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*Philadelphia and
the Other Underground Railroad*

IF FREE BLACKS IN THE ANTEBELLUM NORTH needed to be reminded that the quality of their freedom was markedly different from that enjoyed by whites, they had only to reflect on the ease with which their freedom could be lost. As long as slavery existed in any region of the United States, blacks, regardless of status, were a valuable commodity to be bought and sold. While scholars have focused much attention on the efforts of fugitive slaves to gain their freedom, they have largely overlooked the existence of a two-way traffic. As the Northern black community was enlarged by the arrival of fugitives, so free blacks were continually being ferried to the plantations of the lower South and sold as slaves. In effect, there were two quite distinct "underground railroads."¹

Ironically, there were many similarities between the two branches of the underground railroad. Both employed black and white agents, both had a network of "safe houses" and both made liberal use of forged documents—in one case free papers and in the other fraudulent bills of sale. Both relied on secrecy and "passengers" were supplied with elaborate stories to tell overly inquisitive strangers.² Just as it is impossible to determine how many slaves escaped from the South, so is it impossible to estimate how many Northern blacks

¹ For a discussion of the kidnapping of Southern free blacks see Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1976), 99-101, 160-61, 309.

² For a description of tactics used to intimidate kidnap victims into lying about their free status see *African Observer*, 8th month, 1827, 38-39n.

found themselves deprived of their freedom. Solomon Northup, who spent twelve years on plantations in the lower South before being rescued and restored to his family in New York, maintained that there were hundreds who were less fortunate than himself. In Philadelphia alone forty black children were abducted in one year, sixty the next.³ Since the Southern courts refused to admit the testimony of blacks, whether free or slave, in cases involving whites, the kidnap victim had little chance of asserting his rights and regaining his liberty. The kidnapper operated with greater impunity than the individual who aided a fugitive. His victims could not give evidence against him. If detected, the kidnapper had only to change his name and move his headquarters. The risk of running afoul of the law was negligible in comparison to the profits to be made. Rumors sometimes circulated in the Northern black communities to the effect that kidnapers were at work; there were instances of blacks meting out vigilante justice to those whom they suspected of being involved in kidnapping schemes. However, most Northern whites were simply ignorant of the scale of the problem. It was only by a series of accidents that authorities in Philadelphia in the 1820s uncovered the existence of a major kidnapping ring and brought it to the attention of the public. Even then, most of those involved in its operations were never brought to trial. As for its victims, they, too, were beyond the reach of the law.

The members of Philadelphia's black community hardly needed to be alerted to the risk of enslavement. Individuals travelling in the South to visit relatives or occasionally to search for work tried to protect themselves by carrying free papers. However, these papers could easily be lost or stolen. The fear of enslavement served to increase black unemployment in the North. Community leaders in Boston insisted that many black sailors would willingly work to support their families if they could be assured that their freedom would be safeguarded once they left their home states. The situation worsened as the years passed. Black sailors entering Southern ports in the aftermath of the Vesey conspiracy were required to be lodged in jail

³ Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, in Gilbert Osofsky, ed., *Puttin' On Ole Massa* (New York, 1969), 406; Kate E. R. Pickard, *The Kidnapped and the Ransomed* (Syracuse, 1856), 246.

until their ships sailed. As their appeals and those of their families to Northern abolition societies indicate, they could find themselves detained for lengthy periods and then auctioned off to cover jail expenses.⁴

While critics assailed the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 for the ease with which it could be abused, fraudulent claims were not unknown under the earlier act of 1793. Philadelphians considered themselves particularly at risk in view of the city's proximity to the slave state of Delaware. Moreover, Philadelphia harbored growing numbers of runaways and therefore attracted the attention of professional slave-catchers. Not all claimants were as unlucky as the Southern planter who tried to prove in court that Bishop Richard Allen of the AME Church was his runaway slave. The examining magistrate—who knew Allen to be a free man, a longtime resident of the city, and one of the most prominent members of its black community—promptly sentenced the planter to jail. However, not everyone enjoyed the same measure of protection as Richard Allen.⁵

Young blacks were particularly vulnerable to seizure. It was not merely that they commanded a good price. They were considered a better risk than older people because “rapid growth,” combined with the hardships of slave labor, often made identification virtually impossible within the space of a couple of years.⁶ A common ploy was to get a child apprenticed and then remove him to the South. Parents might bind out a child to learn a trade and then discover that both apprentice and master had disappeared. It took a stroke of luck to free Amos Dunbar, a young Philadelphia apprentice who was bound

⁴ Herbert Aptheker, ed., *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States* (Secaucus, NJ, 1951), I:20-21. The brother of Boston abolitionist James G. Barbadoes was enslaved in New Orleans when his seaman's papers were torn up. *Ibid.*, 153. The risk was even greater for blacks from Philadelphia, since a higher percentage of the adult males in the city were sailors. Gary B. Nash, “Forging Freedom: The Emancipation Experience in the Northern Seaport Cities, 1775-1820,” in Ira Berlin and Ronald Hoffman, eds., *Slavery and Freedom in the Age of the American Revolution* (Charlottesville, 1983), 8-9; Philip M. Hamer, “Great Britain, the United States, and the Negro Seamen Acts, 1822-1848,” *Journal of Southern History* 1 (1935): 3-28.

⁵ *National Antislavery Standard*, December 31, 1840. The author of the article, Issac T. Hopper, indicated that the incident had taken place many years earlier. Allen died in 1831.

⁶ *African Observer*, 5th month, 1827, 38; *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Fourteenth American Convention for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery* (Philadelphia, 1816), 7-8.

out by his stepfather in 1824 and promptly shipped off to New Orleans. Dunbar secured his freedom because the man who purchased him discovered that the youth had influential friends. Robert Layton had heard of the black entrepreneur James Forten and soon established that Dunbar was related to him. Dunbar was quickly freed, and Layton wrote to Forten to insist that he wanted nothing more than a chance to be revenged on the slave dealer who had sold the boy to him. He added that he would not refuse whatever the "Honour and Gratitude" of Dunbar's friends might prompt them to offer him as compensation for his loss.⁷ Like Allen, Dunbar's situation was exceptional. Most of the kidnapped apprentices came from poor families who could do little more than appeal to the Pennsylvania Abolition Society or other antislavery organizations to intervene.

