

“I am persuaded it is done with their knowledge and connivance”: Black Elders, Fugitivity, and Community in American Slavery

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In July 1864 the South Carolina rice planter Adele Petigru Allston wrote to Jesse Belflowers to note her distress at how frequently enslaved people were escaping during the Civil War and to assert her belief in the need for collective punishment to dissuade others from following suit. Allston indicated that the runaways were predominantly young people and that recapturing individuals who had fled in the fog of war would be difficult. Instead, she mused, they might punish the parents of runaways or other elders in the enslaved community. Allston seemed to take pleasure in the idea of making “an example among the old people whose children have deserted.” To dissuade escape and to lure back those runaways who might hear of their loved ones’ punishment, slavers became adept at weaponizing the family ties and community bonds enslaved people had crafted despite the violence of slavery. Allston’s plan embraced those goals but also acknowledged that fugitivity and other forms of resistance were communal efforts and that resistant actions among the enslaved could be elevated and supported by Black elders. Allston huffed that “the older negroes should endeavour to influence the younger ones to order and subordination while this war lasts,” but she understood the opposite to be true. Of flight, she noted: “I am persuaded it is done with their knowledge and connivance.”¹

Resistance may be the most well-examined phenomenon in slavery studies. Scholars have identified the diverse activities of enslaved people who sought to disrupt the power and deny the authority of slavers over body and mind. In doing so, they have moved beyond earlier work that elevated rebellion, organized violence, and permanent flight exclusively to address diverse forms of fugitivity, community building, and collective cultural expression as tools of solidarity and survival that enabled enslaved people to navigate the hardships of bondage. Scholars now frequently argue that separating visible acts, such as rebellion, from cultural and social activities is misreading the situation, and that resistance among the enslaved should be considered nonbinary, existing on a vast, nuanced spectrum of everyday actions. In Vanessa Holden’s work on the 1831 Southampton rebellion, more commonly known as

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¹ Adele Petigru Allston to Jesse Belflowers, July 16, 1864, in *The South Carolina Rice Plantation, as Revealed in the Papers of Robert F. W. Allston*, ed. J. H. Easterby (Columbia, S.C., 2004), 292–93.

Nat Turner's rebellion, she insists on the need to rethink analytical frameworks when conceptualizing resistance, to take account of its collective and communal dimensions: "Denmark Vesey's rebellion, 'Gabriel's' rebellion, and 'Turner's' Rebellion are all names that hold up one man where whole neighborhoods and communities supported collective resistance and endured its consequences." As Holden succinctly notes, "communities were much more than the backdrops for resistance action; they were the genesis of resistive action."²

Historians have done important work in addressing the role of women and children, thinking about enslaved communities holistically, and examining the gendered dynamics that facilitated and fostered resistant acts and mentalities. Scholars are also pushing back on the notion that violence—collective and individual—was the preserve of enslaved men and arguing for a nuanced appreciation of the gendered connotations of physical conflict. While a wave of scholarship, including histories from Frederick Knight and Liana DeMarco, has studied the aged enslaved, few scholars have focused on the role older slaves might play in fostering acts of resistance or in directly challenging slavers and the institution of slavery. Although Holden stresses the importance of considering resistance and survival in slavery generationally, she focuses on interactions between adults and children without distinguishing those considered elders. In my earlier work, in fact, I showed how some Black and white contemporaries depicted enslaved elders as less capable and as occasionally less willing to take the risks of fight and flight. DeMarco, too, has noted that many enslavers looked at "older enslaved people . . . [with] the assumption that they would be less capable of resistance, if not more or less resigned to enslavement."³

² Works that address diverse forms of resistance and collectivity include John Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1972); George P. Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (Westport, 1972); and Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1976). For critical discussions of enslaved community, see Brenda E. Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York, 1996); Anthony E. Kaye, *Joining Places: Slave Neighborhoods in the Old South* (Chapel Hill, 2007); and William Dusinger, *Strategies for Survival: Recollections of Bondage in Antebellum Virginia* (Charlottesville, 2009). Recent work that foregrounds nuanced collective resistance includes Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill, 2004); Sergio Lussana, *My Brother Slaves: Friendship, Masculinity, and Resistance in the Antebellum South* (Lexington, Ky., 2016); and Daina Ramey Berry, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved, from Womb to Grave, in the Building of the Nation* (Boston, 2017). Vanessa M. Holden, *Surviving Southampton: African American Women and Resistance in Nat Turner's Community* (Champaign, 2021), 6–7.

³ On the role of women and children in enslaved communities, see Wilma King, "Mad Enough to Kill: Enslaved Women, Murder, and Southern Courts," *Journal of African American History*, 92 (Winter 2007), 37–56; Rebecca Hall, *Wake: The Hidden History of Women-Led Slave Revolts* (New York, 2021); Tamika Y. Nunley, "Thrice Condemned: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Practice of Leniency in Antebellum Virginia Courts," *Journal of Southern History*, 87 (Feb. 2021), 5–34; Kellie Carter Jackson, "'Dare you meet a woman': Black Women, Abolitionism, and Protective Violence, 1850–1859," *Slavery and Abolition*, 42 (June 2021), 269–92; Nikki M. Taylor, *Brooding over Bloody Revenge: Enslaved Women's Lethal Resistance* (Cambridge, Mass., 2023); and Tamika Y. Nunley, *The Demands of Justice: Enslaved Women, Capital Crime, and Clemency in Early Virginia* (Chapel Hill, 2023). On the aged enslaved, see Nathaniel Windon, "Superannuated: Old Age on the Antebellum Plantation," *American Quarterly*, 71 (Sept. 2019), 767–87; Liana DeMarco, "Managing 'Old Mammy,' Making 'Mother Wit': Older Enslaved Women, Efficiency, and Survival on the Plantation," *Slavery and Abolition*, 44 (June 2023), 317–33; Corinne T. Field, "Old-Age Justice and Black Feminist History: Sojourner Truth's and Harriet Tubman's Intersectional Legacies," *Radical History Review*, 139 (Jan. 2021), 37–51; Berry, *Price for Their Pound of Flesh*, 129–47; David Stefan Doddington, *Old Age and American Slavery* (New York, 2024); Frederick C. Knight, *Black Elders: The Meaning of Age in American Slavery and Freedom* (Philadelphia, 2024); and Daniel Livesay, "Elder Protest in Jamaican Slavery: Navigating Paternalism through Longevity," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 82 (April 2025), 177–204. Earlier studies addressing Black elders include John W. Blassingame, "Status and Social Structure in the Slave Community: Evidence from New Sources," in *Perspectives and Irony in American Slavery: Essays*, ed. Harry P. Owens (Jackson, 1976), 137–51; Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 522–23; Leslie Pollard, "Aging and Slavery: A Gerontological Perspective," *Journal of Negro History*, 66 (Autumn 1981), 228–34; and Stacey Close, *Elderly Slaves of the Plantation South* (London, 1997). Holden, *Surviving Southampton*, 56–80; DeMarco, "Managing 'Old Mammy,'" 323; Doddington, *Old Age and American Slavery*, 195–222.

These arguments reflect the quantifiable dynamics of fight and flight. As the abolitionist Samuel Ringgold Ward noted in 1855, “fugitives coming to Canada are, the majority of them, young, single men. Many more young than old, many more male than female, come.” Such observations were not merely anecdotal. The historians John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger revealed in their quantitative analysis of two thousand runaway advertisements published between 1790 and 1816 and 1838 and 1860 that 78 percent of runaways in the first period were boys and men between the ages of thirteen and twenty-nine, with only a small decrease to 74 percent during the later period. Those aged forty and older were only 5 percent of runaways in the early period and 6 percent in the later period. Similar demographic trends were evident in the breakdown by age of enslaved women who fled, where fugitives in their teens and twenties “represented more than two-thirds of the women in both periods.” Historians who have focused on flight argue that the activity was more common among the young. Viola Müller recently underlined in her work on antebellum runaways that “the majority of fugitive slaves were between their late teens and late thirties,” and she draws a conclusion about the significance of age in shaping patterns of resistance: “Reckoning with their physical fitness to wage an escape attempt, their mental abilities to assimilate to the free population, their chances to find a job and make money for themselves, and the hope of having a family and seeing their children grow up in freedom, provided [enslaved people] with a window of about twenty years.”⁴

The demographic dynamics of permanent flight likewise affected the source material historians rely on when looking to elevate the voices of formerly enslaved people. Antebellum “slave narratives” were, by and large, authored by or written about fugitives, whose necessary escape from bondage established a teleological framework and a subjective first-person narrative that elevated their heroism in securing freedom. As a result, the narratives typically replicated the gendered and aged distinctions of long-term fugitivity and, at times, reified them in asserting the prominence of enslaved men as rebels. Fugitive slave narratives and abolitionist accounts frequently associated physical resistance with youth, and with manhood in particular, where the aged enslaved could be held up as foil characters designed to show the tragedy of surviving slavery at the expense of taking more radical action to escape or to attack the institution and its defenders.⁵

These dynamics existed, and the aged enslaved were a small proportion of runaways and overt rebels. However, as Cheryl Janifer Laroche has argued in her assessment of women’s resistance to slavery, numbers are not everything. Rather than simply offer “the obligatory yet perfunctory disclaimers such as ‘young men ran away in greater numbers,’”

⁴ Samuel Ringgold Ward, *Autobiography of a Fugitive Negro: His Anti-Slavery Labours in the United States, Canada, and England* (London, 1855), 151. On the demographic trends of runaway advertisements, see John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (New York, 1999), 209–13. Viola Franziska Müller, *Escape to the City: Fugitive Slaves in the Antebellum Urban South* (Chapel Hill, 2022), 32.

