Introduction

In early 1840, an enslaved man named Madison Washington escaped from Virginia and made his way northward all the way to Upper Canada (modern-day Ontario). A success story of the so-called Underground Railroad, he lived for several months with Hiram Wilson, a white missionary who had become famous among anti-slavery advocates for his tireless work on behalf of fugitive slaves arriving in Canada during the 1830s. Now a free man under British law, Madison Washington nevertheless found that he could not live in freedom without his wife, who remained enslaved in Virginia. So, Washington decided to reverse the perilous route he had traveled to secure his freedom and returned to the United States in 1841.

Sadly, his rescue attempt failed. Washington was re-captured and sold to a slave-trader who put him on board a fast-moving brig, the *Creole*, alongside 134 other enslaved men, women, and children. The ship was engaged in the flourishing U.S. domestic slave trade, a lucrative business that transported thousands of enslaved people from states like Virginia in the Upper South to regions of intensive cotton and sugar production in the expanding Deep South and Southwest. The *Creole* was scheduled to carry Madison Washington and the rest of its enslaved human "cargo" from Richmond, Virginia, along the Atlantic coast to New Orleans, Louisiana.[1]

But the slave ship did not reach its destination. On November 7, 1841, Washington led nineteen of the slaves aboard the *Creole* in a violent rebellion. They overpowered the ship's crew and commandeered the vessel. Once in command, Washington and his compatriots demanded that the *Creole* be sailed into the port of Nassau on the British island of

New Providence (the Bahamas). Washington knew from his time in Canada that Great Britain, which had abolished slavery over the four-year period from 1834 to 1838, maintained a policy of freeing and protecting enslaved men and women who were able to cross into British territory. And this is exactly what happened. British officials in the city of Nassau immediately freed all but the nineteen leaders of the shipboard rebellion, and they eventually freed the leaders as well.[2]

While little is known about their lives after they engineered their emancipation, Madison Washington and the freed men, women, and children aboard the *Creole* were not soon forgotten. The *Creole* rebellion unfolded at the same time that abolitionism was picking up steam in the United States, with anti-slavery activists pitting themselves against powerful slaveholding interests in an ongoing battle to sway American public opinion toward their cause. The drama of a seafaring rebellion led by a self-liberated slave captured the imaginations of anti-slavery advocates, and the fact that British officials opted to free everyone on board in accordance with British law caused an uproar among southern slaveholders.[3] For American observers both for and against slavery, the event proved in no uncertain terms that the international borders separating slavery and freedom were both permeable and politically significant.

A decade later, in 1851, a free-born African American woman in her late twenties named Mary Ann Shadd left her family home in Pennsylvania and resettled in Canada West (formerly Upper Canada) after the enactment of the infamous 1850 Fugitive Slave Act. She was horrified by what the new law meant for the safety of free African Americans and for the future of slavery in the United States. The Fugitive Slave Act deputized all U.S. citizens to assist slave-catchers on the hunt for self-emancipated men and women, and it denied African Americans accused of being slaves the ability to contest their legal status in court. An expansion of the federal government's commitment to protecting southern enslavers' human "property," the Fugitive Slave Act put self-emancipated people in more danger than ever, and it escalated the threat that free black northerners might be kidnapped and sold illegally into southern bondage. Like thousands of other black northerners, Shadd decided to leave for Canada, where she knew that she would be safe from the predations of American

enslavers and that British laws would not discriminate based on the color of her skin.[4]

Once across the U.S.–Canada border, Shadd proudly claimed an identity as a British subject and encouraged others to do the same. Yet from her new home, she still continued her tireless work as an activist against slavery in the United States. Like many free middle-class northerners, she espoused the idea of "racial uplift," the belief that African Americans' material and moral progress would diminish white racism and raise the social and political standing of African Americans in the United States. She believed, therefore, that African Americans needed opportunities to demonstrate their capacity to be free and equal members of society – and that they could do so only as British subjects.[5]

In Upper Canada, Shadd became a prominent newspaper editor (the first African American woman to do so) and used her fiery editorials to advocate for the abolition of American slavery and for the political advantages of black emigration away from the United States. She frequently compared her new home in Canada with other places where slavery had been outlawed in order to assess where African Americans could live most comfortably and fight American slavery most effectively. Weighing Canada against the British West Indies, Liberia, Haiti, Mexico, and South America, Shadd encouraged African Americans to join her in Upper Canada because it guaranteed them "impartial freedom" – meaning that they would be equal in the eyes of the law and accorded all the rights of British subjects. She believed that this distinction made the British province "the only ground on which [African Americans] can make despots feel the force of their words and actions," and a place from which activists could exert a "reflex influence" upon slavery in the United States.[6]