Even more threatening to the black community than the activities of individuals such as the man who sold Amos Dunbar was the existence of well-organized kidnapping rings. As early as 1799 Rev. Absalom Jones and seventy-three other black Philadelphians sent a petition to Congress in which they described "a trade practiced openly by citizens of some of the southern states, upon the waters of Maryland and Delaware." The petitioners went on to detail how free blacks were kidnapped in Philadelphia and "like droves of cattle . . . fettered and hurried into places provided for this most horrid traffic, such as dark cellars and garrets." When a sufficient number had been seized, they were forced on board vessels, transported to the lower South, and promptly sold. However, despite the evidence which the Philadelphians had gathered to substantiate their charges, they were unable to secure any federal action.⁸

⁷ Pennsylvania Abolition Society (hereafter PAS), Acting Committee Minutes, 1822-42, 39; Robert Layton to James Forten, May 2, 1825, PAS Correspondence, incoming, 1825; Watts and Lobdell to Thomas Shipley, November 1, 1825, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (hereafter HSP). Forten was related to the Dunbar family through his sister, Abigail Forten Dunbar. For a discussion of other methods of kidnapping employed against Philadelphia's free black population see Jesse Torrey, *American Slave Trade; or, An Account of the Manner in which the Slave Dealers take Free People from some of the United States of America, and carry them away, and sell them as Slaves in other of the States; and of the horrible Cruelties practised in the Carrying on of this most infamous Traffic* (London, 1822), 52-53, 89-90.

⁸ The petition is printed in full in John Parrish, *Remarks on the Slavery of the Black People; Addressed to the Citizens of the United States, Particularly to Those who are in Legislative or Executive Stations in the General or State Governments; and Also to such Individuals as Hold Them in Bondage* (Philadelphia, 1806), 49-51.

Outside Philadelphia's black community, only the members of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society displayed real concern over the issue of kidnapping. Occupied initially with monitoring Pennsylvania's gradual abolition law, members of the PAS found themselves cooperating with "the Committee of the black Abolition Society" to investigate allegations of kidnapping. Prosecuting kidnappers and rescuing the kidnapped eventually monopolized the attention of the PAS and absorbed a large portion of its funds. "The artifice and cunning of those who are engaged in this barbarous traffic" also led to petitions to the Pennsylvania legislature for stronger penalties to deter would-be kidnappers. In 1820 a measure of success was achieved, when the legislature imposed a penalty of twenty-one years in prison at hard labor for kidnapping. However, the frequency with which kidnapping cases continued to appear in the PAS minutes suggests that the new law did not eradicate the problem. The law might be more stringent, but the risks involved were far outweighed by the profits. With the foreign slave trade banned, prices for healthy young slaves rose steadily, particularly in the lower South. Illegal imports and the natural increase of the existing slave population could not supply the needs of planters. By the 1820s kidnapping free blacks had become a well-organized business venture, with the kidnappers "emboldened to keep up a regular chain of communication and barter from Philadelphia to the Eastern shore of the Chesapeake."⁹

The situation of Philadelphia's black community in the early 1820s

⁹ PAS report in *Minutes of the Seventeenth Session of the American Convention for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery* (Philadelphia, 1822), 30. Edward Turner maintained that kidnapping was a major problem before the passage of the law, that it then declined, and that after 1847, "the growth of popular indignation made the crime too dangerous to carry on." *The Negro in Pennsylvania: Slavery—Servitude—Freedom, 1639-1861* (Washington, DC, 1912), 115. For efforts by the PAS to secure more effective legislation see PAS Minutes, 1800-24, 153, 158-59, 302. On the law passed by the Pennsylvania legislature in 1820, and on the revision of that law in 1826, see Thomas D. Morris, *Free Men All: The Personal Liberty Laws of the North, 1780-1861* (Baltimore, 1974), 45-53. Kidnapping cases involving free blacks from Philadelphia are detailed in *National Antislavery Standard*, October 29 and November 5, 1840 (the incidents happened in 1812 and 1801 respectively); *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Fourteenth American Convention for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery* (Philadelphia, 1816), 7-3, 24-25; PAS Minutes, 1787-1800, 154-55, 215-16, 342; PAS Minutes, 1800-24, 338-39, 341, 358, 407; PAS Minutes, Acting Committee, 1810-22, 19, 33-34, 37-38, 72-73, 84, 88-89, 142-43, 222, 302.

certainly worked to the advantage of would-be kidnappers. Affluent black citizens were able to send their sons and daughters to private schools or keep them at home. But the children of the urban black poor could often be found wandering the streets in search of opportunities to earn a few cents. Moreover, the city was in the grip of a recession. Poverty forced black and white alike into criminal activities, including kidnapping. The organizers of kidnapping operations found no difficulty in recruiting agents.¹⁰

The majority of white Philadelphians might not have condoned kidnapping, but blacks were left in no doubt that their presence was unwelcome and that they could expect only minimal protection of their rights. Many whites watched the rapid growth of the black population with alarm and dismay. The census of 1820 recorded 11,891 black residents, although it was asserted that that figure failed to take account of several thousand fugitive slaves hidden in the city. Between 1820 and 1830 the black population increased by 30 percent. Petitions to the state legislature called for measures to make the city less attractive to blacks. Laws were proposed to restrict the mobility of blacks, to impose special taxes on them, and to enable townships to auction off black felons for a term of years. White Philadelphians contributed generously to the American Colonization Society in the hope that free blacks could be induced to emigrate to Liberia. In 1824 and 1825 there was considerable interest in a proposal to encourage a mass exodus of Northern blacks to Haiti. The only fear on the part of Philadelphia's white citizens was that Haiti's president, Jean-Pierre Boyer, would take the black elite and leave them the "disreputable element" of the black population.¹¹

Racial antipathy could easily turn to violence. The city was spared a major race riot until the 1830s, but long before that there was a clear sense that blacks were legitimate targets for harassment. Community leaders could never be quite sure what actions would result

¹⁰ Priscilla Ferguson Clement, "The Philadelphia Welfare Crisis of the 1820s," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 105 (1981), 151.

