵⁸

Numerous bills were proposed in the state legislature by white supremacists hoping to combat the growing number of free blacks within the state. In December 1831, for example, state representative Franklin Vansant of Philadelphia proposed a bill that would prohibit free blacks from moving to Pennsylvania. Vansant's bill went further, requiring African Americans who simply wanted to move from one region of the state to another to present proof of residence to local officials confirming their prior residency. Though the bill failed to pass in the legislature, the attempt alone went far in developing a sense of second-class citizenship for African Americans born free within the state. These legislative attempts also illustrate the complexities of a state where the white population was nearly unanimous in its opposition to slavery at home while still uncomfortable with the thought of sharing political, social, or economic rights with African Americans. Though these measures presented a series of political obstacles for blacks, perhaps the heaviest impediment was the elimination of voting rights for the entire black population.⁵⁹

Challenging the Rights of African Americans

The convention of delegates that gathered in Harrisburg from May 1837 to February 1838 to draft a new state constitution debated important issues ranging from executive powers, judicial tenure, and the process for chartering banks, yet none more impactful to African Americans than black disenfranchisement. On June 19 Democrats

⁵⁸ Bureau of the Census, *Negro Population in the United States, 1790-1915*, 57. There seems to be some similarities between the negative correlation of slavery and liberty in the antebellum North with the Jim Crow System that replaced slavery in the South by the end of the nineteenth century.

⁵⁹ Smith, "The End of Black Voting Rights in Pennsylvania: African Americans and the Constitutional Convention of 1837-1838," 282.

John Sterigere of Montgomery County and Benjamin Martin of Philadelphia suggested inserting the word “white” to the list of voter requirements. Sterigere initially appealed to white supremacists, embracing theories of racial inferiority and arguing that Pennsylvania should fall in line with efforts of black voter suppression in other states.⁶⁰ Benjamin Martin added to Sterigere’s remarks that none of the delegates wished to allow African Americans to run for, or serve in, political office. Offering them the vote would “prove ruinous” and give blacks an unrealistic perception of equality. The appeals of Sterigere and Martin were met with general disapproval however, as an initial vote to add “white” to the new constitution failed in a sixty-one to forty-nine vote.⁶¹

Though the suggestion of black disenfranchisement initially failed, the topic sparked heated debate among the delegates as to the social and political roles of African Americans in Pennsylvania society. Suffrage for blacks in the state’s prior constitutions had been more ambiguous than guaranteed. The question of black voting rights centered on one’s interpretation of the word “freeman.” Were all men not held in some form of bondage free? How would voting limitations, if any, be implemented if race was to be the determining factor?⁶²

Some delegates, like Allegheny County’s H.G. Rogers, argued that Pennsylvania’s government should be founded “upon two broad and enduring pillars -

⁶⁰ John Agg, *Proceedings and Debates of the Convention of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to propose Amendments to the Constitution, commenced and held at Harrisburg, on the Second Day of May, 1837*, vol. 2 (Harrisburg: Packer, Barrett, and Parke, 1837-1838), 472; Wood, “‘A Sacrifice on the Alter of Slavery’: Doughface Politics and Black Disenfranchisement in Pennsylvania, 1837-1838,” 81, 84.

⁶¹ Agg, *Proceedings and Debates of the Convention of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to propose Amendments to the Constitution, commenced and held at Harrisburg, on the Second Day of May, 1837*, vol. 2, 477-478; Wood, “‘A Sacrifice on the Alter of Slavery’: Doughface Politics and Black Disenfranchisement in Pennsylvania, 1837-1838,” 84.

⁶² Agg, *Proceedings and Debates of the Convention of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to propose Amendments to the Constitution, commenced and held at Harrisburg, on the Second Day of May, 1837*, vol. 2, 478-479, 540-541; Smith, “The Pittsburgh Memorial: A Forgotten Document of Pittsburgh History,” 107; Smith, “The End of Black Voting Rights in Pennsylvania: African Americans and the Constitutional Convention of 1837-1838,” 279-281.

universal suffrage and general education.”⁶³ John Sterigere, and his supporters, did not share in Rogers’s support of universal suffrage. Rather, they believed that state residency and taxpayer requirements, alongside one’s race, were critical components in determining whether an individual had the right to vote.⁶⁴

Sterigere’s opponents on the interpretation of “freeman” had to contend with a ruling previously issued by the state’s Supreme Court. The court case was initiated in October 1835 when William Fogg, a black property owner and taxpayer of Luzerne County, was denied the right to vote by county elections inspector Hiram Hobbes. Though the county court of appeals ruled in favor of Fogg, claiming that he qualified under the state’s current constitution as a “freeman” and, therefore, could not be denied his right to vote, the decision was overturned by the state supreme court. The court’s decision, offered by Justice Gibson, claimed that being free from bondage did not automatically make an individual a “freeman”. Rather, the status of freeman included specific rights and responsibilities that being a “free man” did not. Though Justice Gibson did not address the fact that many blacks across the state owned property and paid taxes, his decision provided ammunition for the white supremacists fighting to end black suffrage.⁶⁵

The move to insert “white” as a requirement for voting was reinforced in early October by the election results of Bucks County. There, Anti-Masons, thought to be associated with the abolitionist movement, won numerous narrow victories over their Democratic challengers. One Democrat, Dr. F. L. Boder, lost his bid for county auditor

⁶³ Ibid., 287.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 287.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 294; Smith, “The Pittsburgh Memorial: A Forgotten Document of Pittsburgh History,”

by just two votes. Citizens angered by these results instantly blamed the county's thirty-nine black voters. The result was a petition by a number of white citizens in the county to the convention for black disenfranchisement. This petition, shared with the convention by John Sterigere on November 30, brought the debate over black voting rights back to the floor. By January 1838 enough delegates had been convinced that black disenfranchisement was necessary and the motion to add "white" to the state constitution passed in a seventy-seven to forty-five vote. The Allegheny County delegates split on the issue of black disenfranchisement, reflecting a thin margin of support for the new constitution throughout the Pittsburgh region. Ultimately, the new constitution was ratified by just fewer than one thousand votes across the state.⁶⁶

Though the move to disenfranchise blacks throughout the state came at the same time as gradual emancipation was eliminating the institution of slavery, and abolitionist voices were growing louder across the northern states, the trend was not completely unexpected. The ratification of Pennsylvania's new constitution in November 1838 completed the process of disenfranchising blacks, in one form or another, in every state south of New England. The process of disenfranchising African Americans across much of the North should be seen as a result of, not in contradiction to, the growing free black population that resulted from gradual emancipation and the growing intensity of

⁶⁶ Agg, *Proceedings and Debates of the Convention of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to propose Amendments to the Constitution, commenced and held at Harrisburg, on the Second Day of May, 1837*, vol. 6, 46; *The Liberator*, November 10, 17, 1837; Wood, "'A Sacrifice on the Alter of Slavery': Doughface Politics and Black Disenfranchisement in Pennsylvania, 1837-1838," 84, 89, 101; Smith, "The End of Black Voting Rights in Pennsylvania: African Americans and the Constitutional Convention of 1837-1838," 289, 294; Smith, "The Pittsburgh Memorial: A Forgotten Document of Pittsburgh History," 107-108; Pennsylvania Constitution of 1838, article III, section 1 (superseded 1874). Eric Ledell Smith calculates the ratification of the new constitution as a margin of 113,971:112,759 statewide. The margin of victory in Allegheny County was 5,049:4,460.

abolitionist rhetoric.⁶⁷ Black suffrage was, as historian Nicholas Wood notes, “a dangerous example to southern slaves, and disenfranchisement helped reconcile the juxtaposition of black slavery and black freedom within the Union.”⁶⁸

The initial attempt by white supremacists to disenfranchise blacks on the grounds of racial inferiority was met with contempt by the majority of moderate delegates at the convention, as can be seen in the initial failed vote to insert “white” into the new constitution. It would take an appeal larger in scope to bring the majority of delegates around to the idea of eliminating black voting rights. The desire to keep peace with southern states proved to be the most effective means for white supremacists to ensure black disenfranchisement in the new constitution. Through a propaganda effort of their own, doughface politicians in both the North and South sought to connect black suffrage with radical abolitionism, southern resistance to the Underground Railroad, and Nat Turner’s recent slave revolt in Southampton County, Virginia. The campaign proved successful at both the national and state levels. Congress, which had been infected with sectional strife since its establishment, implemented gag rules preventing the discussion of slavery and emancipation that were being proposed by abolitionists. At the state level moderate politicians began to accept the disenfranchisement of African Americans as a critical step in preserving the union. Blacks in Pennsylvania, and those throughout the country, would only begin to see their voting rights restored with the Reconstruction Amendments after the Civil War.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Wood, “‘A Sacrifice on the Alter of Slavery’: Doughface Politics and Black Disenfranchisement in Pennsylvania, 1837-1838,” 75.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 75-76, 79, 81, 84-86, 96, 106; Smith, “The End of Black Voting Rights in Pennsylvania: African Americans and the Constitutional Convention of 1837-1838,” 282, 279.

The move to disenfranchise African Americans in the 1838 state constitution was not met by mere passivity on the parts of blacks. Rather, a mobilization was undertaken to protect the suffrage that had existed to some extent in the previous constitutions. Word of potential disenfranchisement reached the Pittsburgh region where, on June 13, a meeting of prominent black citizens was held. The drafting of the *Pittsburgh Memorial*, discussed in Chapter One, was the direct result of this meeting.⁷⁰ This petition, according to one scholar, “appealed to both logic and the moral conscious of the convention delegates.”⁷¹ The memorial first sought to argue that the definition of “freeman” and, therefore, suffrage included qualified African Americans. Second, the memorial catalogued the property owned and taxes paid by numerous citizens of the Pittsburgh black community.⁷²

The *Pittsburgh Memorial* was introduced to the convention by Allegheny County Democratic delegate Harmar Denny on July 8. It was then moved that the memorial be referred to the conventional subcommittee on Article III, concerning voting and elections, which resulted in another debate over the rights of African Americans. Charles Ingersoll, of Philadelphia, opposed referring the memorial to committee, arguing instead that black citizens should be heard only through their elected representatives. Ingersoll’s opinion was challenged by Walter Forward of Pittsburgh, who argued that all citizens, regardless of race, had a right to petition the government for redress of grievances. John Sterigere

⁷⁰ Ibid., 288; Smith, “The Pittsburgh Memorial: A Forgotten Document of Pittsburgh History,” 109-111.

⁷¹ Smith, “The End of Black Voting Rights in Pennsylvania: African Americans and the Constitutional Convention of 1837-1838,” 288.

⁷² Ibid., 288; Smith, “The Pittsburgh Memorial: A Forgotten Document of Pittsburgh History,” 106, 109-111.

joined Ingersoll's position, questioning why less than one hundred African Americans had signed the document when Pittsburgh's black population rested in the thousands.⁷³

After some debate Sterigere and Ingersoll won out. The convention voted eighty-five to sixteen to table the memorial and temporarily end the discussion on black suffrage. Fear of further sectional divide, as previously discussed, motivated many Pennsylvanian's to resist the *Pittsburgh Memorial* and support black disenfranchisement. James Buchanan, Democratic Senator from Pennsylvania, felt the uneasiness at the nation's capital and wrote the mayor of Pittsburgh, Jonas R. McClintock, condemning the action of the region's black community.⁷⁴

Though the *Pittsburgh Memorial* helped to temporarily suspend the elimination of black suffrage in the commonwealth, it could not prevent the convention from voting in early 1838 to add "white" to the enumeration of voting requirements in the new constitution. This disenfranchisement sent shockwaves throughout Pennsylvania's black community. Many Pittsburgh citizens, black and white, could hardly believe how backwards the political culture of the convention had been. The result of disenfranchisement, however, did not silence the voices of black Pennsylvanians as some of the delegates had hoped. Rather, the elimination of black suffrage encouraged more and more blacks to take the fight for their political rights into their own hands. George Vashon, John Vashon's son, emerged as a defender of black rights and met with other

⁷³ Agg, *Proceedings and Debates of the Convention of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to propose Amendments to the Constitution, commenced and held at Harrisburg, on the Second Day of May, 1837*, vol. 3, 683, 685-701; Smith, "The End of Black Voting Rights in Pennsylvania: African Americans and the Constitutional Convention of 1837-1838," 288-289.

⁷⁴ Agg, *Proceedings and Debates of the Convention of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to propose Amendments to the Constitution, commenced and held at Harrisburg, on the Second Day of May, 1837*, vol. 3, 700; Wood, "'A Sacrifice on the Alter of Slavery': Doughface Politics and Black Disenfranchisement in Pennsylvania, 1837-1838," 87.

leaders, including John Peck, at what was considered the first state convention of African Americans in 1841.⁷⁵

The disenfranchisement of African Americans in the state constitution of 1838 preceded a decade in which the debate around slavery would take center stage across the nation. The annexation of Texas, the acquisition of vast territories from Mexico, and the desire to construct a transcontinental railroad each contributed to the growing tensions between North and South. The political results of these events, and the debates that followed, was the Compromise of 1850. Eventually passed as a series of laws sponsored by Illinois Senator Stephen Douglas, the compromise attempted to settle the burning questions of the previous decade. A new fugitive slave act represented “the political fulcrum on which the entire 1850 compromise turned...”⁷⁶ It also directly affected the growing sectional divide within the nation and further challenged the rights of free African Americans.

President Millard Fillmore signed the act into law on September 18, 1850. The new Fugitive Slave Act sought to accomplish two goals. First, the law would update, and improve what white southerners viewed as the inadequacies of the original Fugitive Slave Act of 1793. Additionally, the new law would set in place a procedure, overseen by the federal government, to help slave-owners retrieve their fugitives. Slave-catchers now needed only to provide an affidavit to a federal marshal in order to retrieve an accused fugitive. The fugitive was denied a trial by jury and was given no opportunity to provide a defense. In an attempt to halt the effects of the Underground Railroad, anyone assisting

⁷⁵ *Pittsburgh Gazette*, January 25, 1838; Smith, “The End of Black Voting Rights in Pennsylvania: African Americans and the Constitutional Convention of 1837-1838,” 288-289, 295-296. The convention of Pittsburgh area blacks met in Pittsburgh’s Bethel A.M.E. Church, located at that time on Front Street, from August 23-25, 1841.

⁷⁶ Blackett, *Making Freedom: The Underground Railroad and the Politics of Slavery*, 32.

a fugitive, white or black, would be subject to imprisonment and a fine. Though the law initially drew harsh criticism from many northerners, most were willing to accept the law as part of a larger compromise for restoring peace and sectional harmony. By the summer of 1851, most opposition to the law had faded.⁷⁷

The enactment of the Fugitive Slave Law, and the hopes for preserving the union, brought forth a wave of political hostility towards free African Americans living in Pennsylvania. The influence of the Whig Party began to wane across the state throughout the decade as new, smaller parties developed and chiseled away the voter base. The result was a domination of the state government by the Democratic Party. Political pressures intensified after September 11, 1851 when the attempted retrieval of four fugitive slaves in Christiana, Pennsylvania by a posse of slave-catchers and a U.S. marshal resulted in a standoff and the death of the slaves' owner. Though the fugitives escaped to Canada soon after the incident, and the attempted prosecution of those involved by the district attorney resulted in acquittals, many Pennsylvanians worried of renewed sectional hostilities with their southern neighbors.⁷⁸

The backlash brought on by abolitionists following the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, coupled with the declining influence of the Whig Party and concerns over national unity, helped Democrats gain a stronghold over the state government. Governor William F. Johnston, a Whig who served as Pennsylvania's chief executive from 1848 to 1852, strongly opposed the act and a push by the legislature to repeal parts of the 1847

⁷⁷ Ibid., 36, 42; Stanley W. Campbell, *The Slave Catchers: Enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, 1850-1860* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1970), 15, 23-24, 49, 55, 63-66; Holman Hamilton, *Prologue to Conflict: The Crisis and Compromise of 1850* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 166-169. The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 would rally many northerners against slavery who had initially accepted the Compromise of 1850.

⁷⁸ Andrew K. Diemer, *The Politics of Black Citizenship: Free Americans in the Mid-Atlantic Borderland, 1817-1863* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2016), 148-149, 150-151.

personal liberty law. The law, imposing barriers for the recapture of fugitive slaves, was in question for seeming to place an undue burden on slave-catchers. By the 1850s, many in Pennsylvania believed that portions of the law should be repealed, specifically the restriction of using state prisons for holding fugitives. The debate proved disastrous for Governor Johnston who, in 1851, was defeated by challenging Democrat William Bigler on charges of being an anti-unionist abolitionist.⁷⁹ The new governor won his election on a platform to repeal of state's personal liberty law and under a belief that opposing the Compromise of 1850 "endangered the hostile feelings between the different sections of the Union."⁸⁰ Though Bigler was unable to oversee the repeal of the personal liberty law, he nevertheless openly supported the Kansas-Nebraska Act and pardoned a slave-catcher and kidnapper from Philadelphia.⁸¹

The judicial system, particularly the federal courts, did little to protect African Americans' rights as they were slowly stripped away in the decades leading to civil war. Two cases from the Pittsburgh region help to demonstrate how hopeless it could seem for African Americans who fought to resist both slavery and kidnapping. The first case involved the capture of fugitive Daniel Lockhart from Virginia. While living in the Pittsburgh region in April 1847, Lockhart was attack by a Mr. Logan and two Virginia constables, who were seeking to capture the alleged fugitive. Lockhart was soon rescued by a large crowd and rushed to Canada while Logan was charged with the "tumultuous and riotous arrest of a slave."⁸² The case went before District Judge Walter H. Lowrie, a

⁷⁹ Ibid., 149-150; Blackett, *Making Freedom: The Underground Railroad and the Politics of Slavery*, 34-35, 38, 51-52, 62.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 52.

⁸¹ Ibid., 51, 62; Diemer, *The Politics of Black Citizenship: Free Americans in the Mid-Atlantic Borderland, 1817-1863*, 159.

⁸² Blackett, "'...Freedom, or the Martyr's Grave,'" 121.

