

The Antebellum Coasting Trade and Fugitives from Slavery

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When the fugitive John Thompson fled Maryland slavery in 1842, he came to New Bedford both overland and by sea. Escaping first to Columbia, Pennsylvania, he continued on after hearing that slave hunters were in that neighborhood to Philadelphia, and then he went to New York to secure a berth on a merchant vessel. There he was told he lacked the necessary experience at sea, and on the advice that “green hands were more wanted” in New Bedford, he took passage to the city and shipped out as steward on board the whaling vessel *Milwood*. He had no training as a steward, who basically acted as a servant to the vessel’s captain, but an injured cook staying in the same New Bedford boardinghouse where he was tried to teach the basics of the trade. Once at sea, the captain confronted him about his evident lack of experience at the post, and Thompson said to him, “I am a fugitive slave from Maryland, and have a family in Philadelphia; but fearing to remain there any longer, I thought I would go on a whaling voyage, as being the place where I stood the least chance of being arrested by slave hunters.”

In that confession John Thompson presented the logic that we might think compelled many fugitives from slavery to escape aboard whaling vessels. After all,

whaling ships and barks needed their labor, and they were at sea for anywhere from sixteen to sixty months. Even the most aggressive slave owner would abandon the effort to retrieve a slave from aboard a ship traveling in remote parts of the world for such a long time.

For many years it's commonly been assumed that New Bedford was a haven for fugitives because of whaling, but to date we've been able to document no more than ten fugitives by name who came to New Bedford and shipped out on a whaler. And after about 1800 virtually none probably came to New Bedford aboard such a vessel. It was very likely the coastwise trade that brought the greatest number of fugitives to this port, and in this talk I want to explain why.

In 1850, at least according to the federal census, New Bedford was home to 1,008 people of color. In a total city population of 16,443, 6.3 percent were black or mulatto. New Bedford had the densest population of people of color of any city in the commonwealth, in New England, and quite possibly in all of the Northeast. In 1850 one person of color short of two thousand lived in Boston, but Boston was ten times the size of New Bedford, and blacks and mulattos made up only 1.5 percent of that city's population. They were the same proportion of New York City's population. New Bedford was more densely populated by people of color than even Philadelphia, which was 4.8 percent black in 1850.

More striking is the avowed percentage of New Bedford people of color who claimed a birthplace in the South. Fully 302 persons, or 29.9 percent, of the local black and mulatto population were southern-born. By contrast, only 15 percent of New York's and 16.6 percent of Boston's black populations claimed southern birthplaces. What is more, every one of those 302 people of color told census enumerators that they were born in Atlantic coastal states, more than 200 of them from Virginia, Maryland, and Delaware and another 60 from the District of Columbia, which at the time included Georgetown and Alexandria. Southern-born men of color were a lesser but still significant proportion of the whaling fleet. Historian Martha Putney has shown that of some three thousand men of color who signed onto vessels leaving New Bedford for foreign ports between 1809 and 1865, fully five hundred, or nearly 17 percent, stated that they were born in a southern state.

These figures almost certainly underestimate the total southern-born settled and whaling populations of color. Numerous statements—variant reporting of birthplaces in censuses, identification as a fugitive in poor relief and pension records, identification of fugitives in reputable contemporary sources—indicate that the inclination to conceal one's true place of birth was high. When the fugitive John S. Jacobs shipped out aboard the whaler *Frances Henrietta* from New Bedford in 1839, he was mum about his birthplace on his seaman's protection paper. In a British

periodical Jacobs later wrote that his unwillingness to lie about his birthplace had kept him from getting a seaman's protection paper when he accompanied his North Carolina master on a trip to Niagara Falls; that unwillingness became feigned ignorance by the time he signed on to the *Frances Henrietta*, just days after he finally escaped in New York City. Another example of failing to claim a southern birthplace is William Ferguson, who told federal census takers in 1850 and 1860 that he did not know where he was born but told a state census taker in 1855 that he was born in Virginia. In February 1848 New Bedford Overseers of the Poor records identified him and his wife Nancy as "runaway slaves," and a 1910 newspaper article written about Ferguson when he was in his late eighties stated that he had stowed away on the coal schooner *Pornony* in Norfolk and arrived in Boston in 1847; he came to New Bedford soon afterward.

