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Introduction: Migrants Against Slavery

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Migrants against Slavery

VIRGINIANS AND THE NATION

Philip J. Schwarz

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Introduction

In 1962 Richard Beale Davis surveyed "The Jeffersonian Expatriates in the Building of the Nation."¹ He made clear that the Old Dominion had supplied numerous noteworthy people—almost all men—to other states, even if to the disadvantage of Virginia. The same year Gordon E. Finnie developed a convincing interpretation of the impact antislavery emigrants from Virginia and the other slave states had on the slave South—by their absence—and the effect of their presence on the North.² Because social history, women's history, and African-American history had not blossomed by 1962, both studies are limited by their exclusion of people who were not leaders, of African Americans, and of women. The brevity of Davis's article and the scope of Finnie's coverage of much of the slave South as well as the Old Northwest also kept them from including more people. There have been other studies of migration from the South to the Midwest as well as descriptive treatments of various northerners, midwesterners, and westerners with Virginian origins. The large body of literature concerning Quakers during the antebellum period deals with these kinds of Americans. But it is necessary to begin a new interpretation of the migration against slavery in order to understand better how the United States developed in the antebellum period as a nation of regions that took on different identities partly because of each region's dominant attitude toward slavery. David Hackett Fischer and James C. Kelly's catalog for the Virginia Historical Society's 1993–94 exhibit "Away, I'm Bound Away: Virginia and the Westward
Movement” is an excellent beginning. That volume follows black and white Virginians to both the North and the South.³

Lloyd Benson has shown in “Hoosiers and Planters: The Development of Sectional Society in Antebellum Indiana and Mississippi” that the absence of legalized slavery and the presence of a significant number of antislavery people in Indiana—along with some proslavery or neutral people—enabled residents of that state to argue publicly about bondage in a way that was virtually impossible in Mississippi. In that Gulf state the peculiar institution was very much in place, and any antislavery whites were usually outnumbered or neutralized. There the dominant slaveholders ensured that African-American opponents of the institution were suppressed when enslaved and were, when free blacks, also closely controlled even if they were too scarce to matter. As Joseph Robert, Alison Freehling, Patricia Hickin, and others have shown, the control of antislavery opinion in Virginia was less certain, especially during the slavery debates of 1831–32. Yet that control was clear enough in the Old Dominion, as Moncure Conway quickly learned, that one could say only so much against the peculiar institution.⁴

The experience of Virginians between the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries merits analysis on its own. But the state that had more slaves than any other through at least 1860 also had a significant impact on the manner in which the rest of the slave South as well as of the nation dealt with sectional issues. That the Old Dominion waited as long as it did to join the Gulf States in secession reflects its economic, ideological, and geographical proximity to the North. But that same proximity made interstate conflict concerning bondage more likely and encouraged feelings of betrayal when antislavery northerners attacked white Virginians or protected fugitive slaves.

Many free people were born, lived a normal span of years, and died in Virginia. Fewer left than stayed, so the important question is why the minority of emigrants decided as they did. Those who migrated away from or against slavery were part of a large general migration. “Go Northwest” should have been the cry in the early nineteenth century. Americans streamed out of northeastern and southeastern states to Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, and later to other states and territories. The population of the Old Northwest frontier bulged. Ohio alone grew over 900 percent between the War of 1812 and the Civil War. Malcolm J. Rohrbough has called this migration to the new territories after the War of 1812 “one of the great immigrations in the history of the western world.”⁵ Of course, land was the key to this migration and growth. Armed with computers and plotters, contemporary geographers make
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detailed migration maps that show the general east-to-west movement of people from seaboard states such as the Old Dominion. They have provided strong empirical support for an older argument that migrants sought out physical and agricultural environments similar to those from which they came. Thus a significant number settled within five or ten degrees of latitude of where their original home was.

Although thousands of people found homes in the Southwest, other thousands had clear reasons for not heading in that direction. They wished to find free soil or to get away from slavery, or to do both. These people were in two groups, those who migrated away from slavery without being expressly opposed to it and those people—the primary subjects of this book—who consciously migrated against slavery. When it was possible to do so—that is, when the migration would not be too expensive because of distance—free southerners often exited the slave South. An overwhelming majority of free people migrating from Delaware and Maryland went to free soil; a simple majority of free Kentuckians and Missourians also did so. Nearly one-half of free Virginia migrants chose free states, so Virginia was very important to Old Northwest growth. Of people living in Ohio in 1860, only those born in Pennsylvania outnumbered Virginians. And far more free Virginians moved to the Midwest than to the cotton-rich Deep South states. Among these migrants away from slavery were the important migrants against bondage.6

In short, we need to concentrate on the migration against slavery into the Midwest and North as well as on the proslavery migration to the slave states.