Democrat and proponent of colonization. Lowrie dismissed the charges against Logan, claiming that protection of property rights was critical in performing “the covenant of union.”⁸³

A second case, presided over by Supreme Court Justice Robert C. Grier serving on the U.S. Circuit Court in Pittsburgh, similarly favored a slave owner. After failing to recapture a fugitive slave in Indiana County, northeast of Pittsburgh, Garrett Van Metre sued Dr. Robert Mitchell, a farmer suspected of assisting the fugitive in November 1847. Grier’s ruling ultimately favored Van Metre and argued that no state law could supersede federal law in regards to individual property rights.⁸⁴ With a growing hostility from the state legislature and a federal court system of “pledged minions of the slave power,” black and white abolitionists began to develop their own unique methods for protecting free blacks and assisting fugitive slaves.⁸⁵

These political and legal battles waged over slavery and the rights of free African Americans across Pennsylvania reflected a nation deeply divided. Northerners did not stand ambivalent to the peculiar institution just as the elimination of slavery within the state’s borders did not bring about racial harmony. Rather, a growing free black population worried those who wielded political power. As a result, gradual emancipation was coupled with black disenfranchisement and the removal of legal protections for African Americans accused of being fugitive slaves. Though the state legislature took steps to prevent southern slaveholders from encroaching on the lives of ordinary white Pennsylvanians, as can be seen in the various personal liberty laws, black participation in politics was never taken seriously by most whites within the state.

⁸³ Ibid., 121-122; *Pittsburgh Daily Morning Post*, April 17, 19, 20, 1847.

⁸⁴ Blackett, “...Freedom, or the Martyr’s Grave,” 122-124.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 121; *The North Star*, February 18, 1848.

The divisions over slavery and black rights did not simply reflect a sectional crisis between the North and South. White supremacists in Pennsylvania, the subject of the next chapter, supported slavery where it already existed as a way to justify the restrictions placed on free African Americans at home. Opposing this group stood black and white abolitionists who voiced concerns over slavery's existence in the South and fought to protect the legal rights of both free blacks and fugitive slaves. These groups would come to define antebellum Pittsburgh, and the nation at large, in the years leading up to the Civil War, when answers would be offered regarding questions over slavery, citizenship, and the rights of African Americans.

CHAPTER III

WHITE SUPREMACISTS

The complexities of the slavery debate reflect those of the first group examined in this research: white supremacists. To understand this particular group some clarifications must be made. The first common factor that connects the majority of white supremacists in this context is the general acceptance, on some level, of slavery. This is not to say that all white supremacists were slaveholders. On the contrary, many individuals under this label only supported the peculiar institution at a distance. White supremacists in the North, for example, supported slavery in the South while, at the same time, promoted gradual emancipation at home. A second factor this group shares is the general disapproval of legislation offering legal or political rights to free African Americans. As presented in the previous chapter, a unique correlation developed in Pennsylvania during the antebellum period that saw the elimination of slavery coupled with the active hostility towards the free black population. It is with this correlation in mind that one can begin to investigate the white supremacists of antebellum Pennsylvania.⁸⁶

With the institution of slavery quickly disappearing across the state, and the abolitionist movement growing more powerful, it forces one to ask: Why did so many individuals support, even indirectly, the institution of slavery and prove so hostile to the rights of a growing free black population? The answer is as complex as the question itself. Although white supremacists did share a general acceptance of black inferiority, this common denominator manifested itself through individuals in many different ways

⁸⁶ Smith, "The End of Black Voting Rights in Pennsylvania: African Americans and the Constitutional Convention of 1837-1838," 279, 282; Wood, "'A Sacrifice on the Alter of Slavery': Doughface Politics and Black Disenfranchisement in Pennsylvania, 1837-1838," 79-80; Meyers, "The Early Antislavery Agency System in Pennsylvania 1833-1837," 85.

and for unique reasons. This chapter will attempt to analyze some of the features that played a role in shaping the white supremacist mindset of antebellum Pittsburgh. Through this analysis, a more concrete answer can be attempted to the question previously posed. Additionally, a more complete side of the slavery debate in Pittsburgh can be recreated.

Economic Factors

Over the course of the early nineteenth century, modernization in the form of new technologies, such as the steamboat, as well as industrialization, would come to define northern cities like Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, and New York. The South, in turn, benefitted from the development of the cotton gin and remained deeply rooted in the slave labor system that was reinforced by the profitability of the growing cotton trade. These different modes of economic development came to compliment, rather than contradict, one another. Cotton could be shipped to northern cities, through the financial backing of investors, where clothing and other cloth materials could be produced for a global market. The heavy focus on cotton production by southern plantation owners would subsequently create a market for northern farmers and craftsmen to sell their products. The element of economic dependence between the North and South created by these modes of market development would come to provide one of the most important elements supporting white supremacist ideology.⁸⁷ This economic dependence would be particularly strong in cities of the lower North, like Pittsburgh, where, as Eric Foner

⁸⁷ Reiser, "Pittsburgh, The Hub of Western Commerce, 1800-1850," 130; Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), xvii-xxiv, 222-224, 229-233.

points out, individuals were inclined to take “a more conciliatory attitude towards slavery...”⁸⁸

Economic incentives are often a driving force for individual and collective decision-making and antebellum Pittsburgh proved to be no exception. White supremacist ideology centered on economic factors that developed out of the conditions of pre-Civil War Pittsburgh. The city itself began to attract western settlers almost immediately after its founding by the British during the French and Indian War. “Location alone would have made Pittsburgh a significant city,” notes one scholar, “for standing where the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers meet to create the Ohio, she formed the point of departure for the westward movement into the Ohio and Mississippi valleys.”⁸⁹ Known as the “Gateway to the West,” Pittsburgh’s geographic location and natural resources would come to provide not only a strategic city for entrepreneurs, but a critical launching point for the country’s further expansion west.⁹⁰

The city’s location along the Ohio River acted as a magnet, drawing in immigrants and settlers from all walks of life. Within half a century, from 1800 to 1850, Pittsburgh’s population expanded from two thousand four hundred people to over forty-six thousand. Technological advances, particularly the steamboat, generated significant economic growth for the Pittsburgh area and connected the city to trading centers from Louisville and Nashville to St. Louis and New Orleans. This western market thrived, in part, due to the high demand of manufactured products and natural resources that Pittsburgh could supply. In addition, the presence of the Appalachian Mountains as a

⁸⁸ Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 186.

⁸⁹ Frederick Moore Binder, *Coal Age Empire: Pennsylvania Coal and Its Utilization to 1860* (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1974), 42.

⁹⁰ Switala, *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania*, 87.

natural divide kept markets to the east limited, at least until 1852 when the Pennsylvania Railroad reached the city.⁹¹ As a result, Philadelphia was viewed more as a competitor than as a partner and Pittsburgh became “more united to the Mississippi Valley and benefitted substantially by the connection.”⁹²

Aside from Pittsburgh’s strategic location along critical waterways leading west, the area also possessed a vast array of natural resources that contributed significantly to the city’s rise as an economic power. Residents were aware of the power and influence bestowed upon the area by this good fortune and sought to take every advantage possible. One observer noted that settlers would not be attracted to just any small town along the Ohio River but will “pass them by, whatever other advantages they possess, to those places that have the source of all industrial power.”⁹³ Thanks to the region’s rich coal and iron-ore deposits, Pittsburgh would become that industrial power.

A variety of products from the Pittsburgh area was sent by steamship to western and southern markets but perhaps none had such a direct impact as coal. Bituminous coal and iron-ore were mined throughout western Pennsylvania and sent, via the area’s vast water networks, to the city of Pittsburgh where they was used in the manufacture of tools, nails, and other products or simply loaded onto steamships and sent down the Ohio River. The city itself consumed massive amounts of coal in the first half of the nineteenth century to meet the growing demands of western and southern consumers. According to one report, the amount of coal consumed in Pittsburgh rose from one million bushels in

⁹¹ Reiser, “Pittsburgh, The Hub of Western Commerce, 1800-1850,” 121-123, 127-129, 131; Binder, *Coal Age Empire: Pennsylvania Coal and Its Utilization to 1860*, 22, 45; *Daily Advocate and Advertiser*, May 18, 1838.

⁹² Reiser, “Pittsburgh, The Hub of Western Commerce, 1800-1850,” 121.

⁹³ *Pittsburgh Gazette*, January 7, 1857; Binder, *Coal Age Empire: Pennsylvania Coal and Its Utilization to 1860*, 44.

1825 to nearly two hundred fifty thousand tons by 1833. The number would rise to nearly six hundred eighty-thousand tons by 1846.⁹⁴

The thriving coal industry helped to promote other businesses within the city as well, creating a diverse market with more consumable products to ship to southern markets. By 1817, for example, the city had three steam engine plants that produced parts for making the transports that would carry coal and other manufactured products along the river routes. In addition, the city boasted glass works, paper mills, salt and iron works, grist mills, breweries and boat yards. Merchants and craftsmen also set up shops throughout the city and farmers from the countryside, travelling to Pittsburgh to sell their produce, often returned home with manufactured clothing or furniture. As early as 1802 that city had no less than forty-six different classes of master craftsmen, producing items that ranged from farming tools, glass, guns, and clothing.⁹⁵

The vast market that was developing in Pittsburgh by the early 1800s began supplying the demands of western and southern commercial centers shortly after the War of 1812. As one historian notes, it was during these years that the Monongahela, Ohio, and Mississippi Rivers would form the “main artery of the Pennsylvania bituminous coal trade.”⁹⁶ This trade became so critical to the lives of ordinary Pittsburgh residents that the *Pittsburgh Gazette* began to publish regular steamship news and market prices in 1818. Though the city faced some competition in regards to coal supplies from areas of Ohio and Kentucky, Pittsburgh dominated the trade well into the 1860s.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Ibid., 42

⁹⁵ Ibid., 42-43; Reiser, “Pittsburgh, The Hub of Western Commerce, 1800-1850,” 121, 123, 126.

⁹⁶ Binder, *Coal Age Empire: Pennsylvania Coal and Its Utilization to 1860*, 154.

⁹⁷ Reiser, “Pittsburgh, The Hub of Western Commerce, 1800-1850,” 129; Binder, *Coal Age Empire: Pennsylvania Coal and Its Utilization to 1860*, 45-46.

The economic bonds between Pittsburgh merchants and their southern markets would not be easily broken, especially over such contentious issues as slavery. Merchants and laborers who made their livelihoods from the growing demands of manufactured products in southern cities and plantations were more passive in regards to the South's peculiar institution and chose not to risk damaging economic ties. Pittsburgh's southern market expanded substantially throughout the 1830s and 1840s. New Orleans alone received less than five thousand tons of Pittsburgh coal in 1835 but by 1860 was receiving over one hundred sixty-eight thousand tons. Low tide on one day in 1818, according to the *Pittsburgh Gazette*, saw no less than thirty boats waiting to leave Pittsburgh with more than \$3 million dollars' worth of goods for the city's western and southern markets. This evidence suggests a unique development for antebellum Pittsburgh. As abolitionist voices grew louder across the state, and as sectional strife continued to flare up in the nation's capital, Pittsburgh merchants, along with laborers, farmers, and craftsmen, grew more connected to their southern countrymen by way of their economic developments. These bonds would leave many in Pittsburgh sympathetic to the slave owner's plight and reinforced an era of doughface politics that reflected support for southern slavery and aggression towards the rights of free blacks throughout the state.⁹⁸

The effect of economic factors on individual responses to slavery as an institution can be viewed in no better light than with Pennsylvania Quakers. The Society of Friends had been particularly active in the eastern part the state, and controlled much of its politics, through the first half of the eighteenth century. The Pennsylvania Quakers are

⁹⁸ Ibid., 154-155; Reiser, "Pittsburgh, The Hub of Western Commerce, 1800-1850," 127; *Pittsburgh Gazette*, December 11, 1818.

often viewed as some of the earliest abolitionists due, in part, to their strict religious practices. Though Quakers were often found as leading advocates of emancipation, and many assisted fugitive slaves as part of the Underground Railroad, their story is a bit more complicated. Many Quakers owned slaves in Pennsylvania and manumission came not only out of a moral sympathy with the enslaved, but from more self-serving and practical reasons.

The political domination of Quakers in Pennsylvania through much of the 1750s was coupled with a general acceptance of slave ownership amongst the Society of Friends. Indeed, most of these political leaders were wealthy and profited from owning slaves. This is not to say that slavery amongst the Society of Friends was comparable to the economic incentives of slaveholding in the South. Most Quakers that did own slaves kept only a handful to work in mills, on docks, or in households. Quakers were also more inclined than southerners to educate their slaves and often viewed the institution through a paternal lens.⁹⁹

Acceptance of slavery throughout the Society of Friends was coupled with a deeply-rooted sense of racism that the group vigorously attempted to justify. Many argued that equality before God did not reflect any kind of political, economic, or social equality on earth. So long as slaves were treated “appropriately,” the Society of Friends was committing no mortal sins. Quakers were also adamant about restricting blacks, free or enslaved from joining their ranks.¹⁰⁰ As one scholar notes, Quaker meetings “failed to

⁹⁹ Jean R. Soderlund, *Quakers and Slavery: A Divided Spirit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 4-7, 12, 61-62; Beverly C. Tomek, *Colonization and Its Discontents: Emancipation, Emigration, and Antislavery in Antebellum Pennsylvania* (New York: NYU Press, 2010), chapter 1, EBSCOhost.

¹⁰⁰Soderlund, *Quakers and Slavery: A Divided Spirit*, 18.

welcome the slaves as full-fledged members of their religion.”¹⁰¹ The group would not permit African Americans into their meetings until the 1790s.¹⁰²

By the mid-1750s, the Society of Friends faced what must have seemed like insurmountable obstacles. Fighting had broken out between colonists, both British and French, and various native tribes and political challenges within the colony threatened the Quakers’ control. Viewing the war as God’s punishment, many Quakers began to blame their acceptance of the peculiar institution for their fate. *An Epistle of Caution and Advice, Concerning the Buying and Keeping of Slaves*, presented at the 1755 annual meeting of Friends in Philadelphia, informed Quakers that blacks were often subjected to slavery through war and theft.¹⁰³ Additionally, holding slaves for personal (i.e. economic) gains demonstrated that they were not guided by God and meant that “their hearts [were] not sufficiently redeemed by the world.”¹⁰⁴

What influence this epistle or the French and Indian War had on the Quakers’ views towards slavery is unclear, and historians cannot clearly agree on the factors leading to the Society of Friends’ ultimate decision to eliminate slavery from within their ranks by 1776. Although some Quakers would go on to assist fugitive slaves and provide support for the abolitionist cause, most did little to impact the institution outside of their own society. These factors present a complicated image of the Society of Friends. As long as their society retained political and economic power throughout the colony, most remained content with slavery. As non-Quakers began to challenge the Society’s power, however, they turned on the peculiar institution as a kind of scapegoat. It seems unlikely

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 12.

¹⁰² Ibid., 13.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 15, 27, 29-30, 35-36, 40, 50-52.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 27.

that most Quakers during the antebellum period would lash out against slavery in the South, as their religious piety and anti-militarism would urge them to avoid sectional hostilities or civil war.¹⁰⁵

Although trade networks that developed between western Pennsylvania and the Ohio and Mississippi River valleys, as well as conservative religious practices on the part of Quakers, encouraged many white residents to take a more conformist, and conciliatory, approach to southern slavery, another economic motivator was pushing some individuals to favor the peculiar institution and the federal laws that protected it. The kidnapping of African Americans across the North drew much public resentment, and helped to solidify, in state legal codes, the various personal liberty laws discussed in Chapter Two, which were seen as a defense from a powerful slaveocracy in the South. This backlash, however, did not prevent some individuals from participating in, and profiting from, the sale of alleged fugitives who had been abducted in northern communities and sold in the South. Though clear statistics on how many people participated in kidnapping, whether directly or indirectly, is impossible to calculate, it is clear that the illegal business flourished across the antebellum North.

The eradication of slavery in northern states and slaveholders' hostilities towards the Underground Railroad added to the growing crime wave as the free black population expanded.¹⁰⁶ The end of northern slavery, as Eric Foner notes, was coupled with the "kidnapping of free blacks, especially children, for sale in the South."¹⁰⁷ The combination of a growing free black population, white Americans fearful of losing political sovereignty, and demands from southern slaveholders for the return of their

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 4-5, 13, 52.

¹⁰⁶ Nash and Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees*, 196-198.

¹⁰⁷ Foner, *Gateway to Freedom*, 50.

runaway slaves created the circumstances that allowed kidnapping ventures to thrive. After arriving in New York City in September 1838, fugitive slave Frederick Douglass recalled how “slavecatchers roamed the city’s streets,” leaving the young man unsure of whom to trust.¹⁰⁸ Pennsylvania proved no less dangerous to African Americans. An interracial gang from Delaware was notorious for luring blacks from the Philadelphia area and Pittsburgh abolitionists fought off numerous kidnapping attempts discussed in Chapter Two.¹⁰⁹ “Our state is infested with them,” warned the *Pennsylvania Freeman* in an article entitled “Kidnappers” in 1844.¹¹⁰

The various personal liberty laws passed in Pennsylvania, and their attempts to address the issue of kidnapping, represent a society facing a severe crisis. Federal legislation regarding fugitive slaves, notably the Fugitive Slave Acts of 1793 and 1850, were particularly biased towards the slavecatcher and left no legal protections for an African American falsely accused of being a runaway slave. All three of Pennsylvania’s personal liberty laws, including those from 1788, 1826, and 1847, declared kidnapping a crime and sought to require more evidence on the part of the slavecatcher before an African American could be taken. Though these laws did provide some legal support for accused blacks, they could not prevent the profitability of kidnapping for some.¹¹¹

Whether it be through trade in commodities, or trade in human lives, the complex economic connections that linked the North and South encouraged many individuals to

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹¹⁰ *Pennsylvania Freeman*, May 9, 1844; Foner, *Gateway to Freedom*, 50.

¹¹¹ Mitchell and Flanders, “An Act to Explain and Amend and Act Entitled ‘An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery’,” 52-56; *Acts of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, passed at a session which was begun and held at the Borough of Harrisburg, on Tuesday the seventh day of December, in the year of our Lord One Thousand Eight Hundred and Twenty-Four...*, 150-152; “An Act to prevent kidnapping, preserve the public peace, prohibit the exercise of certain powers heretofore exercised by judges, justices of the peace, aldermen and jailors in this commonwealth, and to repeal certain slave laws,” 206-297; Foner, *Gateway to Freedom*, 51.

support, if only indirectly, slavery. Even Quakers, one of the earliest groups in the state to condemn the institution, had a difficult time distancing themselves from the profitability of owning slaves. Actively attacking slavery would prove ruinous to Pittsburgh merchants, most of who relied on southern communities of slaveholders as consumers. These economic incentives proved challenging for abolitionist groups to overcome, as many Pennsylvanians relied on trade to feed their families. Over time, white supremacists driven by economic factors began to grow hostile to the increasing number of free black communities within the state. Fearing backlash from the South, and loss of political influence, many found an escape through the efforts of colonization, a solution that promised to remove free blacks from the North while maintaining healthy economic relationships with communities below the Mason-Dixon Line.