In the years before the Civil War New Bedford was in many respects atypical. It was phenomenally wealthy, it had a corner on the whaling industry, and it was more cosmopolitan than most port cities at the time. Yet even though its population of color was atypically large for a northern place, **how** that population of color developed in New Bedford probably differed little from how it developed in other northeastern coastal cities, where the lion's share of men and women of color tended to live. People of color who came from southern states were probably much more apt to reach the city aboard coastal trading vessels like the *Pornony* than

overland, a presumption on my part that is based on three facts. First, overland travel along the southern Atlantic coast was difficult at best, punctuated as the region is by numerous bays and massive swamps. As historian Gary Collison pointed out, New Bedford is only five hundred miles from Norfolk by sea; a coasting vessel could make that trip in four or five days. The North Carolina ports of Wilmington, Washington, and New Bern were only between a half-day and a day further south. Second, people of color were common in maritime occupations both north and south. And third, despite its overshadowing reputation as a whaling port, New Bedford also carried on a very busy coastwise trade with the West Indies and southern states.

In whaling's early decades some vessels cruised the southern Atlantic for whales only in summer and returned to Nantucket and New Bedford to refit for trading voyages to southern ports in the winter. In the 1790s the city's two newspapers regularly reported vessel clearances for North Carolina, Virginia, and Georgia ports from late October through December and returns generally from mid-February through late April. But as the hunt for whales took the industry farther afield after about 1800, whaling vessels ceased to moor in southern harbors and both schooners and sloops took over the coastwise trade.

These vessels left New Bedford with oil and New England manufactured products to exchange for raw goods in the South, the materials that made much of northern

enterprise possible. In these years before the Erie Canal made western New York the nation's breadbasket, the best commercial grain crops were grown in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Maryland. The South also supplied the North with barreled beef and pork, rice, corn, tobacco, and cotton. By this time, too, shipbuilding was rapidly expanding in the North and depended very heavily on the import of timber and such naval stores as turpentine and pitch from the Cape Fear and Dismal Swamp area on the border of Virginia and North Carolina.

As early as the 1760s New Bedford merchants such as Joseph Rotch were trading sperm and whale oil with merchants in North Carolina ports. In late November 1791 his grandson William Rotch Jr. sent two men "to such parts of Georgia as may be thought best or other parts of the Southern States" to harvest "the best Live Oak & red cedar" for framing two ships and directed them to sell whatever surplus they amassed on the "Savannah or Charlestown [sic] Market." Rotch's 1792 letterbook lists the family firm's widely dispersed connections with, among many others, merchants in Alexandria, Petersburg, Winchester, and Lynchburg, Virginia, and in New Garden, North Carolina, where many Nantucket Quakers had settled at the beginning of the Revolution. That same year, the first issue of New Bedford's first newspaper reported vessels clearing for New Bern, North Carolina; Savannah, Georgia; the Chesapeake; and the West Indies. Two years later Rotch placed a notice in the *Medley* advertising the sale of Baltimore flour as well as of pitch and turpentine.