In other words, Shadd saw Upper Canada as far more than just an escape hatch from the United States in the wake of the Fugitive Slave Act. She saw it as a model for what it looked like when a powerful government was willing to guarantee the legal equality of all residents, and she saw it as a secure base camp from which black men and women could pursue socio-political change in the United States.

Mary Ann Shadd's anti-slavery emigrationism and Madison Washington's dramatic, transnational odyssey from slavery to freedom illustrate the significance of international "free soil" within the American

anti-slavery movement of the nineteenth century. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, diverse anti-slavery efforts transformed Haiti, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Upper Canada, Mexico, some newly independent South American nations, Great Britain, and the British West Indies into places where anti-slave trade legislation and emancipation laws either immediately or gradually freed enslaved populations. These locations became "international free-soil havens" – places with the potential to free and protect self-emancipated men and women and offer equal standing for free African American emigrants.

Weaving together themes of black mobility, information circulation, jurisdictional dispute, and transnational abolitionism, this book investigates the individual and collective influence that these international free-soil havens had on the American anti-slavery movement over the fifty-year period between 1813 and 1863. Their influence was profound, variable, and complex. Over time, international free-soil havens developed into practical models of black freedom, offered concrete destinations where free and self-emancipated people could anticipate legal protection and equal standing, and became potent symbols of liberty in the fight against American slavery. Not only did they provide enslaved men and women, free people of color, and black and white anti-slavery advocates alternative possibilities to slavery and racism in the United States, they helped Americans develop and articulate ideas about national character, who belonged, and under what conditions. Free-soil havens abroad formed the international stage upon which the fight to end American slavery took place.

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First identified by historians Sue Peabody and Keila Grinberg in 2011, the "principle of free soil" created significant but often overlooked boundaries between slavery and freedom on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean.[7] Unrelated to the American "Free-Soil Party" of the mid-nineteenth century, the concept of free soil in this context encompasses a far greater expanse of time and a much wider geographic field.[8] At surface level, it refers to places where slavery had already been curtailed or abolished, and where slaves could expect to be freed upon crossing the border. But this gets us only so far. Neither the characteristics nor the significance of

international free-soil havens were static at any point in the nineteenth century. They were characterized by different forms of government, various approaches to anti-slavery legislation, differing degrees of anti-slavery sentiment, and varying levels of geopolitical power with which to police and enforce anti-slavery borders against neighboring pro-slavery interests. They also had complex internal social, political, and economic currents that shaped and changed them over time, just as the evolution of domestic politics in the United States regularly re-shaped the geography of slavery and black Americans' access to legal rights and protection.

Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, international free-soil havens were defined in different ways by different people in response to changing social conditions and evolving geopolitical relationships within and beyond the United States. Over time, international free-soil havens developed specific and distinct reputations among slaves, free black activists, and white anti-slavery advocates for their potential to harbor African Americans, influence the fight against U.S. slavery, and provide socio-economic opportunities for free people. Yet these reputations were always contingent. How different people viewed international free-soil havens and their relevance to the American anti-slavery project shifted in relationship to individuals' legal standing, the changing context of U.S. race relations, conditions on the ground in different free-soil locales, and the evolving landscape of slavery and freedom around the Atlantic.

For self-emancipated slaves, international free-soil havens offered destinations where, as fugitives from bondage, they expected to be freed and protected by local laws and international treaties. Enslaved people like Madison Washington frequently had some awareness of the evolving geography of freedom beyond the United States. In some cases, they learned of free-soil havens directly from enslavers who expressed frustration over their inability to retrieve or extradite lost "property" from across specific borders. In other cases, they learned from people who had personal experience or who had access to information. Escapees themselves were often able to pass along critical details about where to go, as well as who to trust and what perils to watch out for. A newspaper left where a literate slave might read it could become a conduit to the wider world. Individuals enslaved or employed in the overland and maritime

transportation industries linking slave-based economies in the South and Southwest to northern and Caribbean markets could also connect enslaved workers to news and information. These nodes of communication and information exchange often took the form of rumor in enslaved communities, helping to create what historian Phillip Troutman has identified as "geopolitical literacy" among enslaved people.[9]