Colonization Efforts

The colonization movement is as complicated as the white supremacists themselves and developed out of what one scholar refers to as “a complex mixture of selfish and humanitarian reasons.”¹¹² The mission was undertaken by a vast array of individuals, each with their own unique purposes. Quakers and various religious denominations saw the benefit of spreading Christianity in Africa. Others had given up on efforts to achieve full citizenship for free blacks and saw colonization as a potential escape from a second-class existence. Economic prosperity, brought on by improved relations with the South, also encouraged individuals to support colonization. Although the reasons for supporting colonization were diverse they will be grouped into two broad

¹¹² Tomek, *Colonization and Its Discontents: Emancipation, Emigration, and Antislavery in Antebellum Pennsylvania*, chapter 2, EBSCOhost.

categories for the purpose of this research: humanitarian concerns and racist sentiments.¹¹³

The humanitarian argument for colonization rested primarily on the desire to relocate all African Americans outside of the United States. The growing free black population posed a threat to white Pennsylvanians who had dominated the political landscape since colonial times. Though this fear was subsided by the disenfranchisement of free blacks in 1838 many white Americans did not intend to live in a racially-diverse country.¹¹⁴ As Philadelphia representative Benjamin Martin indicated at the state's constitutional convention, allowing free blacks to live and participate in a society where they would be considered second-class citizens would "prove ruinous" for all involved.¹¹⁵ Martin's statement rang true in the minds of many individuals who supported colonization. Elliot Cresson, a Philadelphia merchant and philanthropist, argued that "antislavery and black uplift" could be accomplished only through effective colonization measures. If African Americans remained in the United States, Cresson believed, they would never overcome their social inferiority to whites.¹¹⁶

As early as 1828 Mathew Carey, an Irish-born editor and publisher linked colonization, and the subsequent black uplift, to improved economic conditions for the United States. Carey, borrowing arguments from Henry Clay, maintained that it would be more efficient to relocate blacks outside of the United States than make any attempts at

¹¹³ Ibid., chapters 2, 6, EBSCOhost.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., chapter 1, EBSCOhost; Foner, *Gateway to Freedom*, 52; Mathew Carey, *Letters on the Colonization Society: And Its Probable Results...* (Philadelphia: E.G. Dorsey, 1838), 12-13. Carey stresses how the population of whites in slave states increased 80 percent since 1790 while the black population increased nearly 112 percent in the same time period.

¹¹⁵ Agg, *Proceedings and Debates of the Convention of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to propose Amendments to the Constitution, commenced and held at Harrisburg, on the Second Day of May, 1837*, vol. 2, 477-478.

¹¹⁶ Tomek, *Colonization and Its Discontents: Emancipation, Emigration, and Antislavery in Antebellum Pennsylvania*, chapters 2, 4, EBSCOhost.

trying to integrate them at home. Though much of the editor's work centered on promoting assimilation of European immigrants to American society and pushed for full-scale industrialization, he saw no place in American's future for African Americans. As one scholar writes, abolishing slavery nationwide and relocating the entire black population would be a peaceful way of "ridding the nation of an outdated system of production."¹¹⁷ The purpose of the arguments used by Clay and Carey for the Colonization Society were twofold: recruit white support for colonization efforts and convince blacks that their best chance of success lay outside of the United States.

In addition to arguments of economic improvement for whites and blacks alike, social stability within the United States, and humanitarian concerns, racist sentiments played a major role in the colonization movement. Historian Beverly Tomek notes how white supremacists believed that "their scheme would allow for the removal of a lazy and criminal population, but they also emphasized that it would save the entire white race by preventing racial mixing and black retribution."¹¹⁸ Tomek's analysis reflects the debates of the state's constitutional convention of 1837-38 and the attitudes of many white supremacists regarding the free black population. Colonization provided the solution to what many white politicians saw as a divisive issue. Slavery would gradually be eradicated throughout the United States, some believed, as the entire black population was being simultaneously relocated to Haiti or Liberia. To men like Henry Clay and Mathew Carey, this was the best chance for preserving the nation.

Plans for colonization were attempted as early as the 1810s, including an effort by Philadelphia Quaker John Parish to grant homesteads to free blacks from the Louisiana

¹¹⁷ Ibid., chapter 3, EBSCOhost.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., chapter 2, EBSCOhost.

Purchase, but nation-wide coordination did not begin until the founding of the American Colonization Society (ACS) in 1816. The ACS grew in popularity, particularly among white Americans, throughout the 1820s and 1830s, with Pennsylvania forming its own chapter in 1826. In its first year of operations the Pennsylvania Colonization Society raised \$6 hundred dollars for colonization efforts.

Aside from successful fundraising campaigns, the organization was able to lobby the state legislature for financial support. On at least two occasions, once in 1829 and again in 1852, the legislature allocated two thousand dollars for African American resettlement outside of the United States. The Pennsylvania Colonization Society relied partially on the racist tendencies of the state legislators to secure funding. In an 1828 memorial, the organization argued that free blacks, at only 20 percent of the state's population, made up nearly 40 percent of the convict population. These arguments proved successful not just in solidifying the belief of black inferiority in the capital but throughout the state at large. White residents began to feel more comfortable resisting the idea of a growing free black population in the country and accepted more limits on the rights of African Americans, particularly disenfranchisement. Although general support for black disenfranchisement failed to take a strong hold in Pittsburgh, support for the measure statewide outweighed the local community's efforts to protect what was considered an invaluable right of citizenship.¹¹⁹

Local chapters also developed across the state, usually as hybrid organizations that promoted both abolition and colonization. The goals of these "friends of colonization" were:

¹¹⁹ Ibid., chapters 1-2, 4, EBSCOhost; Burns, "Slavery in Western Pennsylvania," 209; Blackett, *Making Freedom: The Underground Railroad and the Politics of Slavery*, 66; Wood, "'A Sacrifice on the Alter of Slavery': Doughface Politics and Black Disenfranchisement in Pennsylvania, 1837-1838," 99-100.

- I. To rescue the free coloured people from the disqualifications, the degradation, and the proscription to which they are exposed in the United States.
- II. To place them in a country where they may enjoy the benefits of free government, with all the blessings which it brings in its train.
- III. To avert the dangers of a dreadful collision at a future day of the two castes, which must inevitably be objects of mutual jealousy to each other.
- IV. To spread civilization, sound morals, and true religion throughout the vast continent of Africa, at present sunk in the lowest and most hideous state of barbarism.
- V. And though last, not least, to afford slave owners who are conscientiously scrupulous about holding human beings in bondage, an asylum, to which they may send their manumitted slaves.¹²⁰

Many of the members of these local chapters were also members of the Pennsylvania Abolitionist Society or were Quakers. A local Pittsburgh chapter of the ACS was established in September of 1826 but was much more sympathetic to the immediate struggles of free blacks than the state or national organizations. Though the entire membership of the Pittsburgh Colonization Society was white men of prominence, many, including Reverend Charles Avery, Dr. Julius LeMoyne, and Reverend Robert Bruce were known abolitionists. Pittsburgh's chapter of the ACS survived only fifteen years due, in part, to the lack of financial support and from the backlash from local African American communities.¹²¹

The response of Pittsburgh blacks to the colonization effort was one of disappointment and resentment. John Vashon, working actively against the society in the region, questioned why blacks were expected to give up their homes in America for a foreign land. The efforts of Vashon were praised by William Lloyd Garrison who boasted in 1834 that the ACS was “effectually crippled” and that the “wall of partition which has

¹²⁰ Carey, *Letters on the Colonization Society: And Its Probable Results...*, 5-6.

¹²¹“Free At Last? Slavery in Pittsburgh in the 18th and 19th Centuries,” University Library System, University of Pittsburgh, Available from <http://exhibit.library.pitt.edu/freetatlast/abolition.html>, accessed January 20, 2019; Switala, *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania*, 88; Carey, *Letters on the Colonization Society: And Its Probable Results...*, 5-7.

so long protected slaveholders and slavery from the shafts of truth and the blows of justice” has been “overthrown.”¹²² The work of men like Vashon and Garrison did much to discourage blacks from supporting colonization. The First Annual Convention of the People of Color, which met in Philadelphia in 1831, condemned the ACS and demonstrated such disgust at colonization in general that considerations were made to buy land for free blacks in Canada. The convention decided against this proposal the following year, believing it to be a victory for the ACS.¹²³

Despite the efforts of individuals like Garrison and Vashon, colonization was supported by politicians and religious leaders. A resolution passed by the Pennsylvania General Assembly in 1829 urged Congress to support the ACS and directed the state’s senators and representatives to “aid the same by all proper and constitutional means.”¹²⁴ A meeting of the Pittsburgh Colonization Society commenced in May 1837 at the Third Presbyterian Church, with Allegheny County Judge Robert Grier serving as president and various reverends in attendance. Mathew Carey applauded the successful efforts of Judge Grier and the Pittsburgh Colonization Society in 1838 for the raising of thousands of dollars for the ACS. Part of the financial success in these fundraising efforts resulted from an emphasis on the benevolence of transporting African Americans outside of the United States, particularly after the founding of Liberia by the ACS in 1821.¹²⁵

¹²² William Lloyd Garrison to John B. Vashon, March 22, 1834, in “Letters of William Lloyd Garrison to John B. Vashon,” *The Journal of Negro History* 12, no. 1 (1927): 38.

¹²³ Smith, “The End of Black Voting Rights in Pennsylvania: African Americans and the Constitutional Convention of 1837-1838,” 285-286.

¹²⁴ Carey, *Letters on the Colonization Society: And Its Probable Results...*, 17.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 33; Tomek, *Colonization and Its Discontents: Emancipation, Emigration, and Antislavery in Antebellum Pennsylvania*, chapters 2, EBSCOhost; “Free At Last? Slavery in Pittsburgh in the 18th and 19th Centuries,” University Library System, University of Pittsburgh, Available from <http://exhibit.library.pitt.edu/freetatlast/abolition.html>, accessed January 20, 2019. It should be noted that Judge Robert Grier later became a justice on the U.S. Supreme Court and issued a pro-southern ruling in the Van Metre case involving a fugitive slave (see Chapter 2).

The West African coastal colony of Liberia, purchased in part by funds allocated from Congress, became, as many believed, the best hope for colonization's success. The newly acquired colony also fueled those promoting colonization, whether for humanitarian or racist reasons.¹²⁶ Mathew Carey argued that the presence of Liberia on the African coast curtailed the region's slave trade, promoted active emancipation efforts in the United States, and "commenced spreading the blessings of civilization, morals, and religion among the natives."¹²⁷ By promoting the perceived successes of the ACS's colony, whether for the United States, for black colonials, or for local Africans, Carey was able to secure continued funding and support from many white Americans.¹²⁸

Carey's praises for Liberia were supported by various accounts of the colony reported by visitors. One traveler to Liberia, a black man named Joseph Jones, spent nearly ten months in the colony, reporting on the productive soil, friendly relations with the natives, and a society that was generally "flourishing."¹²⁹ Jones's report was welcomed news to the Kentucky Colonization Society, the group who organized the expedition, and provided more evidence in support of colonization. The report of Liberia further expanded on what life in the colony was like, at least between 1833 and 1834. Jones counted five major settlements across the colony with Monrovia, the capital and primary seaport, containing the largest population at one hundred houses. Churches were also ample throughout the colony, with Monrovia claiming five. Farming proved to be the staple employment, with fields growing products that ranged from rice, coffee, and sugar cane. Jones also notes how schools were constructed for both boys and girls in the

¹²⁶ Foner, *Gateway to Freedom*, 53.

¹²⁷ Carey, *Letters on the Colonization Society: And Its Probable Results...*, xiii.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 1-3.

two largest towns though, admittedly, attendance was very low. The report proceeds with an advertisement for future settlers.¹³⁰ “Each head of a family is entitled to one town lot, and ten acres of ground within three miles of the town, or thirty acres over three miles.”¹³¹ Jones concludes his report with the following analysis: “I found the large majority well satisfied, and would not return to this country, if they could.”¹³²

Other reports further emphasized the successes of Liberia and sought to present the colony as the best option for African Americans struggling in the United States. A Captain Weaver who, like Jones, had witnessed the growth of Liberia wrote in 1831 that “He [the black man] is there, lord of the soil—all mankind are there his equals—the distinction of colour is there against the white man.”¹³³ Another report, this time attempting to recruit African Americans to the colony, highlighted “That the situation of the colonists in Liberia, is at least equal to that of the most fortunate and favoured of their class in this country.”¹³⁴ Though these types of promotions helped to convince some whites that colonization was the best choice for all regarding race relations, African Americans were not so easily swayed. In all, roughly ten thousand African Americans immigrated to Liberia prior to the Civil War, none of which are known to have come from the Pittsburgh region.¹³⁵

¹³⁰ Ibid., 1-4, 21-22.

¹³¹ Ibid., 4.

¹³² Ibid., 4.

¹³³ Ibid., 23.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 27.

¹³⁵ Tomek, *Colonization and Its Discontents: Emancipation, Emigration, and Antislavery in Antebellum Pennsylvania*, chapters 2, 3, EBSCOhost; “Free At Last? Slavery in Pittsburgh in the 18th and 19th Centuries,” University Library System, University of Pittsburgh, Available from <http://exhibit.library.pitt.edu/freetatlast/abolition.html>, accessed January 20, 2019. The Pennsylvania Colonization Society was active in at least one venture to colonize Liberia. The organization spent over \$3 thousand dollars transporting 128 African Americans from Norfolk, Virginia to the African colony via two separate voyages in 1830.

Although supporters of colonization were diverse in their arguments of why the United States needed to relocate its African American population the method, particularly after the founding of Liberia, united the group as a whole. A specific destination and reports of early successes were enough to convince many whites to support the cause, despite outright opposition on the part of African Americans in Pittsburgh. As time went on, and as slavery became more of a national crisis, supporters of colonization saw their role as essential to preserving the union. By simply removing the black population from the country, argued individuals like Mathew Carey, the United States could industrialize and expand geographically without hostilities arising over race relations. Though most Democrats in Pennsylvania sympathized with southern slaveholders early on, it became critical to many moderates, particularly by 1850, to abandon support for free blacks living in the country in order to protect the union.

Sectional Strife

The changing culture of the United States from the 1830s through 1860 had a profound impact on the debates regarding slavery. Northern industrialization and population growth, thanks in part to an increase in immigration, coupled with the expansion of the southern cotton market forced more and more Americans to view their own lives on a national scale. Westward expansion, particularly in the late 1840s after the conclusion of the Mexican-American War, presented new questions over just what a larger, and more diverse, United States would look like. All of these changes assisted in dividing the country along sectional lines, which in turn greatly alarmed those concerned with national unity. One result of this divide was a growing wave of proslavery ideology set on preserving the nation by protecting the South's peculiar institution.

Concerns intensified over slavery and the future of the United States throughout the 1830s and 1840s. Many whites in Pennsylvania, particularly Democrats, who had a long history of appeasing southern slaveholders, viewed abolitionism not as a moral crusade but rather as a threat to the nation's survival.¹³⁶ Cementing the Democrat Party as the opposition to the abolition movement in 1831, then-Senator James Buchanan wrote, "In my own state, we inscribe upon our party banners hostility to abolition. It is one of the cardinal principles of the Democratic Party: and many a hard battle have we fought to sustain this principle."¹³⁷ By connecting southern appeasement with security for the union, politicians like Buchanan were able to coerce many moderates to accept the South's peculiar institution.

A meeting held by concerned white citizens in Pittsburgh condemned the abolitionist movement for attempting to recklessly assert control over the rights of fellow Americans and firmly argued that the federal government had no authority to regulate slavery in the South.¹³⁸ The Abolitionists' propaganda was, according to those attending the meeting, "as capable of evil as effectual as the worst enemies of the Republic could wish; that it had sown wide the dragon teeth of discord, disunion, and civil war..."¹³⁹ The gathering also passed a resolution holding that southerners should "provide their own remedy in their own way" for dealing with slavery.¹⁴⁰

The approach taken by doughface politicians at the local and state levels reflected a growing trend in the nation's capital. The Missouri Compromise of 1820, coupled with

¹³⁶ Wood, "A Sacrifice on the Alter of Slavery": Doughface Politics and Black Disenfranchisement in Pennsylvania, 1837-1838," 106; Blackett, *Making Freedom: The Underground Railroad and the Politics of Slavery*, 62.

¹³⁷ Wood, "A Sacrifice on the Alter of Slavery": Doughface Politics and Black Disenfranchisement in Pennsylvania, 1837-1838," 83.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 81; Burns, "Slavery in Western Pennsylvania," 210.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 210.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 210.

an eight-year gag rule on the topic of slavery in the House of Representatives, initially sought to keep the slavery question away from Washington, D.C. Following the U.S. victory in the Mexican-American War, however, these measures began to appear obsolete and ill-equipped to handle new questions over western expansion. The late 1840s and 1850s saw a critical shift in the national government's policy towards slavery, from one of caution and moderation to one with a clear bias towards the pro-slavery movement.¹⁴¹

The first controversial measure passed by Congress after the Mexican-American War was the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Support for the law came out of a decades-long struggle between slaveholders, particularly from Border States like Maryland and Virginia, attempting to recover fugitives and antislavery northerners who sought to obstruct their efforts. The new act also replaced what was, by the 1840s, seen as a vague and outdated fugitive slave law from 1793. Though the Fugitive Slave Act did receive some backlash from northern abolitionists at the time, it was viewed by most as a necessary component of a larger compromise that would secure the union.¹⁴² “The North has not surrendered to the South, nor has the South made humiliating any concession to the North,” remarked Stephen Douglas, Democratic Senator from Illinois. “Each section has maintained its honor and its rights,” Douglas assured, “and both have met on the common ground of justice.”¹⁴³

¹⁴¹ David Brion Davis, “The Impact of British Abolitionism on American Sectionalism,” in Paul Finkelman and Donald R. Kennon, *In the Shadow of Freedom: The Politics of Slavery in the National Capital* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010), 20; David Zarefsky, “Debating Slavery By Proxy: The Texas Annexation Controversy,” in Finkelman and Kennon, *In the Shadow of Freedom*, 125; Stephen W. Stathis, *Landmark Debates in Congress: From the Declaration of Independence to the War in Iraq* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2008), 109-110.

¹⁴² Campbell, *The Slave Catchers: Enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, 1850-1860*, 6-8, 16-17, 63; Finkelman, “Introduction: A Disastrous Decade,” in Finkelman and Kennon, ed. *Congress and the Crisis of the 1850s* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2012), 12-14.

¹⁴³ Stathis, *Landmark Debates in Congress*, 129.