Who went? Who were the people who left the Old Dominion to avoid slavery? I could attempt to create a statistical profile of the migrants. For example, Cincinnati in 1860 was home to a free black population nearly one-third of whom were from Virginia; only about one-sixth of the white residents of Cincinnati came from Virginia.7 But such data have limited explanatory value. The stories of individuals and groups provide the most important evidence concerning the motives of migrants against slavery.

The stories in this book show that complete avoidance of slavery was impossible because of the power of Virginian slaveholders and because of the residues of slavery in the Midwest and elsewhere in the North. Because of these factors, people who left Virginia to avoid slavery developed diverse tactics and followed markedly different routes.

There are echoes of earlier migrations in these people's experiences. Many settlers in the thirteen English colonies emigrated from Europe to escape from various kinds of oppression or to search for greater op-
portunity or freedom, whether religious, political, social, or economic. Those who tried to leave Virginia to avoid slavery represent still another migratory group whose flight from a lack of freedom and toward the goal of greater opportunity and freedom helped to shape the American character.

Those who left Virginia to avoid slavery have much to tell us about the staying power and long-term influence of slaveholders, “the habit of authority” of European Americans over African-American people, the migration of racism within the United States, perceptions of American identity or character, and the limits of geographical and social mobility in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American society. The “escap­ees” had to make a social exchange that was not always fair. They usually gained something by escaping, but they always lost something as well. This experience of loss is common to most migrants, but consider the special case of Virginians—and for that matter, migrants from other slave states. If Virginians who left their native state to avoid slavery wished to go home again, slavery was now an impediment, a factor against their return. Before, their attitude toward slavery had helped them leave. African-American migrants from Virginia were acutely aware of slavery as an impediment to moving back to the Old Domin­ion. Upon returning, they could be captured as fugitives or jailed as free blacks entering the state. But free whites too would have had to think carefully about returning to their home. What would be the point unless family obligations or other special circumstances existed? Thus did slavery help to create the “rootless American.” The experience of Americans made rootless by slavery should be systematically and comprehen­sively factored into general explanations of American migration.

MIGRATION FROM THE SLAVE STATE OF VIRGINIA

Americans sometimes act as if migration were their sole defining historical experience. It is no wonder: migration created the British North American colonies; mass human movement to and within the United States contributed significantly to the new country’s staggering growth. Migration from Virginia is a significant part of this American migratory experience. Scholarly disputes abound concerning the European and African journey to the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Old Do­minion. But discussions of the second major migration that affected Vir­ginia’s history—the 1790 to 1860 out-migration—have also consumed large quantities of printer’s ink. Nearly four decades ago Richard Beale Davis focused on Virginians who attained political prominence after leaving their native state. Many other scholarly explanations of Vir­ginia’s exodus have appeared since Davis’s seminal article, providing ad-
ditional evidence that the rest of the United States had ample room for numerous Virginians who decided to leave their state. Many looked north, south, and west; many followed what they saw.

Evidence concerning this migration is voluminous but sadly not equally specific. Still, the 1850 and 1860 censuses’ tracking of the states in which each state’s residents were born, the many pension records for Revolutionary War veterans, genealogical records, local histories, correspondence, and other sources have enabled scholars to offer a general analysis of departures from the Old Dominion. In short, many black and white Virginians moved, or were moved, to other slave states; surprisingly, a nearly equal number of whites and, not surprisingly, many African Americans moved to free states—free, that is, of legal slavery.

The ultimate destinations of Virginian migrants are eloquent as to general motives. (The census is silent as to any intermediate destinations.) Free or fugitive African Americans favored the trip north to Philadelphia, New York, and other northeastern urban destinations (table 1). Some went to the “far North,” Canada. But many black Virginians who preferred an agricultural environment within the United States were more likely to head for the Old Northwest. Especially after 1850, some of them in turn fled to Western Ontario. Other Virginian expatriates followed the unwritten rules of American migration: go along an east-west axis to familiar agricultural environments, seek the hoped-for sources of wealth, or find the most accessible available land. Many sought out agricultural environments similar to those they had left (such as hilly, tobacco-growing southern Ohio or Kentucky). Later, Old Dominion residents ventured as far west as Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri. Others followed the money to Black Belt cotton-producing regions or to gold mines in the future golden state of California. Involuntary black migrants, however, were shipped to the slave states; given the way human bondage expanded across the nineteenth-century continental landscape, most slaves transferred from Virginia ended up in Deep South states such as Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas. People like Dred Scott, who went from Virginia to Alabama, then to Missouri, Illinois, and Wisconsin Territory, and finally back to Missouri, can only be classified as especially mobile forced migrants.