New Bedford merchant shipping manifests have survived from 1808. A comparison to the shipping and maritime news columns in the local newspaper shows this collection of manifests to be quite incomplete, but it does shed light on who is shipping what to which ports. In 1808 a later Joseph Rotch, William Rotch Jr., and Stephen Mosher sent apples, sperm oil, and plaster to Alexandria; Isaac Cory sent whale oil, apples, cheese, and potatoes to Richmond; William Rotch alone sent sperm and whale oil and spermaceti candles to Charleston. From the 1810s forward New Bedford vessels also carried south ceramic tablewares, bridles and harnesses, and a great many shoes and both woolen and felt hats, many of them very likely destined for use by enslaved people. Vessels returned from Alexandria with ship stores, superfine flour, and corn; from New Bern with tar, pork, corn, bacon, pine lumber, planks, feathers, varnish, and lard; from Savannah with rice, cotton, beef hides, cedar posts, iron ware, hops, feathers, bonnets, nails, and skins. Of twenty-three manifests in January 1815 alone, eleven were for vessels headed to and coming from southern ports—Wilmington and Elizabeth City, North Carolina, and Norfolk. Here again these manifests probably undercount the number of vessels going to and from southern ports: for example, the coastwise vessel *Rising States* left the New Bedford customs district on 4 June 1808 for Savannah, but when it returned later that year it was listed as having come from New York City, probably its most recent port of call. Similarly, Paul Cuffe's *Traveller* left for Wilmington, Delaware, in May 1808 but was registered as having returned

from Bristol, Rhode Island. New Bedford merchants, including such African American traders as Peter and Alexander Howard and Richard Johnson, regularly advertised for sale goods from southern and West Indian ports—“superfine Alexandria Flour, Rice, Philad. Pilot Bread and Biscuit,” loaf, Havana, and New Orleans white and brown sugars, “Upland and Sea-Island Cotton,” the “best Windward Island molasses,” and potatoes from Martinique.

For years the Cape Fear section of North Carolina lacked an adequate port, so its raw materials were often shipped through Norfolk, Virginia—also, and probably not coincidentally, the port through which the largest number of known fugitives escaped to New Bedford. Soon, though, New Bedford vessels were trading for cooperage in the smaller North Carolina port of Edenton, the home of John S. Jacobs and his sister Harriet, and for pork and corn at New Bern. Among the most active of New Bedford-based traders were Paul Cuffe and his brother-in-law Michael Wainer from Westport, both of African and Wampanoag descent. With his share of oil and bone from his first whaling voyage, Cuffe had purchased the iron he needed to build the seventy-ton schooner *Ranger*, his third vessel, which he ran between New Bedford, the Down East ports of Maine and New Brunswick, and such cities as Philadelphia, Wilmington, Delaware, Norfolk, and Savannah. On its maiden voyage in 1795 the schooner carried cargo to Norfolk and then went North to the Potomac to take on a load of Indian corn on its tributary Nanticoke River. Unidentified whites, alarmed at the *Ranger's* all-black

crew, at first attempted to prevent the vessel from landing, but Cuffe eventually succeeded in purchasing three thousand bushels of corn and returning with it to Westport.

Paul Cuffe traded goods in southern ports until the year he died, 1817, and he corresponded often with abolitionists, including Baltimore flour merchant Elisha Tyson, a wealthy Quaker abolitionist who sometimes purchased slaves at auction in order to free them and who was active in the so-called Underground Railroad in that city. Yet no source I know of documents that Cuffe himself carried fugitives north. In 1799, though, his *Ranger* was identified as the vessel on which two Maryland slaves had escaped. In that year slaveowner Samuel Sloane accused the *Ranger's* master, Wainer's twenty-six-year-old son Thomas, of having "carried off" both Sloane's slave Harry and Harry's then-pregnant wife Lucy, owned by a hatter who lived in Snow Hill, Maryland. Sloane stated that Wainer was a "Mulatto, who traded here, and cleared out as Capt. of a small vessel from Westport—came to the port of Snowhill, Maryland, where he got a load of corn and staves, and cleared for Norfolk, Virginia, whence, he said, he intended for Westport, whither I suppose him to have gone." Earlier in the 1790s New Bedford captains had themselves placed newspaper notices of men of color who had stowed away on their vessels, probably to clear themselves of any legal responsibility for these escapes. They typically claimed that they were unaware of the stowaways' presence until well after they had set sail and that, the "wind being

ahead,” it was impractical to turn around and bring them back. But the notice of Wainer’s involvement is the first known instance of alleged complicity on the part of a northern crew member or captain in a fugitive escape.

