

FOREWORD

by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham

My first real knowledge of the Civil War and its aftermath came from seeing a photograph of my great-grandfather Albert Royal Brooks. A former slave, Brooks served on the Richmond grand jury convened to consider evidence against Jefferson Davis for treason. Davis never came to trial; he was pardoned in 1868 by President Andrew Johnson. In fact, the only visual record I have of my great-grandfather comes from this extraordinary photograph of him, sitting proudly among the black and white jurors.¹ As a child, and for years thereafter, I wondered why the trial had not occurred and also what my great-grandfather might have felt about it. Later in life, I would come to understand Davis's amnesty from the perspective of a professional historian—a perspective far more complex than that of a young girl.

The granting of amnesty was not simply the act of a Southern president whose sympathies ran opposite to those of the many Northerners and Radical Republican Congressmen who sought to see Davis tried for treason and murder. Other Northerners joined Southerners in sending petitions and memorials for Davis's release. The *New York Herald* and *New York Tribune* both printed editorials sympathetic to secession and to the fate of Davis. Wealthy, influential Northern men, including Cornelius Vanderbilt, Horace Greeley, and once-radical abolitionist Gerrit Smith, put up the money for Davis's bail. Even more ironic, the fiery black clergyman Henry McNeil Turner, who had served as a chaplain in the Union army, presented an earnest supplication for mercy for Davis.

1. For the photograph of the grand jury, see Marie Tyler-McGraw, *At the Falls: Richmond, Virginia, and Its People* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), p. 171.

Jefferson Davis himself was never repentant about the war, nor did he ever petition for amnesty, as did thousands of both ordinary and prominent ex-Confederates.² Historian David Blight has noted that in the decades after the war the “drive for reunion both used and trumped race.”³

Unlikely alliances and strange bedfellows often create ironic stories. In 1641, for example, the Massachusetts Bay Colony became the first of the American colonies to give legal recognition to the institution of slavery. Its Body of Liberties permitted the enslavement of “lawful captives taken in juste warres, and such strangers as willingly sell themselves or are sold to us.”⁴ Although the Virginia colony had already begun the practice of using black slaves, the Massachusetts statute preceded Virginia’s legal sanctioning of servitude. It seems ironic that clergy-led Boston, this seventeenth-century “city on a hill,” would soon become a bustling port for the trade in human flesh. Religion proved no match for profits. In Rhode Island, in the Narragansett Bay area, large landholdings used sizable numbers of slaves to provision the mono-crop plantations in the Caribbean with foodstuffs. Such cities as Boston, Salem, Providence, and New London, bustled with activity; outgoing ships were loaded with rum, fish, and dairy products, as slaves, along with molasses and sugar, were unloaded from incoming ships. Up until the American War for Independence, the slave trade was a profitable element of the New England economy.⁵

It is little wonder, then, that England looked askance at Americans’ demands for independence in the early 1770s. The British had published Phillis Wheatley’s book of poetry in 1773, while simultaneously chiding the people of Boston for failing to free her from slavery. “We are much concerned to find that this ingenious young woman is yet a slave,” the British admonished the liberty-loving American patriots, and they also asserted that “one such act as the purchase of her freedom, would, in our opinion, have done them more honour than hanging a thousand trees with

ribbons and emblems.”⁶ In the early years of the American Revolution, the Massachusetts legislature was bombarded with petitions submitted by the colony’s slaves requesting, in no uncertain terms, the right to freedom; this right of petition was part of the “liberties and Christian usages” that the Puritans believed slave owners should allow their slaves. Yet, in 1777, in reaction to one such petition, the legislature felt duty bound to emphasize regional conciliation as opposed to black freedom. In a missive on the subject of slavery and freedom to the Continental Congress, which was sitting in Philadelphia, these descendants of the Puritans opined that “we have such a sacred regard to the union and harmony of the United States as to conceive ourselves under obligation to refrain from every measure that should have a tendency to injure that union which is the basis and foundation of our defense and happiness.”⁷ Remaining sensitive to the happiness of Southern slaveholders, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts never formally abolished slavery, but rather left it to acts of private manumission and the withering effect of court decisions that questioned the legality of human ownership. To the credit of Massachusetts, however, as of the first federal census in 1790, it was the only state in the new republic to register no slaves in its population.