Among the many outward-bound Virginians were intentional migrants against slavery. The last thing these migrants wished to find was a new slave society to replace the one they left. Instead their intention was to avoid involvement with the peculiar institution. Fugitive slaves were the most obvious migrants of this type. Former slaves and African Americans born free also found good reason to leave the place where, in spite of their free status, some had been expected to labor “so hard for old
"Massa" or were forced to be second-class citizens, especially after the legal and political vise in which they lived began to tighten in the 1820s. Members of the Society of Friends, the first major organization of any kind that worked against bondage in the slave South, also found it increasingly necessary to go into exile to protect themselves from the burdens a slave society placed on nonslaveholders, to find more abundant sources of free labor, or simply to follow their families or meetings, which, in many cases, had exited the Old Dominion as a group. There were clearly enough such people to require analysis of their unique and significant migratory experience.

True, as the career of Loudoun County Quaker Samuel Janney suggests, antislavery people could remain in Virginia. They faced limits on their speech and action, yet they could still somehow witness against human bondage. They might also have economic advantages in Virginia that kept them there in spite of the dominance of slave labor. Certainly some of those people who did stay benefited from the rapid growth of the Old Dominion's economy in the 1850s. Conversely, there were people who could not leave the state, either because they could not afford to or because, in the case of free blacks, they would be legally barred from returning to visit relatives or friends who remained in Virginia.

Table 1. Virginia-born African Americans in northern cities, 1850 and 1860

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>1850 Virginia born</th>
<th>1850 Total black</th>
<th>1860 Virginia born</th>
<th>1860 Total black</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boston</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>296</td>
<td>1,923</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>947</td>
<td>947</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cincinnati</td>
<td>71.9</td>
<td>775</td>
<td>3,715</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>878</td>
<td>13,815</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>532</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philadelphia</td>
<td>49.4</td>
<td>1,241</td>
<td>2,1922</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How much can we know about Virginians who migrated against slavery? The best we can do is to tell some of their stories so as to explain the importance of their experience. There are too few sources to carry out a prosopographic study of migrants against slavery. But census data and publications from the time do enable us to set the stage for displaying the dramatic and significant choices some people made, or had made for them, to leave the slave Commonwealth of Virginia. First, census data do provide evidence for the persistence of two kinds of migration: one intentionally against slavery and the other simply away from slavery, and not necessarily intentional. These same data also help create a taxonomy of the classic “push and pull” forces involved in the migration against slavery.

Those Virginian expatriates who only moved away from bondage to free states influenced but did not necessarily determine the future of slavery. Their move to a free state cut them off temporarily or permanently from slave ownership. They could never legally own slaves in their new states; they would not add to the number of Virginian slaveholders. Their children would not grow up in a society based on proslavery assumptions. With the exception of some earlier migrants who engaged in wishful thinking about terminating the Northwest Ordinance’s prohibition of bondage, the Virginian migrants to the Northwest knew they had no choice about slavery if they stayed in the North. They had consciously chosen to give up their slaves or never to buy any. Such decisions may or may not have resulted from principle. They nevertheless were choices against involvement with slavery the adults among these people made with their feet. True, they could still hope to move again to a slave state and become slave owners there, but the 1850 and 1860 census data concerning people who moved from free states to slave states do not include computations of “hopscotch” migration.¹⁵

Those who migrated against slavery certainly affected the future of Virginia as well. The fewer potential slave owners there were in Virginia, the less political strength the slavocracy there might have. The tidewater slaveholders prevailed in the 1831–32 legislature’s debates whether to consider abolition, but by a slim margin that conceivably might have changed rapidly. Could Virginian slaveholders prevail in their own state? The question was realistic: Maryland slaveholders were becoming more and more localized as well as politically isolated. Virginia’s new Constitution of 1851 protected or strengthened some slaveholder prerogatives, while simultaneously diluting the domination of the legislature that eastern Virginia owners had previously enjoyed. Such a compromise foretold future weakening of slave owners. Slavery may have been growing substantially in certain areas of western Virginia, but not
to a degree that heartened the more numerous slave owners in tidewater, piedmont, and Southside Virginia.  