Support for the Fugitive Slave Act, and concerns over sectional tensions, led to sweeping victories for Democrats in Pennsylvania throughout the 1850s, particularly in southern and eastern counties. Conservative Whigs began to abandon antislavery rhetoric and focused instead on issues pertaining to internal improvements and tariffs as the Know-Nothings also began to wield influence in many districts. The relatively new Republican Party, on the other hand, held influence in northern and western counties (including Allegheny). The political divides forming between conservatives, moderates, abolitionists, and others ensured victory for a Democratic Party united behind the Fugitive Slave Act in 1852 and helped James Buchanan carry the state in the 1856 presidential election. Though Buchanan was politically unpopular with Pittsburgh residents, and the majority of Allegheny County citizens cast their vote for the Republican challenger, John C. Frémont, it was not enough to outweigh the influence of a united Democratic Party in 1856.¹⁴⁴

The passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 represented a nation committed to preserving the union rather than risking secession over the slavery question. This appeasement went a step further in 1854 with the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. This law angered many moderate northerners who had previously accepted the Fugitive Slave Act because of its removal of the precedent set by the Missouri Compromise. By offering to reopen western territories to the possible expansion of slavery under the claim of “popular sovereignty,” some doughface politicians hoped to further ease sectional unrest. Senator Stephen Douglas, a proponent of the act, was able to use his political skill

¹⁴⁴ Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, 202-203, 237-238, 254-255; Campbell, *The Slave Catchers: Enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, 1850-1860*, 65; “Presidential Election Results by County (1856),” Minnesota Population Center, National Historical Geographic Information System: Version 2.0, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 2011, Available from <http://www.nhgis.org/>, accessed 25 April 2019.

to gain enough support, including from President Franklin Peirce, to ensure its passage.¹⁴⁵

Pennsylvanians were too divided politically to mount a strong resistance to the Kansas-Nebraska Act at the time. Although a Whig convention in Harrisburg condemned the act as a “high-handed attempt to force slavery into a vast territory free from it by law,” most white Pennsylvanians were more concerned with internal improvements or a perceived immigration threat.¹⁴⁶ With the abandonment of the antislavery efforts by many, and the Democrats controlling the state government, the legislature failed to pass a resolution condemning the Kansas-Nebraska Act.¹⁴⁷

A final victory for doughface politicians and white supremacists of the antebellum era came in the Supreme Court’s infamous *Dred Scott* decision. The decision itself answered a number of pressing questions for both African Americans and slaveholders: Were slaves legally free when taken to a state or territory where the institution was not recognized? What legal rights, if any, did African Americans have? The Court’s answers to these questions weighed heavily on the proslavery side. Chief Justice Roger Taney, writing for the majority, argued that not only was Scott still a slave but that he had no right as a black man to sue in federal court. Justice Taney then went a step farther, despite concern from some of his fellow justices, to claim that Congress’ exclusion of slavery in federal territories amounted to a violation of slaveholders’ Fifth Amendment protection of property.¹⁴⁸ Despite the controversy, the ruling proved decisive with a 7:2 vote, the

¹⁴⁵ Stathis, *Landmark Debates in Congress*, 137-139; Campbell, *The Slave Catchers: Enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, 1850-1860*, 49, 81; Burns, “Slavery in Western Pennsylvania,” 212.

¹⁴⁶ Campbell, *The Slave Catchers: Enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, 1850-1860*, 84.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹⁴⁸ Finkelman, “Introduction: A Disastrous Decade,” in Finkelman and Kennon, ed. *Congress and the Crisis of the 1850s*, 15; Irons, *A People’s History of the Supreme Court*, 157-158, 163-171; “Dred Scott

majority including Pennsylvanian Robert Grier. Democratic President Buchanan, having taken his oath of office just days earlier noted: "To their decision, in common with all good citizens, I shall cheerfully submit, whatever this may be."¹⁴⁹

Despite efforts of African Americans and white abolitionists, which will be discussed in the next chapter, doughface politicians and white supremacists gained significant influence throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. Concerns over preserving the union, often coupled with protecting southern slavery, forced many to accept measures that they may otherwise have opposed. Sectional tensions were not the only forces driving proslavery sympathies, however, for economic connections with the South and sharp resistance to a large free black population also played a role. These efforts created a force of diverse voices opposed to rights for free blacks and threats to the South's peculiar institution.

Some white supremacists supported colonization as a way to gradually eliminate slavery, while others supported it as a means of securing the nation for whites only. Many politicians stepped carefully around the slavery debate until it was forced onto the national stage in the 1840s. This resulted in stronger measures to appease the South for the sake of national harmony. These various components represent a diverse population internally divided over how to address slavery, but as a matter of principle most were willing to accept the institution as a price for national unity or as a means to justify racist ideology.

v. Sanford," Oyez, Available from <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1850-1900/60us393>, accessed 20 February 2019.

¹⁴⁹ Irons, *A People's History of the Supreme Court*, 171.

CHAPTER IV

WHITE AND BLACK ABOLITIONISTS

The slavery debate was a complicated matter for those living in antebellum America, as can be seen by the numerous attempts to provide solutions in the courts, on the national political stage, or more locally in individual states and communities. The white supremacists, discussed in Chapter Three, stood on one side of this issue. On the opposing side stood a diverse collection of individuals who can, for the sake of this research, be labelled “abolitionists.” Like the white supremacists, abolitionists were varied in their outlooks and reactions to the peculiar institution. The question over slavery’s westward expansion did much to develop an antislavery consensus among traditional abolitionists, members of the Free Soil Movement, and Republicans. This consensus was not always clearly defined but rested on some general principles.

First, abolitionists were opposed to the institution of slavery, though the reasons for this opposition varied. Abolitionists were also generally willing to assist fugitive slaves when presented with the opportunity. This does not mean that all abolitionists were active members of antislavery societies. Some individuals only chose to take an active resistance to slavery when a fugitive arrived lost or hungry on his or her doorstep. More active abolitionists, however, were willing to form antislavery organizations that worked to resist slavery’s existence as an institution. These individuals were often willing to publicly oppose proslavery policy and actively campaigned against white supremacist ideologies.

Before an analysis is undertaken of the abolitionists in Pittsburgh, a few more points must be addressed. First, the local abolitionist community was made up of both

black and white Americans. Though these two groups often saw slavery in different ways, and had unique motivations for opposing the institution, their end goals were the same. They sought to bring freedom to those living in bondage, protect the rights of free blacks, and put slavery on a path to ultimate extinction. Another critical component of the antislavery group was the Underground Railroad. Though myths and legends have shrouded this unique institution in a complicated haze for historians, there is no doubt that it played a significant role in abolitionist efforts in the Pittsburgh region. Sitting at the eastern end of the great Ohio, a river that one historian notes “divided and connected a nation,” Pittsburgh became a critical player in the Underground Railroad.¹⁵⁰ The city’s large free black population, and the area’s geographic proximity to the South, established what would become a battleground for proslavery and antislavery forces.

Abolitionist Teachings

Abolitionist teachings reached Pittsburgh in much the same way they had reached other areas across the North, that is, through individual lecture tours that sought to spread the word of slavery’s evil. The New England Antislavery Society sent numerous representatives throughout the northwestern region of the country, particularly western Pennsylvania and Ohio, to set up local societies. One successful agent, James Loughhead, worked to establish fourteen auxiliaries of the antislavery society by the mid-1830s. A young Frederick Douglass, working his way through the area as part of his One Hundred Conventions campaign for the American Antislavery Society in 1843, found Pittsburgh very welcoming.¹⁵¹ A local attendee of one of Douglass’s lectures recalled,

¹⁵⁰ Griffler, *Front Line of Freedom*, 1.

¹⁵¹ Meyers, “The Early Antislavery Agency System in Pennsylvania 1833-1837,” 62-64, 66-67; *The Liberator*, December 14, 21, 28, 1833; David Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2018), 135-136.

“DOUGLASS a SLAVE! Who that heard it, did not feel his heart leap, as he [Douglass] exclaimed, ‘NO! I am no SLAVE! Your laws may manacle my limbs, but it cannot enslave my spirit...’”¹⁵²

Douglass would return to Pittsburgh at least two more times, in 1847 and 1852, with each experience having a significant impact on the abolitionist’s life. John B. Vashon, a local black leader, and a small brass band welcomed Douglass to the city in 1847. While lecturing in Pittsburgh, Douglass befriended Martin R. Delaney, a well-educated African American who would later serve as a contributor and editor of *The North Star*. In 1852 Douglass was invited back to the city to speak at the Free-Soil Convention, where he took the opportunity to promote the Liberty Party’s ideology and denounce government-sanctioned slavery. Each of these experiences proved positive for Douglass, reflecting a moderate and accepting city for the spread of abolitionist propaganda. Other areas, particularly in rural western Pennsylvania and Ohio, proved less accommodating for the former slave.¹⁵³

Calls to resist slavery from former slaves themselves proved successful in embedding the Pittsburgh region with abolitionist sentiment, but it was not their only strategy. Theodore Weld and other deeply spiritual abolitionists used religious teachings to spread antislavery messages to entire congregations. Weld’s strategy followed the advice of William Lloyd Garrison, who wrote to an abolitionist friend that “To convert

¹⁵² *The Liberator*, December 1, 1843, quoted in Blight, *Frederick Douglass*, 136.

¹⁵³ Blight, *Frederick Douglass*, 185-193, 268; William Lloyd Garrison to John B. Vashon, July 27, 1847, in “Letters of William Lloyd Garrison to John B. Vashon,” 39-40; Martin R. Delaney and Robert A. Levine, *Martin R. Delaney: A Documentary Reader* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 38, 69, 73; Laurence A. Glasco, *The WPA History of the Negro in Pittsburgh* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2004), 63.

one clergyman is nearly the same as to convert a whole church and congregation.”¹⁵⁴ His plan proved somewhat successful, recruiting forty-eight new members to the abolitionist cause in the summer of 1835, twenty-seven of whom were ministers. These new recruits, including John B. Vashon and the Reverend Lewis Woodson, were quick to mobilize and established Pittsburgh’s first antislavery society the same year. The next two years would see increased participation in antislavery efforts, whether through emancipation or colonization efforts, and more financial support for local auxiliaries.¹⁵⁵

Abolitionists travelling and working to spread their message across the nation often faced obstacles, and early successes did not always reflect the challenges that first needed defeated. Pushback from pro-slavery Democrats, white supremacists, and colonizationists (discussed in Chapter Three) arose almost immediately as a reaction to what was considered radical and threatening to the union. Theodore Weld, for example, had to compete against Reverend Sereno W. Dwight, a supporter of colonization, for speaking locations. Samuel Gould, an abolitionist preaching closer to the Virginia border was interrupted and threatened by a mob. Violence could be quite common for abolitionists travelling through the North to spread their antislavery message, but most endured and successfully planted the seeds of an ideology that would grow and develop over the next two-and-a-half decades.¹⁵⁶

William Lloyd Garrison, famed abolitionist and editor of *The Liberator*, also set his sights on expanding antislavery sentiment in the Pittsburgh region. To succeed, he

¹⁵⁴ William Lloyd Garrison to John B. Vashon, August 15, 1832, in “Letters of William Lloyd Garrison to John B. Vashon,” 34.

¹⁵⁵ Meyers, “The Early Antislavery Agency System in Pennsylvania 1833-1837,” 62-64, 68-69, 75-85; Burns, “Slavery in Western Pennsylvania,” 208-209; Switala, *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania*, 88.

¹⁵⁶ Meyers, “The Early Antislavery Agency System in Pennsylvania 1833-1837,” 70, 72-74.

relied on his connection with local black activist John B. Vashon. Vashon worked closely with Garrison to help spread abolitionist ideology, assist fugitives escaping from the South, and expand the readership of Garrison's works.¹⁵⁷ "Last year, I felt as if I were fighting single-handed against the great enemy;" Garrison recounted to Vashon in 1832, "now I see around me a host of valiant warriors, armed with weapons of an immortal temper, whom nothing can daunt, and who are pledged to the end of the contest."¹⁵⁸ Writing later that year, Garrison could barely seem to contain his happiness in response to the growing wave of abolitionist ideology sweeping through the North. "The signs of the times cannot be mistaken," he assured Vashon, "It is apparent that a generous compassion and a liberal feeling are extending among the whites for the people of color."¹⁵⁹

Thanks to the efforts of local organizers, like Vashon, Pittsburgh became home to numerous organizations and newspapers that promoted antislavery ideology. The Union Anti-Slavery Society of Pittsburgh and the Pittsburgh and Allegheny Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society, alongside the Anti-Slavery Society of Pittsburgh, all sought to combat slavery through various efforts. To many, providing educational opportunities to local blacks was critical. Other supports provided by these groups include legal assistance for fugitives and funding for colonization expeditions. Newspapers also spread abolitionist beliefs throughout the area and by the 1840s Pittsburgh saw no less than eight anti-

¹⁵⁷ Glasco, *The WPA History of the Negro in Pittsburgh*, 58.

¹⁵⁸ William Lloyd Garrison to John B. Vashon, August 15, 1832, in "Letters of William Lloyd Garrison to John B. Vashon," 34.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, December 8, 1832, in "Letters of William Lloyd Garrison to John B. Vashon," 35.

slavery papers in publication. One of the most prominent, *The Saturday Evening Visiter* edited by Jane Swisshelm, reached a national readership of over six thousand.¹⁶⁰

Of the numerous white abolitionists operating in the Pittsburgh area perhaps none was as influential as the Reverend Charles Avery. Having arrived in Pittsburgh in 1812, Avery was able to take full advantage of the area's economic opportunities. He successfully profited from business ventures ranging from cotton mills to pharmaceuticals shortly after his arrival and, using a philanthropic spirit directed at improving the lives of local blacks, constructed a school in Allegheny City. The Allegheny Institute and Mission Church, established in 1849, provided vocational training, literacy, and religious services to roughly one hundred students per term. For two dollars a term in tuition, African Americans of all ages could have access to over seven hundred volumes of varied literature. The school also provided leadership opportunities for black leaders. George Vashon and Henry Highland Garnet, for example, each served as presidents of the institution.¹⁶¹

Though Avery's impact on the abolitionist movement and black advancement included assisting fugitives and funding his educational and religious institutions, his impact after death extended well beyond the Pittsburgh area. Initially, \$300,000 was allocated, via Avery's will, to assisting blacks in need. Half of the proceeds were sent to

¹⁶⁰ Switala, *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania*, 88-89; Blackett, "...Freedom, or the Martyr's Grave," 129; Burns, "Slavery in Western Pennsylvania," 209; "Free At Last? Slavery in Pittsburgh in the 18th and 19th Centuries," University Library System, University of Pittsburgh, Available from <http://exhibit.library.pitt.edu/freetatlast/abolition.html>, accessed January 20, 2019. The eight newspapers include *The Christian Witness*, *The Christian Advocate*, *The Presbyterian Advocate*, *The Daily Advocate*, *The Saturday Evening Visiter*, *The Mystery*, *The Daily American*, and *The Pittsburgh Visitor*.

¹⁶¹ Switala, *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania*, 93; Belfour, "Charles Avery: Early Pittsburgh Philanthropist," 19-21; Catherine M. Hanchett, "George Boyer Vashon, 1824-1878: Black Educator, Poet, Fighter for Equal Rights Part Two," *The Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* 68, no. 4 (1985): 333-334; "Free At Last? Slavery in Pittsburgh in the 18th and 19th Centuries," University Library System, University of Pittsburgh, Available from <http://exhibit.library.pitt.edu/freetatlast/abolition.html>, accessed January 20, 2019.

Africa, while the other half was divided by the American Missionary Society amongst colleges that could provide educational training to African Americans.¹⁶² An Avery fund, in the amount of \$25,000 was also awarded to black men attending the University of Pittsburgh in “the college of arts, and the schools of engineering, mine economics, and education.”¹⁶³ For his own namesake (Allegheny Institute, which would later be renamed Avery College), Charles Avery donated all of the books, maps, and other resources from his private collection.¹⁶⁴

Although some Pittsburgh whites were not as enthusiastic to resist southern slavery as Charles Avery, political changes in the 1850s encouraged many to support antislavery candidates for public office. Many Pennsylvania’s were anxious to ease sectional tensions by 1850, resulting in a large amount of support for Senator Henry Clay’s “Great Compromise” and victories for the state’s Democratic Party in 1852. This changed in 1854 with the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The new law replaced the Missouri Compromise, a document that, according to Samuel P. Chase was “canonized in the hearts of the American people.”¹⁶⁵ In its place the act called for a referendum by the territory’s settlers, when the said territory applied for statehood, to determine whether slavery would exist or not. This concept became known as “popular sovereignty.” The opening of the western territories to potential slavery unnerved many western Pennsylvanians and helped to further divide the struggling Whig Party. Large groups began to defect to the Know Nothings and the newly established Republican Party, in an

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid. Lincoln, Wilberforce, and Oberlin were some of the colleges to receive funding from Charles Avery.

¹⁶⁴ Charles Avery, *The Last Will and Testament of Rev. Charles Avery* (Pittsburgh: W.S. Haven, 1858), 4, 7.

¹⁶⁵ Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, 94-95.

attempt to resist slavery's expansion. Though these defecting individuals did not always actively support antislavery ideologies at home, they certainly resisted the spread of the peculiar institution from outside of the South.¹⁶⁶

African American Influences

African Americans native to the Pittsburgh region, alongside white abolitionists, also became active in the antislavery movement and worked to improve the lives of free blacks across the state. The link between uplifting the lives of free blacks, particularly through educational and economic means, and the antislavery movement remained strong in the minds of most African Americans. Only by proving their worth as active contributors in society did blacks hope to have an opportunity for fair and equal treatment before the law as well as the protection of their political and economic rights. Although African Americans worked hard to improve their place in society in the early nineteenth century, the strength of white public opinion was against them. Despite losing the right to vote and limited legal protections in courts of law, African Americans in the Pittsburgh region persisted and, as one scholar notes, “constituted the shock troops of the antislavery cause.”¹⁶⁷

The efforts of the African American community to provide educational opportunities to its members and assist fugitive slaves came in part due to the growing presence of blacks in the region in the first half of the nineteenth century. In 1830, just a few years before James Loughhead and Theodore Weld travelled through the city spreading their antislavery message, only 472 blacks resided in Pittsburgh, with an

¹⁶⁶ Burns, “Slavery in Western Pennsylvania,” 212; Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, 149, 163, 193-194, 254. Foner describes how the destruction of the Whig Party, and the defection of voters to either the Know Nothing or Republican Parties, helped ensure James Buchanan's victory across the state in 1856.