Coastwise commerce remained important in New Bedford even after the Erie Canal connected the fertile western lands to the East Coast in 1825. The city was never especially well connected by road to westward routes, and waterborne trade continued to be vastly more efficient and economical. The centrality of the coastwise trade was assured when the famed “Black Ball” packet trade was put in place in New York City in 1822. The largest of these shipping companies was founded that year by Quaker entrepreneurs Preserved Fish and his cousin Joseph Grinnell, both New Bedford natives. In addition to enhancing the reliability of waterborne commerce, such firms cemented the kin and sectarian connections so central to Quaker mercantile enterprise worldwide.

David Cecelski has noted that the South’s expanding trade in naval stores and cotton attracted the settlement of numerous merchants and mariners from New England and New York who, he has written, “continued to have personal connections and trading interests in the North.” Even a superficial examination of New Bedford suggests as much quite strongly. Members of the Howland family were numerous and important in New Bedford from its earliest years, and from at least the 1810s branches of the

family had established themselves in the South. Whaling merchant George Howland built his trading sloop *Emily* in New Bedford but registered it in Elizabeth City, North Carolina, in 1815. Another member of the family, the master mariner Joseph Howland, had worked in the coasting trade between Savannah and New Bedford between 1818 and 1831 and was well known among many southerners. Thomas H. Howland, brother of the New Bedford's first mayor, helped run a commission house in Alexandria; his father Weston Howland's flour packet the *Regulator* is claimed to have carried two and possibly three fugitives to New Bedford from the Washington area about 1818. Another part of the far-flung family had established itself as Howland and Sons in Norfolk and was trading regularly with New Bedford and Nantucket merchants. Members of the Rodman and Hathaway families, both prominent New Bedford names, also settled in Norfolk and Portsmouth, Virginia, though the precise kinship between them has not yet been studied. Other connections between New Bedford and the South that may have been significant in the movement of southern-born people of color to the north were the firms of Whitridge and Company of New Orleans and Thomas Whitridge in Baltimore, both related to New Bedford's William C. Whitridge, and of the Quaker Jacob Barker, who ran a brokerage business in New Orleans in the 1840s. New Bedford merchant William Tallman Russell traded candles and whale oil with merchants Thomas Whitridge and Richard G. Howland in Baltimore as well as with the ports of Charleston, Philadelphia, and Norfolk.

Packets dedicated mostly to the passage of freight also often carried passengers, and to what extent sympathy for people of color living in the South influenced whom captains carried is impossible to determine, at least at this stage of the game. In New Bedford, the families of George and Weston Howland both demonstrated strong abolitionist tendencies; Weston's son William Penn Howland ran one of New Bedford's only stores to offer goods made by free rather than slave labor, and George Howland and his sons were well known antislavery men who also employed men of color regularly on their wharves and in their homes. That people of color traveled by packet to the North is unquestionable; what is in doubt is only the extent of this movement. A few examples from my work on the movement of fugitive slaves north may suffice to hint at its possible dimensions.

Thomas Wentworth Higginson, not one to exaggerate his role or the extent of the Underground Railroad, told Ohio historian Wilbur Siebert in the mid-1890s that "fugitive slaves commonly came by water, as stowaways in vessels, though sometimes by rail from Philadelphia"; those who traveled by land, he said, were part of a more westerly stream and usually went through Ohio. Higginson and others told Siebert of a vessel known as the *White Pigeon*, ostensibly run as an excursion vessel in Boston Harbor but really employed in ferrying fugitives aboard cotton vessels to shore during the darkness of night. The *White Pigeon* was operated by Austin Bearse, who had worked in the coasting trade between the Cape, New Bedford, and Boston