¹¹ Turner, *Negro in Pennsylvania*, 253; Emma Jones Lapsansky, "Since They Got Those Separate Churches": Afro-Americans and Racism in Jacksonian Philadelphia," *American Quarterly* 32 (1980), 57-59; Julie Winch, *The Leaders of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1787-1848* (Philadelphia, forthcoming), 137-39, 238-51, 460-68.

in violence. Even a scheme to establish a black fire company was denounced as provocative, and the company was obliged to disband.¹²

City authorities could afford little protection to either black or white residents. Moyamensing, where increasing numbers of black Philadelphians lived, was not incorporated into the city; hence, there were problems of jurisdiction for law enforcement officials. In the city itself, policing was scarcely adequate. Philadelphia had no full-time trained police force, and the network of watchmen and foot patrols could not be expected to maintain order in a city with a population of 135,000 by 1820. Mayor Joseph Watson was a conscientious public official concerned about the safety and well-being of all of the city's residents. He devoted much time and energy to rescuing kidnap victims, but he could not prevent them from being kidnapped in the first place.¹³

In the late spring and summer of 1825 the Philadelphia authorities began to receive more than the usual number of inquiries concerning the disappearance of young blacks. By August, there were estimates that as many as twenty black youths had vanished from Philadelphia and the surrounding suburbs. Some were supposed to have drowned in the Delaware, and others were rumored to have run away, possibly in search of better jobs. Had the authorities compared the reports, they would have detected a pattern to the disappearances. Most of those missing were males between the ages of 8 and 15. Almost all were living apart from their families as servants or apprentices. They

¹² Winch, *Black Community*, 151-53. It was also unsafe for black Philadelphians—even Revolutionary War veterans like James Forten—to appear on the streets on July 4th. *Letters from a Man of Colour on a Late Bill Before the Senate of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1813), 7.

¹³ Nash, "Forging Freedom," 42; John Melvin Warner, "Race Riots in the United States During the Age of Jackson, 1824-1849," Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1972, 183; John Schneider, "Mob Violence and Public Order in the American City," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1971, 39; David Grimsted, "Rioting in its Jacksonian Setting," *American Historical Review* 77 (1972), 365-68; Michael Feldberg, "The Crowd in Philadelphia History: A Comparative Perspective," *Labor History* 15 (1974): 323-36. For the impact of the city's rapid growth on neighborhoods see Stuart L. Blumin, "Residential Mobility Within the Nineteenth-Century City," in Allen F. Davis and Mark H. Haller, eds., *The Peoples of Philadelphia: A History of Ethnic Groups and Lower-Class Life, 1790-1940* (Philadelphia, 1973), 49.

were not usually immediately reported missing since their employers assumed them merely truant. Neither the mayor nor his chief of police discounted a kidnapping operation, but they lacked firm evidence. There were, however, vague reports of a party of black children having been taken through Sussex County, Delaware "in a manner which excited strong suspicion of foul play."¹⁴

Despite rumors, there was nothing to link the disappearance of the youths to the trips of the schooner *Little John* to Philadelphia that summer. Sometimes it tied up at the Arch Street wharf and sometimes further down river at the rope walks. Its owner was one Joseph Johnson, a tavern-keeper and trader from Delaware, and its small crew included a black sailor variously known as John Smith, Spencer Francis, John Purnell, and James Morris. Only in the early months of the following year did it emerge that Johnson was the head of a kidnapping conspiracy and that Smith acted as the decoy to lure young blacks onto the vessel.¹⁵

In January, 1826 Mayor Watson received letters from two Mississippi planters, John W. Hamilton and John Henderson. The previous month Hamilton had been interested in purchasing some field hands and had noted the arrival in Rocky Spring, Mississippi, of Ebenezer Johnson with a gang of young slaves. Sensing that he had a good customer, Johnson had readily agreed to let the planter keep the slaves overnight on his plantation. The next morning one of the boys in the party approached Hamilton and told him that they were freeborn and that most of them had been seized in Philadelphia the previous summer. The child also maintained that he had been severely beaten, and he begged Hamilton to protect him from further ill-treatment. Hamilton ordered him to remove his shirt and found "his body cut in a most cruel manner."

Inclined to believe the child's story of kidnapping, Hamilton then summoned a local magistrate. An irate Ebenezer Johnson produced

¹⁴ *African Observer*, 5th month, 1827, 37; Joseph Watson to William Rawle, July 4, 1826. PAS Correspondence, incoming, 1820-49.