⁵ On slave narratives, see John Blassingame, “Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems,” *Journal of Southern History*, 41 (Nov. 1975), 473–92; John Ernest, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the African American Slave Narrative* (New York, 2014); and David Stefan Doddington and Elizabeth Maeve Barnes, “Using Primary Sources: Slave Narratives,” 2021, available at *Bloomsbury History*. On representations of the aged enslaved in fugitive narratives and abolitionist accounts, see David Stefan Doddington, “Old Age, Resistance, and Surviving Slavery in the US South,” *Slavery and Abolition*, 42 (Dec. 2021), 710–32, 715. On gendered resistance, see James Oliver and Lois E. Horton, “Violence, Protest, and Identity: Black Manhood in Antebellum America,” in *A Question of Manhood: Reader in U.S. Black Men’s History and Masculinity*, vol. I: “Manhood Rights”: *The Construction of Black Male History and Manhood, 1750–1870*, ed. Darlene Clark Hine and Earnestine Jenkins (Bloomington, 1999), 382–95; and Sarah N. Roth, *Gender and Race in Antebellum Popular Culture* (New York, 2014).



Figure 1. Gendered ideologies associated with fight and flight are captured in this image, seemingly based on Henry Bibb's 1849 fugitive narrative, where the enslaved man fights the hounds, while the enslaved woman protects the child with her body. "*Fugitive Slaves and Bloodhounds, U.S. South*," 1850–1860, reprinted in *The Suppressed Book about Slavery! Prepared for Publication in 1857* (New York, 1864), insert between pages 288 and 289.

we can instead emphasize the pursuit of, or support for, freedom among the aged enslaved. As Laroche notes of enslaved women, those who “demonstrate[d] an unyielding attitude toward enslavement and a willingness to resist captivity for a chance at freedom deserve as much attention as the outcome of the ultimate mission of liberation.” In focusing thusly, we can see the contested politics of age, as noted by Knight, where “black people developed competing ideas and practices of aging and eldership,” drawing on “these resources in their struggle to define the meaning of family, community, and freedom.” Having shown in my earlier work the extent to which old age was seen as limiting and based on negative models associating aging with fatalism, I wish to now highlight the competing discourse: positive models of Black aging as offering knowledge, hard-worn experience, moral and practical support to younger generations, and a refusal to bow to slavery. These supportive representations of elders relate to the actions of real people but also underline the rhetorical value of the aged in Black activist and abolitionist writing. The image—and reality—of the selfless elder not as helpless supplicant but as supporter of the younger generations provided a language of hope, solidarity, and resilience that would be required to attack slavery as an institution and to establish the communities necessary to make good of promised and real freedom.⁶

This article underscores the significance of age as a category of analysis and asserts the value of locating elders in resistance. I show how older slaves enabled the resistance of others, and I address their motives for doing so—whether presumed by external narrators or stated directly by the elders themselves. Advanced age did not stop enslaved people

⁶ Cheryl Janifer Laroche, “Coerced but Not Subdued: The Gendered Resistance of Women Escaping Slavery,” in *Gendered Resistance: Women, Slavery, and the Legacy of Margaret Garner*, ed. Mary E. Frederickson and Delores M. Walters (Champaign, 2013), 50, 54. On the value of focusing on fugitivity within numerically unrepresented groups—namely, enslaved women and girls—see Tamika Y. Nunley, *At the Threshold of Liberty: Women, Slavery, and Shifting Identities in Washington, D.C.* (Chapel Hill, 2021), 41. Knight, *Black Elders*, 5.

from participating in fight or flight. These elders' resilience reveals the range of challenges enslaved people gave to those who sought to exploit them from cradle to grave, and this article expands our understandings of the dynamic nature of resistance to slavery by underlining that resistant agency was not tied to temporal rhythms. As Andrew Jackson recorded in his fugitive narrative after hearing of the jailing of Cook, a seventy-five-year-old runaway, bearing witness to such actions was, and is, important:

When I see poor old persons, who are old enough to sit down quietly and take comfort in the enjoyment of their early labor, I find that in this glorious land of gospel darkness and oppression, they must be chased, hunted and shot like tigers. It is a disgrace to our nation—a scandal to you as a republic, and a sin in the sight of God; therefore it is the duty of every person that can write to be up and doing.⁷

Historians are attuned to the significance of age as a category of analysis, exploring the power of generational distinctions at the personal and political levels. This article focuses on resistant elders in American slavery, but its arguments speak to broad debates over age and power and connect to wide generational distinctions in radicalism and resistance. Scholars frequently emphasize cross-generational support networks in Black American communities, but active resistance has long been associated with the young, accompanied, at times, with a dismissal of earlier generations for perceived inactivity. When Charles S. Johnson wrote "The New Frontage of American Life" during the Harlem Renaissance, he applauded the "move from acquiescence, silent or ineffectually grumbly," to "new convictions which more often prompt to resistance," and he stressed a necessary rejection of "servile" feelings that had been inherited from those who had suffered enslavement: "the newer spirits are beginning to free themselves from the slough of that servile feeling . . . inherited from slavery and passed along with virulence for over fifty years."⁸

In one of the most famous exhortations to radical action during the civil rights movement, Malcolm X forcefully insisted that the new generation would no longer listen to elders who counseled nonviolence or accommodation, indicating that an epochal shift was occurring: "And now you're facing a situation where the young Negro's coming up. They don't want to hear that 'turn the-other-cheek' stuff, no." By showcasing Black elders' role in resistance to slavery and how these individuals were configured in the politics of slavery, this article asks scholars to consider the ubiquity of generational distinctions in real or perceived resistant activities and how the politics of age affects perceptions of radicalism cross-culturally and transhistorically. The timeliness of such critiques—and of generational tensions associated with resistance—is evident in the emergence and critical reception of slogans such as "We are not our ancestors," in Black activist communities. By highlighting the resistant actions of elders in American slavery, I challenge static narratives

⁷ Andrew Jackson, *Narrative and Writings of Andrew Jackson, of Kentucky; Containing an Account of His Birth, and Twenty-Six Years of His Life While a Slave; His Escape; Five Years of Freedom, Together with Anecdotes Relating to Slavery; Journal of One Year's Travels; Sketches, etc. Narrated by Himself; Written by a Friend* (Syracuse, 1847), 71.

⁸ Abosede George et al., "AHR Conversation: Each Generation Writes Its Own History of Generations," *American Historical Review*, 123 (Dec. 2018), 1504–46; Corinne T. Field and Nicholas L. Syrett, "Chronological Age: A Useful Category of Analysis," *American Historical Review*, 125 (April 2020), 371–84; Stephen Katz, Kavita Sivaramakrishnan, and Pat Thane, "'To Understand All Life as Fragile, Valuable, and Interdependent': A Roundtable on Old Age and History," *Radical History Review*, 139 (Jan. 2021), 13–35. For work that indicates generational support during and after slavery, see Field, "Old-Age Justice and Black Feminist History"; and Knight, *Black Elders*. For the cross-cultural and transhistorical relevance of ideas on youthful radicalism and generational distinctions, see Clive Glaser, "Youth and Generation in South African History," *Safundi*, 19 (April 2018), 117–38; and George et al., "AHR Conversation." Charles S. Johnson, "The New Frontage of American Life," in *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, ed. Alain Locke (New York, 1925), 278–99, esp. 297.

that associate resistance with youth, underline the complexity of perceived generational distinctions in radicalism, and underscore the need for complex, nonlinear models to understand age, identity, and action in the past and the present.⁹

Although I use terms such as *elder* and *elderly*, or refer to *old age* in this article, offering an entirely consistent definition or strict chronology of their use in the context of American slavery is difficult. For both enslaved and white people, the U.S. Census of 1850 designated “infancy” as under five years of age, “youth” from five to twenty, and “maturity” as between twenty and fifty. Those aged from fifty to one hundred were in “old age,” with “extreme old age” being one hundred plus. Daina Ramey Berry has noted, however, that the hardships of slavery could hasten the aging process, and that enslaved people who passed the age of forty were generally considered “old” by contemporaries. Similar distinctions were used to demarcate the young from the old in Franklin and Schweninger’s quantitative breakdown of runaways, both women and men. I have argued elsewhere that notions of old age were relational and intersubjective, where enslaved people might have been considered “old” in certain settings, but not in others, regardless of chronology. However, in this article I will focus on cases of escape during which individuals were over the age of forty, were explicitly held up as elders by their peers, and when descriptive labels and common tropes associated with aging were applied with dramatic and rhetorical effect to underline the significance of the aged rebel or runaway.¹⁰

The majority of long-term fugitives during the antebellum period were younger than forty, but even they, in their seemingly individualistic act, required community guidance and active support. As Stephanie Camp argued, “runaways to the North badly needed the help and complicity of other blacks to feed them and to guide them through unfamiliar land and waters.” Even short-term runaways “needed the collaboration of the larger community.” For this section of the article, I focus on flight to northern states, to presumed freedom, as this form of fugitivity was integral to the politics of abolitionism, and I examine the level of agreement between contemporaries and later historians about the age and generational distinctions among those who fled and those who aided fugitives. Focusing on the assistance provided by the aged enslaved underlines not only individual experiences in bondage but also how and why antislavery activists used Black elders to showcase unity among enslaved people and to emphasize the cross-generational collaboration required for successful resistance to slavery. In emphasizing the resilience and endurance of elders despite a lifetime of oppression, these activists and authors were seeking to foster a sense of common purpose in challenging the idea and institution of slavery and to throw down the gauntlet to those unwilling to take such risks.¹¹

⁹ Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet,” in *Encyclopedia of African American Writing: Five Centuries of Contributions. Trials and Triumphs of Writers, Poets, Publications, and Organizations*, ed. Bryan Conn and Tara Bynum (2000; New York, 2018), 955–65, 959. Kaelyn Conley, “The Seduction of Rage: Pushing Back against ‘We Are Not Our Ancestors’ Rhetoric within Black Youth Activist Culture,” *Common Cause: Alliance for Emerging Power*, Sept. 15, 2021, <https://www.commoncause.org/emerging-power/articles/the-seduction-of-rage-pushing-back-against-we-are-not-our-ancestors-rhetoric-within-black-youth-activist-culture/>.