Clearly, most of the migration from Virginia to free states was at least somewhat intentional when the migrants knew they were separating themselves from slave ownership and slavery. But what were their intentions? A person who had never lived with slaves could decide he or she would never do so in the future. That might have been an economic rather than ethical choice. It was still a choice against a slave society. Racism certainly led many whites to seek “free white” soil where they would not have to live with African Americans. Those whites who left eastern Virginia for this reason did not need census figures to know when they were outnumbered by enslaved and free African Americans. Nearly fifty of the Old Dominion’s counties and cities had a black majority from the 1820s through the 1860 census. Those same people needed no roll-call data to know that the old and new elites who could use the state government to control their future would take only so much notice of nonslaveholding whites’ interests, not to speak of free and enslaved African Americans’ interests. There is excellent evidence, though, that others decided to move to free states for antislavery reasons. Other motives may have coexisted with the antislavery convictions, but the intention to oppose slavery was crucial. This is the point at which available evidence fails us. We cannot regularly determine exactly which of the migrants from Virginia to free soil acted by conviction rather than by necessity or interest.

But we can determine approximately how many of both kinds of migrants against slavery—unintentional and intentional—there were; we can also estimate the impact on Virginia of their departure. Almost as many free Virginia-born individuals (47.1 percent of those who had left the commonwealth) lived in free states in 1850 as lived in other slave states (52.9 percent). The comparable figures for 1860 are 49.5 percent in free states and 50.5 percent in other slave states. A rough measure of the impact these migrants had on the Old Dominion is that in 1850 the number of those in the free states equaled 19.2 percent of the 1850 free population of Virginia. In 1860 the number measured 17.9 percent of the free population of Virginia that year. In other words, if all those people who had stayed in Virginia, they could have made the free population of the state 19.2 percent greater in 1850 and 17.9 percent greater in 1860 (table 2). Births and migration to Virginia compensated for some of this loss, but only so much. Moreover, Virginia’s general loss of free people—especially the younger people who would have contributed labor and capital to the economy—was proportionally the fifth largest of all the eastern states in both 1850 and 1860 (table 3).
Connecticut, New Hampshire, and Vermont were particularly decimated in the North; Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina led the South in losing free population. These three southern states also had the highest ratios of natives to newcomers of any state.

Table 4 shows why caution is necessary about counting people who left Virginia for northern states as conscious opponents of slavery. It was border states that lost most of their free expatriates to northern states. (Note in table 4 how precipitously the percentage of southern expatriates who moved to northern states decreases from Delaware south to Georgia.) Those states not only lived up to their categorization as border states, but several lay east of parts of several northern states. Proximity presented opportunity. Nonslaveholders in Georgia may have wished to leave, but their principles concerning and attitudes toward slavery did not outweigh the practical disadvantages of moving far enough to reach a free state.\(^ {21} \)

It remains true that when free Virginians saw the opportunity to move to nearby states, almost as many chose free as slave states, even though some slave states were contiguous to Virginia. Free Virginians had the chance to choose, and nearly half of them migrated to free states.

Migrants from Virginia had numerous reasons to leave and many attractive destinations to find. The emigration from the Old Dominion to the Midwest is a classic case of "push and pull" forces at work. Clearly there was declining opportunity in Virginia; certainly many people

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 2. Free Virginia-born people living in states outside Virginia, 1850 and 1860</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In slave state/terr.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In free state/terr.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total outside Virginia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 3. Ratio of free expatriates to their native eastern states’ free population, 1850 and 1860

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1850</th>
<th>1860</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S. Car.</td>
<td>66 to 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N. Car.</td>
<td>49 to 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vermont</td>
<td>46 to 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conn.</td>
<td>42 to 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Va.</td>
<td>41 to 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Del.</td>
<td>36 to 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N. Hamp.</td>
<td>35 to 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R.I.</td>
<td>29 to 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N.J.</td>
<td>27 to 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Md.</td>
<td>26 to 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ga.</td>
<td>23 to 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mass.</td>
<td>20 to 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pa.</td>
<td>18 to 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N.Y.</td>
<td>18 to 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D.C.</td>
<td>15 to 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maine</td>
<td>11 to 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fla.</td>
<td>10 to 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S. Car.</td>
<td>64 to 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vermont</td>
<td>55 to 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N. Car.</td>
<td>41 to 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N. Hamp.</td>
<td>39 to 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Va.</td>
<td>36 to 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conn.</td>
<td>33 to 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ga.</td>
<td>32 to 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R.I.</td>
<td>29 to 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N.J.</td>
<td>26 to 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Md.</td>
<td>23 to 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N.Y.</td>
<td>22 to 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mass.</td>
<td>21 to 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pa.</td>
<td>20 to 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N.Y.</td>
<td>19 to 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D.C.</td>
<td>19 to 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maine</td>
<td>19 to 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fla.</td>
<td>1 to 100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: See table 2.
Note: Free expatriates include both black and white migrants.