¹⁶⁷ Griffler, *Frontline of Freedom*, 10.

additional 1,193 living in the surrounding areas. By 1850 the number of African Americans residents in Pittsburgh climbed to 1,959, or about four percent of the city's population, and about 3,431 lived throughout the county. The majority of blacks living within the city limits worked along the rivers and canals or in the various hotels that sprung up throughout the growing industrial center. Although the growing population of whites and blacks in Pittsburgh usually coexisted peacefully, two race riots broke out (one in 1834 and the other in 1839) with the city's mayor and police officers intervening. If the Pittsburgh black community took anything from this violence it was that a tight-knit community with institutions to provide for the social and educational needs of its members was critical.¹⁶⁸

A sense of community began to develop amongst the black residents of Pittsburgh beginning in the 1830s as educational and religious associations were formed. This trend mirrored the rise in popularity of social clubs and organizations across the nation with the church, particularly the Bethel African-American Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, serving both spiritual and practical purposes.¹⁶⁹ Religion provided a powerful force for Pittsburgh's black community and, as noted by one historian, helped in "stabilizing relationships, providing psychological guidance and emotional sanctuary, and symbolizing autonomy and community among African-American people."¹⁷⁰ With a

¹⁶⁸ Blackett, "...Freedom, or the Martyr's Grave'," 118-120; Switala, *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania*, 87-88; James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 83.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 125-130; "Free At Last? Slavery in Pittsburgh in the 18th and 19th Centuries," University Library System, University of Pittsburgh, Available from <http://exhibit.library.pitt.edu/freetatlast/abolition.html>, accessed January 20, 2019. Pittsburgh's Bethel AME Church, established in 1808, was originally located on Front Street but was relocated several times before settling in "Little Haiti," known today as the Hill District.

¹⁷⁰ Horton and Horton, *In Hope of Liberty*, 149.

strong foundation in religious practice and belief, African Americans were able to launch a series of programs that helped to improve their own social and economic conditions.

One of these early associations was the African Education Society, established by John B. Vashon and the Reverend Lewis Woodson in 1832. The primary mission of the institution was highlighted in the preamble to its constitution:

“WHEREAS, ignorance in all ages has been found to debase the human mind, and to subject its votaries to the lowest vices, and most abject depravity; and it must be admitted, that ignorance is the sole cause of the present degradation and bondage of the people of color in these United States; that the intellectual capacity of the black man is equal to that of the white, and that he is equally susceptible of improvement, all ancient history makes manifest; and even modern examples puts beyond a single doubt.

We, therefore, the people of color, of the city and vicinity of Pittsburgh, and State of Pennsylvania, for the purpose of dispersing the moral gloom, that has long hung around us; have, under Almighty God, associated ourselves together, which association shall be known by the name of the Pittsburgh African Education Society...”¹⁷¹

Vashon, who had arrived in the city in 1829, hoped that organizing the school would prove the worth of African Americans to their white counterparts and allow for social and economic advancement.¹⁷² “I trust,” wrote Garrison to Vashon in 1834, “my colored brethren in Pittsburgh are virtuously striving to get knowledge, to improve their minds, their manners, and their morals, and to secure the pearl of great price.”¹⁷³ Garrison’s encouraging words reflected a positive outlook for the coming decades, when more

¹⁷¹ *Pittsburgh Gazette*, February 10, 1832, quoted in George L. Davis, “Pittsburgh’s Negro Troops in the Civil War,” *The Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* 36, no. 2 (1953): 101-102.

¹⁷² Switala, *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania*, 88; Catherine M. Hanchett, “George Boyer Vashon, 1824-1878: Black Educator, Poet, Fighter for Equal Rights Part One,” *The Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* 68, no. 3 (1985): 206; Blackett, “...Freedom, or the Martyr’s Grave,” 118; Smith, “The End of Black Voting Rights in Pennsylvania: African Americans and the Constitutional Convention of 1837-1838,” 285; *The Liberator*, February 25, 1832. The school was located on the corner of Wood and Market Streets.

¹⁷³ William Lloyd Garrison to John B. Vashon, March 22, 1834, in “Letters of William Lloyd Garrison to John B. Vashon,” 39.

organizations and societies would develop that would provide further assistance to local blacks.

The Reverend Lewis Woodson, pastor of the Bethel AME Church, was a critical figure in the black community of antebellum Pittsburgh. Aside from helping to organize the African Education Society, Woodson also taught its nearly ninety students. Woodson supported the educational programs that developed in Pittsburgh as a way for blacks to improve their own lives. His hope was that individual African Americans could live separately from whites, in their own societies where they could provide for their own educational and spiritual well-being.¹⁷⁴ Woodson's philosophy of self-improvement was displayed in a state convention of free blacks, meeting in 1841 to discuss the recent disenfranchisement of African Americans in the state's constitution. "The participation of others is not rejected out of any disrespect to them," Woodson notes, "but because it is a natural right. Every man knows his own affairs best, and naturally feels a deeper interest in them than anyone else, and therefore on that account ought to attend to them."¹⁷⁵ Though African Americans were unable to use Woodson's advice to reobtain the vote, more and more societies developed around the city in an attempt to improve the social and economic conditions of free blacks.

Perhaps the most successful of Woodson's students to study at the African Education Society was Martin R. Delaney. Having arrived in Pittsburgh in 1831, when the city was home to approximately four hundred and fifty blacks, Delaney quickly took

¹⁷⁴ Glasco, *The WPA History of the Negro in Pittsburgh*, 56; Switala, *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania*, 92; "Free At Last? Slavery in Pittsburgh in the 18th and 19th Centuries," University Library System, University of Pittsburgh, Available from <http://exhibit.library.pitt.edu/freetatlast/abolition.html>, accessed January 20, 2019. The Reverend Woodson arrived in Pittsburgh in 1815 before taking his critical role at the Bethel AME Church.

¹⁷⁵ *The Pittsburgh Gazette*, n.d., quoted in Blackett, "...Freedom, or the Martyr's Grave'," 119-120.

advantage of obtaining an education under Woodson's guidance. Though Delaney would go on to study medicine as well as publish a newspaper, *The Mystery*, his earliest efforts in the city went towards establishing the Theban Literary Society.¹⁷⁶ Founded in 1831, the same year Delaney arrived in Pittsburgh, the organization was an attempt to unite black men "who might have literary tastes similar to theirs and who would like to be associated for mutual enjoyment."¹⁷⁷ The Society would become so successful that, in 1837, Delaney would expand and rebrand the organization as the Young Men's Literary and Moral Reform Society of the City of Pittsburgh and Vicinity. This new organization held monthly meetings for members, all of whom were young black men between the ages of 18 and 35. For the monthly fee of about twelve cents, members could attend meetings and debates as well as have access to the organization's library, to which Delaney was elected librarian.¹⁷⁸

The presence of the African Education Society and the Theban Literary Society, as well as active black community's leaders such as Vashon, Woodson, Delaney, helped to provide opportunities for free blacks to become successful. As a result of these individuals and organizations blacks in the Pittsburgh vicinity owned property, operated businesses, and lived relatively prosperous lives.¹⁷⁹ "If one could gauge the black community's cohesiveness by the number of organizations and associations catering to the needs of the black population," remarks historian Richard Blackett, "then the 1830s

¹⁷⁶ Glasco, *The WPA History of the Negro in Pittsburgh*, 56; Delaney and Levine, *Martin R. Delaney*, 25; Switala, *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania*, 89.

¹⁷⁷ Porter, "The Organized Educational Activities of Negro Literary Societies, 1828-1846," 573.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 557, 573; Blackett, "...Freedom, or the Martyr's Grave'," 118; Delaney and Levine, *Martin R. Delaney*, 25. Porter notes that seventeen members were present at the Society's first meeting in 1837.

¹⁷⁹ Blackett, "...Freedom, or the Martyr's Grave'," 120; Glasco, *The WPA History of the Negro in Pittsburgh*, 55. The "relatively prosperous lives" of Pittsburgh blacks was in relation to other free black communities across the North.

and 1840s witnessed the emergence of a relatively close-knit black community in the city.”¹⁸⁰ Professor Blackett goes further to emphasize how “they [Pittsburgh blacks] created their own churches as a protest against segregation in white churches and founded black newspapers to air their views, literary societies to improve skills, temperance and moral reform societies, masonic lodges, and secret societies to protect their communities from outside encroachment.”¹⁸¹ With a growing free black population active and ready to improve their own economic and social conditions, it is little wonder that Pittsburgh became the center of a large and complex debate over the institution of slavery throughout the antebellum period.

One individual, George B. Vashon, helps to demonstrate how the black community of Pittsburgh could open new opportunities for young freemen, while also revealing the insurmountable challenges that such young people constantly faced. George Vashon, son of John B. Vashon, moved to the city with his family when he was only five years old. He studied, like Delaney, under the guidance of Reverend Woodson and went on to become the first black graduate of the Oberlin Collegiate Institute (later Oberlin College) near Cleveland, Ohio. With hopes of practicing law, Vashon returned to Pittsburgh and, by the mid-1840s, was working under prominent lawyer Walter Forward. After being denied entrance to the bar in Allegheny County, Vashon moved to New York where he was admitted. Shortly thereafter, in 1848, he reconnected with his friend Martin Delaney and moved to Haiti where he became a correspondent for *The North Star*. After living in Haiti for two short years Vashon returned to Pittsburgh, where he was once again denied entrance to the bar. Finally giving up any chance to practice law in the city,

¹⁸⁰ Blackett, “...Freedom, or the Martyr’s Grave’,” 118.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 117.

Vashon relocated, for the last time, to New York where he worked tirelessly alongside Frederick Douglass and other abolitionists to resist slavery.¹⁸²

The progress made by Pittsburgh African Americans throughout the early 1830s, thanks in part to the various social and educational organizations they developed, culminated in one of the most important documents in the history of abolition: the *Pittsburgh Memorial*. This appeal, discussed in Chapters Two and Three, reflects both the strong political arguments against black disenfranchisement as well as the practical contributions of African Americans to the local Pittsburgh community. As the state's constitutional convention debated black disenfranchisement in 1837, African Americans were quick to respond. Meeting on June 13, the community quickly established a committee, comprised of John B. Vashon, Reverend Lewis Woodson, and other black leaders, to draft the memorial. Though failing to convince delegates to preserve black voting rights after being presented to the convention by Allegheny County's Harmar Denny, the *Memorial* proves useful as a means to gauge the situation for blacks within the city.¹⁸³

Vashon, Lewis, and the other contributors to the *Pittsburgh Memorial* argued passionately for the preservation of black voting rights, while also pointing out the hypocrisy of American slavery. "It has been deemed both at home and abroad, a matter of just sarcasm," the *Memorial* reads, "that, whilst the Declaration of Independence boasts of the universal equality of men, in many of the States, one half of the community is the absolute property of the other subject to the despotic will, nay to the passion, caprice, and

¹⁸² Hanchett, "George Boyer Vashon, 1824-1878: Black Educator, Poet, Fighter for Equal Rights Part One," 206-209, 212.

¹⁸³ Smith, "The End of Black Voting Rights in Pennsylvania: African Americans and the Constitutional Convention of 1837-1838," 288-289.

cruelty of a master.”¹⁸⁴ The petition then goes on to explain how Pennsylvania has been an exception to this hypocrisy, quoting the preamble to the state’s 1780 gradual emancipation law. In one last attempt to illuminate the hypocrisies of black disenfranchisement the *Memorial* urges the convention delegates to not “fallback upon barbarous prejudices...” but to remain supportive of the state’s “liberal and enlightened policy.”¹⁸⁵

In addition to the political and moral arguments of the *Memorial*, Pittsburgh’s black leaders included a series of statements to “show our present condition, the stand that has been taken in the useful pursuits of life, in the requisition of property, and the efforts made to ameliorate the condition of our race.”¹⁸⁶ Of the approximate two thousand five hundred black residents of the Pittsburgh area, according to the *Memorial*, many had found work in trades ranging from carpenters and blacksmiths to bricklayers and coppersmiths. The petition highlighted the existence of the numerous organizations, including the African Education Society and the Young Men's Literary and Moral Reform Society.¹⁸⁷ The Bethel AME Church reminded the convention delegates of the black community’s morality and sense of Christian brotherhood and was quoted as a “substantial brick building, newly enlarged and repaired, and furnished with comfortable pews, carpets, Venetian window blinds, and opaque lamps,…” with a value of ten thousand dollars.¹⁸⁸

The purpose of these added statements are quite clear: the African American community of Pittsburgh was productive, peaceful, and civic-minded. The last statement

¹⁸⁴ Smith, “The Pittsburgh Memorial: A Forgotten Document of Pittsburgh History,” 109.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 110.

included in the *Memorial* is a list of taxes paid by various black citizens. According to the city tax collector, Thomas Dickson, the city's black population paid roughly \$422 in annual property and poll taxes. Of this total, John B. Vashon paid the most at \$130. This final argument turned from the moral and ideological arguments of the primary text. The focus was to highlight the contributions of various black community members to the city. If African Americans attended church, owned property, and paid taxes, the authors of the *Memorial* argued, why should they also retain the right to vote?¹⁸⁹

A feeling of shock and disappointment ran through the city as residents realized the petition's inability to prevent disenfranchisement for local black citizens. "We can really not see the justice of excluding native born freemen of this commonwealth from this privilege," wrote the *Pittsburgh Gazette* in January 1838, "merely because their skins are a little darker than of some of their neighbors."¹⁹⁰ Martin Delaney had also been actively opposed to black disenfranchisement, attending protests within the city. Reflecting on the entire process years later, he wrote "as a matter of course it follows that the forfeiture of every claim to civil and decent respect, is fully implied in the base surrender of our manhood, crouching in servility at the feet of insolence and usurpation."¹⁹¹

The efforts of Pittsburgh African Americans to prevent black disenfranchisement, along with the city's reaction to its codification in the state's new constitution, demonstrates the vast amount of organization and structure the black community had developed by 1837. Thanks, in part, to organizations like the African Education Society

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 110-111; Wood, "A Sacrifice on the Alter of Slavery': Doughface Politics and Black Disenfranchisement in Pennsylvania, 1837-1838," 87.

¹⁹⁰ *Pittsburgh Gazette*, January 25, 1838, quoted in Smith, "The End of Black Voting Rights in Pennsylvania: African Americans and the Constitutional Convention of 1837-1838," 295.

¹⁹¹ *The Mystery*, December 16, 1846, quoted in *Delaney and Levine, Martin R. Delaney*, 37.

and the Theban Literary Society, African Americans were able to educate themselves on legal, political, and social issues. The arguments made in the *Pittsburgh Memorial* clearly demonstrate a community with experience struggling over slavery and racism. The Bethel AME Church, and other religious organizations, also helped in providing an interconnected community of blacks with clearly defined goals, such as black social and economic improvements. Together, these factors allowed African Americans to play a critical role in not only the fate of blacks in Pittsburgh, but how the region as a whole would respond to questions over slavery.

Slavery's Impact

Like many free black communities across the United States, African Americans in the Pittsburgh region worked tirelessly to resist slavery both locally and nationally. Pennsylvania's gradual emancipation law, discussed in Chapter Two, put the peculiar institution on a steady decline at home. Below the Mason-Dixon Line, however, slavery was becoming more and more essential as a labor system. The wide-spread use of the cotton gin and the development of steam power fueled southern capitalists' demands for cheap labor. The legal end of the transatlantic slave trade in 1808 meant that the growing demand for slave labor in states like Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi had to be satisfied by other means. States in the Upper South, Virginia and Maryland for example, proved successful in meeting these demands since the land in these states were not as suited to the mass production of cotton as was that of their neighbors to the south. The result was a powerful slave market within the United States that relied on the natural

increase of the slave population in the Upper South to meet the labor demands of the states in the Cotton Belt.¹⁹²

These circumstances created a unique situation for Pennsylvania as a whole, and Pittsburgh in particular. The Mason-Dixon Line, and the Ohio River to the west, became the literal boundary lines between slavery and freedom. The Ohio River itself became, for many in bondage, the symbolic Jordan River and ideas of escaping to the North rang clear with similarities from the biblical story of Exodus. Due to the proximity of the Upper South to this borderline of freedom and slavery, most of the slaves escaping into western Pennsylvania and the Ohio Valley were from Virginia, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri.¹⁹³

Determining precisely how many slaves escaped into western Pennsylvania, and the Pittsburgh region, proves an impossible task. Eric Foner estimates in his work *Gateway to Freedom* that anywhere from 1,000-5,000 fugitives escaped the South per year from 1830 to 1860. Of these individuals, Professor Matthew Pinsker estimates approximately 2,000 settled or passed through Pennsylvania. Pinsker goes further, relying on local accounts, newspapers, and letters, to argue that upwards of ten percent of all fugitive slaves (or 100-500 individuals per year) passed through western Pennsylvania. These estimates are greatly inflated from Edward Burns' estimations from 1925, which had only several hundred fugitives in total escaping through western Pennsylvania before 1860.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹² Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told*, xvii-xxiv, 222-224, 229-233.

¹⁹³ Griffler, *Frontline of Freedom*, 1-2, 6; Campbell, *The Slave Catchers: Enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, 1850-1860*, 6; Blackett, *Making Freedom*, 72.

¹⁹⁴ Foner, *Gateway to Freedom*, 4; Pinsker, "Vigilance in Pennsylvania: Underground Railroad Activities in the Keystone State, 1837-1861," 4, 23-24; Burns, "Slavery in Western Pennsylvania," 211.

Regardless of how many individuals sought freedom by escaping into western Pennsylvania, there is clear evidence that the free black community of Pittsburgh played a significant role in Underground Railroad operations. “To a large extent the cohesiveness of the black community was forged from determined efforts to defend fugitive slaves from possible recapture,” argues Richard Blackett, “and, where necessary, to aid them on their journey farther north.”¹⁹⁵ The social and educational organizations established by Pittsburgh blacks in the antebellum period develop a mutually-beneficial relationship with operations to assist fugitive slaves. This relationship helped to make Pittsburgh a critical location in the state’s western branch of the Underground Railroad.¹⁹⁶

The significant number of fugitive slave escaping through western Pennsylvania, coupled with the area’s growing black population, kept the slavery question alive in the region even as the direct presence of the institution itself disappeared locally. Abolitionists in the area sought to resist the peculiar institution in many ways. Wealthy white individuals, such as Charles Avery, often provided legal and financial assistance to fugitives. This proved successful as the state passed laws restricting slavery and setting up procedures for slavecatchers to reclaim fugitives. If Pennsylvania slaveholders did not register slaves according the gradual abolition act of 1780, for example, lawyers could argue for those individuals’ freedom. The same strategy could be applied to slavecatchers from the Upper South who constantly traversed the state. If slaveholders or their representatives failed to capture a fugitive while abiding by the state’s various personal liberty laws then lawyers were often quick to act. In some cases, the failure on the part of

¹⁹⁵ Blackett, “...Freedom, or the Martyr’s Grave’: Black Pittsburgh’s Aid to the Fugitive Slave,” 120.