¹⁰ “Table XXXIII: Proportion of White Males to Females, for 1850,” U.S. Department of the Interior, Census Office, *Compendium of the Seventh Census: 1850*, pt. I: *Population* (Washington, 1854), 56; “Table LXXXV: Proportion of Male Slaves to Female, for 1850,” *ibid.*, 91. Berry, *Price for Their Pound of Flesh*, 130; Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 209–13. On notions of old age in the antebellum period, see Doddington, *Old Age and American Slavery*, 5–18.

¹¹ Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 47. On the politics of flight to the North, see Steven Lubet, *Fugitive Justice: Runaways, Rescuers, and Slavery on Trial* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010); R. J. M. Blackett, *Making Freedom: The Underground Railroad and the Politics of Slavery* (Chapel Hill, 2013); and Eric Foner, *Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden*

In their memoirs, enslaved freedom seekers often acknowledged the assistance they received, noted the diverse forms the help might take, and celebrated the wide bonds of solidarity enslaved people forged in bondage. As Harriet Jacobs explained in her own fugitive account, “there are no bonds so strong as those which are formed by suffering together.” Although support came from various quarters, fugitives and freedom seekers sometimes explicitly recognized the role that Black elders played in guiding them on their path to freedom—offering practical and psychological assistance and helping galvanize the young in their quest. In doing so, they clarified to readers that age (or any other perceived limiting factor) should not prevent personal action against slavery or slavers. Lewis Garrard Clarke fondly recalled the assistance he received from “an old slave as true as steel,” and William Street remembered the help he received from an “old colored man” as he sought to avoid patrollers on his flight from middle Tennessee. Street had entered an old house to rid himself of his plantation clothing and then made his way through a house where fellow slaves were working. They did not give up his location but apparently did not proffer support either. Street noted that “nobody spoke a word to me.” After [he] got through them,” he encountered, “an old colored man with a wagon,” who appeared to take pleasure in tricking Street’s pursuers and aiding his flight. The silent enslaved were perhaps fearful of punishment if they were found to have aided this runaway, but the older man had no such qualms. As Street explained: “He told me, ‘You go this way, and when they come I’ll tell ’em you’ve gone that way.’” Street “did as he advised” and continued on his road to freedom. Enslaved elders could thus be seen as critical cartographers in making and sustaining the “geographies of evasion” that Vanessa Holden has argued shaped resistance in slavery, and they could be extolled as survivors whose knowledge would be passed on to support the next generation.¹²

Moses Roper offered detailed memories of the generational support networks that repeatedly aided him, reinforcing Frederick Knight’s assessment of the role Black elders could play, in slavery and freedom, as “teachers through their power of their knowledge, character, and presence.” Roper outlined his sorrow after being sold away and his determination to get drunk and kill himself, but he gratefully acknowledged the protection he received, having been “prevented from committing this horrid deed by an old slave on board.” Although Roper did not indicate why the elder, “who, knowing [Roper’s] intention, secretly took the bottle from [him],” Roper came to believe he had been granted a second chance and promised to make good on his plans to escape. In his next effort, support from an elder took more active form. Having escaped, Roper was “surrounded by planters looking for” him, and, after navigating the treacherous Chattahoochee River, found himself needing a rest. Fortunately, he “found an old slave hut,” which held an equally “old man, who appeared seventy or eighty years old.” Having outlined his perilous situation, Roper recounted the pleasure his elder took in providing support to him, despite his own meager rations: “[I] asked him, if he could give me something to eat, having had no suitable food for three or four days; he told me, he had nothing but a piece of

History of the Underground Railroad (New York, 2015). On the youthfulness of freedom seekers to the North, see Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*; and Müller, *Escape to the City*.

¹² Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Written by Herself* (Boston, 1861), 175. Lewis Garrard Clarke, *Narratives of the Sufferings of Lewis Clarke, during a Captivity of More Than Twenty-Five Years among the Algerines of Kentucky, One of the So-Called Christian States of America. Dictated by Himself* (Boston, 1845), 48. Benjamin Drew, *A North-Side View of Slavery. The Refugee: Or the Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada. Related by Themselves, with an Account of the History and Condition of the Colored Population of Upper Canada* (Boston, 1856), 285–88. Holden, *Surviving Southampton*, 23.

dry Indian bread, which he cheerfully gave me.” This elder had barely enough food to feed himself, but Roper intimated that the chance to aid another’s escape was succor enough, and the man’s selfless assistance helped Roper on his way to freedom. An elder insisting that individual desires should be supplanted by the collective need to support resistance against slavery was a potent political message.¹³

When discussing the support the aged might offer to runaways, authors and activists often acknowledged specific types of work Black elders might be doing, sensing that their frequent use in auxiliary roles as cooks, nurses, or as guards of stock and supplies provided them access to the raw materials that might be the difference between life and death for runaways. When Jordon Smith recounted to his Works Progress Administration (WPA) interviewer in the 1930s the repeat escape attempts of a man named Tom from his plantation in Georgia, he explained that access to food (and a willingness to share it) were integral to successful resistance. After their enslaver locked “Tom up in a log house,” following a failed escape, he told the community that “if they give him anything to eat he’ll skin ’em alive.” Notwithstanding the threats, Smith explained that the community surreptitiously came to Tom’s aid: “The old folks slips Tom bread and meat.” Whether on account of their access to victuals, or presumed docility on account of age, the illicit support and protective acts from the “old folks” enabled Tom to survive and to continue his resistant ways. As Smith proudly explained, “When he gits out, he’s gone to the woods ’gain.” In these instances, the practical support provided from the aged enslaved enabled the resistance of others, and their protective actions spoke vividly to the bonds of support connecting the wide slave community.¹⁴

Formerly enslaved people and Black activists addressed the practical abandonment of elderly Black people by enslavers who saw only their increasing dependency and weakness. Slavers sometimes took measures to avoid their “paternalistic” obligations in these cases, offering a cynical form of freedom to those deemed no longer exploitable by granting them a small dwelling on the outskirts of the plantation or enabling them to “live at large” and fend for themselves. Where slavers saw weakness, however, runaways could find deliverance. In his postbellum narrative, William H. Robinson explained that after fleeing seven or eight miles in his first escape attempt, he was near collapse. Fortunately, “about dusk I came in sight of a cabin in the distance. I was satisfied this was the home of some old mother or father who had outlived the days of their usefulness, and was given a peck of meal each week and cast off to fish or hunt for the rest of their living.” White southerners may have looked to those who were “getting old” and believed “that cause” made them “infirm and useless,” as one Alabama enslaver put it, but enslaved people could see in these same elders salvation. Robinson was correct in his intimation about the cabin, finding “an old woman eighty years old” who provided succor and safety. She was pleased to hear of his resistance and determined to guide him:

The first words the old lady said were, “Son, you is a runaway, aint you?” I told her that I was, and she told me “the overseer haven’t been around yet cause dey aint done milking yit, but you take this path (as she pointed to a path) and follow it till

¹³ Knight, *Black Elders*, 183. Moses Roper, *A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper, from American Slavery* (Philadelphia, 1838), 61, 64, 65.

¹⁴ On older slaves in auxiliary roles, see Doddington, *Old Age and American Slavery*, 31–71. Jordon Smith interview, 1936, in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, vol. V: *Texas Narratives, Parts 3 and 4*, ed. George P. Rawick (Westport, 1972), 38.

you come to a log across de creek, with a fish box upon it; you sit there until you hear me singing this song, God has delivered Daniel, and why not deliver me?"