¹⁵ It was evidently a common ploy for blacks to act as decoys. In the case of Isaiah Sadler, a neighbor offered him a good job if he would accompany her to the South. The woman was a member of an interracial kidnapping gang, and Sadler was sold into slavery, although he was eventually able to escape. Statement of Isaiah Sadler, September 5, 1824, Joseph Watson Papers, 1824, HSP. See also Turner, *The Negro in Pennsylvania*, 116-17n.

a bill of sale for his slaves, denied that he had knowingly purchased free people, and attempted to shift the responsibility to his brother, Joseph, who had been commissioned to buy some slaves for him. There was insufficient evidence to detain Johnson, and he was permitted to leave, ostensibly for Accomack County, Virginia to collect proof of his ownership of the slaves. The youths were left in the custody of Hamilton while the matter was investigated. When Johnson failed to return, Hamilton and his neighbor, John Henderson, began to question the "slaves" in greater detail. The sworn testimony of one of them, Samuel Scomp, was forwarded to Mayor Watson with the urgent request that he begin an inquiry and publish details of the kidnappings so "that the coloured people of your City and other places may be guarded against similar outrages."¹⁶

Samuel Scomp stated that he was freeborn and that he had been bound out to serve as an apprentice until the age of 25. However, in the summer of 1825, when he was 16, he had run away from his master in New Jersey and had gone to Philadelphia to work on his own account. Early one morning, while hunting for casual work along the city's waterfront, Scomp encountered a black man who introduced himself as John Smith. Smith asked Scomp if he would be interested in helping to unload a cargo of fruit and earning a quarter. Scomp accepted his offer, and the two boarded a small vessel. Immediately they were both seized. A white man appeared and "informed" Smith that Scomp was his escaped slave. Smith was then permitted to leave the boat with a stern warning not to return. Scomp was fettered and locked in the hold, where he found two black children, Enos Tilghman and Alexander Manlove, already imprisoned. Tilghman, aged 10, had been bound out to a black sweep by his parents. Like Scomp, he had been lured on board the boat by Smith's offer of work. Alexander Manlove, aged 9, was apprenticed to Caleb Carpenter, a black mat-maker. Manlove's stepfather had apprenticed him because the boy was "bad." Carpenter permitted him to attend school for a few hours each week, and he was literate. However, Carpenter, like Manlove's stepfather, found the child difficult to control; he admitted

¹⁶ John Henderson to Joseph Watson, January 22, 1826; John W. Hamilton to Joseph Watson, January 27, 1826. Joseph Watson Papers, January-April, 1826. Henderson (1795-1866) served as United States Senator for Mississippi from 1839 to 1845.

that he had been forced to beat him on several occasions. Rebelling against his treatment, Manlove had run away. Johnson and Smith found him asleep in the street. The fact that Alexander Manlove was, in Carpenter's words, "uncommonly Smart" proved to be of considerable importance in uncovering the conspiracy. His knowledge of life in Philadelphia and his ability to describe the city's landmarks inclined John Hamilton to believe that he and his companions had indeed been kidnapped.¹⁷

Not long after Scomp's capture, two more young blacks joined them in the hold. Cornelius Sinclair, aged 10, had refused John Smith's offer of work. However, he had agreed to follow Smith into an alley. He had immediately been gagged and bundled into a small wagon driven by a white man. Joe Johnson, a young sweep, had been tricked in the same way as Scomp. All the youths were threatened with having their throats cut if they attempted to attract attention by shouting for help.¹⁸

Scomp reported that the vessel set sail soon after the capture of Joe Johnson. He estimated that they were on the Delaware a week before they were landed somewhere on the boundary between Maryland and Delaware. They were then roped together and marched the twenty miles to Joseph Johnson's house. After a day spent in irons in Johnson's garret, they were taken to Jesse Cannon's. Although Scomp did not know it, Cannon was part of the Johnson clan. His wife, Patty, was the sister of Ebenezer and Joseph.

After a week at Cannon's, the youths were herded into a wagon, along with two black women. Mary Fisher, in her forties, married and the mother of several children, had gained her freedom through manumission. She had been gathering firewood near Elkton, Maryland, when the Johnsons had seized her. They generally preferred to abduct young males, but they were prepared to take anyone who could be sold for a profit. Fisher's kidnapping probably occurred because the Johnsons found her alone in an isolated area. The other

¹⁷ Tilghman was freeborn. His master subsequently advertised for his return in the *United States Gazette* on November 11, 1825. Watson to Richard Stockton, March 9, 1826. This is in a series of extracts of documents forwarded by Watson to Stockton on March 9, 1826. Carpenter's deposition to Watson is undated. Joseph Watson Papers, January-April, 1826. Carpenter added that Manlove was "an active, mischievous Boy."

¹⁸ Sinclair, like Manlove, could read and write. His father was a porter.

woman in the party, Maria Neal, was a slave. She stated that she believed the Johnsons had purchased her legally. That might have been the case, although the Johnson brothers had no objection to stealing slaves and reselling them.

The procession set off, with John Smith, the decoy from the Philadelphia waterfront, driving the wagon. Behind it rode Ebenezer Johnson and his wife in a small open carriage. The journey southward continued as the party transferred from the wagon to a small boat. After a week on the water, they disembarked and were marched through Alabama, where Sinclair was sent off and sold for \$400.

It was now late fall and the kidnap victims, with the exception of the very youngest boys (who rode in a wagon), were forced to walk barefoot thirty miles a day, for six hundred miles. Two of the captives got frostbite; all were whipped for complaining. Scomp, one of the more resourceful members of the party, learned that they were passing through Indian territory and made a bid for freedom by running off to join the Choctaws. However, the first Indian he met returned him to Johnson, who beat him severely.¹⁹

Joe Johnson suffered most on the trek south. When the group moved on from Ashville, Alabama (where Ebenezer Johnson had a log cabin), to cross the state line into Mississippi, the youth could hardly walk. Ebenezer Johnson, often urged by his wife, flogged the boy every time he fell. Finally, just before they reached Hamilton's plantation at Rocky Spring, the sweep died. He was buried on the plantation, and Hamilton initially accepted that he had died of natural causes. Once he uncovered the kidnapping plot, he questioned the others and learned what had really happened. However, since the only witnesses to Joe Johnson's continued abuse were black, Ebenezer Johnson stood in no danger of having to answer to a charge of murder or manslaughter.