In slave-free Massachusetts, the fight for the immediate rather than gradual abolition of slavery was launched, with William Lloyd Garrison’s *Liberator* in 1831 and the alignment of the New England Anti-Slavery Society in 1832 with the state’s free blacks in their commitment to immediatism. If New England represented the heart of the antebellum abolitionist movement, it also represented a complex mixture of antislavery sentiment and virulent racism.⁸ Indeed, Harriet Beecher Stowe portrayed this complexity in her now-classic abolitionist novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The book’s designated racist is none other than the pious antislavery New Englander Ophelia, who, while visiting her slave-owning cousin Augustine St. Clair in Louisiana constantly criticizes him for his participation in the evil of slavery, yet cannot bring herself to touch the black “uncivilized” Topsy. Amused by Ophelia’s New England hypocrisy, Augustine offers her a challenge: “If we emancipate, will you educate?” Ophelia eventually accepts but, after adopting and educating Topsy in

2. Jonathan T. Dorris, *Pardon and Amnesty under Lincoln and Johnson: The Restoration of the Confederates to Their Rights and Privileges, 1861–1898* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1953); Roy Franklin Nichols, “United States vs. Jefferson Davis, 1865–1869,” *American Historical Review* 31 (January 1926):266–284; Clarence A. Bacote, “Truth from the Point of View of the Investigator,” *Journal of Negro History* 25 (October 1940):460.

3. David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 2.

4. Quoted in A. Leon Higginbotham Jr., *In the Matter of Color: Race and the American Legal Process: The Colonial Period* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 62.

5. On slavery and the slave trade in New England, see Lorenzo Johnston Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England* (New York: Atheneum, 1968).

6. *The Poems of Phillis Wheatley*. Revised and Enlarged Edition. Edited with an Introduction by Julian D. Mason Jr. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), p. 25.

7. Massachusetts Legislature’s letter to the Continental Congress, printed in *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, vol. 10, pp. 332–33.

8. On New England antislavery sentiment, see Donald Martin Jacobs, ed., *Courage and Conscience: Black and White Abolitionists in Boston* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1993).

New England, sends her along with the majority of the novel's major black characters, including Liza, George, Harry, Emmaline, and Cassie, to Africa. That the plot ended with colonization permitted Stowe's readers to advocate the abolition of slavery while forestalling the question of what to do with the ex-slaves.⁹ For most Northern whites in the 1850s, the desire to end slave labor did not equate with a belief in racial equality. Thus blacks might be freed, eventually, but they would not be welcome to remain. For most free blacks in the 1850s, colonization failed to offer a realistic, or desirable, "solution." Northern blacks had clearly flirted with the idea in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and a small minority continued to prefer colonization to racism in America well into the twentieth century. However, the majority was determined to stay on American soil, where they built viable and cohesive black communities.¹⁰

The process of black community-building began in the years immediately after the Northern states signaled their complicity in slavery by agreeing to those sections in the Constitution that, in crucial ways, gave tacit support to the "peculiar institution." Not coincidentally, this era has also been called the "first emancipation."¹¹ With the exception of Massachusetts and tiny Vermont, which had joined the union in 1791 with a constitution outlawing slavery, all of the other states in New England and the Middle Atlantic adopted gradual-emancipation statutes. Such laws made provisions for those freed after a certain date to work as indentured servants for their "masters" until adulthood. Thus, the North's moral repugnance to slavery was compromised by a deeper respect for property rights, even those inclusive of the right to hold men and women of African descent as chattel.¹²

And yet, complicity and complexity went hand in hand. It was in Pennsylvania and New York, both of which gradually emancipated their slaves, that the very first American antislavery societies were formed. The Pennsylvania Abolition Society (PAS) and the New York Manumission Society were both founded in the late eighteenth century by white

9. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin: Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Criticism*, Elizabeth Ammons, ed., (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994). For black responses to the novel and specifically to the colonization plot device, see Dickson D. Bruce Jr., *The Origins of African American Literature, 1680-1865* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001), pp. 285-87.
10. On black community life in the antebellum North, see James O. Horton and Lois E. Horton, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
11. Arthur Zilversmit, *The First Emancipation: The Abolition of Slavery in the North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).
12. *Ibid.*; also see Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 233-37.