and southern ports until it began to sicken him. He had seen slavery in Spanish and French ports and in Algiers and Smyrna “among the Turks,” he wrote, but “my opinion is, that American slavery, as I have seen it in the internal slave trade, as I have seen it on the rice and sugar plantations, and in the city of New Orleans, was *full as bad* as any slavery in the world—heathen or Christian. People who go for visits or pleasure through the Southern States, cannot possibly know those things which can be seen of slavery by shipmasters who run up into the back plantations of counties, and who transport the slaves and produce of plantations,” Bearse wrote. While living in New Bedford Bearse began to subscribe to the *Liberator*, and in Boston he became an agent of the Vigilance Committee, dedicated to aiding fugitives or impeding their capture. The *White Pigeon* was Bearse’s second vessel. Higginson told Siebert that committee men used to run the boat “down in the harbor to meet Southern vessels. The practice was, to take along a colored woman with fresh fruit, pies, &c—she easily got on board & when there, usually found out if there was any fugitive on board; then he was sometimes taken away by night.”

Such a subterfuge worked because men and women of color were ordinary sights along the waterfronts of all coastal cities, north and south, to say nothing of how commonplace black mariners were on board ships of every description. At some moment before June 1816 the fugitive William Grimes was helping the crew of the Boston brig *Casket* load the vessel with cotton at Savannah when a few of the

“Yankee sailors” in the crew suggested that they leave a space among the bales lashed onto the deck in which Grimes might hide and effect his escape. The night before the *Casket* was to leave Savannah, one of the vessel’s black crew members told Grimes to act as his servant so that they might go together in town to buy the supplies Grimes would need in hiding. In his 1824 escape narrative Grimes wrote that he stayed hidden as much as possible but would sometimes at night lie on deck with the other sailors. “The night being dark,” he wrote, “the captain could not distinguish me from the hands, having a number on board of different complexions.”

In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs revealed how the prevalence of black mariners and waterfront workers facilitated her escape, and no doubt the escape of others, from Edenton, North Carolina. Her uncle Joseph had twice attempted to escape slavery by vessel, succeeding the second time after he had been sold to New Orleans. Her uncle Mark worked as a steward aboard a vessel, and an in-law named Stephen was a sailor who had also escaped to the North. When Jacobs escaped slavery in 1835 and felt she must leave her first Edenton hiding place, a slave woman friend brought her “a suit of sailor’s clothes,—jacket, trowsers, and tarpaulin hat” so that she might disguise herself. “Put your hands in your pockets,” her friend advised, “and walk ricketty, like de sailors.” Together they walked to an Edenton wharf, from which a black “seafaring man” (probably Stephen) rowed Jacobs to a vessel to hide for the night. Her friends then hid her in a swamp until her uncle Mark

could find another place to conceal her. But Edenton officials, sensitive to the possibility that northern vessels were carrying slaves to freedom, had begun intensive shipboard inspections at this time, so Jacobs put her sailor's clothes back on, used charcoal to darken her face, and walked with a black friend to her own grandmother's house, where she hid in a tiny crawl space for a month short of seven years without the knowledge of her children, living in the same house, or her owner, living a few blocks away. She then got a message to her friend Peter, another "trustworthy seafaring person," so that he might post letters she wrote home from New York City when he arrived there; thus she hoped to fool her owner into thinking she had already made her way north. In 1842 Jacobs finally escaped. After her friend Peter arranged with one vessel's captain to take her to the North, she walked to the wharf at night, her uncle Mark rowed her out to the anchored ship, and the captain "showed her to a little box of a cabin." He advised her to stay below whenever a sail came in view, but otherwise she might be on deck; by the third week of June she stepped ashore in Philadelphia.

That the assistance of such men as Peter in the escape of slaves to the North was something more than incidental is, I would argue, clear. Elizabeth Cooley of Boston told Siebert in 1897 that she had hidden for two years in Norfolk before a woman of color named Eliza Baines helped her escape aboard a Boston-bound coaster in 1851.