The song choice—and its use as a warning signal—spoke to the collective support necessary for resistance, and it underlined the vicarious joy this woman took in the flight of another. It also illustrates the wide role Black elders played in cultural activities, with common positions as singers or storytellers enabling them to mask more rebellious messaging. Robert Franklin, for example, told his WPA interviewer "dere wuz always a leader in de fiel's to warn ebery one if de overseer's wuz comin'," and that an elder named "Aunt Dianah" held this role. It is plausible that Robinson's aide held a similar position and was able to use her status as an elder to evade suspicion and to aid runaways and rebels.¹⁵

Robinson eventually "heard the feeble voice of the old mother," indicating that the overseer had passed by, and made his way to her cabin. Robinson used signifiers of aged weakness, noting her "feeble voice," but also insisted on her passion for his freedom. Her voice, although strained by time's passage, "rang out on the still, balmy air." The woman's song informed Robinson the coast was clear, and it held a deeper meaning as to the value of—and collective celebration of—acts of resistance. As the woman told him: "Hold up your head with courage bold, And do not be afraid; For my God delivered Daniel, And He will deliver poor you." In addition to describing the food the woman provided, Robinson outlined the moral support and practical guidance he received. This elder had not escaped bondage herself, but she was determined to assist others; she offered advice on when and where the patrollers were likely to be and how to avoid the bloodhounds that slavers used to capture their human prey. According to Robinson, "she told me whenever I heard the baying of hounds on my trail, to rub the onions on the bottoms of my feet and run, and after running a certain distance to stop and apply the onions again, then when I came to a large bushy tree, to rub the trunk as high up as I could reach, then climb the tree." The tactics worked, even if Robinson was eventually recaptured.¹⁶

This woman's use of folk remedies and practical guidance also spoke to the common understanding of Black elders as purveyors of wisdom that served moral, spiritual, and corporeal purposes. As Ned Chaney explained of his great-grandmother, "Her head was as white as a piece of cotton, an' ever'body set a heap of sto' by her. I reckon, because she done 'cumeillated so much knowledge an' because her head was so white." This knowledge might include assisting those seeking flight, and Robinson was not the only person to benefit from the guidance of an elder. Walter Rimm told his WPA interviewer that an older woman assisted his mother in her escape attempt, telling her that the way "to keep de hounds from followin' you is to take black pepper and put it in you socks and run without you shoes. It make de hounds sneeze." The cruel efficacy of hounds—and memories of their savagery—would indicate that these tactics were not always successful, but the shared wisdom and the desire of the aged to protect others comes through repeatedly in the memories of the formerly enslaved. These memories speak to the generational ties

¹⁵ On enslaver abandonment of the aged enslaved, see Doddington, *Old Age and American Slavery*, 72–104. Petition of M. C. Stokes, June 9, 1858, Montgomery County, Alabama, petition no. 20185825, series 2, Race and Slavery Petitions Project, Slavery and the Law (1775–1867) Module, available at ProQuest History Vault. William H. Robinson, *From Log Cabin to the Pulpit, or, Fifteen Years in Slavery* (Eau Claire, 1913), 59–60. Robert Franklin interview, 1937, in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, vol. IV: *Texas Narratives, Parts 1 and 2*, ed. George P. Rawick (Westport, 1979), 1419.

¹⁶ Robinson, *From Log Cabin to the Pulpit*, 60–63.

that could bind the enslaved together in the face of oppression; resistance took many forms and could manifest variously at different stages of life.¹⁷

A sense that Black elders might serve as lookouts or take particular pleasure in elevating the success of runaways also comes across in Isaac Mason's recollections of slavery. Mason explained how he and his fellow fugitives, advised by a trusted Black elder, avoided a "gang of body-snatchers" tracking runaways. The elder was most likely a known guide for fugitives, as the leader of the runaways took the group "to the house of an old colored man . . . to seek for information." They were fortunate to have gone there, as "the old man told him not to go any further on that road as there was a gang of body-snatchers waiting by the bridge to mob every colored person that came that way." This was not the last time that sage advice from an elder saved Mason. Later in their flight to freedom, his fellow runaways, surrounded by hunting parties with dogs, were losing hope. Mason remembered what he had been taught and used this generational knowledge to effect their freedom: "I had gained some early knowledge of the north star for the express purpose for which I was now about to use it. An old man by the name of Charley Miller had told me where that star was, and if 'I could follow it[,] it would guide me north, that the Lord had placed it there to lead people out of slavery.'" Mason found freedom, and he acknowledged the vernacular cartography and generational knowledge necessary to craft the "rival geographies" that enabled his (and others') escapes.¹⁸

David Holmes made similar claims about the collective effort required to escape, and he extended his gratitude to the elders who facilitated his flight. Holmes received moral support from two elders who served as his fictive parents, noting that he could not make up his mind whether or not to flee bondage and that his decision came after consulting them: "the old woman began to get me ready for a start. She gave me a big corn-loaf she had just got baked, and a little rum and tobacco, and when all was quite still she and the old man set me outside, and told me to run for it." Holmes received not just moral fortitude from his elders but also practical guidance. Holmes freely admitted his lack of practical knowledge, but he knew enough to try to follow the North Star. This was not dumb luck but was based on his interactions with a trusted elder. As Holmes explained, "Heard about that [North Star] from an old man, a slave, who had gone off a good many times; but he never had the luck to get right away." Although the older man failed in his personal quest for freedom, he did not fail to offer support to others and clearly hoped to inspire resistance among his peers: "He used to point out the North Star to me, and tell me that if any man followed that, it would bring him into the north country, where the people were free; and that if a slave could get there hew would be free." Holmes followed this man's advice and made it to freedom. In these depictions, fugitive authors and formerly enslaved people emphasized how the aged enslaved were not just figures of pity or supplicants requiring sympathy from a white northern audience. These elders were necessary agents in the collective culture of resistance. In making these claims, these authors and activists were arguing for the importance of cross-generational support networks

¹⁷ Ned Chaney interview, 1937, in *The American Slave, A Composite Autobiography*, vol. VII: *Oklahoma and Mississippi Narratives*, ed. George P. Rawick (Westport, 1979), 369. Walter Rimm interview, 1937, in *American Slave*, ed. Rawick, V, 248. On the use of hounds, see Tyler D. Parry and Charlton W. Yingling, "Slave Hounds and Abolition in the Americas," *Past and Present*, 246 (Feb. 2020), 69–108; and Bill L. Smith, "'Open jaws of this monster-tyranny': Abolitionism, Resistance, and Slave-Hunting Canines," *American Nineteenth Century History*, 23 (Jan. 2022), 61–92.

¹⁸ Isaac Mason, *Life of Isaac Mason as a Slave* (Worcester, 1893), 40–43. Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 7.

in fostering Black activism—within and outside bondage—and insisting that age alone should not be considered a barrier for action in the fight against slavery.¹⁹

Claims of practical and psychological support and of the role Black elders played as necessary aides to rebels and runaways were not just found in abolitionist literature or vernacular histories but were also documented in the legal records of frustrated whites. In 1817, petitioners in Chowan County, North Carolina, pleaded for action to be taken against “negro Phillis[,] commonly known by the name of Old Phillis.” Although she was nominally the “property” of Calib Elliot and William Jackson, she had been permitted the “freedom” brought by her presumed uselessness and “has been running at large at divers days and times from the 1st day of September AD 1806 upon to the present time.” White enslavers may have assumed that age rendered Phillis of limited value to them, but she deliberately used her liminal status to guide others in their resistance. According to these petitioners, Phillis was “frequently communicating with Runaway negroes affording to them various supplies of food . . . and receiving of them stolen goods, to the great injury of all owners of slaves and against the peace & dignity of the State.” Phillis was not working alone. Another Black elder also had this role, and their efforts illustrate the wide networks of solidarity and practical support the aged might provide to those seeking freedom. Another set of petitioners described “Old Mingo late the property of Wm Haskin living out of Town,” as being “a great pest and nuisance to society and wrong to the neighbourhood.” In instances such as Phillis’s and Mingo’s, the presumed uselessness of the aged enslaved, and their practical abandonment by slavers who had taken their best years, facilitated networks of collective resistance.²⁰

In his fugitive narrative, William Hayden emphasized how the “nuisance” the white slavers bemoaned carried the opposite meaning for the enslaved, underlining how intergenerational bonds of solidarity were a necessary component of successful resistance. He spoke to the clear connections between cultural and communal activities and more overt acts of rebellion. Hayden explained that in Lexington, Kentucky, he used to meet up with “an old colored man, known as ‘Uncle Daniel,’” and that “he would lavish a great deal of loose change, which was of great advantage to [Daniel], in procuring him many little necessities, which he otherwise would not have received.” Hayden stressed how the deprivations caused by enslaver neglect were rectified by the Black community, but he also noted that this sparked a sense of reciprocity for future endeavors. Daniel seemed to have internalized the message of his own limited value, commenting “upon the waste of [Hayden’s] money, as he was pleased to term it,” but Hayden told Daniel he would be invaluable in assisting him in permanent flight. This renewed Daniel’s sense of purpose and identity, with Hayden claiming, “the old man wept tears of joy, when I told him this, and raising his hands and eyes to heaven, he invoked its aid in enabling him to discharge his duty to me, in performing whatever act I might require.”²¹

Daniel was true to his word. When Hayden made his escape, the elder agreed “to build [him] a sort of a room in the hay in the loft, and permit [him] to remain there,” while

¹⁹ “David Holmes Interviewed, 1852, London, by L. A. Chamerovzow,” in *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies*, ed. John W. Blassingame (Baton Rouge, 1977), 297–98.

²⁰ Session March 1817, Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, box 30, Criminal Actions Concerning Slaves, 1767–1829, Chowan County (N.C.) Slave Records, 1730–1869, CR.024.928.030 (North Carolina Department of Archives and History, Raleigh).