¹⁹⁶ Griffler, *Frontline of Freedom*, 101.

slaveholders to obey state law allowed for the release of the suspected fugitive. If the lawyers of a fugitive were unable to win freedom for the individual, money was often raised in the local abolitionist community in an attempt to purchase their freedom.¹⁹⁷

The operations of the Underground Railroad in Pittsburgh varied significantly from other areas bordering the South and are worth examining. The state legislature of Ohio, for example, proved far more hostile to free blacks and fugitives than their Pennsylvania counterpart in the 1830s and 1840s. A series of “Black Laws,” passed as early as 1804, placed the burden of proving that one was free on the suspected fugitive. The laws also gave more power to slavecatchers, while stripping free blacks of many legal rights.¹⁹⁸ These “Black Laws” were designed, according to one historian, “to sustain slavery by making the existence of free African Americans north of slavery as precarious as possible.”¹⁹⁹ The result was a greater emphasis on free black communities living throughout the state to assist fugitives and to undermine the state laws, as the number of white abolitionists remained relatively low.

Though Pittsburgh’s efforts to resist slavery and assist fugitives proved stronger than in most communities of Ohio, the level of organization and complexity never reached that of the city’s eastern counterpart, Philadelphia. Due to its smaller black population and less fugitive slaves, Pittsburgh did not (and perhaps could not) develop a system for attacking slavery as Philadelphia had. Although Pittsburgh did have numerous organizations devoted to the anti-slavery cause, the city did not have an organized vigilance committee. Philadelphia’s vigilance committee, chaired by black abolitionist

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 3, 10; Blackett, “...Freedom, or the Martyr’s Grave’: Black Pittsburgh’s Aid to the Fugitive Slave,” 121, 132-133; Nash and Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees*, 99, 121, 199.

¹⁹⁸ Griffler, *Frontline of Freedom*, 15, 18-20.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 31.

William Still, provided documented assistance to far more fugitives than the local efforts of the Pittsburgh community. This is, in part, due to the geographic locations of each city. Pittsburgh was separated from the east by the Allegheny Mountains and connected more to the South and West via its water networks than to any other part of the country. Philadelphia was located along the Atlantic coast, and a major hub for coastal trade. The numerous ships that passed through the city's port provided more opportunities for fugitive attempting to escape to upstate New York, New England, or even Canada.²⁰⁰

The lack of a vigilance committee, and the limited number of famous fugitive slave cases from the region, should not be taken to presume that Pittsburgh did not play a significant part in Pennsylvania's Underground Railroad. In fact, the city had numerous organizations that mirrored Philadelphia's larger organization in helping to assist fugitives.²⁰¹ Richard Blackett goes so far as to argue that the limited attention given to Pittsburgh and its efforts in the larger story of the Underground Railroad reflect "the well-organized system, devised by blacks and white abolitionists, for protecting fugitives in their community."²⁰² When the time came to implement strategies for assisting fugitives, or protecting free blacks from capture, Pittsburgh antislavery forces proved to be just as successful as any other community across the North.

Local histories, traditional accounts, and the geographical landscape each help to illuminate the Underground Railroad that passed through Pittsburgh. Fugitives escaping into western Pennsylvania often travelled first to Uniontown, near the state's southern border. The escape route then split, heading northwest to Brownsville and then following

²⁰⁰ Switala, *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania*, 157, 163-169.

²⁰¹ ²⁰¹ Blackett, "...Freedom, or the Martyr's Grave': Black Pittsburgh's Aid to the Fugitive Slave," 134.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 122.

the Monongahela River north to Pittsburgh, or farther west to Washington. From Washington, fugitives had the option of either heading northeast to Pittsburgh or northwest into Ohio. These routes were particularly helpful to fugitives, considering the area's relatively large population of free blacks willing to provide assistance. The route was also home to numerous black churches, which were always willing to lend a hand to those in need. Black communities and churches were always a welcome sight for fugitives since there was always a risk in placing trust in white individuals.²⁰³

Blacks escaping slavery who travelled the Uniontown route to Pittsburgh often first stopped at the home of Thomas Bigham, a prominent lawyer and Whig politician. Bigham's home, perched on top of Mount Washington just south of the three rivers' merging point, provided a safe haven for fugitives until they could be safely taken across the river and into the city itself. Once inside the city, fugitives were generally taken to either the Bethel AME Church or to John B. Vashon's City Baths. The Bethel AME Church would play a significant role in Pittsburgh's resistance to slavery, providing not only support for fugitives, but also a rallying spot for antislavery meetings. Vashon's City Baths, established in 1833, gave fugitives a place to regroup and prepare for the next leg of their journey.²⁰⁴

Other slaves were rescued after travelling to Pittsburgh with white southerners.

Slaveholders conducting business in Pittsburgh after 1840 often stayed at the

²⁰³ Switala, *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania*, 56-58; Burns, "Slavery in Western Pennsylvania," 211; Griffler, *Frontline of Freedom*, 42; Irene Williams, "The Operation of the Fugitive Slave Law in Western Pennsylvania," *The Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* 4, no. 3 (1921): 151. Switala reports the percentage of free blacks in the southwestern corner of Pennsylvania to be approximately 2.2 percent of the area's population at this time.

²⁰⁴ Switala, *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania*, 90-91; Horton and Horton, *In Hope of Liberty*, 150; Hanchett, "George Boyer Vashon, 1824-1878: Black Educator, Poet, Fighter for Equal Rights Part One," 205; Griffler, *Frontline of Freedom*, 43. Vashon's City Baths was located on Third Street, between Market and Ferry Streets.

Monongahela House Hotel. As the most prominent hotel in the city, the Monongahela House saw a significant amount of southern travelers and employed over three hundred African Americans in its staff. The presence of both slaves travelling with southern slaveholders, and a large number of free black employees, created a tense environment in the heart of the city. Slaves were often first contacted by hotel employees or from Pittsburgh's Philanthropic Society, where they were encouraged to escape. If the slave agreed, he or she was quickly rushed to either the Bethel AME Church or Vashon's Bath House. If the slaveholder uncovered the plot, they were often met with resistance from a crowd of civilians which bought the slaves enough time to get out of the city. Fugitives would often cross into Allegheny City, where they were assisted by Charles Avery, and then transported farther north.²⁰⁵

One particular case involving a fugitive in Pittsburgh, and recounted in Switala's *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania*, is worth noting. The incident began when a slaveholder, Mr. Rose, from Wellsburg, Virginia (now West Virginia) entered Vashon's barbershop in 1850 and recognized an apprentice as one of his former slaves. The fugitive, a Mr. George White, had escaped from the South two years prior and had been working for Vashon ever since. To avoid a legal battle, Vashon offered to pay Mr. Rose \$200 dollars for White's release. The slaveholder consented, taking the payment and granting George White his freedom.²⁰⁶

The significant role free blacks played in the resistance to slavery mirrored the efforts put forth in the debates over colonization. The colonization plans put forward,

²⁰⁵ Switala, *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania*, 91-94; Blackett, R.J.M. "...Freedom, or the Martyr's Grave': Black Pittsburgh's Aid to the Fugitive Slave," 129-130; "Free At Last? Slavery in Pittsburgh in the 18th and 19th Centuries," University Library System, University of Pittsburgh, Available from <http://exhibit.library.pitt.edu/freetatlast/abolition.html>, accessed January 20, 2019.

²⁰⁶ Switala, *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania*, 91-92.

primarily by elite whites, proved a contentious issue for free blacks. On one hand, many African Americans who chose to leave the United States would be abandoning the only home they had ever known. Despite being free, some blacks had family members in bondage, and leaving the country would mean leaving them as well.²⁰⁷ Alternatively, leaving the antebellum United States where, as one historian notes, “race was the defining limit of African-American life,” one could have a chance at social and economic elevation.²⁰⁸ Establishing communities in Haiti, Liberia, or Canada could also provide blacks with the opportunity to develop their own political institutions, where conflicts over race would be nonexistent. The colonization debate would become heated at times amongst Pittsburgh’s African American community but in the end both sides wanted to the same result: economic, social, and political advancement for all blacks.

William Lloyd Garrison effectively summarized the arguments of those free blacks opposed to colonization in his work, *Thoughts on African Colonization*, by stating:

“The language of the people of color is,—'This is our country: here were we born—here will we live and die—we know of no other place that we can call our true and appropriate home—here are our earliest and most pleasant associations—we are freemen, we are brethren, we are countrymen and fellow-citizens—we are not for insurrection, but for peace and equality.' This is not the language of sedition or alienated affection.”²⁰⁹

Garrison’s statement came, in part, from his communication with free blacks from across the country. John B. Vashon, Garrison’s closest ally in Pittsburgh, condemned all organizations devoted to colonization, believing their mission to be directly at odds with what abolitionists were trying to accomplish. Vashon attended the First Annual

²⁰⁷ Griffler, *Frontline of Freedom*, 25-26, 35; Mehlinger, “The Attitude of the Free Negro Toward African Colonization,” 277-279.

²⁰⁸ Horton and Horton, *In Hope of Liberty*, 172.

²⁰⁹ William Lloyd Garrison, *Thoughts on African Colonization* (Project Gutenberg, 2010), Part 2, 4.

Convention of the People of Color, held in Philadelphia in 1831, to encourage churches and other black organizations to resist colonization. The following year saw the splintering of the convention, as African Americans debated on whether buying land in Canada was essentially giving in to the colonization pressures. Although there were some blacks who saw leaving the United States as their best chance for future progress, the majority (particularly in Pittsburgh) remained strongly opposed.²¹⁰

Many free African Americans resisted leaving America on principle. They knew, and usually acknowledged, that the road to equality would be difficult, but it was worth fighting for. "... We are freemen, that we are brethren, that we are countrymen and fellow-citizens," read one report from a Pittsburgh meeting, in which Vashon was elected chairman, "and as fully entitled to the free exercise of the elective franchise as any men who breathe; and that we demand an equal share of protection from our federal government with any class of citizens in the community."²¹¹ Declaratory statements like this proved ineffective in the political arena, where blacks would soon be stripped of their right to vote. Another challenge was the growing number of both whites and blacks who saw colonization as the best, if not the only, solution. Although black voices in Pittsburgh were few, their force provided enough weight to prevent a united stance from the black community.²¹²

²¹⁰ Mehlinger, "The Attitude of the Free Negro Toward African Colonization," 282-284, 287, 290-292; Smith, "The End of Black Voting Rights in Pennsylvania: African Americans and the Pennsylvania Constitutional Convention of 1837-1838," 285-286. Vashon and other free blacks from Pittsburgh did not attend the annual meetings of 1834 and 1835. Smith claims that the meetings had become dominated by individuals from New York and Philadelphia. African Americans in Pittsburgh turned their attentions instead to creating the Pittsburgh Moral Reform Society in 1837 which promoted moral character development and temperance amongst the black community.

²¹¹ William Lloyd Garrison, *Thoughts on African Colonization* (Project Gutenberg, 2010), Part 2, 35.

²¹² Horton and Horton, *In Hope of Liberty*, 188, 191, 211.

The strongest voice in favor of colonization from the Pittsburgh black community was Martin Delaney. Delaney had long considered colonization as a solution for African Americans in the United States, but only became a vocal supporter in the 1850s. Delaney had worked with other colonization supporters to organize an expedition to the Niger Valley after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act. Apparently unhappy with the white Colonization Society's selection of Liberia, Delaney wanted to find the perfect place where American ideas of liberty could become a reality for blacks. Although the Niger Valley expedition came up short with providing free blacks a new home, it reflected a growing trend of African Americans taking colonization into their own hands.²¹³

Of all the locations that African Americans considered suitable for moving to, Canada was the most popular. Not only was it in close proximity geographically to the northern United States, but it also had an established black population (of primarily fugitive slaves). Canada had been considered a safe haven since at least 1833, when slavery had been eradicated and the Canadian government officially refused to return fugitive slaves. Haiti, like the Niger Valley, was also considered, but proved less than ideal for many free blacks. The African and Haitian communities that colonizers would have to adapt to were often very different socially, religiously, and culturally than African Americans. Sharp resistance to colonizing Haiti, particularly from whites in the South, also made it challenging to raise funds for such a venture.²¹⁴

²¹³ Ibid., 261; Hanchett, "George Boyer Vashon, 1824-1878: Black Educator, Poet, Fighter for Equal Rights Part One," 216; Mehlinger, "The Attitude of the Free Negro Toward African Colonization," 296; Pinsker, "Vigilance in Pennsylvania: Underground Railroad Activities in the Keystone State, 1837-1861," 38.

²¹⁴ Griffler, *Frontline of Freedom*, 25-26; Horton and Horton, *In Hope of Liberty*, 194-199, 209; Pinsker, "Vigilance in Pennsylvania: Underground Railroad Activities in the Keystone State, 1837-1861," 37; "Free At Last? Slavery in Pittsburgh in the 18th and 19th Centuries," University Library System, University of Pittsburgh, Available from <http://exhibit.library.pitt.edu/freetatlast/abolition.html>, accessed January 20, 2019.

An increase in support of colonization from black communities came in the wake of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. The law's set legal procedures for apprehending fugitives, which left nothing in the form of rights for African Americans, was enough to force many who had been on the fence regarding colonization to support it. The North's compliance with the law, as a means to appease the South and preserve the union, demonstrated that support for free blacks nationwide was precarious at best. Delaney, working with the Reverends William Webb of Pittsburgh and Augustus R. Greene of Allegheny City, organized a national council for colonization in 1853. The council worked to explore the various options for blacks who were open to colonization opportunities. Colonization would continue to be a divisive issue for the nation, and the black community, until the outbreak of the Civil War. Only then would black Americans be given a new opportunity to demonstrate their worth and gain, in time, a new birth of freedom.²¹⁵

The growing resistance to slavery that coincided with more direct support for Underground Railroad activities in the 1830s and 1840s led to harsh criticisms from white supremacists and proslavery forces.²¹⁶ As one historian notes, the success of fugitive slaves in achieving freedom prior to 1850s resulted in the Underground Railroad to become a "victim of its own success."²¹⁷ These criticisms only intensified as more and more free blacks chose to oppose colonization efforts, as Vashon had in Pittsburgh. By

²¹⁵ Mehlinger, "The Attitude of the Free Negro Toward African Colonization," 299-300; Peter C. Ripley, *Witness for Freedom: African American Voices on Race, Slavery, and Emancipation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 21; "Free At Last? Slavery in Pittsburgh in the 18th and 19th Centuries," University Library System, University of Pittsburgh, Available from <http://exhibit.library.pitt.edu/freetatlast/abolition.html>, accessed January 20, 2019. Though Delaney had moved with his family to Canada by 1856, he remained active in black-led colonization activities and travelled frequently in the United States. The national council co-founded by Delaney helped to organize his 1859 expedition to the Niger Valley.

²¹⁶ Griffler, *Frontline of Freedom*, 48.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 106.

the late 1840s it was clear that no single solution would help to mend the ever fraying bonds of sectional unity.

One attempt by politicians to solve the sectional problem was the passage of the Great Compromise, and more particularly the Fugitive Slave Act, in 1850. By establishing a federal task force to enforce stricter regulations in regards to runaway slaves, the law was meant to lessen proslavery criticisms. The specific details of the Fugitive Slave Act, discussed in Chapter Two, met initial criticisms across the North, and particularly in Pittsburgh. State personal liberty laws could no longer offer protections against kidnappings, as the jurisdiction to handle fugitive slave cases passed solely to the federal government. Northern blacks and whites were forced to think twice about assisting fugitives after the law's passage, since providing support could result in harsh punishments.

The African American community in Pittsburgh had been proactively opposed to the idea of a stronger federal fugitive slave law even before its passage. A public meeting held at the Bethel AME Church in June of 1850 resulted in the drafting of a memorial that was subsequently sent to Congress. Although the memorial failed to prevent the law's ultimate passage, it did provide blacks the opportunity to reassert their claims for fair treatment as citizens. A portion of the memorial, printed in *The North Star*, read:

"We the colored people of Allegheny County, in the State of Pennsylvania, do most respectfully and solemnly remonstrate and Petition against the provisions of the Act of Congress, 1793, relative to the recapture of Fugitive Slaves, and against all and every Act, Bill, or Provision now in existence or that may hereafter be introduced into either Houses of Congress of the United States, in any way or manner infringing upon our liberties as American citizens."²¹⁸

²¹⁸ *The North Star*, July 11, 1850, quoted in Blackett, "...Freedom, or the Martyr's Grave": Black Pittsburgh's Aid to the Fugitive Slave," 125.

At another community meeting, this time in September after the law's passage, many prominent abolitionists and antislavery politicians spoke against it. Charles Avery, as one of the meeting's speakers, argued that the act was unconstitutional since it suspended habeas corpus and trial by jury for blacks.²¹⁹ "Our constitution otherwise so perfect contains one blot," claimed Thomas H. Howe, Whig candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives, "and we should not allow ourselves to be turned from men into slave-catchers."²²⁰ Howe's remarks were so popular with the crowd that they overwhelmingly elected him to the House in the fall. The result of this second meeting was the following resolutions:

"FIRST: That the editors of the newspapers be requested to publish in a conspicuous place the names of all persons who accept nominations as commissioners under the Fugitive Slave Law.

SECOND: Members of the Pennsylvania delegation in Congress, who voted for the passage of the Slave Bill are unworthy of the support of their friends.

THIRD: The Fugitive Slave Bill recently passed by Congress is unconstitutional, and aims a deadly blow at Liberty under the pretext of vested rights.

FOURTH: We will unite and stand shoulder to shoulder until with the blessing of God, the Fugitive Slave Bill shall be expunged from the statute books, and every supporter of the abominations be driven from the national councils."²²¹

The *Pittsburgh Gazette's* and the *Pittsburgh Daily Morning Post's* predictions that the Fugitive Slave Act would strengthen antislavery forces in the North could not have been more accurate.²²² Frederick Douglass, who always found friends in Pittsburgh,

²¹⁹ *Pittsburgh Gazette*, September 30, 1850; *Pittsburgh Daily Morning Post*, September 30, 1850; Blackett, "...Freedom, or the Martyr's Grave": Black Pittsburgh's Aid to the Fugitive Slave," 127-128; Williams, "The Operation of the Fugitive Slave Law in Western Pennsylvania, 153; Burns, Edward M. "Slavery in Western Pennsylvania," 210; Delbanco, *The War Before the War*, 5-6.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 153. Howe, like many moderates after the election of 1850, would come to support the law on the belief that it was necessary in preserving the union.

