

CHAPTER 1 In Secret Places

Acquiring Literacy in Slave Communities

No child, white people never teach colored people nothing, but to be good to dey Master and Mistress. What learning dey would get in dem days, dey been get it at night. Taught demselves.

Louisa Gause, South Carolina

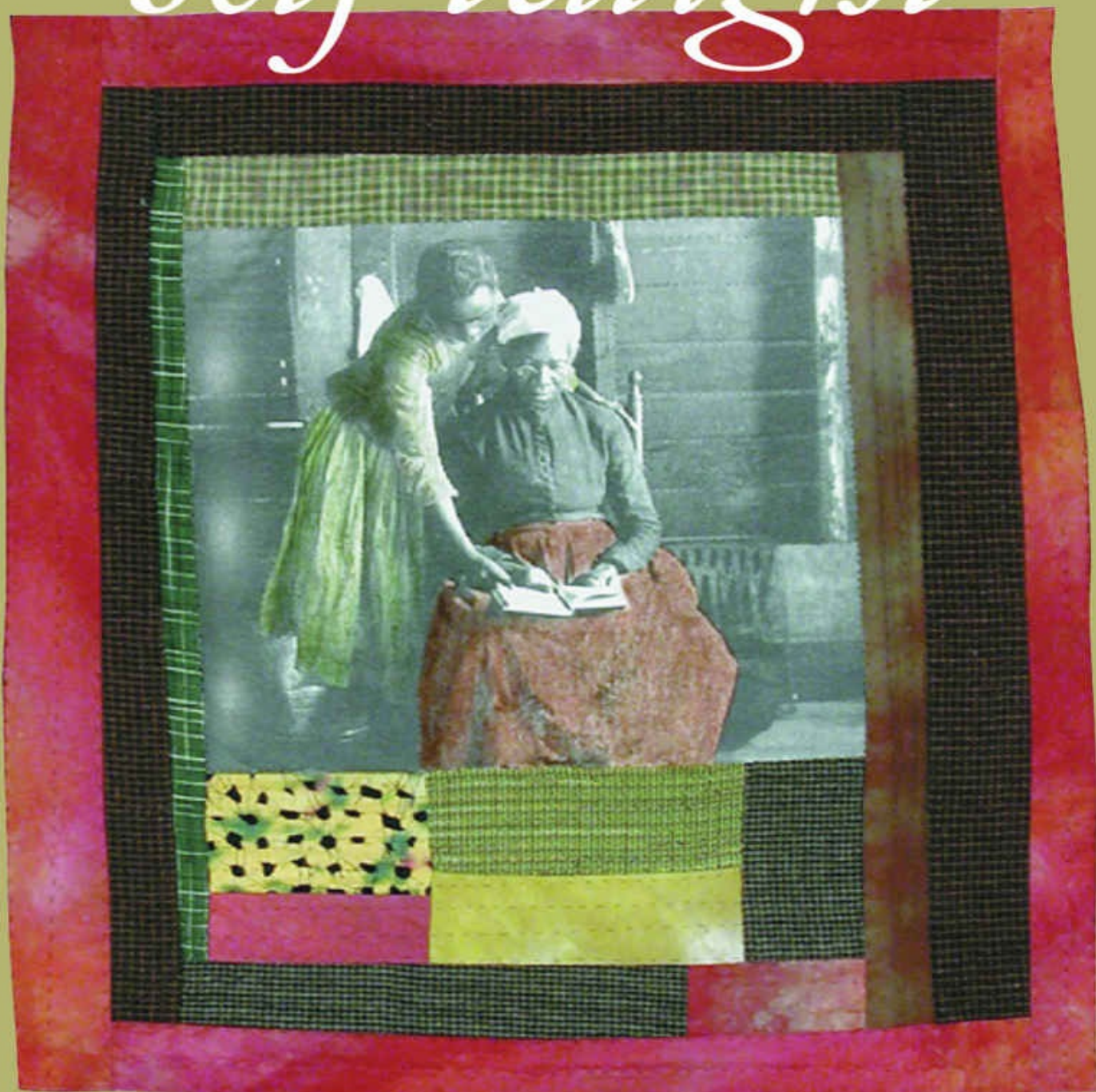
I have seen the Negroes up in the country going away under large oaks, and in secret places, sitting in the woods with spelling books.

Charity Bowery, North Carolina

Despite laws and custom in slave states prohibiting enslaved people from learning to read and write, a small percentage managed, through ingenuity and will, to acquire a degree of literacy in the antebellum period.¹ Access to the written word, whether scriptural or political, revealed a world beyond bondage in which African Americans could imagine themselves free to think and behave as they chose. Literacy provided the means to write a pass to freedom, to learn of abolitionist activities, or to read the Bible. Because it most often happened in secret, the very act of learning to read and write subverted the master-slave relationship and created a private life for those who were owned by others. Once literate, many used this hard-won skill to disturb the power relations between master and slave, as they fused their desire for literacy with their desire for freedom.

AFRICAN AMERICAN
EDUCATION IN SLAVERY
AND FREEDOM

self-taught



HEATHER ANDREA WILLIAMS

Placing antiliteracy laws in dialogue with the words of enslaved people enables an examination of the tensions that slave literacy provoked between owned and owner. Masters made every attempt to control their captives' thoughts and imaginations, indeed their hearts and minds. Maintaining a system of bondage in the Age of Enlightenment depended upon the master's being able to speak for the slave, to deny his or her humanity, and to draw a line between slave consciousness and human will. The presence of literate slaves threatened to give lie to the entire system. Reading indicated to the world that this so-called property had a mind, and writing foretold the ability to construct an alternative narrative about bondage itself. Literacy among slaves would expose slavery, and masters knew it.

Understanding how enslaved people learned not only illuminates the importance of literacy as an instrument of resistance and liberation, but also brings into view the clandestine tactics and strategies that enslaved people employed to gain some control over their own lives. While it is common to view Frederick Douglass's antebellum struggle for literacy as exceptional, slave narratives, interviews with former slaves, and other documents offer a view of more widespread communities of learners who also forged the crucial link between literacy and freedom.

The story of Mattie Jackson illustrates the radical potential that enslaved African Americans perceived in literacy. Although Jackson came of age as the institution of slavery faced its final challenge, her personal efforts to free herself are suggestive of other people's experiences in slavery. Once free, Jackson told her story to a more literate black woman who wrote it down. This

narrative helps us to understand the key role that literacy—and gender—could play in the crusade for freedom.