She apparently told Siebert that Baines worked for the captains of vessels, perhaps

doing laundry, and was able to learn from them when they planned to sail. Cooley said that Baines got “numbers” of fugitives “on board boats sailing for Boston and New Bedford.” Writing from his new home in Toronto in 1854, the fugitive John Henry Hill told William Still, the black secretary of the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee, that the black mariner Esau Foster, who worked in the port of Richmond, would tell Hill’s wife how to reach a certain white vessel captain who would take her from Richmond to Boston. By 1855 an Esau Foster, born in Richmond, Virginia, was living in the New Bedford household of Martha and Henry Onley, also from Richmond. It seems more than likely that he was the same Esau Foster Still described. Still and others also described the activity of four white vessel captains—Alfred Fountain of the steam packet *City of Richmond*, William D. Bayliss of the *Kesiah*, William Lambdin, and Robert Lee—who carried fugitives singly or in groups of a dozen or more. All but Fountain were ultimately caught and imprisoned, as was the mariner Daniel Drayton, whose spectacular attempt to carry seventy-seven slaves from Washington North aboard the schooner *Pearl* in 1847 ended in his arrest and imprisonment—and the dispersal further South of almost all whose escape he had tried to effect. Drayton killed himself in a New Bedford hotel in 1857.

Southern legislators were well enough convinced that slaves regularly escaped North aboard northern trading vessels that, from 1822 into the 1840s, they enacted what were known as Negro Seamen’s Acts. These laws aimed in part to curb the free

movement of northern black mariners in southern ports on the presumption that they were enticing slaves to escape. Some black writers and orators claimed that these acts cut deeply into the number of jobs at sea available to men of color, but there is no question that black mariners continued to work on coasting vessels after their passage. Larry Gara has noted that the editor of a Norfolk newspaper in 1850 charged that virtually the entire coasting trade was “in the hands of Northern abolitionists” and that the free black crews of such ships instilled in slaves “notions of freedom, and afterwards afford[ed] them the means of transportation to free soil.” The editor further alleged that some vessels “actually [made] the abduction of slaves a matter of trade and source of profit.” Norfolk and other southern newspapers complained throughout the 1850s that slaves were escaping all the time—indeed, some claimed daily—in the holds and on the decks of northern vessels. My own work, which has identified in New Bedford more than one hundred fugitives by full name and dozens of others whose full names were not recorded, has tended quite strongly to affirm what David Cecelski has argued—specifically, that “runaway slaves regularly headed to the coast instead of attempting overland paths out of bondage.” Cecelski stated that he found “several dozen accounts of specific runaway slaves who reached ships sailing out of North Carolina ports between 1800 and 1861. . . . one may safely conclude that they represent only the tip of an iceberg. The presence of an escape route along the East Coast was indeed widely known both locally and among northern abolitionists who, though it operated independently of them, frequently assisted fugitive slaves

after their voyage from the South.”

Some of the best-known fugitives, generally those who published narratives of their escape, managed to get to the free states by coastal vessel. Moses Roper became a steward on a New York-bound packet and jumped ship in New York City, and he continued to use the maritime trade to escape his pursuers. Daniel Fisher told a Connecticut newspaper in 1900 that he had escaped from South Carolina aboard a lumber vessel headed for Washington; once he arrived there, he said, the vessel's captain put on a “coat of a certain color” and told him to follow him in town. Fisher went from there overland to Baltimore, Pennsylvania, and New York and then by steamboat to New Haven; eventually, after having changed his name to William Winters, he left Deep River, Connecticut, for New Bedford. And Henry Box Brown's escape in a crate shipped from Richmond to Philadelphia is legendary, made the more so by his frequent reenactment of it on the antislavery lecture circuit. Brown's journey, ultimately to New Bedford and then to Boston, is one of the best-documented fugitive escapes I know of. Rhode Island abolitionist Elizabeth Buffum Chace wrote in her memoir, “Slaves in Virginia would secure passage, either secretly or with consent of the captains, in small trading vessels, at Norfolk or Portsmouth, and thus be brought into some port in New England, where their fate depended on the circumstances into which they happened to fall. A few, landing at some towns on Cape Cod, would reach New Bedford, and thence be sent by an abolitionist there to