Northerners of property and political power. These men were the allies, and sometimes the financial backers, of blacks who were in the process of forming institutions—mutual-aid societies, fraternal lodges, schools, and churches—around which to orient their nascent communities. Among them were such illustrious men as Alexander Hamilton and John Jay, in New York, and Benjamin Franklin and Benjamin Rush, in Philadelphia. In these early years of black community-building, free blacks realized that the racist society of the North also included persons and institutions of good will.¹³ African Americans were careful to distinguish degrees of complicity from blatant disrespect and disregard for the rights of blacks, free and slave. Black leaders in the North attacked a complex cast of characters in their protest literature. The extraordinary black Boston pamphleteer and antislavery militant David Walker denounced Thomas Jefferson for his insulting remarks. Thomas Jefferson, who wrote the Declaration of Independence proclaiming the equality of all men, also wrote of the natural inferiority of blacks in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Walker raged in 1829, "Do you believe that the assertions of such a man, will pass away into oblivion unobserved by this people and the world? . . . I say, unless we try to refute Mr. Jefferson's arguments respecting us, we will only establish them."¹⁴

Nineteenth-century black protest literature, too, exposes the contradictions inherent in what historians term the Jacksonian Democracy of the 1830s, since the era's extension of "universal" manhood suffrage was accompanied by the disfranchisement of black freeholders. Even earlier, in Connecticut in 1818 and New York in 1821, state laws significantly enlarged the white male electorate, while simultaneously reducing the number of black male voters through property requirements and harsh residency laws specific to blacks.¹⁵ Such scholars as David Roediger reveal that the Northern free blacks stood alienated both literally and figuratively from white workers, who violently chased African Americans from public parks on the Fourth of July. The legacy of black soldiers who had fought in the Revolutionary War was too often unob-

13. Richard S. Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).
14. David Walker, *Walker's Appeal in Four Articles; Together with a Preamble, to the Colored Citizens of the World* (Boston, 1929), quoted in Henry Louis Gates and Nellie McKay, eds., *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), p. 188.
15. Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Michael Warner, "A Soliloquy 'Lately Spoken at the African Theatre': Race and the Public Sphere in New York City, 1821," *American Literature* 73 (March 2001):1-46.

served and unwelcome in public commemorations of American Independence.¹⁶

Doubtless aware of the complicity of Northern whites with regard to slaves and free blacks alike, African Americans also criticized fellow blacks. When David Walker asked, “Are we not Men?” he railed against the complicity of his own people, those who had become silent in the face of injustice, “*submissive* to a gang of men, whom we cannot tell whether they are as good as ourselves or not.” No less controversial, black antislavery activist Henry Highland Garnet believed Southern slaves themselves complicit, if they did not rebel against their continued enslavement. Praising the heroism of Denmark Vesey and Toussaint L’Ouverture, Garnet challenged the slaves: “Let your motto be resistance! *resistance!* RESISTANCE! No oppressed people have ever secured their liberty without resistance.”¹⁷

“Complicity” is a loaded word, pregnant with complication and irony. Thus it is a word appropriately chosen as the title for this book by Anne Farrow, Joel Lang, and Jenifer Frank. In this study of how the North promoted, prolonged, and profited from slavery, the authors give a fascinating account of racial inequality in America, revealing that positions do not fall neatly into categories such as North versus South, antebellum versus postbellum, and virtuous versus complicit. Although *Complicity* calls attention primarily to slavery, the North and South continued their complicitous relationship with regard to white supremacy into the late nineteenth century and the twentieth. It is worth remembering that the litigants who appealed to the Supreme Court in the *Civil Rights Cases of 1883* brought charges of national, not simply Southern, discrimination, suing establishments in New York, San Francisco, Kansas, and Tennessee. Decades later, in the 1940s through 1960s, the fight to end Jim Crow and disfranchisement would be waged not only in Southern cities and deltas, but also in Northern cities, where African Americans and their white allies fought for racial justice in regard to education, housing, and hiring. The authors of *Complicity* have rendered a story full of new and interesting facts about an earlier time in this nation’s history, and by so doing they speak powerfully to present-day America and the continuing quest for freedom and justice for all.

16. David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991), p. 57; David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776–1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); see also Shane White, “‘It Was a Proud Day’: African Americans, Festivals, and Parades in the North, 1741–1834,” *Journal of American History* 81 (1994):13–50.

17. Walker, *Appeal*, in Gates and McKay, *Norton Anthology*, p. 189; Henry Highland Garnet, *An Address to the Slaves of the United States of America* (New York, 1848), in Gates and McKay, *Norton Anthology*, p. 283.

PREFACE

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, ON ITS FRONT PAGE, *THE HARTFORD COURANT* published a story with an extraordinary headline—“Aetna ‘Regrets’ Insuring Slaves”—concerning an overdue admission and apology from one of Connecticut’s oldest and most prestigious companies.