²¹ William Hayden, *Narrative of William Hayden, Containing a Faithful Account of His Travels for a Number of Years, Whilst a Slave, in the South. Written by Himself* (Cincinnati, 1846), 112.

waiting for the search to die down: "This, the old man promised faithfully to attend to, and I remained secreted in the stable nine days, living during the whole of that period, upon three cakes and the same number of pints of water." Hayden's eventual flight revealed his individual bravery and fortitude but also the collective bonds between enslaved people in the antebellum South and the vital networks of intergenerational support that enabled forms of resistance and survival in slavery. Hayden's demonstration that presumed uselessness on account of age could be rejected and that seemingly small acts of support were the necessary fuel for successful resistance was a potent political message for Black activists and abolitionist writers waging a rhetorical, cultural, and actual war against slavery.²²

Beyond providing material support, enslaved elders were also depicted as having encouraged those younger than themselves to fight or take flight, stressing the need to act while there was time to do so. I have previously argued that for some Black activists, "a degree of fatalism, even resignation to enslavement, could . . . be understood and articulated through a binary discourse of youth/old age," but others sought to elevate those elders who supported resistance or even practiced it themselves. These writers and activists underscored that resilience and activism were not bound by temporal rhythms, and they underlined the necessity of acting against slavery, or individual slavers, in every possible way. Charles Ball recalled one such instance: his father was set to be sold for some contrived reason, but his aged grandfather overheard the plot and set his son to freedom:

That night about midnight, my grandfather silently repaired to the cabin of my father, a distance of about three miles, aroused him from his sleep, made him acquainted with the extent of his danger, gave him a bottle of cider and a small bag of parched corn, and then enjoined him to fly from the destination which awaited him.

Ball never saw his father again, nor the grandfather his son, but both took pleasure in the fact that he had avoided the fate his enslaver had desired for him. As Ball put it: "In the morning the Georgian could not find his newly purchased slave, who was never seen or heard of in Maryland from that day."²³

Where Ball's father was warned of the danger and sent on his way, others recalled more specific guidance from the aged. Stephanie Camp wrote eloquently of the "geographies of containment" that slavers constructed as part of the antebellum South's carceral landscape, and Vanessa Holden more recently stressed the importance enslaved people placed on their "competing geographies of evasion and survival." These geographies were shared in a vernacular culture and were best articulated by those with long experience in navigating them. Formerly enslaved people often insisted on the specific importance of their elders here, and on the value of generational knowledge in crafting vernacular cultures of resistance. John Anderson explained that he came to know the geography of freedom after speaking with an older man, whose knowledge directly influenced his plans to escape. As Anderson noted, "An old man, who was called Jacob, had many times talked with me about Canada, and I had talked with other slaves about starting off for that place." On

²² *Ibid.*, 113–14.

²³ Doddington, "Old Age, Resistance, and Surviving Slavery," 718. Charles Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains; or, The Life of an American Slave* (New York, 1859), 14.

occasion, Black elders thus shared their knowledge, articulated a willingness to vicariously enjoy freedom, fight, or flight, and made personal sacrifices so that others might yet make good on freedom.²⁴

Some elders used their advanced age to pressure people into remaining enslaved, with particular emphasis placed on their need for practical support given the extractive violence of slavers. Others, however, stressed how the vicarious pleasure gained from knowing their friends and family were free outweighed personal considerations. A rhetorical value existed in these claims for Black activists and abolitionists. Their stress on the collective and individual sacrifices necessary to undermine slavery was designed to galvanize a movement facing tremendous pressures. An emphasis on resistant elders underlined the position that fight and flight could—or should—be supported and even elevated by those who would never experience freedom themselves, and that generational networks focused on survival and solidarity were the necessary conditions for successful resistance. These claims were personal and political, rhetorical and real, and can reveal the traumatic decisions enslaved people faced when navigating slavery and freedom. William Wells Brown, for example, noted that his strong desire for freedom clashed with belief that to leave his aged mother “in slavery, after she had undergone and suffered so much for me, would be proving recreant to the duty which I owed to her.” Brown, however, was directly disabused of this by his mother. She knew her own flight was impossible but “counselled [Brown] to get [his] liberty if [he] could.” Brown eventually persuaded his mother to attempt escape, but they were caught and soon separated. Brown blamed himself “for her sad condition; for if I had not persuaded her to accompany me, she would not then have been in chains,” but his mother gave him short shrift. She insisted he continue on the rebel’s path, noting her limited time left and the hastening of time’s passage in the cotton fields of the Deep South: “Do not, I pray you, weep for me. I cannot last long upon a cotton plantation. I feel that my heavenly Master will soon call me home, and then I shall be out of the hands of the slave-holders!” This was not mere fatalism, however. Brown’s mother’s final conversation with her son was designed to inspire him to escape once more, and to do so before his own time ran out: “You have ever said that you would not die a slave; that you would be a freeman. Now try to get your liberty! You will soon have no one to look after but yourself!” This inspiration worked, and cross-generational support networks played a fundamental role in facilitating Brown’s flight from bondage.²⁵

The previous sections examined the role enslaved elders played in facilitating resistance, guiding the youth, and taking vicarious pleasure in their fight or flight, as well as on the political and rhetorical value in asserting the selflessness of resistant elders. This section looks at direct resistance from older slaves. It considers why elders sought escape and how these rebels were viewed by others in their community. Black elders comparatively rarely made it to freedom, but their efforts to do so showcase incredible levels of endurance in the face of lifelong oppression and speak to a wider refusal among enslaved people to accept their condition or the logic of slavery. Discussing their actions can connect to and

²⁴ Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 16; Holden, *Surviving Southampton*, 22, 56–80. Harper Twelvetrees, ed., *The Story of the Life of John Anderson, the Fugitive Slave* (London, 1863), 129–30.

²⁵ Doddington, *Old Age and American Slavery*, 220–21. William Wells Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown, an American Slave. Written by Himself* (London, 1849), 29–31, 77–79.

enrich Nikki Taylor's recent imperatives to focus less on frequency of action and to avoid applying a rigid model of "success" when exploring resistance and instead to appreciate the desire for autonomy and expressions of agency among enslaved people on their own terms. Taylor's work relates specifically to enslaved women's use of violence, where she accepts "violent resistance to slavery was not the preferred form among enslaved women," instead insisting that "the fact it happened at all—and despite the constant surveillance and repression women endured—is what makes these actions remarkable." Similar claims could be made of the aged enslaved who took flight. Their actions underline the need to think beyond binaries or linear models of aging that emphasize only declining force as people grow older. The actions of aged rebels undermined their enslavers' hopes for mastery, dismantled the proslavery propaganda that a paternalistic bargain was accepted by enslaved people, and inspired others' radical actions.²⁶

The sense that the resistant activities of the aged enslaved—whether "successful" or not—might serve a wider purpose among the enslaved was acknowledged by enslavers. Rimm explained that even though one habitual runaway was listed simply as an "old fellow," his ability to evade the patrollers and to remain free within the region was inspiring to others. "Dey wants him bad, 'cause it 'spire other slaves to run away if he stays a-loose." Similar concerns were articulated by slavers, who understood that Black elders who refused to submit might inspire collective revolt or forms of activism from the community who looked up to these figures. Liana DeMarco is correct to note that many enslavers looked at "older enslaved people . . . [with] the assumption that they would be less capable of resistance, if not more or less resigned to enslavement," but the opposite could also be true. Henry Bibb explained that after being caught escaping with "old Jack," their enslaver focused punishment on the older man in the belief that he "had persuaded me off, or I never would have gone." On occasion, then, slavers saw the aged as dangerous on an individual level but also as leaders of resistance in their communities.²⁷

A sense that the rebellious spirit of the aged must be quashed to prevent inspiring others was evident in William Pettigrew's correspondence. Pettigrew, who enslaved approximately eighty people on two rice plantations in North Carolina, Magnolia and Belgrade, outlined his annoyance at an unnamed man "now somewhat advanced in years, who has done much faithful service, but who is at this time, and has been for the last four years, lamentably deficient in common honesty and faithfulness." Pettigrew's self-indulgent shock at the man's ingratitude was followed by the rather more self-aware (and ultimately tragic) statement that the elder "is haunted, as I am informed, with a desire for freedom, and indulges in harsh strictures against me for not granting it to him." Pettigrew's framing here suggests that time had only emboldened the man, who saw little to lose having now (forcibly) given his "faithful service" and his best years to his slavers. The fifty-six-year-old man verbally resisted "in the presence of his fellow servants and has been in the habit of doing for some years," and Pettigrew feared the man's actions would inspire others to do similar or worse.²⁸

²⁶ Taylor, *Brooding over Bloody Revenge*, 2.

²⁷ Rawick, ed., *American Slave*, V, 248. DeMarco, "Managing 'Old Mammy,'" 323. Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave, Written by Himself. With an Introduction by Lucius C. Matlack* (New York, 1849), 142.

²⁸ William Pettigrew to John Williams, esq., Nov. 4, 1852, folder 158, doc. case 8, Correspondence, 1852: November, Pettigrew Family Papers, 1776–1926, no. 592 (Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill).

Pettigrew mused as to how best to discipline the man, determining that “mercy” meant he was unwilling to send him to the Deep South, but that he could also not suffer him to remain and ferment discord. Pettigrew understood, moreover, that the man’s advanced age and attendant status was a factor in inspiring others to resist, and that this elder’s broad “connexions”—likely fictive as much as consanguineal—saw him as a figurehead who might inspire resistance:

his years (56) and experience have given him an influence that is already but would then be far more, injurious to my people; he would be a malignant enemy in the heart of my establishment poisoning the minds of all around him, particularly among his family connexions who are numerous and already much contaminated, I think to a great extent by him.