Still, the enormous risk of running away ensured that far-flung havens of freedom remained little more than a dream for the vast majority of enslaved African Americans. Furthermore, the majority of those who did escape bondage remained in the United States, either in free states north of the Ohio River or in urban spaces where they hoped to avoid recapture.[10] Nonetheless, enslaved people crossed international free-soil borders regularly throughout the nineteenth century. For some, international free-soil borders were simply closer than domestic free states, as was the case for enslaved people in the southwest who absconded across the border between the United States and Mexico. For others, especially in the wake of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, the increased security that specific international free-soil havens provided made the longer journey worth it. Whether they remained in bondage, escaped to free spaces within the United States, or crossed international borders, enslaved and self-emancipated people viewed international free-soil havens as places of hope and freedom that interrupted the geography of slaveholders' power.

For free African Americans, international free-soil havens meant something a bit different. First and foremost, they offered possible alternatives to the oppression and discrimination that people of color faced in the United States. Beginning in the early nineteenth century, it seemed increasingly clear to many free black northerners that the United States and its white citizenry remained staunchly opposed to extending the promises and protections of the U.S. Constitution to people of color – despite African Americans' ongoing efforts and activism to define themselves into the fabric of citizenship.[11] International free-soil havens, by contrast, seemed unburdened by the social and civic weight of slavery in the United States. As a result, they became sites for the development and trial of a range of political, social, and economic ideas related to black liberty and empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the nineteenth century, free-soil havens abroad inspired international black trade networks, alternative crop economies designed to undercut produce grown by slave labor, and the evolution of black nationalist thought and enterprise.[12] Particularly in moments of social and political rupture, like when states passed laws restricting black people's rights or when Congress passed the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, free African Americans engaged in deep and sustained discussion about where they might go in order to experience meaningful freedom with equal standing before the law. Whether they left or, like the vast majority of free African Americans, stayed to fight for equality in the United States, free black people throughout the nineteenth century recognized international free-soil havens as a powerful force in the fight for racial justice.

Because international free-soil havens provided examples of black liberation – both as spaces where slavery had been immediately or gradually abolished and as places where free and self-emancipated people might experience liberty unfettered by the threat of capture or enslavement – anti-slavery advocates and reformers also saw them as key sites of study and social engineering. When neighboring empires and republics passed anti-slavery legislation and abolition laws, American anti-slavery advocates took note and took action. Black and white activists alike assiduously observed and assessed international free-soil havens in order to demonstrate the practicability of emancipation, and they evaluated the outcomes of other governments' emancipation processes in order to formulate specific arguments regarding how to dismantle slavery in the United States. These places, they argued, showed that the abolition of slavery was realistic, safe, and unlikely to cause the long-term economic damage forecasted by enslavers and their supporters.

Anti-slavery advocates and reformers also saw international free-soil havens as places to identify and even cultivate the legal practices and social interventions they believed would best support black freedom. They sent investigatory missions to places where slavery had been dismantled, offered philanthropic assistance to black communities, and advocated for black emigrants with local, regional, and imperial governments. Significantly, while evaluating and comparing the living conditions and socio-economic prospects facing people of African descent in disparate free-soil environments, black and white observers often

reached contradictory conclusions about what practices and interventions were paramount for safeguarding black freedom – and what black freedom should even entail. African Americans tended to focus on all aspects of civic life, from access to education and economic opportunity to voting rights and the ability to hold public office. White observers tended to focus on administrative and legal mechanisms that guaranteed equality under the law, but not much else.

Although they did not always agree on what made international free-soil havens truly meaningful spaces of freedom, black and white anti-slavery advocates did agree that positive reports about the outcome of black freedom would contribute to the anti-slavery cause. Reflecting what historian Ibram X. Kendi has described as "uplift suasion," they believed that evidence of good behavior, industriousness, and success in freedom had the capacity to diminish racism and white opposition to abolition.[13] Laboring to prove what black people were capable of if the fetters of slavery and racism were removed, anti-slavery activists circulated their copious observations and conclusions with one another through the anti-slavery press. In the process, they defined the specific attributes that they believed made free soil "free" and that they believed would best contribute to emancipation if implemented in the United States.