As a child in Missouri, Mattie Jackson experienced the family disruptions that so often characterized the experiences of enslaved people. When she was three years old, her father was sold, but he escaped before he could be transferred to his new owner. Months passed before the family received word that he had reached freedom. Two years later, Jackson's mother, Ellen Turner, attempted to escape to Chicago, where her husband now preached. With two children accompanying her, however, Turner was quickly captured and returned to her owner, who promptly sold her and the children. It was not unusual that the man would successfully escape while the woman remained behind, as responsibility for childbearing and child-rearing circumscribed slave women's movement. Work assignments also restricted women's mobility. Men were more likely to be hired out or sent on errands into town, thus acquiring greater knowledge of how to move about without detection as well as greater opportunity to meet people who might shield them from discovery. Turner's attempt to leave, then, spoke of her determination to be free even in the face of the discouraging odds against success.²

Four years after her initial escape attempt, Turner remarried, and this second husband too escaped, once again to avoid being sold. Now left with four children, Turner went about her job as cook in the household, attending to her domestic duties, even at the expense of caring for her fatally ill son. Her owners, Mr. and Mrs. Lewis, might well have thought that all was in good order with this family of slaves. Turner, it appeared, had been tamed. With the loss of two husbands and a child, she seemed to have

given up any hope of ever being free.³

In truth, Turner had not surrendered and had in fact managed to pass on some of her resolve to her daughter, Mattie. The coming of the Civil War stirred their hopes to the surface. With Union troops stationed nearby, tension grew in the household. The Lewises' agitation at news of Union victories emboldened Mattie Jackson and her mother in their challenges to being owned. Gathering information through eavesdropping became an important weapon in their private war with their owners. According to Jackson, when husband and wife talked about the war, Mrs. Lewis “cast her eye around to us for fear we might hear her. Her suspicion was correct; there was not a word that passed that escaped our listening ear.”⁴

To learn most of their news, the Jackson women had to listen hard and remember well, tasks that slaves had perfected across the South. Such eavesdropping constituted a vital and accessible component of the intelligence network within slave communities. As important as literacy was to the slaves who employed it in service of their own freedom or for the benefit of others, enslaved African Americans also had other ways of knowing. They relied heavily on oral and aural systems of information. Those with access to white people's conversations listened closely when masters gathered and developed acute skills of perception and memory. As Henry Bibb noted, “slaves were not allowed books, pen, ink, nor paper, to improve their minds. But it seems to me now, that I was particularly observing and apt to retain what came under my observation.” Specifically, Bibb recalled, “all that I heard about liberty and freedom to slaves, I never forgot. Among other good trades I learned the art

of running away to perfection.”⁵

As an enslaved boy in Winchester, Virginia, John Quincy Adams similarly honed his eavesdropping skills. When he learned there was no one to teach him to read and write because whites did not want blacks to become literate, the prohibition only stoked his curiosity. Whenever he heard a white person reading aloud, he lingered to listen, replying “nothing” when asked what he wanted. Then, at the first opportunity, he repeated to his parents everything he had heard. They, in turn, encouraged him to “try to hear all you can, but don't let them know it.” By listening in this manner, Adams was able to inform his parents of an impending election that the owners wanted kept from their slaves. His information-gathering skills likely helped the family to escape to Pennsylvania during the Civil War. Other slaves worked as scouts for the one literate person among them. A woman in Beaufort, South Carolina, recalled that her mistress and master spelled out any information they did not want her to understand. As she was unable to read, she memorized the letters and repeated them as soon as she could to her literate uncle. He then decoded her memories into words or scraps of words.⁶

Long after he had transformed himself from enslaved child to prominent African American leader, Booker T. Washington reflected on the eavesdropping that had fed the “grape-vine telegraph” among slaves, which had kept them so well informed of the “questions that were agitating the country” leading up to the war. Enslaved people, he recalled, had developed reliable means for acquiring and dispersing information. For example, the man sent to pick up mail at the post office tarried long enough to overhear white men discussing the letters and

newspapers they had just received. On the three-mile walk back to the plantation, the mail carrier relayed the news he had gathered. In this way, slaves often heard of important occurrences before the white people at the big house did.⁷

In addition to this traditional and widely available tactic of eavesdropping, Mattie Jackson and her mother had a device that John Quincy Adams would have coveted: they could “read enough to make out the news in the papers.” According to Jackson, “The Union soldiers took much delight in tossing a paper over the fence to us. It aggravated my mistress very much.” Although the soldiers likely considered the newspapers to be propaganda directed at white residents, Jackson and her mother appropriated them for their own purposes, sitting up late at night to “read and keep posted about the war.” They then strategically deployed the information against their owners. During Mrs. Lewis's visits to oversee her slaves in the kitchen, the women taunted her with their knowledge of Union activity. In one kitchen skirmish the infuriated owner declared, “I think it has come to a pretty pass, that old Lincoln, with his long legs, an old rail splitter, wishes to put the Niggers on an equality with the whites.” She went on to vow “that her children should never be on an equal footing with a Nigger, she had rather see them dead.”⁸

Slave owners grew keenly aware that all around them African Americans were increasingly taking advantage of the Civil War to mount challenges to the institution of slavery. Perhaps spurred on by his wife's diminishing sense of authority over their human property, Mr. Lewis searched Turner's room and, upon finding a newspaper picture of Abraham Lincoln pasted on the wall,

angrily demanded an explanation. When Turner, refusing to suppress her own feelings, replied that she had hung the picture because she liked it, a livid Lewis knocked her to the ground and “sent her to the trader's yard for a month as punishment.”⁹ It must have occurred to Lewis then that Ellen Turner had not been tamed at all; she had merely changed her tactics of resistance. Instead of running away, she now used the newspaper and, by implication, her literacy as a mechanism for destabilizing the master-slave relationship. For her part, Turner fully knew that both she and her room were Lewis's property and that he could enter the space at will. By cutting Lincoln's image from a newspaper and hanging it on a wall in Lewis's house, Turner reinforced for herself the possibility of imminent freedom. At the same time, she issued a challenge to her owner's power by asserting that she and other slaves had allies in high places. In displaying the image of a potential liberator over her bed, she declared that slavery would not last forever and that she fully supported its demise.

In the domestic battle between owners and slaves, literacy persisted as a symbol of resistance. Despite Turner's severe punishment for brandishing Abraham Lincoln's likeness, order in the household continued its decline. While Mrs. Lewis mourned over a Union victory, the enslaved women rejoiced. “The days of sadness for mistress were days of joy for us,” Jackson recounted. “We shouted and laughed to the top of our voices. My mistress was more enraged than ever—nothing pleased her.” One night, Mrs. Lewis flew into an unprovoked rage. She announced that Jackson would be punished, selected a switch, and placed it in the corner of a room to await her husband's return. Countering

Mrs. Lewis's assertion of power, Jackson proclaimed both her recalcitrance and her literacy by bending the switch into the shape of an “M,” the first letter of her name. With this symbolic challenge to her master and mistress, Jackson and another enslaved girl walked away from the house.

Jackson's display of literacy, paired with her departure, telegraphed to her owners the clear message that she refused to acquiesce in her enslavement. She sent them word that despite their prohibitions she had learned to write and was intent on marshaling every means at her disposal to undermine their authority. By asserting that Mr. and Mrs. Lewis could not stop her from learning to write, could not whip her, and could not prevent her from running away, Mattie Jackson utilized at once all the oppositional strategies that her mother had used over a lifetime.

The two girls made their way to the arsenal to find the Union troops, who they believed were a new form of protection. But they could gain neither admission to the arsenal nor the protection they sought. Even so, the girls had made a point. Upon returning to the Lewis household, “not a word was spoken respecting [their] sudden departure.”¹⁰

Silence, however, did not signal peace. Slavery was a negotiated relationship maintained by the power of owners' violence.¹¹ Sometimes, though, enslaved people overwhelmed shocked owners with displays of their own force. Within weeks the stalemate in the Lewis home erupted into a violent confrontation. Once again the incident began with Mrs. Lewis's complaints. Mr. Lewis intervened, asking Jackson if she had

done her work. Jackson said she had, in essence contradicting her mistress, who “flew into a rage and told him I was saucy, and to strike me, and he immediately gave me a severe blow with a stick of wood, which inflicted a deep wound upon my head.” When Jackson disobeyed Mr. Lewis's order to change her bloody clothing, he “pulled me into another room and threw me on the floor, placed his knee on my stomach, slapped me on the face and beat me with his fist, and would have punished me more had not my mother interfered.” In Jackson's estimation, her mother's refusal to leave the room angered Lewis, but it also intimidated him as he assessed his chances of winning a fight against these two women.