The next day, *Courant* reporters began to investigate the newspaper’s own role in slavery. After giving such prominence to the Aetna story, it seemed only fair that we try to determine whether we, as an institution, were also culpable. As America’s oldest continuously published newspaper—the *Courant* dates from 1764—we thought it likely that we were.

Four months later, we ran what we’d learned across the top of the front page: “Courant Complicity in an Old Wrong—Newspaper’s Founder Published Ads in Support of the Sale and Capture of Slaves.” The response was immediate and fierce: The story was picked up by media across the country, and we received calls even from overseas. Adding spice to the story, a *Courant* spokesman apologized for the newspaper’s role in slavery.

The following year, in partial response to a lawsuit seeking reparations that had been filed against Aetna and several other companies (though not against the *Courant*), the newspaper’s editor, Brian Toolan, e-mailed a challenge to the staff. Would it be possible, he asked, to learn the identity of a slave, any slave, who had been insured, and to write of his or her life?

The staff of *Northeast*, the *Courant*’s Sunday magazine, decided to look into it. Longtime writer Joel Lang headed to Yale for an exploratory talk with Robert P. Forbes, associate director of the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition. A handful of scholars, Lang discovered, were starting to look at slavery through a

global economic lens. As they did so, it was becoming clear that Connecticut's role in slavery was not only huge, it was a key to the success of the entire institution. Finding an insured slave suddenly became secondary. We were now looking at nothing less than an altered reality.

Our first response was confusion: Hold on, weren't we the good guys in the Civil War? Wasn't the South to blame for slavery? After all, Southerners had plantations, we had the Underground Railroad. They had Simon Legree, we had his abolitionist creator—Harriet Beecher Stowe's house is literally up the street from the *Courant*.

But the more we looked, the more we found what appeared to be unshakable proof of Connecticut's complicity in slavery. What's more, it quickly became obvious that our economic links to slavery were deeply entwined with our religious, political, and educational institutions. Slavery was part of the social contract in Connecticut. It was in the air we breathed.

There was more. The year before the American Revolution, more than 5,000 Africans were enslaved in Connecticut. Though there were certainly fewer slaves proportionately than in Virginia or South Carolina, the number shocked us. How could we not know this? How could we not know, for example, that in 1790 most prosperous merchants in Connecticut owned at least one slave, as did 50 percent of the ministers? The federal census clearly showed this.

In addition, some Connecticut slaves actually lived on farms as large as many in the South. Another word for such farms could be "plantations."

The story grew bigger, and more damning.

The Triangle Trade between the Americas, Europe, and Africa is a staple of the high school curriculum. But as Lang wrote in the original "Complicity" issue of the newspaper,

somehow in popular perception, slavery has been cut out of the trade triangle and transferred forward to the Civil War, where it became a moral problem confined to the South. Just as Connecticut was thought not to have "had slavery" because it did not have many slaves or Southern-style plantations, it was thought not to profit from slavery as much as the South did.

The truth, however, which ought to have been plain, is that Connecticut derived a great part, maybe the greatest part, of its early surplus wealth from slavery.

ONCE OUR SPECIAL ISSUE WAS PUBLISHED, REQUESTS FOR EXTRA COPIES flowed in from scholars, educators, and the public.

Literary agent Tanya McKinnon read "Complicity" and came to us with an exciting proposal. We agreed to broaden our thesis to encompass the North, and she sold the idea to Ballantine Books. This book is the result of a year and a half of post-magazine work by Lang, *Northeast* staff writer Anne Farrow, and *Northeast* editor and writer Jenifer Frank.

WHAT WAS TRUE OF CONNECTICUT TURNED OUT TO BE OVERWHELMINGLY true of the entire North. Most of what you'll read here was gleaned from older, often out-of-print texts, and from period newspapers, largely in Connecticut, New York, and Massachusetts.

We are journalists, not scholars, and want to share what surprised, and even shocked, the three of us. We have all grown up, attended schools, and worked in Northern states, from Maine to Maryland. We thought we knew our home. We thought we knew our country.

We were wrong.

INTRODUCTION

COMPLICITY IS THE STORY OF HOW THE NORTH HELPED CREATE, strengthen, and prolong slavery in America.

We're telling this side of the story because we already know the story of the South. The South's story is set on a plantation in Mississippi or Louisiana or any other Southern state where overseers brandished whips over slaves picking cotton.