²²¹ *Pittsburgh Gazette*, September 30, 1850, quoted in Williams, "The Operation of the Fugitive Slave Law in Western Pennsylvania, 153.

²²² Williams, "The Operation of the Fugitive Slave Law in Western Pennsylvania, 152.

offered a chilling solution when visiting the city to speak at the National Free Soil Convention in 1852: "...A half dozen or more dead kidnapers carried down South would cool the ardor of southern gentlemen, and keep their rapacity in check."²²³ Many free blacks took Douglass's remarks to heart, though did not seem as ready to resort to violence. They continued resisting the Fugitive Slave Act by providing assistance to runaway slaves, whose only hope for perpetual freedom now rested outside of the United States.

For other Pittsburgh blacks, the thought of increased kidnappings was too much to bear. By the end of September, immediately following the passage of the act, around two hundred individuals had left the Pittsburgh area in small bands headed for Canada. Another one hundred would follow by the end of October. Armed with knives, revolvers, and rifles, these individuals pledged to defend each other to death rather than avoid capture. Newspaper reports documented the effects of these exoduses on the city. *The Liberator* noted how one hotel alone lost its entire black staff. The *Pittsburgh Gazette* reported how, in some cases, families were split apart over the question of abandoning homes and property. By 1860, Pittsburgh had lost nearly eight hundred individuals to Canada, while its neighbor Allegheny City reported a loss of over seven hundred.²²⁴

Despite the failure of abolitionists to prevent the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, and the acceptance on the parts of some within the black community that colonization was the best hope for freedom, the years between 1830 and 1860 tell a great

²²³ Campbell, *The Slave Catchers*, 52-53; Blight, *Frederick Douglass*, 268.

²²⁴ *The Liberator*, October 4, 1850; *Pittsburgh Gazette*, September 24, 25, 26, 1850; Burns, "Slavery in Western Pennsylvania," 211; Blackett, R.J.M. "'...Freedom, or the Martyr's Grave': Black Pittsburgh's Aid to the Fugitive Slave," 126; Williams, Irene. "The Operation of the Fugitive Slave Law in Western Pennsylvania," 152. Blackett estimates that roughly 15,000-20,000 blacks migrated to Canada as a result of the Fugitive Slave Act's passage. If Blackett's calculations are correct, African Americans from the Pittsburgh area made up about 7 to 10 percent of those migrants who left for Canada in the decade preceding the Civil War.

deal about how slavery was addressed in Pittsburgh. First, whites and blacks in and around the city proved remarkably adept at assisting fugitive slaves. The very fact that Pittsburgh became a vital hub in the operations of Pennsylvania's Underground Railroad, despite lacking the resources of various branches in the east, demonstrates a high level of cooperation. Additionally, the level of achievement that blacks in the Pittsburgh region were able to reach on their own merits demonstrates a community where antislavery forces dominated. The efforts of Vashon, Reverend Woodson, Delaney, and so many others would not have been possible without a strong work ethic on the parts of individual African Americans, as well as an atmosphere that allowed for such efforts to be carried through. Ultimately, Pittsburgh faced the same challenges regarding the slavery question as every other northern community in the antebellum period. How the city, and its surrounding communities, chose to address those challenges, however, reinforces the need to study the slavery debates in the United States on a local level.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The history of slavery in the United States, and particularly its influences on the Pittsburgh region, is one full of contradictions and complexities. Pennsylvanians were not ambivalent to slavery in the antebellum period, considering it took until the 1840s to see the institution completely disappear within the state. It is also unwise to say that these “northerners” were completely resistant to the South’s peculiar institution in the decades before the Civil War. Sweeping Democratic victories in the state throughout the period represent a population, at least a general white population, ready to compromise on moral principles and questions of slavery in order to preserve national harmony. Businessmen and entrepreneurs, especially in the Ohio River Valley, were unlikely to risk the profitable trade routes that had developed from Pittsburgh to New Orleans.

This research has also brought to light the tense relationship between slavery and liberty that developed across the state, and the nation at large. As the free black population began to rise in cities like Pittsburgh, politicians were quick to act in their own self-interest. The *Pittsburgh Memorial*, written in 1837, blueprints a strong, tight-knit community of African Americans in Pittsburgh as well as highlights the contributions made by its members from taxes paid to the organization of civic-oriented societies. Rather than prove the value of African Americans as hardworking and virtuous members of society, state politicians sought to limit as many black rights as possible. Attempts were made to restrict black movement into and around that state, and the 1838 constitution officially disenfranchised the entire black population. These juxtapositions are complicated, yet necessary to analyze when attempting to understand the impact of

slavery on a community and when determining the factors influencing the slavery debates of the time.

A Complicated History

One factor that greatly affected the slavery debates in Pittsburgh was the gradual emancipation of slaves within the state. The very fact that this emancipation had to be gradual is quite telling. Additionally, slavery was not completely outlawed in the state until 1847. This gradual emancipation reflected a society not yet firm on its stance against slavery as an institution. It is also important to note that different parts of the state reacted differently to slavery. Residence of eastern counties often manumitted their slaves before those living in the south-western counties. As time went on, south-western Pennsylvania, including present-day Allegheny County, held an increasingly larger proportion of the state's slaves. By 1810, thirty years after the initial passage of Pennsylvania's gradual emancipation law, the south-western counties held ninety-four percent of the state's slave population.²²⁵

Controversy over the law began even before its enactment. At least two attempts had to be made in the state legislature in order for gradual emancipation to even have a chance at passage. When the bill was finally maneuvered through the legislature the vote count, 34 to 21, was anything but a unanimous victory for antislavery voices. It appears that the biggest concern for many representatives when considering this bill was questions over property rights. How much might it cost the legislature to entice individuals to manumit their slaves? How would the various parts of the law be enforced? What effects might this law have on the property rights of individuals not living in

²²⁵ Bureau of the Census, *Negro Population in the United States, 1790-1915*, 57; Burns, "Slavery in Western Pennsylvania," 204, 207; Nash and Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees*, 4-5, 32, 74; "An Act to prevent kidnapping....," 208.

Pennsylvania? These questions and more left many representatives uncertain about a gradual emancipation scheme.²²⁶

The law itself began with an idealistic statement about the state legislature's duty to rescue the commonwealth from the chains of slavery, remnants of "the arms and tyranny of Great-Britain..."²²⁷ The practical application of the law was far from being uncontroversial. The act drew clear distinctions between Pennsylvania slaves who had been emancipated by law and fugitives. By clearly outlining the punishments for those who assisted fugitives, the gradual emancipation law was clearly not a piece of abolitionist rhetoric.²²⁸

Another reason why some whites in Pittsburgh were hesitant to support antislavery ideologies was the close economic ties the region had to the South. The linking of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers provided a vital trade route for businessmen in Pittsburgh, which had grown into an industrial city by the early decades of the nineteenth century. With the Appalachian Mountains dividing the state in half, Pittsburgh entrepreneurs were able to find a demanding market for manufactured goods further south. As goods flowed up and down the Mississippi-Ohio network, northern businessmen were more likely to support, or at least turn a blind eye to, the South's peculiar institution.²²⁹

The thriving coal and iron-ore industries that developed around Pittsburgh, due to the area's vast natural resources, contributed significantly to the economic bond that

²²⁶ Nash and Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees*, 101-105; Burns, "Slavery in Western Pennsylvania," 204; Mitchell and Flanders, "An Act for the gradual Abolition of Slavery," 71.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 72.

²²⁹ Binder, *Coal Age Empire*, 42; Switala, *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania*, 87; Reiser, "Pittsburgh, The Hub of Western Commerce, 1800-1850," 121; Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told*, xvii-xxiv, 222-224, 229-233.

developed along the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. After the War of 1812, the Pittsburgh region began supplying coal to demanding markets in the South by the 1830s and 1840s. Pittsburgh coal would dominate the western and southern markets until the outbreak of the Civil War. New Orleans alone received over 168 thousand tons of Pittsburgh coal in 1860.²³⁰

In addition to providing the South with natural resources, Pittsburgh benefitted from the Ohio-Mississippi River trade network via manufacturing. The existence of diverse industries ranging from glass works and paper mills to grist mills and boat yards attests to the economic prosperity of the city. The majority of the items manufactured in Pittsburgh found its way to the South and West. As more of the Deep South's economy came to rely on slave labor, particularly after the widespread use of the cotton gin, a supplier of manufactured goods became critical. Pittsburgh's rise as a booming manufacturing community, coupled with the region's vast array of natural resources, allowed the city to supply the South's demands. In turn, the residents of Pittsburgh who profited from southern trade also helped to indirectly support the South's peculiar institution.²³¹

Another market that developed out of the close geographic proximity of western Pennsylvania to the South was kidnapping. Though the act of kidnapping and selling an African American into bondage was illegal, a black market of sorts developed and thrived in the first half of the nineteenth century. Frederick Douglass perhaps summed up the fugitive slave's situation best when he wrote that "slavecatchers roamed the city's

²³⁰ Binder, *Coal Age Empire*, 42, 45-46, 154-155; Reiser, "Pittsburgh, The Hub of Western Commerce, 1800-1850," 127-129.

²³¹ Binder, *Coal Age Empire*, 42-43; Reiser, "Pittsburgh, The Hub of Western Commerce, 1800-1850," 121, 123, 126.

streets.”²³² The precarious situation for fugitives escaping to northern cities was often not that different than experiences for free blacks. Solomon Northup’s narrative, *Twelve Years a Slave*, reminds its readers that kidnapping was not only a threat to fugitives. To make matters worse, the fugitive slave laws passed by Congress in 1793 and 1850 greatly favored the white slavecatchers and failed to protect the legal rights of African Americans.²³³

Expansion of federal authority to defend the institution of slavery and to limit the rights of blacks was met by massive resistance in the abolitionist community. A general distaste for slavery, and in some cases concern for the constitutional rights of African Americans, helped in establishing a number of measures that sought to counterbalance the federal fugitive slave laws. The first of these so-called “personal liberty” laws was passed by the state legislature in 1788. The new law’s purpose was twofold. First, it attempted to close loopholes in the 1780 gradual emancipation law so that slaveholders could not abuse the system and illegally retain slaves longer than permitted. Second, the law attempted to clearly define, and set the punishments for, kidnapping.²³⁴

Another concern of antislavery forces was the federal government’s willingness to put so much power in the hands of slavecatchers. This led the Pennsylvania legislature, in 1826, to pass a second personal liberty law. This new law meant to streamline the process slavecatchers had to take before transporting a suspected fugitive out of the state. The law also put greater control in the hands of the state to prevent kidnappings. The new process for returning a fugitive slave from Pennsylvania to a southern state after 1826 required the slavecatcher to show enough evidence to receive a warrant for the individual in

²³² Foner, *Gateway to Freedom*, 2.

²³³ Pinsker, “Vigilance in Pennsylvania,” 61-62.

²³⁴ Mitchell and Flanders, “An Act for the gradual Abolition of Slavery,” 52-56.

question. Next, a state judge would review the evidence, hear testimony, and make an ultimate ruling. Southerners argued that the state law put too heavy a burden on the slavecatcher. A Supreme Court ruling on the issue in *Prigg v. Pennsylvania* agreed. The state reacted by completely removing itself from participation in the recapture of fugitive slaves.²³⁵

In addition to restricting slavecatchers and thwarting kidnappers, Pennsylvania's personal liberty laws also extended certain legal rights to free blacks. Individuals would be charged with a misdemeanor, for example, if their attempts to seize a suspected fugitive was done so in a "riotous, violent, tumultuous and unreasonable manner, and so as to disturb or endanger the public peace."²³⁶ State judges were also given the authority to issue writs of habeas corpus when questions over an arrest's legality were presented. These legal protections that were codified by Pennsylvania's personal liberty laws provided influential ammunition for free blacks who, under constant attack from white supremacists, constantly returned to the specific wording of the state's various antislavery acts to defend their own citizenship.²³⁷

Occasionally legal protections were insufficient to protect fugitives from unjust treatment and free blacks from getting kidnapped. In larger cities, vigilance committees were developed to assist fugitives, stop kidnappers, and resist southern slavery in general. Though Pittsburgh was not large enough to have its own vigilance committee, the city did

²³⁵ *Acts of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, passed at a session which was begun and held at the Borough of Harrisburg, on Tuesday the seventh day of December, in the year of our Lord One Thousand Eight Hundred and Twenty-Four...* (Harrisburg: Mowery & Cameron, 1825), 150-152; Foner, *Gateway to Freedom*, 51, 108-109; Irons, *A People's History of the Supreme Court*, 151-152; Pinsker, "Vigilance in Pennsylvania," 44-45; Robert J. Cottrol, "The Thirteenth Amendment and the North's Overlooked Egalitarian Heritage," *National Black Law Journal* 11, no. 2 (1989): 201-206.

²³⁶ "An Act to prevent kidnapping, preserve the public peace, prohibit the exercise of certain powers heretofore exercised by judges, justices of the peace, aldermen and jailors in this commonwealth, and to repeal certain slave laws," 207-208.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 207-208.

develop a network for assisting fugitives and preventing kidnappings. Fugitives often found their way to Pittsburgh in one of two ways: via the Underground Railroad from Uniontown or by accompanying southern businessmen. Once a fugitive was in the city, free blacks would often rush the individual to either the Bethel AME Church or to John Vashon's City Bath. From there, fugitives were sent across the river to Allegheny City where Charles Avery would see them farther north.²³⁸

In addition to operating an extensive branch of Pennsylvania's Underground Railroad, African Americans worked hard to save fugitives and prevent kidnappings when the laws failed them. On numerous occasions, the Pittsburgh African American community was able to intervene and protect free blacks from being tricked into slavery. In every instance, a large group of citizens assembled and held off the slavecatcher while the victims escaped. In other cases, where the law supported the slavecatcher, antislavery activists would raise funds and buy the fugitives their freedom. John Vashon paid \$200 dollars to a slaveholder in 1850, for example, after it was discovered that a fugitive, George White, had escaped from Virginia and was working as an apprentice in his Pittsburgh barbershop.²³⁹

As the peculiar institution gradually disappeared in Pennsylvania throughout the 1830s and 1840s a negative correlation developed, particularly between slavery and liberty. Many whites grew concerned that the growing free black population would soon

²³⁸ Switala, *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania*, 90-94; Horton and Horton, *In Hope of Liberty*, 150; Hanchett, "George Boyer Vashon, 1824-1878: Black Educator, Poet, Fighter for Equal Rights Part One," 205; Griffler, *Frontline of Freedom*, 43; Blackett, R.J.M. "'...Freedom, or the Martyr's Grave': Black Pittsburgh's Aid to the Fugitive Slave," 129-130; "Free At Last? Slavery in Pittsburgh in the 18th and 19th Centuries," University Library System, University of Pittsburgh, Available from <http://exhibit.library.pitt.edu/freetatlast/abolition.html>, accessed January 20, 2019.

²³⁹ *Pittsburgh Gazette*, May 30, 1853, August 12, 1853; *The Anti-Slavery Bugle*, June 11, 1853; *Pittsburgh Daily Morning Post*, May 31, 1853; *Pittsburgh Commercial Journal*, May 31, 1853; *Pittsburgh Evening Chronicle*, August 12, 1853; Blackett, "'...Freedom, or the Martyr's Grave'," 131; Switala, *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania*, 91-92.

outnumber them at the voting booth. To address these concerns, white supremacists and doughface politicians worked hand-in-hand to steadily strip blacks of their legal and political rights. The racist arguments used by both groups to defend new measures, such as black disenfranchisement, played right into the hands of the South's slaveocracy. Now racist ideologies, coupled with growing economic ties, would unite the nation at the expense of the black community.

The initial concern of white supremacists was to keep the free black population from growing. As early as 1831, new bills were introduced to the legislature that attempted to prohibit free African Americans from moving into the state. Although the bill failed to pass, it did offer some troublesome burdens for those African Americans already living in the state. According to the failed 1831 bill, black residents wishing to move from what part of the state to another would be required to show a proof of residence, essentially proving that one was not from outside the commonwealth. Plans like this, alongside racist ideologies, gave whites new ways of thinking about black citizenship. It would only be a short time before this citizenship would be practically taken away from the black community.²⁴⁰

In June of 1837, a motion was made by John Sterigere of Montgomery County and Benjamin Martin of Philadelphia at Pennsylvania's constitutional convention to eliminate black suffrage by adding the word "white" to the state's list of voting qualifications. The motion caused a great deal of commotion at the convention, and across the state as a whole, as citizens debated the role of African Americans in politics. Sterigere and Martin argued that many states, such as Maryland and New Jersey, had

²⁴⁰ Smith, "The End of Black Voting Rights in Pennsylvania: African Americans and the Constitutional Convention of 1837-1838," 282.

already disenfranchised blacks and since they could not run for, or serve in, public office in Pennsylvania, allowing them to vote would be hypocritical.²⁴¹

Some proponents of black disenfranchisement went so far as to claim that African Americans were not “freemen” and, therefore, should never have been allowed to vote in the commonwealth. Their argument was defended by the state Supreme Court who ruled in the *Hobbes v. Fogg* case of 1838 that though blacks were “free men” (not literal slaves) they were not “freemen” (active citizens). Concern over growing black political power was reinforced by local elections in Bucks County in the fall of 1837, when it was believed that black sympathizers won narrow victories due to African Americans casting ballots. A petition of concern by white Bucks County residents presented to the convention by Sterigere proved effective in modifying the constitution’s election clause to include “white” as a voting requirement.²⁴²

It took a great deal of influence to convince moderate representatives at the convention to support black disenfranchisement. Initially relying on racist appeals, the white supremacists saw the measure fail in an early vote. By 1838, however, a successful vote in the convention solidified the measure in the state’s new constitution. The proposal’s success came, in part, because of the white supremacists’ shifting arguments. Racist ideology was coupled with southern sympathies and calls for sectional unity.

²⁴¹ Agg, *Proceedings and Debates of the Convention of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to propose Amendments to the Constitution, commenced and held at Harrisburg, on the Second Day of May, 1837*, vol. 2, 472, 477-478; Wood, “‘A Sacrifice on the Alter of Slavery’: Doughface Politics and Black Disenfranchisement in Pennsylvania, 1837-1838,” 81, 84.