Unlike slave women narrators such as Harriet Jacobs, who felt constrained to present themselves to white northern readers as demure and genteel, Jackson spoke unabashedly of her physical confrontation with her master. “I struggled mightily, and stood him a good test for a while, but he was fast conquering me when my mother came. He was aware my mother could usually defend herself against one man, and both of us would overpower him, so after giving his wife strict orders to take me up stairs and keep me there, he took his carriage and drove away.”¹² With his departure Lewis conceded that even the man of the house could no longer control his slaves, which encouraged Jackson to place even more pressure on the weakening slave power. Still wearing her bloody clothing as evidence of her mistreatment, Jackson once again set out for the arsenal to seek protection from the Union army. This time, she was able to convince an officer to hear her complaint and give her shelter.¹³

Mattie Jackson's search for freedom and protection openly

asserted her opposition to her owners' control and violence. Her actions were tantamount to a declaration of domestic civil war.¹⁴ By calling on authorities who might exercise some power over her owners, she publicly declared her intention to be free. Certainly Jackson's will to make this declaration gained momentum from the Civil War, yet early in the war, particularly in border states such as Missouri, Union officers refused to interfere in the established relationships of the South. When Jackson turned to Union officers to help execute her private war, they failed to provide long-term protection. Thus, three weeks later when Mr. Lewis appeared to claim his property, the Union troops handed her over. Before long, Lewis sold Jackson, her mother, and her siblings to different owners. Jackson's actions had only served to further infuriate her owners, who retaliated by simultaneously liquidating their investment and disrupting this enslaved family once more.¹⁵

Like Mattie Jackson and her mother, Ellen Turner, other enslaved people folded literacy into the store of strategies that they called upon both to challenge slavery and make slavery bearable. Becoming literate itself required them to employ creative tactics. Jackson does not reveal how her mother learned to read, but presumably mother taught daughter at night in their room in the Lewis home. Accounts of such efforts make it evident that even in slavery, with its violence, insults, and punishing labor, many African Americans yearned to become literate, to have access to the news and ideas that otherwise would have been beyond their reach. For similar reasons, southern white elites continued their efforts to place literacy itself beyond the reach of African Americans.

Indeed, literacy constituted one of the terrains on which slaves and slave owners waged a perpetual struggle for control.¹⁶ Cognizant of the revolutionary potential of black literacy, white elites enacted laws in slave states to proscribe teaching enslaved and sometimes free blacks to read or write. The timing of these antiliteracy laws often exposed the close association in white minds between black literacy and black resistance. Whether the threat to slavery came in the form of a slave rebellion or talk of abolition, southern lawmakers linked black literacy to the institution's demise and invested powers of surveillance and punishment in a host of officials, including justices of the peace, constables, sheriffs, marshals, police officers, and sergeants. Although antiliteracy statutes are often associated with Nat Turner's rebellion in 1831, they in fact had their beginnings a century earlier. In 1739, in an effort to escape to Florida, South Carolina slaves killed more than twenty whites in what became known as the Stono Rebellion. One year later, suspecting that slaves had communicated their insurrectionary plans in writing, the colonial legislature of South Carolina inscribed its fear into a statute that outlawed teaching any slave to write or employing any slave to write. The legislature reasoned that this prohibition was necessary because permitting slaves to engage in writing "may be attended with great inconveniences."¹⁷

Black people in South Carolina, however, devised methods to circumvent the law, and in 1800 the legislature explicitly acknowledged that earlier laws had been insufficient to keep blacks in "due subordination." Teaching had moved farther underground. The legislature hoped to root it out by enacting a statute that declared any assembly of "slaves, free negroes,

mulattoes and mestizoes,” among themselves or with whites, for the purpose of “mental instruction,” an unlawful meeting. The new law broadened both the scope of prohibited activity and the categories of individuals covered. Rather than solely criminalizing the teaching of writing, the 1800 statute outlawed “mental instruction,” which could include reading, writing, memorization, arithmetic, and much more. Furthermore, while the 1740 statute had only prohibited teaching slaves, the 1800 law prohibited teaching slaves *and* free blacks. Finally, the 1800 law aimed specifically to prevent African Americans from gathering in secret places to learn “either before the rising of the sun, or after the going down of same.” The legislature had undoubtedly become aware of clandestine schools meeting before dawn and late into the night. By way of enforcement, lawmakers required magistrates to enter into such “confined places,” to “break down doors,” and to disperse such unlawful assemblages. The law subjected each person of color in the group to corporal punishment not to exceed twenty lashes.¹⁸

In 1829 David Walker's *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, with its militant attack on slavery and its call for armed resistance, stirred fears in southern whites that the essay would inspire slaves to rebel. Rebellion, of course, was exactly what Walker hoped to provoke. Born to an enslaved father and a free mother, he had left his home in Wilmington, North Carolina, eventually settling in Boston, where, although free, African Americans led severely circumscribed economic and political lives. In the *Appeal*, Walker declared white Americans the natural enemies of African Americans, and he both predicted and urged warfare that would bring about the destruction of slavery.

Moreover, Walker linked literacy to slavery's demise. Powerful whites went to great lengths to deprive blacks of education because, he argued, “for coloured people to acquire learning in this country, makes tyrants quake and tremble on their sandy foundation,” knowing that “their infernal deeds of cruelty will be made known to the world.” Walker hoped “all coloured men, women and children, of every nation, language and tongue under heaven, [would] try to procure a copy of this Appeal and read it, or get some one to read it to them.” Published in September, the pamphlet quickly made its way south.¹⁹

On December 11, 1829, the Savannah, Georgia, police department seized sixty copies of the *Appeal*. Walker would no doubt have proposed severe punishment for the black Baptist minister who handed the *Appeal* over to officials after receiving copies from a ship's steward.²⁰ The Georgia legislature wasted little time in responding. Ten days following the seizure, the legislature passed a law to quarantine any ship that carried a free black person or a slave into Georgia ports. In addition to outlawing teaching any “slave, negro or free person of colour” to read, the statute provided punishment for blacks or any person bringing into the state and circulating “any printed or written pamphlet, paper or circular, for the purposes of exciting to insurrection, conspiracy or resistance among the slaves, negroes, or free persons of color” of the state.²¹ Although a black minister may have betrayed his brethren, white legislators clearly feared that other African Americans would not be so afraid or so loyal.