After reading Scomp's testimony and the letters from the two planters, Mayor Watson admitted that he was not entirely surprised to learn that kidnappers had been at work in his city. In reply to Hamilton and Henderson he observed, "I regret to say that these attempts at kidnapping, notwithstanding the vigilance of the police,

¹⁹ *African Observer*, 5th month, 1827, 40.

are frequently made, and all too often with success.” On the strength of the information presented to him, Watson was able to secure indictments for kidnapping in the Philadelphia Quarter Sessions against Joseph and Ebenezer Johnson and two of their accomplices. Warrants were issued by the governor of Pennsylvania and sent to five states in the hope that the men could be traced and forced to stand trial.²⁰

Mayor Watson prepared an account of the conspiracy, and it was widely published. As a result, he began to receive more information about the activities of the gang. He soon learned that the Johnsons, who were described as “very brave and fearless,” had criminal records. Joseph Johnson had already been convicted of kidnapping in Delaware in 1821. He had received thirty-nine lashes; he had been put in the pillory; and his ears had been cropped. Undeterred, he and his brother, along with an accomplice, made another attempt at kidnapping. They promptly were indicted for assault with intent to imprison. But the brothers became more ambitious and better organized. They shifted their center of operations from Delaware to Philadelphia, and they recruited more agents. One of their neighbors informed Watson of the Johnsons’ specific goal: to relocate in Alabama with their widowed mother and Ebenezer’s father-in-law. They were going to purchase land, establish themselves as planters, and make one more trip to Philadelphia to acquire some field hands!²¹

It was particularly galling to Watson to learn that Ebenezer Johnson had narrowly escaped arrest in Philadelphia. He had passed through the city a matter of days before the kidnapping indictments had been handed down. His brother, generally acknowledged as the ring-leader in the kidnapping conspiracy, could not be traced.²²

²⁰ Joseph Watson to John W. Hamilton, February 24, 1826 (copy), Joseph Watson Papers, January-April, 1826.

²¹ James Gaskins to Joseph Watson, February 19, 1826; Jesse Green to Watson, February 28, 1826; James Bryan to Watson, March 18, 1826. Bryan charged that Joseph Johnson was a “complete outlaw” and that he had thirty men under his command. Bryan also wrote to appeal for help for a black neighbor whose two young sons had been taken by the Johnsons. Joseph Watson Papers, January-April, 1826.

²² Joseph Watson to William Rawle, July 4, 1826, PAS Correspondence, incoming, 1820-49. See also Watson to John W. Hamilton, February 24, 1826 (copy) and Watson to Hamilton and Henderson, March 10, 1826 (copy), Joseph Watson Papers, January-April, 1826.

Although the criminal activities of the Johnsons had been uncovered, the individuals they had abducted could not automatically be released and restored to their families. Richard Stockton, attorney-general of Mississippi, wrote to Watson to explain the complications of the situation. Hamilton wanted to send the youths in his custody home to Philadelphia by way of New Orleans. He was particularly apprehensive about their health and wanted to spare them from having to spend a summer in Mississippi. However, Ebenezer Johnson had initiated a law suit against Hamilton. The planter now found himself under bond to return the "slaves" to Johnson if their freedom could not be established by January 1, 1827. Stockton advised sending them back to Philadelphia to be questioned by Watson. He assured the mayor that Mississippi might be a slave state, but that her citizens felt "abhorrence" of the "infamous traffic carried on by negro stealers."²³

By late June, 1826 Samuel Scomp and Enos Tilghman were back in Philadelphia. Hamilton had taken them to Natchez and directed them to a friend in New Orleans who arranged their passage North. Mary Fisher disliked the idea of a sea voyage and chose to stay in Hamilton's household as a free woman. He promised to find some way of sending her home by land. Mayor Watson took the depositions of Scomp and Tilghman and reported to the Pennsylvania Abolition Society that the case had been concluded. The Society passed resolutions condemning the "Cold and dilatory forms of the Law" that had allowed the kidnappers to escape punishment and impeded the rescue of their victims. Gratitude was expressed for the efforts of the two planters to uncover the conspiracy and tokens of appreciation sent to them. As far as Mayor Watson and the members of the PAS were concerned, there the matter rested. It merely provided another example of the constraints under which the members of the city's black community were obliged to live.²⁴

The case was reopened in December, 1826 when Mayor Watson

²³ Richard Stockton to Watson, March 26, 1826, in *African Observer*, 5th month, 1827, 41.

²⁴ Watson advised the members of the PAS to send some token to Hamilton and Henderson, partly as a sign of their gratitude and partly because of the "salutary effect" it might have elsewhere. The PAS sent two engraved silver pitchers. PAS Minutes, 1825-47, 42.

received another letter from Mississippi—this time from David Holmes and Joseph E. Davis of Natchez. Holmes was a former governor of the state and a wealthy planter. One of his servants had recently discovered that a neighbor's new slaves were claiming to be free people and were alleging that they had been kidnapped in Philadelphia. They named as their abductors Joseph and Ebenezer Johnson. Disturbed by their charges and concerned that they might be telling the truth, Holmes and Davis forwarded to Watson a statement made by one of the "slaves," Peter Hook. They requested that Watson consider it and send to Natchez "some creditable person or persons" to investigate the matter.²⁵

In its essentials, Hook's narrative was similar to that of Samuel Scomp. One evening in June, 1825 John Smith had invited him on board the schooner in Philadelphia for a drink. Hook soon found himself tied to the pump along with William Miller and Milton Trusty. William Chase and Clem Cox joined them the next day. They eventually made the same journey as Scomp's party down the Delaware to Joseph Johnson's house. While Hook and his companions were chained up in the garret, other kidnapping victims were brought in. John Jacobs, a carter from Philadelphia, arrived at the end of June. Three more captives—James Bayard, Benjamin Baxter, and "Little Jack"—joined them early in July. Then Ephraim Lawrence, "Henry" and "Little John" were brought in. The last to arrive were two young women, Lydia Smith and Sarah Nicholson. Lydia Smith had been seized in Delaware, but all the others were from Philadelphia.²⁶

As was the case with Scomp and his companions, most of those in Hook's party were young and relatively poor. Milton Trusty was the only one from a moderately prosperous family. His father, Jonathan Trusty, was a sweep-master who owned a house on Spruce Street.