The phenomenon of finding freedom across international borders was not new, however. Long before the term "free soil" entered the anti-slavery lexicon, knowledge that political borders and boundaries could be crossed in a gambit to secure one's freedom was already a familiar element of slavery's geopolitical landscape. In eighteenth-century North America, imperial powers held out the promise of freedom to one another's slaves in the hopes of undermining each other's economic and social security. During the ill-fated 1739 Stono Rebellion, for example, enslaved men and women marched from Britain's South Carolina colony toward neighboring Spanish Florida, responding to a well-known Spanish promise that freedom and protection would be granted to British slaves who converted to Catholicism.[14] Thirty-six years later, Dunmore's Proclamation of 1775 inspired thousands of "American" slaves to cross British military lines in an effort to secure their freedom during the American Revolution.[15]

It was in the aftermath of the political revolutions severing imperial powers from their overseas colonies, however, that international free-soil borders emerged as truly salient reference points within the geopolitical landscape of Atlantic slavery. As American, Haitian, and Spanish American revolutions began to redraw political borders in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, they created a growing and evolving map of freedom based on the new nations' varying commitments to the idea of universal liberty.[16] Simultaneously, the loss of thirteen mainland colonies encouraged British abolitionists to pursue anti-slave trade projects that focused on ending the transatlantic slave trade, including establishing a black colony in Sierra Leone.[17] These changing circumstances all contributed to the emergence of international free-soil havens that seemed increasingly relevant to enslavers, enslaved people, free African Americans, and white reformers in the United States.

Of course, spaces of freedom were not unique to international locales. After the American Revolution, black and white reformers in the United States – and enslaved people themselves – leveraged ambiguity around the issue of slavery in the new republic to create free spaces at the state level in places like Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Vermont, and Rhode Island. Over time, state-level anti-slavery legislation in places like Connecticut and New York and the prohibition of slavery in states carved out of the Northwest Territory (Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin) further expanded spaces of freedom within the nineteenth-century United States.[18] These zones of freedom were enormously important for both free and self-emancipated African Americans, offering potential safety from recapture and opportunities for collective organizing and activism around emancipation, racial justice, and citizenship rights. In some cases, they even functioned as domestic free-soil havens when enslaved people crossed specific state borders and lodged freedom suits in court, hoping to secure their liberty based on local laws.[19]

Yet there was a fundamental difference between domestic spaces of freedom and the international free-soil havens that began to dot the horizon beginning in the late eighteenth century. In the United States, freedom at the state level was always circumscribed by the fact that, at the federal level, the institution of slavery remained sanctioned and

protected. Enslavers' reach into ostensibly free spaces was a point of major contention and concern throughout the antebellum era.[20] While the vast majority of free black people and self-emancipated men and women nevertheless remained within the United States, the particular significance and appeal of international free-soil havens stemmed from the fact that slavery had been abolished throughout the land and at the highest levels of government, providing a higher level of protection against re-enslavement and, in many places, equal standing for black people. In other words, international free-soil havens were important destinations and meaningful sites of American anti-slavery thought and activism in part because the promise of freedom in domestic spaces was curtailed by the fact that slavery was condoned and upheld at the national level.

Often, the significance of international free-soil havens had as much to do with the debates they inspired and the possibilities they represented as it did with the lived experiences of those who crossed their borders. When opportunities arose to emigrate to international free-soil locales, black communities across the northeast and mid-Atlantic gathered to discuss the practical and ideological implications of relocating to places where black liberty and equality were enshrined in law. While the overwhelming majority of free African Americans stayed to fight for "birthright citizenship" in the United States, the possibility of free-soil migration sparked intense debate within individual communities, at national conventions, and through the pages of the black newspaper press over the course of several decades.[21] Should African Americans leave the country or continue to fight for equality from their homes in the United States?[22] Would leading successful lives in free-soil havens prove the merits of black freedom and thereby contribute to achieving abolition in the United States, or would it ultimately strengthen the institution of slavery by removing its most vocal antagonists? What allegiance did African Americans owe the United States and the fight for equality within it when there were other places where they could experience equality immediately? As free-soil alternatives expanded beyond the United States, they facilitated important discussions among black communities about national identity and citizenship at a time when slavery remained a defining institution in American life.[23]

The prospect of international free-soil migration similarly tapped into diverse conversations held among white anti-slavery advocates.