Louisiana lawmakers were also afraid. In 1830 that state's legislature criminalized teaching slaves to read or write. Sections of the statute resonated with the panic that Walker and other

abolitionists had inspired. The law punished with death, or imprisonment at hard labor for life, “whosoever shall write, print, publish or distribute any thing having a tendency to produce discontent among the free coloured population of the state, or insubordination among the slaves therein.” Further, the statute specifically targeted anyone who “shall knowingly be instrumental in bringing into this state, any paper, pamphlet or book” that tended to excite insubordination or to cause discontent among African Americans, free or enslaved.²²

As the northern abolition movement, prodded by African American abolitionists, shifted from a position of gradualism to immediatism, slave states ratcheted up their efforts to sustain a way of life that depended on slavery.²³ In 1830, a critical turning point for the abolition movement, North Carolina enacted a statute that articulated the perceived kinship between slave literacy and slave control. “Whereas the teaching of slaves to read and write, has a tendency to excite dissatisfaction in their minds, and to produce insurrection and rebellion, to the manifest injury of the citizens of the State,” the law read, “any free person, who shall hereafter teach, or attempt to teach, any slave within this State to read or write, the use of figures excepted, or shall give or sell to such slave or slaves any books or pamphlets, shall be liable to indictment in any court of record in this State.” The law further specifically forbade any slave to teach another slave to read or write. Significantly, North Carolina's antiliteracy stance constituted part of a larger scheme of surveillance and control over African Americans, enslaved and free. In the same legislative session, lawmakers promulgated limiting conditions for the manumission of slaves by owners, targeted runaways and

those who harbored them, imposed restrictions on free black peddlers, and sought to exclude northern-produced literature that might “excite insurrection, conspiracy or resistance in the slaves or free negroes.”²⁴ As was often the case, the North Carolina statute punished blacks more harshly than whites. White men and women could be imprisoned or fined between \$100 and \$200. Free people of color faced fines, imprisonment, or the public humiliation of whipping. Slaves convicted under the statute could be punished with “thirty-nine lashes on [the] bare back.”²⁵

Notably, North Carolina's antiliteracy law permitted teaching slaves arithmetic, likely because mathematical skill was necessary for trades such as carpentry and would therefore inure to the benefit of slave owners. Writing was strictly forbidden, however, even when a slave might use the skill to benefit his owner. Similarly, an 1833 Georgia statute made it unlawful for any person to “permit a slave, negro or person of colour to transact business for him in writing.” Legislators assessed the costs and benefits of having literate slaves in their midst. They concluded that the risk was too high that slaves would use writing skills to subvert owners' power.²⁶

A few months after North Carolina did, Virginia moved against African American literacy. In the spring of 1831, Virginia rendered unlawful “all meetings of free negroes or mulattoes, at any school-house, church, meetinghouse or other place for teaching them reading or writing, either in the day or night, under whatsoever pretext.” The statute also specifically outlawed the compensation of any white person for teaching slaves to read or write.²⁷ Three months after the August 1831

insurrection in which Nat Turner, a literate slave, and several other slaves killed fifty-five whites in Virginia, Alabama enacted a legislative package intended to severely curtail African American activity.²⁸ In addition to forbidding any person to teach any free person of color or any slave to spell, read, or write, it forbade slaves to associate with free blacks without permission of their owners, made it unlawful for five or more male slaves to assemble outside of their plantation, and made it unlawful for any person of color to “preach to, exhort, or harangue any slave or slaves, or free persons of color, unless in the presence of five respectable slaveholders.” The statute also attempted to legislate paternalism by imposing a duty on all slaveholders to “feed and clothe their slaves with a sufficiency of food and clothing for their comfort.” Legislators hoped that satisfying physical needs would stave off insurrectionary fervor.²⁹

In 1836 the Alabama legislature voiced its fear that prohibitive laws notwithstanding, some African American slaves were literate and had access to antislavery literature. In a memorial addressed to the legislatures of all other states, Alabama lawmakers condemned the “dark, deep, and malignant designs of the Abolitionists,” who were “sending into our country their agents and incendiary pamphlets and publications, lighting up fires of discord in the bosoms of our slave population.” The legislators charged that abolitionists “have presses in the various parts of the Union, from which they issue millions of essays, pamphlets and pictures and scatter them amongst our slave population, calculated to urge them to deluge our country in blood.” “This cannot be tolerated,” Alabama's

leaders concluded.³⁰ As David Walker had urged, some slaves were getting their hands on antislavery writings.

It is clear, too, that enslaved and free black people operated schools, particularly in urban areas.³¹ An 1834 South Carolina statute suggests that the state's two earlier attempts to prevent slaves from becoming literate had not succeeded. This third attempt at control punished anyone who taught or assisted any slave in learning to read or write. In a revealing move, the statute added a new level of detail that presumably targeted contemporary practices; it punished by fine, imprisonment, or corporal punishment “any free person of color or a slave [who] shall keep any school or other place of instruction, for teaching any slave or free person of color to read or write.” This statute aimed at African Americans who did not rely on sporadic teaching, but who instead established schools to make education more formal and methodical.³²

White Americans' opposition to black education was not limited to the southern states. At the same time that Virginia and Alabama enacted legislation to prohibit African American education in the 1830s, the northern free state of Connecticut used both legal and extralegal means to curtail education options for black people. When the Convention of Colored Men of the United States met in 1831, delegates proposed establishing a college on the manual labor system in New Haven. Following up on a proposal by the convention's education committee, Arthur Tappan, who along with fellow white abolitionists William Lloyd Garrison and Simeon Jocelyn attended the convention, went so far as to purchase several acres of land to house the school. However, the white people of New Haven vehemently

opposed any plan to provide higher education for African Americans. Supporters of the school suggested that opponents particularly objected to the impertinent idea of building a *college* for African Americans. The city's political leaders declared that a college to educate the black population would be “incompatible with the prosperity, if not the existence” of Yale College and the city's other educational institutions. The mayor and city council resolved to “resist the establishment of the proposed college in this place by every lawful means.”³³

Convention delegates abandoned the idea of building a black college in New Haven, but the struggle to provide education for African Americans in Connecticut did not end there. In 1832 Prudence Crandall, a white Quaker schoolteacher, along with black abolitionists James Forten, Reverend Theodore Wright, and Reverend Peter Williams, founded a boarding school for African American girls in Canterbury, Connecticut. In response, in May 1833 the state legislature outlawed the establishment of schools that provided instruction to “colored persons who are not inhabitants of this state.” Crandall was prosecuted and convicted for violating the statute, but an appellate court reversed the conviction. Not long after, angry white residents set the occupied school on fire, then vandalized the building with clubs and iron bars, forcing Crandall to close the school.³⁴

Back on southern plantations, purveyors of advice warned white masters, or more probably white mistresses, against giving in to any impulse to teach enslaved people to read the Bible to save their own souls. Prizewinning essayist Nathan Bass argued in 1851 that although a literate slave, if provided with appropriate reading material, might learn to “respect and

venerate the authority of his owner,” the risk was too great. Bass blamed “the spirit of bigotry and fanaticism which are abroad in the country, seeking to disseminate a spirit of insubordination in the bosom of the slave, by the circulation of incendiary publications, inducing him to throw off the authority of those to whom his services are due.” Bass thought it wiser for owners to take responsibility for inculcating their own precepts of morality and religion into their slaves. A Mississippi planter also writing on slave management agreed with Bass. “I would gladly learn every negro on the place to read the Bible,” he proclaimed, “but for a fanaticism which, while it professes friendship to the negro, is keeping a cloud over his mental vision, and almost crushing out his hopes of salvation.”³⁵ Bass and the Mississippi planter would have considered naive the opinion of a Georgia planter who encouraged teaching slaves to spell and read; he found these skills convenient for slaves engaged in weighing cotton and erecting buildings. “Hurricane,” as the planter called himself, saw no danger in the practice because he considered African Americans too stupid to become literate enough to undermine white authority.³⁶