heard the siren song of “free land” in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and other new and relatively wide-open spaces. Free white workers in Virginia had to make the same decision as workers in any other state: was opportunity better elsewhere? An employment contraction necessarily resulted from Virginia’s declining economy. Moreover, some free white workers concluded on their own that the predominant or even occasional use of slave labor in industry as well as agriculture devalued free labor; newspaper and pamphlet writers and an occasional legislator were quite willing to make the same point. Those who argued that there was some opportunity for free white men in the Old Dominion were right, but the emigration of many young white men indicated those
workers thought there was better opportunity elsewhere. The prospects of free white labor failed to improve during the antebellum period. At times, the supply of slave labor for hire or sale increased, putting free workers in peril. Small, nonslaveholding farmers often faced hardship as well because of competition with slaveholders.22

Who could blame some people who left Virginia’s ailing economy in the dust to seek their fortune elsewhere? The formerly dominant state’s economic problem was no secret. Unlike slavery, the weakening economy had often been publicly discussed before 1831. Although it is difficult to determine exactly how unpromising the Old Dominion’s antebellum economy was, the few indicators reveal the potential for disaster.23 Land was becoming less fertile as well as more scarce and expensive. There seems not to have been catastrophic unemployment, but for at least two decades, neither was there any sign of fruitful employment growth. Perceptions undoubtedly outweighed the few economic indicators available to antebellum people. No one claimed that the Old Dominion’s economic future was rosy; people argued only about how to improve the economic outlook. Government helped little. From a twen-

### Table 4. Distribution of expatriates from South Atlantic and border states, 1850 and 1860

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>1850 % in free states</th>
<th>1850 % in other slave states</th>
<th>1860 % in free states</th>
<th>1860 % in other slave states</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Delaware</td>
<td>78.8</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>77.5</td>
<td>22.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maryland</td>
<td>67.1</td>
<td>32.9</td>
<td>66.6</td>
<td>33.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dist. Col.</td>
<td>41.8</td>
<td>58.2</td>
<td>46.7</td>
<td>53.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>47.1</td>
<td>52.9</td>
<td>49.5</td>
<td>50.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N. Carolina</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>79.6</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>79.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S. Carolina</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>92.9</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>94.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>95.6</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>96.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>89.7</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>88.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kentucky</td>
<td>57.9</td>
<td>42.1</td>
<td>54.4</td>
<td>45.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missouri</td>
<td>59.6</td>
<td>40.4</td>
<td>67.7</td>
<td>32.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: See table 2.
tieth-century perspective, the state government failed to respond adequately to this economic and social crisis. Such leaders as Governors John Floyd and Henry A. Wise championed internal improvements with little success.\textsuperscript{24} Others searched for ways to stem the tide of emigration and to attract energetic migrants to the commonwealth, but they generally failed. The public works program helped the economy in the late 1840s and 1850s, but Virginians were slow to move into manufacturing. Some observers laid the blame for the state’s economic anemia on northerners and the federal government’s tariff policies.\textsuperscript{25}

But once Nat Turner’s Revolt temporarily ended the normal public silence concerning slavery, some respected legislators declared that bondage was holding Virginia back. It was slavery, they insisted, that scared immigrants away and pushed free white laborers out of their native state. It was inefficient slave labor that retarded economic growth. Moreover, slave plots and Nat Turner’s Revolt had revealed danger for white Virginians who stayed in their state.\textsuperscript{26} Proslavery advocates responded to these rarely heard public statements against the peculiar institution, arguing that slavery was still good for the commonwealth.\textsuperscript{27} Close as the Virginia legislature came during the 1831–32 slavery debates to a decision in favor of discussing some kind of emancipation, the tidewater slavocracy held their own and maintained their state’s commitment to slavery. Virginian Whigs argued against slavery as an economically retardant force, but they would fail to make their position prevail until the creation of West Virginia in 1863. It is no wonder that some people concluded that there would be little change in the near future.