Pettigrew’s planned “solution,” which he ultimately did not employ, was to send the man to Liberia; he took pleasure in the idea that this would be an unwanted “gift.” Pettigrew gloated that “he may then enjoy the freedom he so much wants, perhaps not unaccompanied by want and sorrow, and even repentance when too late.” Even in this endeavor, however, Pettigrew acknowledged a fear that the aged man’s unbroken spirit risked inspiring others. Pettigrew insisted that “his” people “must be kept entirely ignorant of the disposal that is made of him” in case he evaded the plans: “Nor do I wish him to be aware that he is destined for Liberia until after the ship has sailed from Baltimore.” Such a level of secrecy made clear the esteem in which this elder was held and Pettigrew’s fear that his resistance would continue to inspire collective or individual dissidence in the Black community.²⁹

Fugitive authors and Black activists often connected successful flight with the vigor of youth, but others insisted that experience and knowledge were more important than physicality alone. They spoke of real peoples’ actions but also allowed for the possibility of a wider pool of rebels and resisters and underlined that broad challenges to slavery could emanate from the entire community. Louis Hughes explained that his escape was possible only with the guidance of an older man. “Uncle Alfred” had built up the rival geography required to plot their route to freedom, having “been a teamster for Dandridge for many years, and was familiar with the road,” and he took charge accordingly. As Hughes noted, “Uncle Alfred, as I always called him, was to be our leader. He was older than any of the rest of us, and had had a good deal of experience; we, therefore, all looked to him—in fact, we relied entirely upon him.” They avoided the patrollers as they “traveled wholly by the stars,” and Hughes indicated that this was facilitated by his elder’s experience and positive attitude: stars “were his guide. He knew by looking at them the four cardinal points of the compass.” Hughes insisted that this type of geography of resistance was built up, and shared more widely, by the aged: “Many old slaves were guided in this way when traveling in the night, and some could tell the time of night by the position of the stars.”³⁰

²⁹ On schemes of colonization to Liberia, see Eric Burin, *Slavery and the Peculiar Solution: A History of the American Colonization Society* (Gainesville, 2005); Ousmane K. Power-Greene, *Against Wind and Tide: The African American Struggle against the Colonization Movement* (New York, 2015); and Nicholas Guyatt, *Bind Us Apart: How Enlightened Americans Invented Racial Segregation* (Oxford, Eng., 2016). Pettigrew to Williams, Nov. 4, 1852, folder 158, doc. case 8, Correspondence, 1852: November, Pettigrew Family Papers. On William Pettigrew, see Robert S. Starobin, ed., *Blacks in Bondage: Letters of American Slaves* (New York, 1974), 12.

³⁰ Louis Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave. From Bondage to Freedom. The Institution of Slavery as Seen on the Plantation and in the Home of the Planter* (Milwaukee, 1897), 139–41.

Page Harris, enslaved in Maryland, recalled how Black elders found ways to resist bondage radically, telling his WPA interviewer how “Old Pete” evolved from guiding others to following the rebel’s path himself. Pete was a mechanic and “the herb doctor and healer,” and he repeatedly used his wares to assist others in fleeing slavery: “It was said that he would save money and give it to people who wanted to run away.” It was intimated that Pete was a repeat truant, with Harris noting that he had run away “on several previous occasions,” but, after hearing he was to be whipped for facilitating a young girl’s flight from bondage, he took more radical steps. “Old Pete . . . heard of it, left the night before he was to be whipped, he went to the swamp in the cove or about 5 miles from where his master lived. He eluded the dogs for several weeks, escaped, got to Boston.” The community marveled at his success and attributed it to his knowledge and status as an aged seer, and perhaps his skills as an herb doctor and healer. As Harris excitedly recalled, “no one to this day has any idea how he did it; but he did.”³¹

Samuel Ringgold Ward, despite noting the prevalence of young fugitives in Canada, indicated that older people also sought permanent flight and that specific moments of injustice could elicit radical responses from the aged. Ward described one man’s escape at the age of sixty-one, explaining both why he fled and how he secured freedom. This man “had spent his best days in the service of a man who had frequently sent him with six horses, as a teamster, to Pennsylvania,” but he overheard that he was set to be sold by the avaricious heirs after the older man’s death. Ward accepted the limited chance of success in a purely physical fight with the trader and his youthful accomplices, who were waiting to trap the man: “should he sit down there to supper, Woodfolk and the young men could, like tigers, spring upon him; and there being no chance of escape, he could be overpowered and borne off, in spite of any resistance he might make.” Physical prowess was only one component of successful resistance, however, and Ward acknowledged that experience—and caution borne from long suffering—was also vital. After “wisely concluding that ‘discretion is the better part of valour,’ he went out as if to look after the horses he was accustomed to attend, and never returned.” The man used the accumulated knowledge from a lifetime of stolen labor to chart his course to freedom, and he eventually secured it.³²

Others similarly insisted to their readers that, although the travails of aging were real, these issues did not—and should not—preclude direct challenges to slavery and oppression. Fortitude born of suffering could foster success, and experience could win out. Isaac D. Williams explained that in his runaway party, “old man Nicholas . . . though over sixty years of age, left both Banks and me far in the rear,” and that he was the more formidable foe irrespective of age: “[Nicholas] was lithe, active, and didn’t have as much flesh to carry along as we had.” Austin Steward described the experience of two runaways, “an elderly man, named Benjamin Bristol, and the other, Edmund Watkins, a lad of about eighteen years of age,” and believed that success came only by the endurance of the older man. After traveling sixty or seventy miles, and finally reaching Lake Ontario, the younger man “was so completely exhausted that he declared himself incapable of further exertion, and begged to be left to his fate.” Bristol insisted they continue, however, with Steward ascribing the old man’s habit of chewing tobacco as having “kept him from sinking so low as his

³¹ “Page Harris,” in *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, vol. VIII: *Maryland*, Brooks–Williams (Washington, 1941), 22–25, esp. 24.

³² Ward, *Autobiography of a Fugitive Negro*, 171–73.

companion.” Whatever the cause, the old man took charge and reversed notions of aged dependency by literally carrying the younger man to freedom. Bristol “took [Watkins] on his back, and carried him home, which they reached in a famished state and reduced to skeletons.”³³

On occasion, then, formerly enslaved people recalled the physical resistance of Black elders and marveled at their fortitude and determination. This was sometimes elevated further by reference to the travails of age and accumulated suffering in slavery, even while asserting that these complaints did not invariably prevent them from attempting fight or flight. Many of the cases offered in this section refer to aged runaways looking to shelter in urban spaces or to hide among family and friends while remaining in the slaveholding South. These activities may be framed as truancy, or short-term flight, which has often been compared to long-term fugitivity and flight to the North, but historians such as Damian Alan Pargas and Sylvia Diouf have asked for reconceptualization of these activities and consideration of them as sincere efforts to secure “informal freedom” within a slave society. The runaways discussed here clearly sought to evade capture, even while remaining in the South and close to family and friends, and their activities were understood by enslavers as resistance that had to be quashed. Supporting evidence, even if bemoaning resistant acts, is found in contemporary white testimony. One enslaver from Charleston, South Carolina, sought to recapture Beck, “an elderly mustee wench,” and warned everyone that she was “remarkably active and erect.” A group of slavers from Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, aimed to capture four runaways, including Jacob, about forty-five years old, with “stoop’d shoulders, grey head and large whiskers.” Jacob was, in fact, a repeat resistor, with the enslaver warning local whites they should not be fooled by his appearance: “[Jacob] is an old offender.”³⁴

A more radical example of disputes over the physical prowess of aged runaways was recorded in the Louisiana Supreme Court in 1852. Parties in *Benjamin v. Davis and Matt* fought for costs over the death of Ned, who was killed in flight by two slave catchers and their hounds. Ned’s “owner” claimed that he was owed monetary damages for Ned’s improper death, and, although he was unable to deny that Ned was a runaway, used discourse equating old age with weakness to claim that the slave catchers had acted excessively. According to counsel, their violence was disproportionate to the older man’s capacity to resist: “Just imagine what excuse can two powerful, athletic men, with horses, guns, pistols, and dogs, in an open field, have for shooting an old negro down of forty-five years of age, unarmed, or at least having nothing but a carving knife, if that.” The slave catchers insisted, however, that despite his age, Ned was a formidable foe who should not be taken

³³ Isaac D. Williams, *Sunshine and Shadow of Slave Life. Reminiscences as Told by Isaac D. Williams to “Tege”* (East Saginaw, 1885), 30. Austin Steward, *Twenty-Two Years a Slave, and Forty Years a Freeman; Embracing a Correspondence of Several Years, While President of Wilberforce Colony, London, Canada West* (Rochester, 1857), 56–57.