²⁵ David Holmes and Joseph E. Davis to Watson, December 23, 1826, Joseph Watson Papers, January-July, 1827. Holmes had served as the governor of Mississippi Territory from 1809 to 1817. He went on to serve as the state's first governor from 1817 to 1820. Elected to a second term, he resigned after seven months because of failing health. He was living in retirement on his plantation when the kidnapping plot came to his attention.

²⁶ *African Observer*, 5th month, 1827, 44.

The others were apprentices and domestic servants. Again, most lived with their employers and not with their own families.²⁷

The whole party remained in Joseph Johnson's garret for six months. Meanwhile, Ebenezer Johnson was making his ill-fated expedition to Mississippi with Scomp and the first group of captives. Finally, Hook's party was taken by river to a location outside of Baltimore and then marched inland for a month. The older youths were chained together and all were threatened with a severe beating if they tried to explain to anyone they met that they were free. Hook recalled that they generally travelled along by-ways and that they camped out most nights.

Near Rockingham, North Carolina, the whole gang of fourteen individuals was sold to two dealers, and two more kidnap victims from Philadelphia were added to their number. At one stage the dealers, Josiah Sutler and a Mr. Miller, disposed of ten of the youths, but the buyer immediately returned them when he discovered that they were from the North. The buyer was unwilling to report the matter to the local authorities. His main concern was to get his money back. The party travelled on, now increased to twenty by the addition of four stolen slaves.²⁸ Eventually the dealers sold them in small lots. Hook and three others were purchased by a Mr. Perryman of Holmesville, Pike's County, Mississippi, for \$450 each.²⁹

Lydia Smith was able to add a few more details to Hook's account of the kidnapping ring. When she was traced to Monticello, Mississippi, she explained that the Johnsons did not always do their own kidnapping. They would dispose of "slaves" acquired by others and ask no awkward questions. Like most of the others, Smith had been bound out to service. Her first master tried to sell her but she was rescued by the Pennsylvania Abolition Society and transferred to the household of one Bill Spicer. The move did not ensure her safety.

²⁷ Benjamin Baxter was a sweep. Lawrence and "Little John" were in service to attorney Jonathan H. Hurst of South Street.

²⁸ The two Philadelphians, Staten and Constant, were known to some of their captives. Both were "corn carriers." The four slaves were named as Lawdy, Fanny, Maria, and Martha. Neither Hook nor Smith knew where they had been abducted. Smith added two more people to the list supplied by Hook. Hannah was a free woman from Philadelphia and Aaron was a slave who had been seized in Baltimore.

²⁹ *African Observer*, 5th month, 1827, 44-45.

Spicer also tried to enslave her, but he was detected in the attempt and sentenced to a term of imprisonment. Smith was sent to a third family and served out the term of her indenture without any further effort to deprive her of her freedom. However, Spicer was unrepentant after his encounter with the law. Immediately upon his release from prison he located Smith, kidnapped her, and eventually sold her to the Johnsons for \$110.³⁰ As Smith's misfortunes indicate, the chances of being enslaved were considerable. As soon as she was bound out, she was effectively at the mercy of anyone who chose to exploit her. Two of her three masters had no hesitation in attempting to sell her into slavery, nor, evidently, any difficulty in finding buyers. There was obviously an underground network for the buying and selling of free blacks if one knew where to look. The Johnsons may have preferred to purchase young males, but Spicer's asking price was reasonable. Smith was young and healthy, and she could be sold at a profit. Sarah Nicholson, the other freeborn woman in the group, may have been an easy target for kidnappers, although she was likely to fetch a lower price than Smith. She was almost blind.

Armed with the new evidence supplied by Hook and Smith, Watson again approached the courts. New indictments were handed down and more warrants were issued; but, as the mayor reported to Holmes and Davis, the gang had moved its base of operations once more, and he was pessimistic about any arrests being made. Undaunted, Watson contacted Philadelphia newspaper editors to outline the conspiracy, to appeal to the public for information, and to call for "the most watchful attention of all classes of the community" to avoid a repetition of the events of 1825.³¹ He also addressed a meeting of the Philadelphia City Council and secured \$1000—\$500 to be offered as a reward for information and \$500 towards the expenses of securing the liberty of those abducted. The City Council passed a resolution declaring that "public justice and the dignity of this city" demanded that action be taken.³²

³⁰ Ibid., 47-48.

³¹ Newspaper clipping from *Democratic Press*, January 22, 1827, in Joseph Watson Papers, January-July, 1827. Watson to Holmes and Davis, January 20, 1827, in *African Observer*, 5th month, 1827, 45.

³² Select Council, February 8, 1827, Joseph Watson Papers, January-July, 1827. The mayor's proclamation offering a reward for information was issued the following day.

Even with the endorsement of the City Council, effective action was not easy. As Mayor Watson wrote to Duncan S. Walker, the lawyer retained by Holmes and Davis in Natchez, "the greatest difficulty is to procure even the written evidence of white people, to establish the identity of black children, more particularly if they have been out of sight for a year or two." The refusal of Southern courts to accept the testimony of blacks, as well as the demand that whites give their evidence in person was, he considered, "a monstrous oppression on these poor blacks." Most of them could not afford to pay the expenses of white witnesses to make the journey to Mississippi and back. As for himself, he observed that he could hardly let the matter drop, even if he had been inclined to do so. Every day he was besieged by the "parents and relatives of the sufferers" begging for the latest information.³³

Walker assured the mayor that he would do everything in his power to secure the release of the Philadelphians. He informed Watson that he had already initiated suits in the cases of eight individuals and that he was concentrating on tracing the others. However, there were several complicating factors. Walker suspected that most of the youths were being held on remote plantations; he had, therefore, been obliged to enlist the aid of his fellow lawyers who rode the circuit. He also reported the death of Richard Stockton, the attorney-general of Mississippi who had contacted Watson regarding the earlier case. Upon Stockton's death, all the papers Watson had forwarded to him passed into the hands of his executors and could not be consulted.³⁴

Throughout the investigation of the case the problem of evidence—at least the kind of evidence that would be accepted in a Mississippi court—proved insurmountable. Watson finally decided to send Philadelphia's high constable of police, Samuel Garrigues, to the South. After a trip of several months, Garrigues brought back only two individuals, James Daily and Ephraim Lawrence. Daily, it was dis-

³³ Watson to Duncan S. Walker, January 24, 1827, in *African Observer*, 5th month, 1827, 46. See *ibid.*, 10th month, 1827, 219-21, for a discussion of the kidnapping cases and the laws of evidence in the South.