The 1831–32 debates revealed that numerous delegates from western Virginia would vote against slavery. Did that mean opportunity beckoned people to move west of the mountains? Population growth in western Virginia revealed problems: there was not so much good land available there as one might have thought. Those who owned arable land intended to profit from selling it and had the power to protect this stance, and the reliance on slave labor was actually increasing in some western counties. How could western Virginia, then, be any more than a way station for many free white workers and farmers traveling to the Midwest? True, parts of western Virginia were more progressive than others, and the percentage of African Americans in the western counties was consistently the lowest in the state, but every time eastern slave owners successfully protected slavery east of the Blue Ridge Mountains, the western counties lost ground.

Although little change was foreseen in the near future, by the 1850s the Old Dominion finally enjoyed some economic growth, attempted to create internal improvements, and welcomed some enterprising Yankee
immigrants, many of whom insisted on using free rather than slave labor. Yet the disappointing experience of Governor Wise, who fully intended to lead an economic renaissance of the state, revealed the limits to the state’s recovery. The road westward from Virginia continued to be filled with people who now knew that the Midwest’s economic promise was largely being fulfilled.

“Free people of color” responded to different circumstances. The increasing hostility of white Virginians toward free African Americans during the antebellum period was a powerful push out of their native state. The 1806 law that required all manumitted slaves to leave the state within a year of being freed sent an obvious message. True, one could petition the legislature or, after 1816, county and city courts to stay, but many such petitions were denied. Often the 1806 law was not enforced, but it stood waiting to be used. In times of heightened fears of insurrection or, more frequently, when judges or legislators deplored the growth of the free black population for racist social or economic reasons, the law could be invoked, leading some people to pack their belongings before being taken to court. There were also periods when legal bonds tightened around free people of color. During part of the 1820s, free blacks convicted of certain crimes could be sold into slavery and transported out of the state. Soon after that experiment ended, lawmakers reacted to possible free African-American involvement in Nat Turner’s Revolt by tightening a legal noose around the black community’s neck. Legislation against schooling for free people of color that passed before Turner’s Revolt severely limited educational opportunity for black people. After the bloody Southampton episode in 1831, new limits were placed on black Christians; and in one of the ironies of a slave society, the state legislators decided to reduce the ability of free blacks to own other African Americans as slaves. At the same time, other states were erecting barriers to black entry, revealing a general climate of hostility toward the free black population. But if free people of color rejected the Liberian colonization alternative, where could they go? One thing was certain for a significant number of free blacks: they could not stay in Virginia. So, many free people of color headed for the relative promise of states without slavery.28

“Black land” was an objective of some migrants out of the Old Dominion. “Black land” free of white interference or control was less obtainable than “white land,” but it still was an objective for African American migrants from Virginia. The well-known story of white Ohioans who turned back from their destination the former slaves of John Randolph of Roanoke is only one indication of how determined many whites were to protect their dream of white soil.29 But there are numer-
ous stories of the intense efforts of freeborn and formerly enslaved black Virginians to determine their future in the Midwest and elsewhere north of the Mason-Dixon Line. Some may have sought black land. Black families and communities led the usual chain migrations. Others followed utopian objectives, hoping to build free, harmonious, and prosperous communities. Some realistically sought to make a virtue of the necessities of leaving Virginia and protecting themselves. Liberia beckoned black Virginians, but those who migrated there were only a small fraction of freeborn and emancipated Virginians.\textsuperscript{30} Canada—specifically Western Ontario—proved to be a haven for other black ex-Virginians, while industrializing and growing cities such as Philadelphia, New York, Boston, and Cincinnati included African Americans born in Virginia in their populations (see table 1).

Fertile land was as much a magnet for intentional antislavery migrants as it was for other migrants. Departure from Virginia was normally out of the question for intentional antislavery migrants if they had no hope of finding an adequate means of support outside the state. Even fugitives from justice such as George Boxley looked for land, while the former Gist slaves were sent out of Virginia only after land was found for them. But just as all former Virginians interested in farming looked for land of good quality, so did many unintentional migrants away from slavery search for land of culturally "good" quality. That is, they wanted "white land"—land for whites only. The racism of many frontier people is well known. Their racism could have led them to sections of slave states that were relatively free of slaves. Such migration within the slave South did occur. But the unspoken objective of white people searching for "free soil" was a combination of "free soil, free labor, free men, and no free blacks." Land without slavery made this objective look attainable. The racist objective of finding white land also depended on the success of the colonization movement. If colonization of African Americans did not happen, only migration of whites would create a white society that could exclude free blacks, as most of the midwestern states tried to do. If exclusion failed, as it largely did, whites searching for white land were bound to be hostile toward free African Americans who found "black land."\textsuperscript{31}