In contrast, the North's story is thought to be heroic, filled with ardent abolitionists running that train to freedom, the Underground Railroad. The few slaves who may have lived in the North, it has been believed, were treated like members of the family. And, of course, Northerners were the good guys in the Civil War. They freed the slaves.

Not all of the above is exactly mythology, but it is a convenient and whitewashed shorthand.

The history of the United States is typically told backwards, as a means of explaining to members of the current generation how their country grew to be the way it is. In such an account, slavery is a single chapter, a background event limited to one region of the country and overwhelmed by the more recent events of pioneers moving west, railroads spanning the continent, and great cities growing up around stockyards and steel mills.

A history told frontwards, however, pushes slavery into the foreground, inserting it into nearly every chapter.

The truth is that slavery was a national phenomenon. The North shared in the wealth it created, and in the oppression it required.

While it may seem incredible that the depth of the North's role in slavery is largely unknown to the general public, only since the civil

rights movement have many historians themselves begun to recognize how central slavery was to our history. Our intention in *Complicity* is to demonstrate that centrality. By the American Revolution, slavery was already a vital part of the national economy. In the decades after the Revolution, particularly after the patenting of the cotton gin, slavery's importance escalated, and the institution expanded to where, on the eve of the Civil War, there were nearly 4 million people living in bondage in America.

Well before that point, however, slavery had become the foundation of a network of interdependent economic systems throughout the country that rested on the premise that it was acceptable to view black human beings as property. The natural consequences of this deeply racist premise were resistance and violence.

The North was in the perfect position, however, to deal with resistance and violence. By and large, the region's relationship with slavery, though extraordinarily profitable, was a distant one. That distance allowed the North to minimize and even deny its links with the institution that fueled its prosperity.

Consider:

- New England and the Mid-Atlantic began their economic ascent in the eighteenth century because the regions grew and shipped food to help feed millions of slaves—in the West Indies.
- Northern merchants, shippers, and financial institutions, many based in New York City, were crucial players in every phase of the national and international cotton trade. Meanwhile, the rivers and streams of the North, particularly in New England, were crowded with hundreds of textile mills. Well before the Civil War, the economy of the entire North relied heavily on cotton grown by millions of slaves—in the South.
- Even some smaller industries had these distant, but vital, links to slavery. Starting before the Civil War and lasting up to the edge of the twentieth century, two Connecticut towns were an international center for ivory production, milling hundreds of thousands of tons of elephant tusks procured through the enslavement or death of as many as 2 million people—in Africa.

Connecticut's Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of the iconic abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, said this was slavery the way Northerners liked it: all of the benefits and none of the screams.

AS SOON AS EUROPEANS SET FOOT ON THIS HUGE, WILD continent, they needed help taming it. In the 1640s, John Winthrop, governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, received a letter from his brother-in-law Emanuel Downing, who complained about how much work needed to be done. Downing suggested to the governor that a “just war” against Indians could provide the colony with captives to exchange in the West Indies for badly needed “Moorees.”

Thus, from the very beginning, the nation's experience with slavery was defined by commerce and violence, in the North as well as the South. This is the backbone of *Complicity*, which opens in the time and place where the fruits of hundreds of years of slave labor may have been the most dramatically realized: in New York City, as the country trembled on the edge of civil war.

The antislavery Abraham Lincoln had just been elected president, pushing the Southern states over the edge to secession. The disintegration of America inspired a most curious response on the part of New York's mayor: he publicly declared that his city should secede from the Union along with the Southern states, in large part because of New York's economic dependence on the cotton trade.

Meanwhile, even before the 1860 election, Boston-area manufacturers—though some held antislavery views—were desperately currying favor with the Southern politicians and planters whose millions of slaves delivered the product necessary to their wealth and financial survival. These businessmen were, after all, in textiles, and what would they do without cotton?

Before the Civil War, the North grew rich beyond measure by agreeing to live, however uneasily at times, with slavery. Perhaps as a consequence of striking that bargain, Northerners have pushed much of their early history into the deepest shadows of repression. Many of the facts can, frankly, be shocking:

- In the eighteenth century, even after America won its freedom from Great Britain, even after the writing of the Declaration of Independence, tens of thousands of black people were living as slaves in the North. Earlier in that century, enslaved blacks made up nearly one-fifth of the population of New York City.
- In the first half of the eighteenth century, two major slave revolts occurred in New York City. During the second uprising, with haunting parallels to the hysteria surrounding the Salem witch tri-