Fall River, to be sheltered by Nathaniel B. Borden and his wife, who was my sister Sarah, and sent by them to my home at Valley Falls, in the darkness of night, and in a closed carriage.”

Southern slaveholding interests were so sure this waterborne route existed that, in addition to lamenting surely exaggerated losses of slaves in their newspapers, they routinely searched northern vessels before they left port. In 1850 Frederick Douglass, who came both by land and sea to New Bedford twelve years earlier, told a gathering at Faneuil Hall about a “female fugitive, now in New Bedford, who hid herself in the hold of a vessel. They smoked the vessel, as was the custom, and the woman lay there in the hold, almost suffocated, but she resolved to die rather than come forth.”

Instances of such events are legion, if uncollated, and suspicion of northern mariners was rife. In his document *The Fugitive Slave Law and Its Victims*, the Reverend Samuel J. May cited numerous cases of incarceration in southern jails of captains charged with knowingly taking fugitives from southern ports north and of free black seamen accused of assisting fugitives to escape on board their vessels. It hit home in New Bedford in 1844 in the case of Henry Boyer, a free black mariner who may have been a New Bedford native. Boyer was then the steward aboard the coasting schooner *Cornelia*, which traded regularly in southern ports. As the result of a mishap—running aground after having loaded with corn at Portsmouth—the *Cornelia*’s captain, Gilbert Ricketson, discovered that a fugitive named Tom had stowed away on the schooner,

and he accused Boyer and another black crew member of having enticed him aboard. Ricketson, afterward vilified in the antislavery press and at least one local paper, took Tom, Boyer, and the other crew member back to Portsmouth in a small boat and turned them all in. Boyer was arrested on the charge of “having advised or persuaded” Tom to escape. When news of Ricketson’s action reached New Bedford, James B. Congdon, then chair of the town’s board of selectmen, contacted a Norfolk law firm to secure counsel for Boyer. But it was too late. A week after the incident, despite assurances that he would have counsel “of the highest standing,” Boyer was tried, convicted, and sentenced to four years in a Virginia prison.

Then, in late June of 1851, a similar accident—the wreck of the Nova Scotia brig *Commerce* off Alexandria—resulted in the arrest of twenty-one-year-old free black mariner Thomas Scott Johnson of New Bedford. Instead of being accused of helping a fugitive escape, Johnson was arrested on suspicion of being a fugitive himself because he had not brought his free papers with him. Johnson’s family was well regarded locally: his industrious and pious father Jacob had come to New Bedford from New York in the early 1800s and died there in the cholera epidemic of 1834. His mother Mary, who remarried the Cape Verdean Domingo Barrows, lived in Jacob Johnson’s longtime home at 91 South Water Street. Thomas’s brothers David, Edmund, and Jacob were mariners as well. Elisha Card, a New Bedford man and captain of the *Commerce*, alerted New Bedford abolitionists to Johnson’s arrest, and they posted a

five-hundred-dollar bond in time to keep Johnson from being sold into slavery.

Such incidents are merely suggestive of the larger movement of people of color from South to North in the decades before the Civil War, and many decades before the Great Migration between the twentieth century's two world wars permanently changed the regional distribution of people of color in the United States. It would seem that, like fugitive slave studies, a good deal more work needs to be done of the specific activities of specific coastwise vessels and their captains in specific ports in order to begin to develop a real understanding of their role not only in the movement of fugitives but in the movement of population between North and South.