³⁴ Damian Alan Pargas, *Freedom Seekers: Fugitive Slaves in North America, 1800–1860* (New York, 2022), esp. 66–114. On informal freedom, including forms of marronage, see Sylviane A. Diouf, *Slavery’s Exiles: The Story of the American Maroons* (New York, 2014); and Matthew J. Clavin, *Aiming for Pensacola: Fugitive Slaves on the Atlantic and Southern Frontiers* (Cambridge, Mass., 2015). “Ran away. Beck,” *Charleston (SC) Mercury*, July 25, 1825, *Freedom on the Move*, <https://database.freedomonthemove.org/advertisements/3cad7558-4f6e-4e48-adfd-c5d799b03ef9?advertisements%5Bquery%5D=Ran%20away.%20Beck;130%20Dollars%20Western%20Carolinian%20May%207%201822%20North%20Carolina%20Runaway%20Slave%20Notices%201750-1865%20Digital%20Library%20on%20American%20Slavery%20https://dilas.uncg.edu/notices/notice/362/>.

lightly: "the negro was armed, and resisted . . . had a knife about eighteen inches long . . . the dogs of defendants were bleeding and appeared to have been cut with a knife." Although the court supported the claim for compensation, citing the slave catchers' excessive use of buckshot, it nonetheless rejected the idea that advanced age could be invariably equated with docility. All parties seemingly agreed that Ned "was a runaway . . . that he was armed, and resisted attempts made to capture him."³⁵

Proslavery propagandists often depicted the aged enslaved as docile and thankful for the support they received, as seen in Edward Williams Clay's image of two fictionalized Black elders lovingly thanking their "master" for the paternalistic care they had been gifted from cradle to grave. (See figure 2.) Claims of mutual respect and forbearance aside, slavers provided extensive evidence, even if unwittingly, of Black elders' desire for freedom and their rejection of these visions of benevolent mastery. John Nevitt, from Natchez, Mississippi, bemoaned the repeated absence of "old" Sam, David, and Edmund from his cotton plantation in 1828 and 1830, while David F. Wilson and John J. Wilson, executors of the will of the late Robert Wilson of Tennessee, sought permission to sell a slave named Sam, "a likely boy about forty five years of age," because of his incorrigible resistance. Sam was "a prolific source of trouble" to them, being "wild, ungovernable and of vicious habits," and the passage of time was only intensifying his desire for freedom. They expressed hopes for a speedy sale because, having "already run away once or twice and came very near making it to a Free state," they feared he would eventually succeed. Even worse, this elder's ungovernable spirit was inspiring others, and the petitioners feared the "pernicious example he is constantly setting." In this instance the slavers saw in the aged an influential rebel whom they could not hope to control.³⁶

This lack of control could be true even among people with signs of the physical depreciation contemporaries associated with aging. In 1851, the North Carolina enslaver W. B. Rhem offered a reward of \$25 for information relating to the capture of Nathan and his wife, Phebe, and their eight-month-old child. Both Nathan and Phebe were at least forty, with Nathan "considerably lame from the rheumatism," but this ailment was not enough to dampen their desire for freedom. Malindy, who ran away from Wake County, North Carolina, in 1852, was between fifty and sixty years old, "with a great many broken veins in her legs," and she took flight to return to the children from whom she had been separated. In individual advertisements, two North Carolina slavers described the physical suffering of aged runaways while expressing anger at their flight. Jack, aged forty-five or fifty, "generally limps in walking," and Jim, about fifty years old, had "lost some of his toes off one or both of his feet," but both were able to evade capture. Other aged runaways dealt with reduced eyesight, as in the case of sixty-year-old Bob Woods, who had "a film over one of his eyes." Many had symptoms of edema, as in the case of Jim Stovall, whose leg was "somewhat flattened and crooked, caused by losing some of the bones from it by a white swelling," or were "hard of hearing," as was Tannah, "an elderly woman" who fled South Carolina in 1829.³⁷

³⁵ *Benjamin v. Davis and Matt*, 6 La. An. 472, 473–74 (1851).

³⁶ Edward Williams Clay, *America/E.W.C.*, 1841, print, *Library of Congress*, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2003690759/>. Petition of John J. Wilson and David F. Wilson, Oct. 30, 1854, Maury County, Tennessee, petition no. 21485411, series 2, Race and Slavery Petitions Project, Slavery and the Law Module, available at ProQuest History Vault.

³⁷ "\$25 Reward," *Newbernian and North Carolina Advocate*, Dec. 2, 1851, *North Carolina Runaway Slave Notices, 1750–1865, Digital Library on American Slavery*, <https://dilas.uncg.edu/notices/notice/3983/>; "\$10 Reward," *Weekly (NC) Standard*, July 21, 1852, *Freedom on the Move*, <https://database.freedomonthemove.org/advertisements/b60b21a2-744d-420c-9c78-2bec4c078a9f>; "Absconded from Old-Town Plantation," *Wilmington (NC) Gazette*,

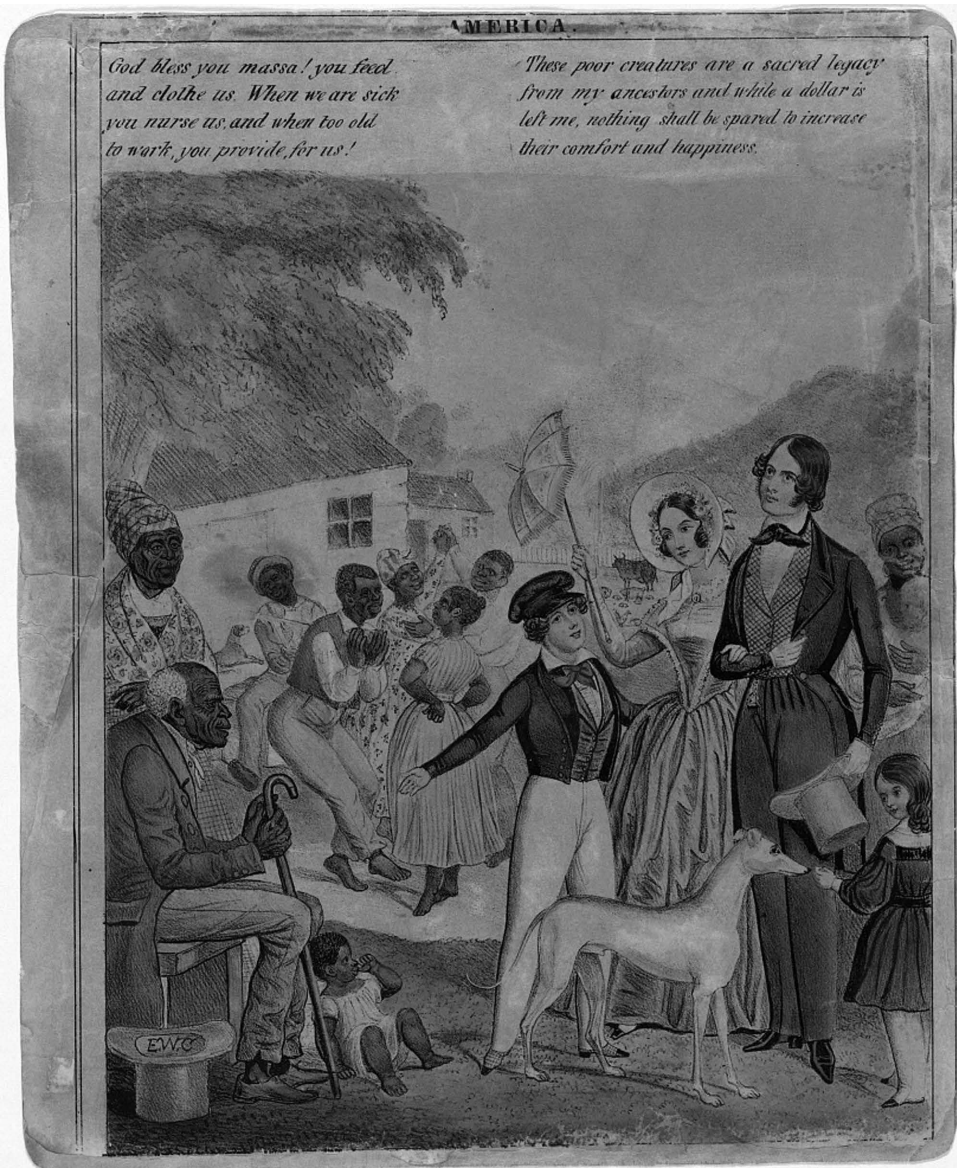


Figure 2. In this proslavery drawing, an elderly couple thank their “master” for the paternalistic care they had always been given. The slaver responds with a performed magnanimity, explaining in front of his adoring wife and curious children that such actions were the natural impulse of a true “master.” Edward Williams Clay, *America/E.W.C.*, 1841, Edward Williams Clay Collection, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2003690759/>.

Along with general ailments associated with aging, accumulated suffering and punishment borne of resistance had damaged the bodies, but not the spirit, of some aged rebels. Tannah had burn marks on one eye and her mouth, and she had a large scar covering her

Dec. 15, 1807, *North Carolina Runaway Slave Notices, 1750–1865*, Digital Library on American Slavery, <https://dlas.uncg.edu/notices/notice/738/>; “Twenty Dollars Reward,” *Carolina (NC) Federal Republican*, April 30, 1814, *ibid.*, <https://dlas.uncg.edu/notices/notice/818/>.

shoulder and arm. Bill Wyatt, who fled Wake Forest, North Carolina, in 1839 at the age of forty-five, “had his left arm cut off near his elbow,” while the description of forty-year-old Moses, who had escaped from near Raleigh, North Carolina, spoke of extensive violence and counterviolence. Moses was described as “weighing about 160 lbs. large beard, with a scar on his chin, caused by a whip saw, the lower part of one ear bit off, large scars on his belly occasioned by a burn, another scar on his leg by a cut with a broad axe.”³⁸