Enslaved people realized that those who owned them brought their awesome and arbitrary power to bear against any effort slaves made to learn to read and write. Interviewed years after slavery had ended, many recalled the barriers that whites had placed between literacy and themselves. Some slaves experienced the threats or punishment directly. Gordon Buford remembered that he and fellow slaves never learned to read and write because their master threatened to “skin them alive” if they tried. Charlie Grant's mistress beat him with a plaited cowhide

when she caught him with a book. And Belle Caruthers's master struck her with his muddy boots when he caught her studying a Webster's blue-back speller.³⁷ Others experienced secondhand the violence that could be visited upon a slave who was caught reading or writing. James Lucas reported that his owner "hung the best slave he had for trying to teach the others how to spell." Literacy could also disrupt a sale. When Lucas's master realized that some of the people he had purchased at auction in Baltimore could read, he sent them back. Similarly, when Tom Hawkins's owner discovered that his carriage driver had learned to read and write while taking the owner's children to and from school, he cut off the driver's thumb and assigned another enslaved man to drive the carriage.³⁸ Still other former slaves had a broad and daunting sense of the punishment that might be meted out. Charlie Davis believed that he would get one hundred lashes if he so much as picked up a book, and George Washington Albright thought a Mississippi statute provided that if any slave learned to read or write, "he was to be punished with 500 lashes on the naked back, and to have the thumb cut off above the second joint."³⁹ The Mississippi statute actually prescribed punishment of thirty-nine lashes, but the expectation of even more violent punishment would surely have been enough to terrorize all but the most courageous and persistent.⁴⁰

As slave owners and legislators suspected, African Americans, free and slave, designed all manner of strategies to elude the laws against learning. At about the same time that Virginia first put into writing its prohibition of teaching blacks to read and write, Mary and Thomas Peake, free people in Norfolk, Virginia, sent their six-year-old daughter Mary to live

with an aunt in the District of Columbia so that she could attend school. She remained there until, according to Peake, the District of Columbia, too, prohibited teaching blacks. In 1847 she moved to Hampton, Virginia, where she taught black children and adults until the Civil War.⁴¹ In Georgia, Susie King Taylor participated in an intricate web of secrecy to become educated. Born enslaved in Georgia in 1848, Taylor's owner permitted her to live with her free grandmother in Savannah. The port city of Savannah afforded a fair amount of mobility to hired slaves and had a large free black population.⁴² Taylor's nominally free status released her from labor and from oversight by an owner, enabling her to pursue an education. Even so, she was constrained to learn in secret and with a patchwork of teachers because both the state of Georgia and the city of Savannah made it illegal to teach slaves or free people of color to read or write.⁴³ Carrying schoolbooks camouflaged with paper, Taylor and her younger siblings stole, one at a time, into the home of a free black woman each morning, careful not to be spotted by the police or any white person. Twenty-five children studied their lessons in Susan Woodhouse's kitchen each day and slipped out, one at a time, each afternoon. After two years with Mrs. Woodhouse, Taylor went to Mary Beasley, another black woman, who, after teaching everything she knew to Taylor, recommended that Taylor's grandmother find a more advanced teacher. That next teacher was a white playmate, who gave Taylor lessons for four months before joining a convent. Finally, the son of her white landlord gave Taylor lessons for several months until he was conscripted into the Confederate army.⁴⁴ Roughly pieced together as it was, Susie King Taylor's education would have appeared veritably formal to many other enslaved people who managed to become

literate.

Sometimes masters' wives, inspired by evangelical Christianity, took it upon themselves to teach slaves to read. While some owners turned a blind eye to their wives' efforts, others badgered them into understanding the dangers inherent in teaching slaves. A few owners, however, not only tolerated but even encouraged their slaves' interest in education, particularly when it could benefit the owners. In one unusual instance, Lucy Skipwith in Hope-well, Alabama, kept up a correspondence during the 1850s and 1860s with her absentee owner, John Cocke, in Fluvanna County, Virginia. In her letters she informed Cocke of activities on the plantation, including the progress of her plantation school for other slaves.⁴⁵ In Virginia the state legislature passed a special law in 1842 granting permission for an enslaved man, Randolph, to learn to read and write. Randolph's owner, Henry Juett Gray, was blind and wanted to become a teacher of the blind. According to the special act, Gray needed the services of a "servant capable of reading and writing, which object cannot be permanently secured otherwise than by the education of a young slave named Randolph." Despite his usefulness to the young white man, the state considered a literate Randolph a potential danger and required that Henry Gray's father, Robert Gray, "indemnify the public against any possible injury which might be apprehended from the misconduct of said slave."⁴⁶

Most enslaved people were not so fortunate; theirs was a covert mission to become literate. They truly had to "steal" an education. Some slaves hid spelling books under their hats to be ready whenever they could entreat or bribe a literate person to

teach them. Some turned to white children, too young to understand that they violated the slave code, or to poor white men who did not care. Former slaves recounted stories of trading food and money for letters and words. In exchange for writing lessons, G. W. Offley fed a white boy whose father had gambled away the family's money. Offley later traded boxing and wrestling lessons with white men for writing instruction. James Fisher gave an old man money to buy whiskey in exchange for his writing lessons. As a young enslaved boy, Richard Parker picked up old nails and traded them for marbles that he then used to pay white boys for reading lessons. He carried a primer under his hat to be ready for class at any time. In addition, he received instruction from his owner's daughter until they were caught. "Uncle" Charles, a former slave in North Carolina, recounted that he also carried a primer under his hat and challenged white boys to tell him what a letter was, until he managed to learn the alphabet. He once traded a knife for a reading lesson from a white boy.⁴⁷ These particular means of acquiring literacy had important gender implications, as once again enslaved males tended to have greater mobility than enslaved females. Boys and men were more likely to accompany white children off the property to school and often had wider access to public spaces in which they could convince white males to teach them.

At the same time, women who worked inside the owner's household could entice their young white charges to pass on what they learned in school. Alice Green recalled that her mother had learned to read by keeping a schoolbook in her bosom all the time and asking the white children to tell her everything they had learned in school each day. In this way, she learned enough to

teach school once slavery ended. Likewise, Allen Allensworth's mother encouraged him to “play school” with his young master who attended school every day.⁴⁸

Enslaved people put the resources they could garner to maximum use. Mandy Jones knew of a young man who learned to read and write in a cave. She also recalled that there were “pit schools” near her Mississippi plantation. Slaves would dig a pit in the ground way out in the woods, covering the spot with bushes and vines. Runaways sometimes inhabited the pits, but they also housed schools. According to Jones, “slaves would slip out of the Quarters at night, and go to dese pits, an some niggah dat had some learning would have a school.”⁴⁹ In South Carolina Edmund Carlisle cut blocks from pine bark and smoothed them into slates. He dropped oak into water to make ink, and he used a stick as his pen.⁵⁰ Some slaves copied letters and words whose meanings they could not yet decipher onto fences and in the dirt.⁵¹ And, more than one hundred years later, when slave cabins were excavated, archaeologists were surprised to find, along with the predictable shards of colonoware pottery, food bones, and oyster shells, the remains of graphite pencils and writing slates, some with words and numbers still written on them.⁵²