³⁴ Walker to Watson, February 25, 1827, in *African Observer*, 5th month, 1827, 47. Walker rejected Watson's offer of a fee and urged the mayor to limit publicity about the kidnappings in case those individuals who had purchased the Philadelphians took steps to move them before they could be rescued.

covered, had been the victim of a completely different kidnapping ring based in Virginia. He had been bound out to a man who posed as a tailor. The man was, in fact, the organizer of a kidnapping operation. Daily, along with several other "apprentices" from Philadelphia, had been taken to Louisiana by way of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. He had eventually been sold to the proprietor of a sugar plantation near Baton Rouge. His abductor, who called himself Patrick Pickard, could not be traced. As for Daily, he was in a wretched condition when he arrived in Philadelphia, and he died several days later in the city's almshouse. The attending physician found scars all over the youth's body and concluded that death was due to cruelty, neglect, and malnutrition.³⁵

Almost as soon as they had returned to Philadelphia, Garrigues and Lawrence were obliged to make another trip to Mississippi. Lawrence had given his testimony to Mayor Watson, and he was now required to appear in a case in the South to establish his freedom. If Watson and Garrigues hoped that this would result in a general restoration of liberty, they were sadly mistaken. It was a major departure from precedent that a Mississippi court was allowing Lawrence the chance to testify in his own behalf. His evidence could not secure the release of his fellow captives. In addition to Lawrence, Garrigues brought back to Philadelphia only Clem Cox.³⁶ Mayor Watson reported to the City Council in the summer of 1828 that ten individuals had been restored to their families. However, he estimated that twenty-five or twenty-six were still missing and that he despaired of ever finding them.³⁷

Watson was also obliged to admit that the Johnsons had continued to evade arrest. One member of their gang had died in prison while awaiting trial. Henry Carr, a black resident of Lombard Street, had been the owner of an oyster cellar and had often played host to Joseph Johnson on his visits to Philadelphia. Carr leagued with Johnson in kidnapping young boys, imprisoning them in his cellar, and selling

³⁵ At the time of his death Daily was 15. He had been bound out from the Philadelphia Almshouse four years earlier. *Freedom's Journal*, January 18, February 15, 1828.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, May 23, 1828.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, July 25, 1828. On this occasion Watson was voted the further sum of \$500 to cover the expenses of tracing the youths and sending Garrigues to Mississippi.

them to Johnson for twenty-five dollars a head. The only successful prosecution was that of John Smith, the other black agent employed by the Johnsons. When Smith was reported to be on board a vessel sailing from Baltimore to Boston, a warrant for his arrest was quickly forwarded to the authorities in Massachusetts. He was arrested on his arrival, and Samuel Garrigues was dispatched to bring him back to stand trial in Philadelphia. On the testimony of several of his victims, Smith was convicted on two counts of kidnapping, fined \$4000, and sentenced to forty-two years in jail. Not one of the white conspirators was ever brought to trial. Their kidnapping ring had been broken up, but the Johnson brothers had made their money. It only remained for them to move their base of operations once more and recruit new agents. They may even have given up kidnapping and pursued their ambition of buying plantations in Alabama.³⁸

While the black youths and their families were the principal victims in the whole kidnapping scheme, some Southern planters also considered that they had ample reason to feel threatened by the criminal activities of the Johnsons. The planters maintained that they had been exposed to a serious risk. "Policy" as well as "humanity" demanded that they should devote their energies to the suppression of kidnapping. The kidnappers had lured away other men's slaves and sold them. Moreover, there were many "evils to be apprehended" from the introduction of free blacks into a slave community. The Vesey conspiracy, the work not of a slave but of a free black, was fresh in the minds of the planters. In their efforts to prevent further rebellions they asserted that "free negroes are the worst description of people that could ever willingly be brought among us." As Joseph Johnson knew to his cost, the slave state of Delaware could hunt down and punish kidnappers far more effectively than its neighbor to the North. Lawyer David Walker suggested that Johnson was lucky to escape with only a few hours in the pillory and the cropping of his ears. Had his crimes been committed in Mississippi the penalty might well have been death—with the sentence carried out by the outraged planters. As Walker informed Mayor Watson, "Our soil

³⁸ *African Observer*, 8th month, 1827. Carr told one witness that John Smith's father had been a noted kidnapper in Virginia and that he had killed himself rather than be captured. Testimony of Simon Wesley Parker, Joseph Watson Papers, January-July, 1827.

affords no stone for building Penitentiaries, but our forests supply gallows for the kidnapper.”³⁹

If Walker, Hamilton, Holmes and other men of their class could afford to condemn kidnapping and denounce the kidnapper in the harshest of terms, there were other planters in the South who could not. The Johnsons and their confederates knew that they could always find buyers for healthy young blacks. Their attempt to do business with John Hamilton had been a costly mistake. Most of their trading was done with less affluent planters who were many miles from the towns where slaves were auctioned on a regular basis. These men may actually have relied on itinerant traders like the Johnsons to keep them supplied with field hands. If the price was reasonable they had no inclination to ask how and where a particular slave had been acquired. In remote areas there was little likelihood that the free status of kidnap victims would come to light. The Johnsons found their best market in the most rapidly developing regions of the lower South. With cheap land available and good prices for cotton, prosperity was in sight—as long as the aspiring planter could secure a labor force. Once the Johnsons had seen such promising prospects, it is hardly surprising that they were considering investing their illegal profits in the purchase of plantations in Alabama. But for the untimely discovery of their activities, they might easily have made one last trip to Philadelphia in search of “slaves” to work their own plantations.