These advertisements reveal aged fugitives’ endurance and determination to secure forms of freedom despite the extensive suffering wrought by bondage. They show the power of the emotional bonds and connections enslaved people had, with runaways commonly described as seeking to escape with loved ones or to find communities left behind, even after decades of absence. In Raleigh, North Carolina, in 1820, Jacob Bates explained that Bob, aged between forty and forty-five, was liable to return to Maryland to hide out, despite having been sold from the region twenty years prior. James Lowe explained that a father and son had taken flight from his farm. He appeared to place the blame on the “oldest Negro,” Romulus, who had borne extensive suffering during his time in bondage. As Lowe explained, Romulus was “yellow complected, his fore teeth nearly all decayed and is very knock-kneed when he walks.” Even so, Lowe knew that Romulus was a tricky character who might yet evade his captors with an escape that had long been planned: “He carried with him the following clothing, a blue broad-cloth Coat, a pair of grey, and a pair of white pantaloons, and fur hat, entirely new; also a plaid cloak, striped with green with sleeves in it. . . . There is but little doubt that said negro has a considerable sum of money about him.” Lowe believed that Romulus was the instigator of the duo’s flight, giving comparatively less attention to the fifteen-year-old son, Willis. He explained that this was not the first time the older man had sought freedom: nineteen years ago Romulus had “runaway, took with him free papers and assumed the name of Chavis.” Lowe believed that Romulus was going to repeat the same trick, nineteen years later, and that he would guide his son in a similar escape. In making these claims, Lowe underscored the power of the familial units enslaved people crafted, the cross-generational support networks that facilitated acts of resistance, and the extent to which aged runaways could inspire younger folk to follow suit.³⁹

If these runaway advertisements reveal motives for aged flight, this article concludes with a sense that for some fugitives, their advanced age and the passage of time motivated them to seek freedom. In their recollections the formerly enslaved spoke to the necessity of action before time ran out, rejecting fatalism and arguing that to die trying was better than dying enslaved. These depictions spoke of real individuals but also served a rhetorical purpose for Black activists in promoting and sustaining a fight against slavery from all who could still do so. Although contemporaries commonly depicted advanced age as a period of encroaching physical and mental weakness, they also understood that

³⁸ “\$25 Reward,” *Charleston (SC) Mercury*, Jan. 6, 1829, *Freedom on the Move*, <https://database.freedomonthemove.org/advertisements/f94a0b27-8790-41ef-96e5-d3292b78e785>. “Fifty Dollars Reward,” *Star and North Carolina State Gazette*, Jan. 1, 1829, *ibid.*, <https://dilas.uncg.edu/notices/notice/918/>.

³⁹ “25 Dollars Reward,” *North Carolina Minerva and Raleigh Advertiser*, April 14, 1820, *North Carolina Runaway Slave Notices, 1750–1865, Digital Library on American Slavery*, <https://dilas.uncg.edu/notices/notice/442/>. “Ten Dollars Reward,” *Raleigh Register and North Carolina (NC) Weekly Advertiser*, June 9, 1826, *ibid.*, <https://dilas.uncg.edu/notices/notice/1342/>.

the passage of time could inspire fearlessness. Benjamin Rush, for example, argued that “the fear of death appears to be much less in old age, than in early, or middle life,” and depicted this as “indifference to life, and desire for death.” Black elders who fought and fled, however, acknowledged indifference but rejected a desire to die. They insisted that they wanted their final breath to be in freedom, to show their enslaver the depth of their resistance.⁴⁰

Col. Douglas Wilson, interviewed by Octavia Rogers Albert in 1890 in a composite autobiography of enslaved life, offered one such tale. Wilson, who secured freedom during the Civil War and fought for the Union, used his memories of “Uncle” Si and “Aunt” Cindy to emphasize the enduring agency of enslaved people and to elevate their resistance to slavery. Like Adele Petigru Allston in her letter to Jesse Belflowers, Wilson agreed that during the war “slaves were escaping from the old plantations in every direction” and acknowledged the distress this caused Southern whites. One enslaver from Vicksburg, Mississippi, spoke to Si, an “aged patriarch, now bent under the weight of over threescore and ten years,” and insisted that he remain loyal. Si professed fealty but fled with Cindy and others the next day, and when the planter went to find the fugitives, he saw that they were beyond his reach across Union lines. Cindy, however, “had died from the exposure and hardship incident upon the making of their escape.” The enslaver sought to reprimand Si for his actions, asking “why on earth did you so cruelly bring Aunt Cindy here for, through all of such hardship, thereby causing her death?” Si’s response underlined the depth of their desire for freedom, even if only for a moment: “Lifting up his eyes and looking his master full in the face, he answered, ‘I couldn’t help it, marster; but then, you see, she died free.’”⁴¹

In making these claims, formerly enslaved people and their allies were making use of common tropes associated with republican manhood, following the call to “Give me liberty or death.” They were refuting the notion that resistance was solely the preserve of the young, insisting on an expansive understanding of activism and putting out a call to arms for endurance. If these elders could do it, what should stop others from promoting resistance to slavery or oppression elsewhere? In Ebber Pettit’s sketches of the Underground Railroad, published in 1879, he offered the tale of William and Margaret, two runaways in their seventies, who were adamant that freedom would be theirs for as long as they had left to live: “[William] and his wife, in their old age, resolved to be free in this life and die in a free country.” Pettit was delighted to describe their success.⁴²

Formerly enslaved elders made similar claims. Lewis Richardson offered a thrilling speech to an abolitionist audience in 1846, outlining his escape “after wearing the galling chains on my limbs 53 years.” Richardson acknowledged the dangers of aging in slavery but vehemently rejected the idea that time’s passage meant acceptance of bondage. Richardson used that knowledge to promote community activism; he knew his odds of escape were long but would rather die trying than “be killed by such floggings and abuse by his cruel overseer in my old age.” His long suffering strengthened his resolve, and he

⁴⁰ Benjamin Rush, “An Account of the State of the Body and Mind in Old Age and Observations upon its Diseases and their Remedies,” in *Medical Inquiries and Observations*, by Benjamin Rush (5 vols., Philadelphia, 1797–1798), II, 313.

⁴¹ Octavia V. Rogers Albert, *The House of Bondage, or, Charlotte Brooks and Other Slaves, Original and Life-Like, As They Appeared in Their Old Plantation and City Slave Life; Together with Pen-Pictures of the Peculiar Institution, with Sight and Insights into Their New Relations as Freedmen, Freemen, and Citizens* (New York, 1890), 133–35.

⁴² Eber M. Pettit, *Sketches in the History of the Underground Railroad, Comprising Many Thrilling Incidents of the Escape of Fugitives from Slavery, and the Perils of Those Who Aided Them* (Fredonia, 1879), 132.

would take the risk whatever the cost: "I wanted to be free before I died, and if I should be caught on the way to Canada and taken back, it could be but death, and I might as well die with the colic as the fever." In some instances, contemporaries associated aging in bondage with fatalism and dimming of the chance of—or hope for—resistance. Others were inspired to appreciate life's temporal boundaries fully, which often precipitated their flight.⁴³

Many of the aged enslaved did not, or could not, escape from bondage, and they lived and died amid tremendous suffering. A focus on resistance here should not be taken to minimize the brute power slavers wielded or the immense damage it wrought on millions. This article has, nonetheless, demonstrated that Black elders could fight against slavery in diverse ways, and that some were seen by their peers as vital participants in a wider culture of resistance. The article's emphasis on resistant elders within American slavery speaks to debates among scholars of age and generation, posing questions and challenging static narratives that associate resistance with youth, underlining the complexity of perceived generational distinctions in radicalism, and underscoring the need for nonlinear models for understanding age, identity, and action in both the past and present.

The cases discussed here connected to wide abolitionist messaging on the value of open resistance; tales of undaunted Black elders undermined white slavers' and their allies' political claims of a paternalistic bargain accepted by the enslaved and called for all to resist where and when they could. When Harriet Jacobs shed tears after hearing her children were being punished because of her flight, she faced a tongue-lashing from an older woman who insisted that she was doing the right thing. "Old Betty" insisted on the need for resilience and endurance to resist: "Don't be so chick'n hearted! If you does, you vil neber git thro' dis world." In cases such as these, elders were promoters of direct resistance and provided the moral and practical support necessary for escape. For abolitionists and Black activists, tales of resistant elders served rhetorical and cultural purposes in showing the political power of endurance and in revealing the depth of resistance across enslaved generations.⁴⁴

Cross-referencing the testimony of fugitives and WPA respondents, planter correspondence, and criminal and civil records, however, underscores that these cases were not pure fiction. We must do more to highlight the dynamic and collaborative nature of resistance in slavery. That these Black elders tried to resist and escape bondage in the face of overwhelming odds, support others even if they believed their own chances of freedom had dissipated, and be strengthened in their resolve to escape by the passage of time reminds us of the importance of Daina Ramey Berry's work on "soul values." Their efforts underline her injunction for historians to consider "the strength and spirit of a people whose objective was to become free or die trying" and to recognize those who "found strength in an internal form of resistance, expressed verbally and physically, one that rejected their status as property." By examining the role Black elders played in crafting and sharing the cartography necessary to build geographies of resistance, and by relating elders' efforts to escape and secure freedom, I have emphasized the collective bonds and community

⁴³ "Speech of Lewis Richardson," March 13, 1846, in *Slave Testimony*, ed. Blassingame, 164–65.

⁴⁴ Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 156.

dynamics that helped foster enslaved resistance and have sought to underline the agency of those who had been forced, as Frederick Douglass poignantly noted, to give their “best years and the best strength of [their] life” to slavers yet with spirits that remained undimmed.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Daina Ramey Berry, “Soul Values and American Slavery,” *Slavery and Abolition*, 42 (May 2021), 201–18. Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom: Part I—Life as a Slave. Part II—Life as a Freeman* (New York, 1855), 112–14.