Sundays proved to be an important day for enslaved people to learn to read and write. Some slaves took advantage of the opportunity that a few missionaries offered to learn to read. Others relied on their own resources. Since the colonial period, slave management on the Sabbath had presented a vexing challenge to slave owners. Whites struggled to maintain control over black movement on the day when slaves were not required

to work, the day when whites attended church and socialized away from their homes. In South Carolina, for example, legislation passed in 1712 aimed to limit the movement of blacks who congregated in Charlestown on Sundays in such great numbers as to “give them opportunity of executing any wicked designs.” Twelve years later the colony's assembly directed white men to ride armed on Sundays in order to defend against slaves who congregated in large numbers. Evidently the legislation did not effectively curtail black behavior because over the next thirty years grand juries made several attempts to mandate stricter enforcement. Their concerns were not unfounded; in September 1739 slaves staged the Stono uprising while whites attended “divine service.”⁵³

In similarly radical fashion, African Americans took advantage of their leisure time and whites' absence on Sundays to become literate. They lurked in their designated places until masters left for Sunday outings, and then they pulled out books and pencils. Former slave Charity Bowery recalled that on Sundays on her Edenton, North Carolina, plantation, she saw “negroes up in the country going away under large oak trees and in secret places, sitting in the woods with spelling books.” In Maryland G. W. Offley, who later paid white men and boys for writing lessons, received his first reading lessons at age nineteen from an old black man, who taught him at night and on Sunday mornings. Here were the clandestine schools that legislatures sought to eliminate, schools that convened after dark and on the Sabbath, when masters were likely to be more concerned about their own souls and their own pleasure than about the activities of the people who worked for them on the other six days of the

week.⁵⁴ In Person County, North Carolina, James Curry began his illegal lessons with his master's son. Curry's mother bought him a spelling book, and the lessons continued until his owner found out and forbade further teaching. According to Curry, though, "when my master's family were all gone away on the Sabbath, I used to go into the house and get down the great Bible, and lie down in the piazza, and read, taking care, however, to put it back before they returned." Just as the slaves who congregated in Charlestown, South Carolina, had used Sundays to resist their owners' control over their bodies, slaves like James Curry took advantage of Sundays to undermine owners' attempts to control their intellect.⁵⁵

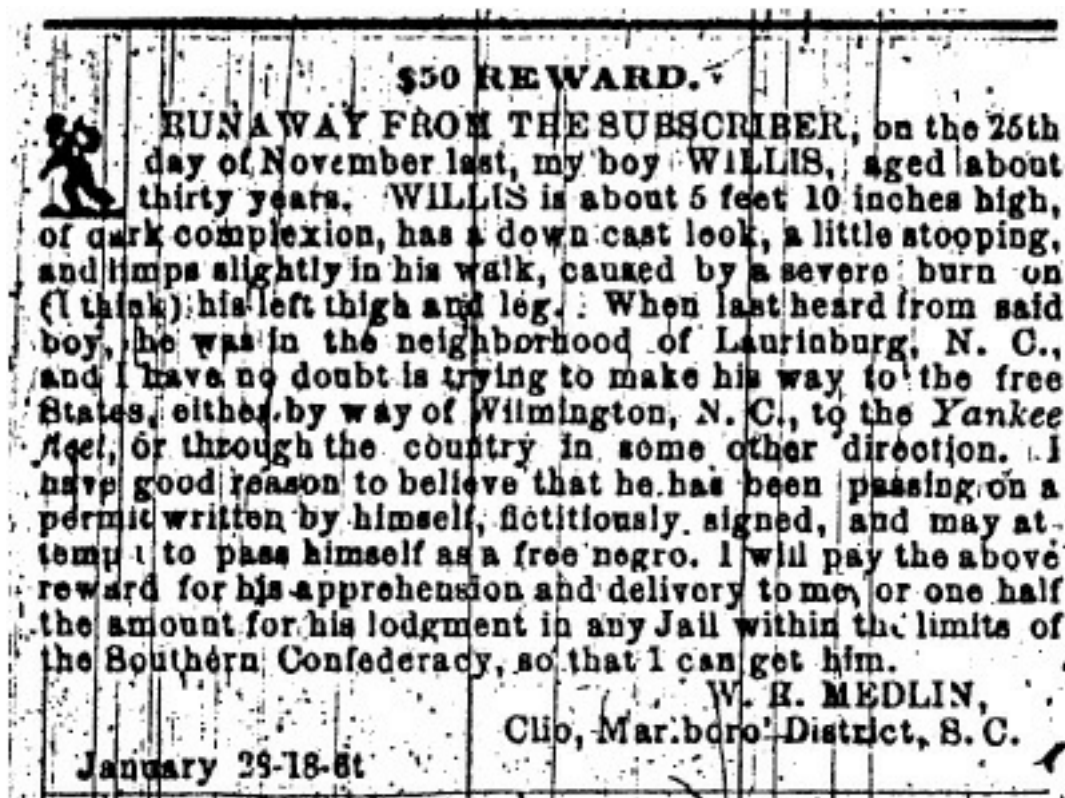
But why was literacy so sought after and so forbidden? The motivations on each side were very much the same. Whites feared that literacy would render slaves unmanageable. Blacks wanted access to reading and writing as a way to attain the very information and power that whites strove to withhold from them. Literacy had practical implications for enslaved people. When James Fisher's owner sold him away from his mother in Nashville, Tennessee, Fisher quickly decided that he must learn to write in case he ever had the opportunity to forge a pass and escape. "I copied every scrap of writing I could find, and thus learned to write a tolerable hand before I knew what the words were that I was copying," Fisher recalled. After a while he met the old man who taught him to write in exchange for money to buy whiskey. When his mistress entered his room and discovered his writing materials, she reported him to her father, Captain Davis, who immediately made the same connection between liberty and literacy that Fisher had made. Davis began by

threatening Fisher, saying that if Fisher belonged to him he would cut off his right hand. Since he did not have authority to carry out such a threat, Davis attempted instead to convince Fisher to forsake ideas of freedom, arguing that he was better off enslaved than free. Both Davis and Fisher clearly equated wanting to learn to write with wanting to be free. Davis's arguments notwithstanding, Fisher eventually escaped to Canada.⁵⁶

As both James Fisher and Captain Davis understood, African American literacy portended a profound threat to slavery by providing slaves with an advantage for greater movement within a system that relied on individual owners' providing passes for their slaves, rather than on some method of universal registration. Susie King Taylor's clandestine educational efforts in Savannah, for example, provided an immediate reward when she was able to write passes for her grandmother, who, although free, was required to produce a pass from her white guardian in order to move about at night.⁵⁷ In Kentucky field hand A. T. Jones cobbled together enough education to write himself a pass to freedom. When Jones learned that his master had sold him instead of allowing him to buy himself as they had previously agreed, he decided to make his way to Canada. "I could hardly put two syllables together grammatically," Jones later confessed, "but in fact, one half the white men there were not much better. I wrote my pass—'Please let the bearer pass and repass, on good behavior, to Cincinnati and return.' " His ability to write, along with the marginal literacy of potential captors, helped Jones to execute the escape.⁵⁸

Owners' fears of slave literacy materialized in the loss of their

property. In February 1863 a South Carolina slave owner placed a newspaper advertisement in search of an escaped slave. He suspected that Willis, a thirty-year-old man with a “down cast look” and a limp, was making his way north through North Carolina and possibly attempting to enlist with the Union army. He also suspected that Willis was using his literacy to effect his escape. “I have good reason to believe,” the advertisement read, “that he has been passing on a permit written by himself, fictitiously signed, and may attempt to pass himself as a free Negro.” The erstwhile owner offered a \$50 reward for Willis's return.⁵⁹



\$50 REWARD.