Going to "free land" was a goal for all intentional antislavery migrants. Thus, upon being separated from his wife and sold from the Old Dominion to Georgia in the 1830s, James Smith told her he hoped they would be brought "together again in a more free land than Virginia."\textsuperscript{32} By the early 1850s that hoped-for reunion did occur in Canada. To some extent, "a more free land" also gave hope to unintentional antislavery migrants, because many wished to get out from under the Vir-
ginia elite who controlled so much labor and such a large part of the available land. Neither the rural nor the urban frontier was necessarily a land of milk and honey or Frederick Jackson Turner’s sociological and political port of entry to the land of freedom. Still, opportunity was greater in many frontier areas. The absence of slave labor in the free states to which so many Virginians migrated made more jobs and land available to—sometimes waiting for—whites and even some blacks. In spite of the pervasive white racism and the residual proslavery sentiment outside the South, the North also attracted and therefore contained enough people willing to engage in strong antislavery advocacy that provoked more open discussion of the problems of race and slavery than occurred in the South.

Migrants to the North also were able to participate in the new version of American expansionism, to be a “rising people” once again. Yet Virginia—and by extension the nation—suffered a negative effect of intentional antislavery migration. If those who migrated had stayed in Virginia, they might have worked against human bondage, though whether successfully or not is difficult to say. The curators of the Virginia Historical Society “Away, I’m Bound Away” exhibit discovered an irony in this impact of emigration from Virginia: “Was the frontier a safety valve for slavery? Did it give the South’s peculiar institution a longer lease on life? Here is a hard question for Turnerians. If the answer is no, then the safety valve mechanism itself is called into question; if the answer is yes, then the idea that the frontier fostered freedom and democracy is undercut.” These historians’ answer is that the frontier was a safety valve for slavery. This idea evokes the long argument over diffusion versus restriction of slavery as the means of encouraging the peculiar institution’s slow death. One implication of this idea is that even intentional antislavery migration may have indirectly upheld slavery in Virginia, at least until the Civil War. Fischer and Kelly concentrate on the expansion of slavery into the frontier, to be sure, but they do briefly discuss the emigration of antislavery people. However, intentional antislavery migrants were likely to support the post-Emancipation Proclamation war aim of emancipation—an aim that created a dilemma for antislavery and anti-war Quakers. If so, their having moved to the states that supplied so many Union troops and so much support for the Union war effort did eventually work against bondage.

Although we lack precise data on all intentional antislavery migrants, it is still possible to focus on certain people’s intentional migrations against slavery. Their stories are the key to our learning about the diverse motives and migratory methods of these people. The motives of some migrants seem obvious. Quakers departed from Virginia and
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other slave states because of their public opposition to slavery, it would
seem. But some Quakers stayed and others departed at quite diverse
times. Other ex-Virginians received short but pointed attention from
the antislavery press. Ohio abolitionist James Birney made certain to
emphasize exemplary stories of white southerners who had renounced
slavery. He reported in 1836 that the recently deceased Virginian Dr.
Isaac Hough, “although a native of a slave state, . . . advocated immediate
emancipation, not only as a thing entirely practicable, but a duty.”
Some migrants against slavery became famous, and their arresting sto-
ries at first sight appear to be adequate sources for understanding the
journey “to a more free land.” Edward Coles took his slaves with him to
Illinois, where he freed them and protected their future by successfully
fighting for the exclusion of slavery from the state. Moncure Daniel
Conway broke with his proslavery past and became a strong public anti-
slavery advocate. Anthony Burns was a committed migrant from Vir-
ginia: he had escaped from his owner under the cover of his relatively
autonomous existence in Richmond. The courtroom and street battles
over rendition of Burns to his owner galvanized antislavery organiza-
tions in the North and stirred the political passions of many people, in-
cluding Moncure Conway. The notoriety of Burns’s escape and rendi-
tion also led to his eventually being sold to a Massachusetts minister,
who manumitted him one year after the famous rendition. Henry
“Box” Brown of Richmond was another fugitive slave who attracted a
great deal of attention, especially because his escape was successful.
George Teamoh of Norfolk attracted considerably less attention when
he escaped, which was desirable under the circumstances. But his mi-
gration against slavery enabled him to prepare for a Reconstruction pol-
itical career in the Old Dominion.

But, arresting as these relatively well known stories are, less well
known stories reveal the complexity of the intentional migration against
slavery. Some people failed to escape from Virginia even though they
lived out their lives beyond its boundaries. The nearly 350 people
emancipated by the will of sometime Virginia resident Samuel Gist were
taken to three locations in Ohio. One contingent of these people met
with so much hostility and other problems that they marched back to
Virginia, only to be shipped to a new Ohio location ten years later. A
portion of those in the other locations migrated voluntarily to sites out-
side the control of Samuel Gist’s will, while many stayed under the pa-
ternalistic control of a trustee who oversaw execution of Gist’s wishes in
Virginia.