In the short term, white Philadelphians responded to the revelations of kidnapping with outrage. Mayor Watson observed that “the public feeling is highly aroused.” Action was taken to thwart future kidnapping attempts. The members of the city’s black upper class collaborated with influential whites to establish the Protecting Society of Philadelphia. This organization offered help to those whose family members had been abducted and pledged to take swift action against anyone who preyed on young blacks.⁴⁰ There was also the probability that kidnappers had to contend with vigilante groups. Black Phila-

³⁹ *African Observer*, 5th month, 1827, 43. The writer added that those who knowingly purchased free blacks were “not esteemed in our society.”

⁴⁰ *Minutes of the Adjourned Session of the Twentieth Biennial American Convention for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery* (Philadelphia, 1828), 23.

delphians who risked jail and attacked officers arresting runaway slaves were not prepared to remain passive in the face of threats to their own children.⁴¹

Kidnapping may have become a more hazardous undertaking, but the kidnapers did not abandon their operations. With a thriving market for slaves in the lower South, the profits of kidnapping continued to justify the risks. The members of the PAS were forced to admit that, in spite of the heightened public awareness of the crime, "many cases occur, which are never brought to light." Cases continued to find their way into the society's minutes, and the abolitionists were frustrated to learn of the freedom with which kidnapers plied their trade. In 1837 there were reports of one "noted kidnapper" at work in Philadelphia who maintained a private jail within the city limits. Some kidnapers were also quite prepared to seize white children and sell them in the South as light-skinned mulattoes.⁴²

The kidnapping conspiracy of the Johnson brothers and their accomplices is not significant in terms of the number of its victims or the extent of its operations. Its importance lies in the fact that it came to light. In the process of tracking down the Johnsons and endeavoring to rescue the people they had enslaved, city authorities in Philadelphia were obliged to acknowledge the scale on which kidnapping took place. James Daily's abduction and death could not be blamed on the Johnsons. His kidnapper had his own organization, recruited his own personnel, and used a different route to transport his "slaves" to the lower South. Spicer's action in kidnapping Lydia Smith may be attributed to the fact that he knew that the Johnsons would buy her, but he would have found others equally willing to pay a reasonable price for her. Joseph and Ebenezer Johnson were clearly not the only kidnapers preying on Philadelphia's free blacks. They were merely

⁴¹ Turner, *The Negro in Pennsylvania*, 116-17n. Vigilante action may have been made somewhat easier because most of the victims were from the same part of the city, South Street. For a discussion of South Street and the antebellum black community see Emma Jones Lapsansky, "South Street, Philadelphia, 1762-1854: 'A Haven for Those Low in the World,'" Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1975.

⁴² PAS Minutes, 1825-47, 212-13, 276. The threat to whites led to a petition to the Pennsylvania legislature for action.

unfortunate in being detected in what was evidently a common criminal enterprise.

Black and white Philadelphians may have been "highly aroused" by the revelations of kidnapping in their city, but moral indignation could not change the climate which made kidnapping possible. The Johnsons and their confederates had merely taken advantage of the situation; they had not created it. Philadelphia remained a threatening place for those who were young and poor, especially if they were black. Poverty and the fact that they were often living apart from their families exposed young, poor blacks to risks which their more affluent contemporaries—both black and white—would almost certainly not encounter. Moreover, the poverty in the wider community ensured that there were always some who would be willing to connive in their exploitation. Nor could they expect protection from the city authorities. With the continued growth of Philadelphia's population and with the explosion of racial, ethnic, and economic tensions in the 1830s and 1840s, the city of Philadelphia lacked the resources to detect and prevent kidnapping.

If black Philadelphians were vulnerable to kidnapping, how great was the risk elsewhere? Clearly the kidnapper who made New York or Boston his base of operations had greater logistical problems. However, as Solomon Northup's experience indicates, kidnapping was by no means impossible in these cities. The kidnapper merely needed to be more resourceful. Nor was Philadelphia the only Northern city conveniently located for kidnapping. Free blacks abducted in Cincinnati had only to be ferried across the Ohio River to the slave state of Kentucky. In some respects blacks in Cincinnati were in greater danger than the Philadelphians. Their presence was even more deeply resented by their white neighbors, who engaged in a concerted campaign to expel them from the city.⁴³

⁴³ Nash argues that the activities of kidnappers in Northern cities may have had a far-reaching effect on the demographic composition of the urban black population. The census returns for Boston, New York, and Philadelphia for 1820 indicate that, in the age group 14-25, black females outnumbered black males two to one. However, this was not the case in the surrounding rural areas. Nash notes that kidnappers preferred to seize young black males. Nash, "Forging Freedom," 12-14. Curry explains this by arguing that the mortality rate was higher for young males. Leonard P. Curry, *The Free Black in Urban America, 1800-1850: The Shadow of the Dream* (Chicago, 1981), 9.

The “underground railroad” clearly operated in two directions. While some blacks secured their freedom through flight, others lost theirs through fraud and deceit. The status of free blacks was directly related to the continued existence of slavery, since it exposed them to the risk of enslavement. The Northern free black, once taken into the South and sold as a slave, would probably remain a slave for the rest of his life. The laws of his home state could not protect him; access to the Southern courts was denied him; and the efforts of friends and public officials were unlikely to secure his freedom. With this ever-present threat of enslavement, free blacks in the antebellum North could have had little doubt that, for them, “freedom” was a relative term.

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