RUNAWAY FROM THE SUBSCRIBER, on the 26th day of November last, my boy WILLIS, aged about thirty years. WILLIS is about 5 feet 10 inches high, of dark complexion, has a down cast look, a little stooping, and limps slightly in his walk, caused by a severe burn on (I think) his left thigh and leg. When last heard from said boy, he was in the neighborhood of Laurinburg, N. C., and I have no doubt is trying to make his way to the free States, either by way of Wilmington, N. C., to the Yankee feet, or through the country in some other direction. I have good reason to believe that he has been passing on a permit written by himself, fictitiously signed, and may attempt to pass himself as a free negro. I will pay the above reward for his apprehension and delivery to me, or one half the amount for his lodgment in any Jail within the limits of the Southern Confederacy, so that I can get him.

W. R. MEDLIN,
Planter, Marlboro District, S. C.

January 29-18-63

Newspaper advertisement placed by a South Carolina slave owner offering a reward for the capture of a slave who may have written a pass to enable his escape. From Wilmington Journal, February 12, 1863.

In addition to providing concrete information about the physical location of freedom and the means to get there, literacy had the potential to help enslaved people articulate intellectual objections to the very existence of the institution of slavery. Reading catapulted some slaves beyond the limited sphere to which owners hoped to keep them restricted and enabled them to engage vicariously in dialogues that raised moral challenges to the enslavement of human beings. When James Curry sneaked into his owner's library on Sunday mornings and carefully took down the family Bible, he somehow made his way to a passage that reinforced the condemnation his slave community had long made of slavery. He “learned that it was contrary to the revealed will of God, that one man should hold another as a slave.” Curry recalled that he had always heard it said among the slaves that their ancestors had been stolen from Africa and should never have been enslaved. By reading the Bible, he discerned that “God hath made of one blood all nations of men to dwell on all the face of the earth.” Curry interpreted the Apostle Paul's message to mean that since God had made all people, no one group was justified in enslaving another. While his owners attended “divine worship,” Curry used the words in their own revered Bible to fashion his own condemnation of their unjust practice.⁶⁰

Another literate slave, C. H. Hall, invoked Patrick Henry, hero of the American Revolution, to support his claim to freedom. Hall's mistress internalized her Baptist teachings of each believer's individual relationship to God and thought it her duty to teach her slaves to read the Bible. Her husband urged her to stop, but she had refused, and thus Hall learned to spell and to read fairly well. As he grew, his master became even more

threatened by his literacy and accused Hall of becoming just like his brother, a literate preacher who “was raising the devil on the place.” His master's watchful criticism forced Hall to stop reading, but only for a while. When after several years he began reading again, his owner's fears were realized, for according to Hall, “the more I read, the more I fought against slavery. Finally I thought I would make an attempt to get free, and have liberty or death.” Hall's invocation of this language suggests that he used the lessons he learned from his mistress to venture beyond the Bible into the writings of American revolutionaries and adapted their language of liberation to his own circumstances. He escaped from his Maryland owners and made his way to Canada in the 1830s.⁶¹

On the Shelbyville, Kentucky, farm where he was enslaved, Elijah Marris early in life became interested in learning to read and write. “I was convinced,” he later wrote, “that there would be something for me to do in the future that I could not accomplish by remaining in ignorance. I had heard so much about freedom, and of the colored people running off and going to Canada, that my mind was busy with this subject even in my young days.”⁶² It is perplexing to consider what might cause an enslaved child to think that he would have important things to do, and what propelled him to make the link between education and effectiveness. Nevertheless, as many other slaves did, Marris “sought the aid of the white boys” to teach him. He then practiced his lessons by reading the newspapers and the addresses on letters that the “white people” sent him to pick up at the post office. After a while, Marris attended a late-night school that Ham Graves, an old black man, secretly taught. It

was Graves who taught Marrs to write, and Marrs, too young to realize that he was leaving evidence of his illicit behavior, practiced his new skill all over the farm: “on every gate-post around the stables, as on the plow-handle, you could see where I had been trying to write.”⁶³

In the Bible, books, and newspapers, literate slaves found a language of liberation that augmented what they learned in slave quarters.⁶⁴ Reading gave a larger voice and conceptualization to ideas they had heard expressed by other slaves. Frederick Douglass, the most famous slave to become literate, demonstrated this progression. In a letter to his former master, Douglass wrote that at the age of six he decided to be free some day. Like James Curry, his first understanding of why he was enslaved came from hearing older black people say that their parents had been stolen from Africa by white men and sold into slavery. These narrations enunciated the community's foundational belief that its enslavement was illegitimate, a belief that was reinforced when Douglass's aunt and uncle escaped to freedom.⁶⁵ His desire for freedom grew when his master made a link between literacy and freedom, and the possibility of freedom became real for him when he read a dialogue between a slave and a master. Finally, the idea that all blacks might some day be free took root when he first read a definition of the word “abolition.” Reading, then, did not introduce Douglass to the concept of freedom; rather it buttressed and augmented a developing consciousness.

While a boy in Baltimore, Douglass's mistress began teaching him to read, but he had not yet made much progress when Hugh Auld, Douglass's master, forbade his wife to continue. Auld also

made the mistake of proclaiming his rationale to Douglass. “If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do,” Auld contended. Then he declared that teaching a black person to read would render him forever unfit to be a slave. As Captain Davis had, Auld saw literacy and liberty as indivisible concepts, and he thus considered a literate slave to be an inherent threat. Auld's outburst inspired the young Douglass to make the same transformative link. Taking Auld at his word, Douglass came to see literacy as power and illiteracy as mental darkness. However, convinced by her husband that a literate slave was a dangerous one, Mrs. Auld took up a new mission to keep Douglass from learning. “Nothing seemed to make her more angry than to see me with a newspaper,” Douglass recalled. “She seemed to think that here lay the danger.” As some other enslaved men and boys did, Douglass adopted a plan in which he befriended every white boy whom he met on the streets and “converted” as many as he could into teachers. He took a book and bread with him on errands, traded the bread for lessons, and so learned to read.⁶⁶

In childhood Douglass may have believed that the mere ability to read would be a magical elixir that would lead to freedom, but in actuality it was the content of the reading material that transformed his life. Caleb Bingham's *The Columbian Orator*, for example, profoundly influenced Douglass. Originally published in 1810, this palm-sized volume contained speeches and essays intended to “improve the youth and others in the ornamental and useful art of eloquence.” Bingham's instructions regarding pronunciation, cadence, pitch, and gesture had been read by thousands of American schoolboys

before they found their way into the hands of a slave boy in Maryland.⁶⁷ Douglass recalled the particular impact of two items in the book. First, he read a speech delivered in the Irish House of Commons in 1795 in favor of the bill to emancipate the Roman Catholics. The speaker asserted that England could not turn back the tide of the world's movement toward freedom and suggested that England's recent loss in America “should serve as a lasting example to nations, against employing force to subdue the spirit of a people, determined to be free.”⁶⁸

Second, in the “Dialogue Between a Master and a Slave,” an African American slave who had twice run away challenged his master's right to keep him enslaved. The master, hurt by the slave's desire to be free, questioned whether he had not treated him well, to which the slave responded that no manner of good treatment could ever compensate him for being deprived of his liberty. The slave further contended that as he had been kidnapped and sold into slavery, there could be no moral justification for his enslavement. Finally, he assured his master that as long as he had legs, he would continue trying to escape because “it is impossible to make one, who has felt the value of freedom, acquiesce in being a slave.” In the end, the slave's moral argument and his threat of continued resistance, prevailed over the owner's defense of slavery and the owner freed him.⁶⁹ Before reading this dialogue, Douglass may never have imagined that a slave and master could speak to each other “man to man,” or that their conversation could come to such a positive end. However, Douglass could certainly identify with the slave who had been kidnapped, as his own oral tradition placed him in a genealogy of ancestors who had been kidnapped into slavery.