There was even a contingent of expatriates who left Virginia in order
to challenge the law of slavery. George Boxley was indicted for trying to
incite slaves to rebellion, but he escaped from jail and continued his anti-slavery and anti-institutional actions in Ohio, where he had to avoid the efforts of bounty hunters to return him to the Old Dominion for prosecution. George and Eliza Gilliam had to contend with the law of race in the Old Dominion. Under that law the Gilliams were black, even though their skin was so light that they could pass as white from the time they left their native state. Dangerfield Newby got out of slavery and Virginia legally: his father-owner freed him by taking him to Ohio. But Newby illegally returned to Virginia to try to buy his wife and children, still slaves there. Rebuffed, Newby then chose to join John Brown’s Harpers Ferry Raid to meet his objective, but his death early in the raid rendered his mission a quick failure.

There follow the stories of people who intentionally migrated against slavery from Virginia to “a more free land than Virginia.”
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and 79.9 percent in 1860—moved to upper South states than to the lower South (CenRep52, xxxvi–xxxviii; CenStat60, lxi–lxii; my calculations).


15. The measure of Virginians who engaged in “hopscotch” migration in 1850 and 1860 is, simply expressed, the number of Virginia-born people in slave states minus those Virginia-born people who came to those slave states via a free state. But the number would be extremely difficult to compute. One indication of the possible incidence of “hopscotch” migration from all free states to
slave states is the imbalance between the (proportional) numbers of free-state migrants to slave states (only 5.3 percent of all living migrants in 1850 and 10.6 percent in 1860) and slave-state migrants to free states (14.9 percent of all living migrants in 1850 and 32 percent in 1860). For available migration data, see CenRep52, xxxvi-xxxviii; CenStat60, lxi-lxii. Because of known problems with the census, my statistical results can only be considered as approximations.

16. If, in addition to migrants to free states, all the migrants from the Old Dominion to other slave states had instead remained in Virginia, there would have been more slaveholders, which would have placed the nonslaveholders in an insecure position.

17. Some whites moved away from slaves or slaveholders within the slave South, making certain to choose locations with a relative absence of slavery (Donald F. Schaefer, "Locational Choice in the Antebellum South," JEH 49 [March 1989]: 145–65).

18. The number of counties and cities with an African-American majority in the 1830-60 censuses is, respectively, 49 (45.4 percent of the jurisdictions) in 1830, 46 (38.7 percent) in 1840, 49 (35.8 percent) in 1850, and 44 (29.5 percent) in 1860. The steadily decreasing percentage of jurisdictions having a black majority during those census years resulted primarily from the creation of numerous western counties.

19. The census used another proportional measure: people born in a state but living outside that state as a percentage of all people born in that state and enumerated in 1860. (This ratio differs from the ratio I have used in that it counts only those residents of Virginia born there; it excludes from the aggregate population of Virginia those who migrated to the Old Dominion.) For 1860, 28.5 percent of living people born in Virginia were living outside the state. Virginia’s percentage of native Virginians living outside the state ranked ninth among all states and territories. The comparable figure for 1850 is 30.8 percent. Virginia ranked sixth that year (CenSupp1900, 309). See also note 15. Census data are insufficiently detailed to support further analysis of interstate migration.


21. CenSupp1900, 313. This table of migration to contiguous and noncontiguous states shows that about half of the native-born Virginians who lived elsewhere in 1850 and 1860 had moved to contiguous states.

Delegates of Virginia, on the Policy of the State in Relation to Her Colored Population, 2d ed. (Richmond, 1832), 4; Jesse Burton Harrison, “The Slavery Question in Virginia (1832),” in Aris Sonis Fociisque, Being a Memoir of an American Family, the Harrisons of Skimino, ed. Fairfax Harrison (New York, 1910), 343, 347, 354–57; [Ruffner], Address to the People, 13, 17–38. The Richmond Daily Whig, Dec. 11, 1845, describes white workers who were moving to free states because of competition with African Americans in skilled jobs. I am indebted to Roger Ward for this reference.


34. Birney, “The Effects.”
35. James G. Birney, obituary of Dr. Isaac Hough, *Philanthropist* (Cincinnati), March 11, 1836.

1. **The Virginia Fugitives’ Experience**