²⁴² Agg, *Proceedings and Debates of the Convention of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to propose Amendments to the Constitution, commenced and held at Harrisburg, on the Second Day of May, 1837*, vol. 6, 46; *The Liberator*, November 10, 17, 1837; Smith, “The End of Black Voting Rights in Pennsylvania: African Americans and the Constitutional Convention of 1837-1838,” 294; Smith, “The Pittsburgh Memorial: A Forgotten Document of Pittsburgh History,” 107; Wood, “‘A Sacrifice on the Alter of Slavery’: Doughface Politics and Black Disenfranchisement in Pennsylvania, 1837-1838,” 84, 89, 101.

Soon, black suffrage was connected to radical abolitionism. This changed proved enough to convince many moderates that black disenfranchisement was necessary.²⁴³

H.G. Rogers of Allegheny County stood firmly opposed to black disenfranchisement. “Universal suffrage and general education,” he claimed, were to be the “broad and enduring pillars” of Pennsylvania’s government. Rogers’s arguments were reinforced by a petition from the black citizens of Pittsburgh, known as the *Pittsburgh Memorial*. The *Memorial* had been drafted by the free black community of Pittsburgh as soon as word of potential black disenfranchisement reached the city. It first sought to catalogue the long history of universal liberty, quoting both the Declaration of Independence and the state’s 1780 gradual emancipation law. Additionally, the properties owned, and taxes paid, by black community members were listed. Though the *Pittsburgh Memorial* made strong moral and practical arguments, they failed to outweigh concerns of some over the nation’s growing sectional divide.²⁴⁴

Black disenfranchisement and the gradual eradication of legal protections for African Americans increased in the 1840s and 1850s as slavery became a central issue on the national stage. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, an attempt to quiet radical southerners who fiercely resisted the Underground Railroad, greatly reduced black legal rights. By presenting an affidavit to a federal marshal, slaveholders could quickly recapture

²⁴³ Ibid., 75-76, 79, 81, 84-86, 96, 106; Smith, “The End of Black Voting Rights in Pennsylvania: African Americans and the Constitutional Convention of 1837-1838,” 282, 279.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 287-288; Smith, “The Pittsburgh Memorial: A Forgotten Document of Pittsburgh History,” 106, 109-111; Agg, *Proceedings and Debates of the Convention of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to propose Amendments to the Constitution, commenced and held at Harrisburg, on the Second Day of May, 1837*, vol. 3, 700; Wood, “‘A Sacrifice on the Alter of Slavery’: Doughface Politics and Black Disenfranchisement in Pennsylvania, 1837-1838,” 87.

fugitives, who were denied the right to a fair trial. The federal law also set harsh punishments, imprisonment and fines, on any individual caught aiding a fugitive.²⁴⁵

Even before the passage of the infamous Fugitive Slave Act, pro-southern judges had already been chipping away at African American legal rights. District Judge Walter H. Lowrie ruled in favor of a Virginia slaveholder who had been arrested for the “tumultuous and riotous arrest of a slave.”²⁴⁶ Another case, this time decided by Supreme Court Justice Robert C. Grier serving on the U.S. Circuit Court in Pittsburgh, also ruled in favor of the slaveholder. In both cases judges refused to bend to local public sentiment in hopes of easing sectional tensions.²⁴⁷ There was no doubt, *The North Star* argued, that the judicial system of the United States was compromised of “pledged minions of the slave power.”²⁴⁸

Antislavery Influences

The political and legal battles that were waged over slavery in the decades before the Civil War reflect a nation deeply divided and not ignorant of the juxtaposition between liberty and bondage for African Americans. Abolitionists, both black and white, fought white supremacist ideologies in the courts and on the streets. It was this group that ultimately prevailed in the slavery debates, but not after a long-fought battle in the decades prior to the Civil War.

Abolitionist speakers sent by the New England Antislavery Society to western Pennsylvania found the Pittsburgh region rather accepting to antislavery rhetoric.

²⁴⁵ Blackett, *Making Freedom: The Underground Railroad and the Politics of Slavery*, 36, 42; Campbell, *The Slave Catchers*, 15, 23-24, 49, 55, 63-66; Hamilton, *Prologue to Conflict*, 166-169.

²⁴⁶ Wood, “‘A Sacrifice on the Alter of Slavery’: Doughface Politics and Black Disenfranchisement in Pennsylvania, 1837-1838,” 75.

²⁴⁷ Blackett, “‘...Freedom, or the Martyr’s Grave’,” 122-124.

²⁴⁸ *The North Star*, February 18, 1848.

Frederick Douglass remarked how blacks in the city, particularly John B. Vashon and Martin Delaney, contributed significantly to the abolitionist cause. Delaney even became a contributing editor to Douglass's paper, *The North Star*. Vashon, aside from coordinating Douglass's speaking engagements in the city, also worked closely with William Lloyd Garrison. The letters that the two shared clearly demonstrates a sense of comradery and a level of trust that both men used to further the antislavery cause.²⁴⁹

As antislavery rhetoric spread through western Pennsylvania, local abolitionists began to organize on a level not seen before. The city was home to groups such as the Union Anti-Slavery Society and the Anti-Slavery Society of Pittsburgh, each with their own goals and strategies to deal with the country's peculiar institutions. Abolitionist ideologies were also spread through newspapers. In Pittsburgh alone, no less than eight antislavery newspapers reached thousands of readers before 1860. The city also produced numerous philanthropists, like Charles Avery, who contributed small fortunes to educating free blacks, resisting slavery, and assisting fugitives.²⁵⁰

One of Charles Avery's greatest contributions to the African American community was the Allegheny Institute and Mission Church (later renamed Avery College). The school provided a vast array of services to its pupils including vocational training, spiritual guidance, and literacy programs. The institute served hundreds of African Americans in the Pittsburgh region at a two-dollar-per-term tuition rate. Black

²⁴⁹ Meyers, "The Early Antislavery Agency System in Pennsylvania 1833-1837," 62-64, 66-67; *The Liberator*, December 14, 21, 28, 1833; David Blight, *Frederick Douglass*, 135-136, 185-193, 268; William Lloyd Garrison to John B. Vashon, August 15, 1832, December 8, 1832, July 27, 1847, in "Letters of William Lloyd Garrison to John B. Vashon," 39-40; Delaney and Levine, *Martin R. Delaney*, 38, 69, 73; Glasco, *The WPA History of the Negro in Pittsburgh*, 58, 63.

²⁵⁰ Switala, *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania*, 88-89; Blackett, "...Freedom, or the Martyr's Grave," 129; Burns, "Slavery in Western Pennsylvania," 209; "Free At Last? Slavery in Pittsburgh in the 18th and 19th Centuries," University Library System, University of Pittsburgh, Available from <http://exhibit.library.pitt.edu/freetatlast/abolition.html>, accessed January 20, 2019.

community leaders also participated as educators and directors. John Vashon's son George, for example, served as president of the school. In addition to an educational establishment catering to African Americans, Avery left over \$300,000 via his will to the improvement of the black community.²⁵¹

Although financial support was desperately needed by abolitionists trying to assist fugitives on the road or in courtrooms, most activists were not as financially stable as Avery. As a result, most abolitionists found other ways to contribute to the antislavery cause. Pittsburgh's tight-knit African American community, over two thousand strong by 1850, worked diligently to provide for the spiritual, educational, and social needs of its members. The center of this community was the Bethel AME Church. The church provided its members with spiritual relief at a critical time, while also playing a secular role in the community. The church was a critical stop along the city's Underground Railroad route, allowing fugitives to rest, obtain new clothing, and stock up on supplies. Without the unifying element of the church, Pittsburgh's black community could not have been as effective as it was in combatting slavery.²⁵²

Another school, the African Education Society, worked alongside Avery College "for the purpose of dispersing the moral gloom, that has long hung around us [African

²⁵¹ Avery, *The Last Will and Testament of Rev. Charles Avery*, 4,7; Switala, *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania*, 93; Belfour, "Charles Avery: Early Pittsburgh Philanthropist," 19-21; Hanchett, "George Boyer Vashon, 1824-1878: Black Educator, Poet, Fighter for Equal Rights Part Two," 333-334; "Free At Last? Slavery in Pittsburgh in the 18th and 19th Centuries," University Library System, University of Pittsburgh, Available from <http://exhibit.library.pitt.edu/freetatlast/abolition.html>, accessed January 20, 2019.

²⁵² Blackett, "...Freedom, or the Martyr's Grave'," 118-120, 125-130; Switala, *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania*, 87-88; Horton and Horton, *In Hope of Liberty*, 83; "Free At Last? Slavery in Pittsburgh in the 18th and 19th Centuries," University Library System, University of Pittsburgh, Available from <http://exhibit.library.pitt.edu/freetatlast/abolition.html>, accessed January 20, 2019.

Americans]...”²⁵³ The growing educational opportunities in Pittsburgh for African Americans, coupled with the unifying effects of the church, created a community of active black citizens. Citizens who would not only be willing to exercise their right to petition the government, as can be seen with the *Pittsburgh Memorial*, but who also displayed a desire to be active and engaged in community life. Black residents in Pittsburgh operated businesses, paid taxes, and belonged to social and educational organizations. This put them at direct odds with the slave labor system that had solidified in the South.²⁵⁴

The educational, spiritual, and social organizations that were developed for African Americans in antebellum Pittsburgh allowed for numerous individuals to play significant roles in the nation’s slavery debates. The Reverend Lewis Woodson, for example, devoted his time to operating the African Education Society and serving as pastor at the Bethel AME Church. Woodson believed strongly in a philosophy of self-improvement and thought that blacks alone could improve their condition through hard work and dedication.²⁵⁵

Two of Reverend Woodson’s students, Martin Delaney and George Vashon, also demonstrate how African Americans from Pittsburgh could use their community resources to propel them into the national debate over slavery. Delaney owed his earliest education to the African Education Society, which then allowed him to study medicine and operate a newspaper, *The Mystery*, throughout much of the 1840s. Delaney also

²⁵³ *Pittsburgh Gazette*, February 10, 1832, quoted in Davis, “Pittsburgh’s Negro Troops in the Civil War,” 101-102.

²⁵⁴ Blackett, “...Freedom, or the Martyr’s Grave’,” 120; Glasco, *The WPA History of the Negro in Pittsburgh*, 55.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 56; Switala, *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania*, 92; “Free At Last? Slavery in Pittsburgh in the 18th and 19th Centuries,” University Library System, University of Pittsburgh, Available from <http://exhibit.library.pitt.edu/freetatlast/abolition.html>, accessed January 20, 2019.

became close friends with Frederick Douglass and even worked to spread the antislavery message through Douglass's own newspaper. George Vashon, like Delaney, studied under Reverend Woodson before travelling to Ohio to attend law school. Unfortunately for Vashon, Allegheny County offered him no hope of becoming a practicing lawyer. After working a for a time in Haiti promoting *The North Star*, Vashon moved to New York where he worked alongside Douglass promoting the antislavery cause.²⁵⁶

Pittsburgh's Legacy

The debates between white supremacists, colonizationists, and white and black abolitionists in antebellum Pittsburgh reflect the struggles of a nation on the verge of crisis. Westward expansion, intensified by the granting of lands from Mexico to the United States in the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, put pressures on the growing sectional divide. Southern politicians hoped to see the West open to slavery, while many northerners saw the expansion of the peculiar institution as a threat to the young republic.

Numerous attempts from the federal government, including the Missouri Compromise and the Kansas-Nebraska Act, did little to ease sectional tensions. Pittsburgh Democrats condemned abolitionist rhetoric and predicted that further hostilities would only result in "...discord, disunion, and civil war..."²⁵⁷ State and national Democratic politicians were quick to associate abolitionism with disunion. By connecting southern appeasement with national unity, Democrats were able to convince

²⁵⁶ Glasco, *The WPA History of the Negro in Pittsburgh*, 56; Delaney and Levine, *Martin R. Delaney*, 25; Switala, *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania*, 89; Porter, "The Organized Educational Activities of Negro Literary Societies, 1828-1846," 573; Blackett, "...Freedom, or the Martyr's Grave'," 118; Hanchett, "George Boyer Vashon, 1824-1878: Black Educator, Poet, Fighter for Equal Rights Part One," 206-209, 212.

²⁵⁷ Burns, "Slavery in Western Pennsylvania," 210. See also Davis, "The Impact of British Abolitionism on American Sectionalism," in Finkelman and Kennon, *In the Shadow of Freedom*, 20; Zarefsky, "Debating Slavery By Proxy: The Texas Annexation Controversy," in Finkelman and Kennon, *In the Shadow of Freedom*, 125; Stathis, *Landmark Debates in Congress*, 109-110.

many moderates that fighting to abolish slavery would come at too heavy a cost. By 1850, and the passage of the so-called Great Compromise, most moderate white Pennsylvanians were willing to accept some form of protection for slavery in return for stable relations between the North and South.²⁵⁸

Colonization proved to be one outlet for moderates wishing to oppose slavery while still respecting southern claims to the peculiar institution. Although there were some individuals, including a few African Americans, who supported colonization on the belief that it was the best hope for blacks to achieve political and social advancement, it was primarily used as a tool for white supremacists. A connection was quickly made by members of local and national colonization societies between colonization and a decline in sectional tensions. Not only would the efforts to transport African Americans outside of the United States allow for less economic competition for whites, many white supremacists believed, but they would also set the institution of slavery on a path of ultimate extinction.²⁵⁹

Colonization efforts in Pittsburgh failed to take a strong hold after a local chapter of the Colonization Society was established in 1826. This early attempt at colonization in western Pennsylvania was more moderate than most others across the state, however, as it began as a hybrid organization with the antislavery movement and held members like Charles Avery who worked tirelessly to improve the condition of blacks. The high level of organization found in Pittsburgh's black community also played a role in securing the

²⁵⁸ Wood, "'A Sacrifice on the Alter of Slavery': Doughface Politics and Black Disenfranchisement in Pennsylvania, 1837-1838," 106; Blackett, *Making Freedom: The Underground Railroad and the Politics of Slavery*, 62; Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, 202-203, 237-238, 254-255; Campbell, *The Slave Catchers: Enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, 1850-1860*, 65, 84, 92.

²⁵⁹ Tomek, *Colonization and Its Discontents: Emancipation, Emigration, and Antislavery in Antebellum Pennsylvania*, chapters 1, 2, EBSCOhost; Foner, *Gateway to Freedom*, 52; Carey, *Letters on the Colonization Society: And Its Probable Results...*, 12-13.

local colonization society's demise.²⁶⁰ John B. Vashon, with the support of his close friend William Lloyd Garrison, worked tirelessly to encourage blacks to resist the temptation of abandoning the United States. Garrison congratulated Vashon as early as 1834 on his work that had "effectually crippled" the area's colonization movement.²⁶¹

Pittsburgh's close geographical proximity to the South and tight-knit free black community helped ensure that the region's most influential role in the slavery debates would center on the Underground Railroad. Although impossible to calculate exactly, a significant number of fugitives passed through the city along a relatively organized route. The area's Underground Railroad represented the broad spectrum of antislavery ideologies and utilized businesses and churches, whites and blacks, lawyers and farmers. Individuals found their own unique ways to contribute. Wealthy merchants, such as Charles Avery, often provided legal counsel to fugitives who were caught. John Vashon and Reverend Woodson provided fugitives with work and the necessities required to continue travelling north.²⁶²

It is important to remember, despite the success of Pittsburgh's Underground Railroad, that it did not always reflect a nation seeking to improve the conditions of African Americans. By the early 1850s, for example, Pittsburgh's Martin Delaney had given up hope on the United States. He led an expedition to the Niger Valley, hoping to

²⁶⁰ "Free At Last? Slavery in Pittsburgh in the 18th and 19th Centuries," University Library System, University of Pittsburgh, Available from <http://exhibit.library.pitt.edu/freetatlast/abolition.html>, accessed January 20, 2019; Switala, *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania*, 88; Carey, *Letters on the Colonization Society: And Its Probable Results...*, 5-7; Smith, "The End of Black Voting Rights in Pennsylvania: African Americans and the Constitutional Convention of 1837-1838," 285-286.

²⁶¹ William Lloyd Garrison to John B. Vashon, March 22, 1834, in "Letters of William Lloyd Garrison to John B. Vashon," 38.

²⁶² Griffler, *Frontline of Freedom*, 1-2, 6; Campbell, *The Slave Catchers: Enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, 1850-1860*, 6; Blackett, *Making Freedom*, 72; Foner, *Gateway to Freedom*, 4; Pinsker, "Vigilance in Pennsylvania: Underground Railroad Activities in the Keystone State, 1837-1861," 4, 23-24; Burns, "Slavery in Western Pennsylvania," 211. Estimates range from a few hundred fugitives prior to the Civil War to upwards of 100-500 fugitives per year from 1830 to 1860.

find a suitable location to found a colony. The passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, and the later *Dred Scott* decision, had made it clear that national politics would favor the South's interpretation of citizenship and property rights. Although Delaney did return to the United States, it would not be until the outbreak of the Civil War when he received renewed hope for the African American community.²⁶³

Despite the eradication of slavery in the United States, and constitutional amendments seeking to solidify the legal and political rights of African Americans, the Civil War and Reconstruction eras provided merely a stepping-stone for what Delaney and so many others had envisioned. It would take another century, and another resistance movement, to uproot the racist ideologies that cemented a second-class citizenship for African Americans. This struggle of slavery and freedom helps to illustrate the history of the United States, yet also tells stories more local and personal. To understand these stories, one must analyze the individuals and their actions. Local people and events are often swept up in the broad strokes of a nation's history. To best understand that history, especially when dealing with a topic as divisive and complex as slavery, one must be ready to analyze local events and reactions, study individuals, and listen to their own experiences. It is with this approach that a more realistic and complete history can be constructed.

²⁶³ Horton and Horton, *In Hope of Liberty*, 261, Hanchett, "George Boyer Vashon, 1824-1878: Black Educator, Poet, Fighter for Equal Rights Part One," 216; Mehlinger, "The Attitude of the Free Negro Toward African Colonization," 296; Pinsker, "Vigilance in Pennsylvania: Underground Railroad Activities in the Keystone State, 1837-1861," 38.

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“Medal of Honor Legacy: World War II,” Professional Development Seminar courtesy of Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge, 2018

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“Thoughtful Professional Development & Practical Resources for Educators,” The Thoughtful Classroom, courtesy of Brookville Area School District, 2016-17

“Our American Experiment: The Constitution in Primary Documents and Pedagogy,” James Madison Legacy Project, courtesy of the Center for Civic Education and Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge, 2016-17

Service Learning Course, Clarion University of Pennsylvania, courtesy of AmeriCorps, 2014-15

“Teaching Social Studies in an Era of Accountability,” Pennsylvania Council for the Social Studies (PCSS) 60th Annual Conference, 2013

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