Douglass lived in a world in which members of his slave community, at least among themselves, challenged the legitimacy of their enslavement, and at the same time, his owner expected him to accept enslavement without question. Exposure to the dialogue and speech delivered Douglass intellectually from this restricted, incongruous space to a place where slavery was not only openly challenged but defeated.

Douglass read the speech and the dialogue over and over, finding that they “gave tongue to interesting thoughts of my own soul, which had frequently flashed through my mind and died away for want of utterance.” The thoughts, then, were not all new, but seeing them in print provided Douglass with a vocabulary for expressing them, as well as an added confidence derived from the new knowledge that his own thoughts had life and meaning outside of himself and his small community. As he meditated on the readings, he came to “abhor and detest” his enslavers and to experience the torment of hatred. “As I writhed under it,” Douglass wrote, “I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. In moments of agony, I envied my fellow-slaves for their stupidity. I have often wished myself a beast. It was the everlasting thinking of my condition that tormented me.”⁷⁰

Thus, Douglass suggested that had he not learned to read, he would not have become dissatisfied with slavery. This, of course, contradicted his assertion elsewhere that his initial desire for freedom came at age six when his aunt and uncle escaped. Rather than introducing the idea of freedom, reading, it seems, reinforced an existing desire and expanded his conception of the possible. The possible became even more enticing when

Douglass learned the meaning of the word “abolition.” He had heard the word and knew that it was significant and somehow opposed to slavery. When he got hold of a newspaper and read about petitions being filed in Washington, D.C., calling for the abolition of slavery, the increased possibility of freedom fired his existing desire to be free. Before he ever mounted a stage to deliver an antislavery speech, Douglass had inserted his consciousness into the national dialogue about the future of slavery.⁷¹

If legislative proscriptions in tandem with limited resources and the wrath of owners effectively kept most enslaved people from becoming literate, they never fully succeeded in arresting black literacy, as Frederick Douglass, Ellen Turner, and Mattie Jackson could have attested. Indeed, the battle between those who would impede black learning and those who would facilitate it continued right up to the Civil War. In 1853 Margaret Douglass, a southern white woman, was sentenced to one month in jail for teaching free black children in Norfolk, Virginia. Douglass, a seamstress, fell into the role of teacher when a free black barber asked if she would teach his children. She was visiting his shop one day and noticed his two sons reading a spelling book. The boys attended a local Sunday school where they received reading lessons, but they could not advance quickly because Norfolk had no schools for black children. Douglass decided that she and her daughter, Rosa, would teach the barber's children. As it happened, he could not spare the boys from their work, so he sent his three daughters instead, and what began as a private tutorial soon developed into a school with twenty students when other families got wind of the lessons.

Douglass excluded enslaved children, but she claimed not to know that the law also prohibited her from teaching free black children. The school continued for several months without disturbance, and the state might have continued to turn a blind eye, as it did regarding the Sunday school, had Douglass not made a public declaration of her association with African Americans.⁷²

When one of her students died, the white teacher joined in the funeral procession. Shortly thereafter, constables entered her home and ordered Douglass, her daughter, and the students to report to the mayor's office.⁷³ Margaret and Rosa Douglass were subsequently indicted by a grand jury on charges that they did “unlawfully assemble with divers negroes, for the purpose of instructing them to read and write, and did instruct them to read and to write, contrary to the Act of the General Assembly.” Representing herself before the court, Douglass argued that as a former slaveholder herself, she was no abolitionist or fanatic and was strongly opposed to northern interference with southern institutions. However, she asserted, “I deem it the duty of every Southerner, morally and religiously, to instruct his slaves, that they may know their duties to their masters, and to their common God.” She would no longer violate the law, Douglass told the jury, but she would continue her good work by “endeavoring to teach the colored race humility and a prayerful spirit, how to bear their sufferings as our Saviour bore his for all of us. I will teach them their duty to their superiors, how to live, and how to die.”⁷⁴

Perhaps swayed by Douglass's expression of loyalty to southern values and her sanction of African Americans'

subservience to whites, the jury found her guilty but imposed a fine of only \$1 instead of the maximum \$100. In the two-tiered sentencing structure, however, the judge also had a say, and he imposed an additional sentence of one month in prison. In imposing the sentence, the judge informed Douglass that he had not been convinced by her argument that literacy was vital for religious training. Intellectual and religious instruction often go hand in hand, he wrote, but the fact that in many parts of Virginia, and other parts of the country, more than a quarter of whites were illiterate and still abided by moral laws proved that literacy was not a prerequisite for understanding moral law.⁷⁵ The judge further asserted that the law prohibiting teaching African Americans was a matter of self-preservation and protection, having its foundations in Nat Turner's memorable insurrection. He blamed the need for such a law on "Northern incendiaries" who clogged the mails with "abolition pamphlets and inflammatory documents, to be distributed among our Southern negroes to induce them to cut our throats."⁷⁶

As late as 1861, the city of Savannah, Georgia, publicly whipped Reverend James Simms, a black man, for teaching slaves. A carpenter by trade, Simms purchased his freedom with money he earned by hiring himself out. Even after being whipped, he persisted in teaching slaves, and the city fined him \$100. Refusing to pay, Simms left Savannah for Boston, where he remained until after the war.⁷⁷

But what of Mattie Jackson with whom we began? After several escape attempts, Jackson finally made it to freedom in Indiana through the help of some "colored people" who "assisted slaves to escape by the Underground Railroad." In 1866, at the

age of twenty, she dictated her narrative, hopeful that its sale would fund her education so that she, in turn, could teach other former slaves. Where slaves' narratives had previously been sold to raise funds to get rid of slavery, this narrative, produced in a new time, was sold to educate those who had outlasted the institution. In a plea to potential readers, Jackson confided, "I feel it a duty to improve the mind, and have ever had a thirst for education to fill that vacuum for which the soul has ever yearned since my earliest remembrance." Jackson believed that she and her race had been oppressed through no fault of their own, but now that the "links have been broken and the shackles fallen from them" through the efforts of the "beloved martyr President Lincoln," they needed education to become full participants in society. "Thus," Jackson implored potential purchasers, "I ask you to buy my little book to aid me in obtaining an education, that I may be enabled to do some good in behalf of the elevation of my emancipated brothers and sisters." Jackson had survived slavery and appealed to "the friends of humanity" to assist her in rendering her freedom meaningful.⁷⁸

As a free woman, Jackson made a declaration that was arguably as significant as her earlier determination to end her physical enslavement. She asserted that she would become educated and began the process of making this new goal a reality. In Indianapolis Jackson boarded with people who became interested in "teaching and encouraging me in my literary advancement and all other important improvements, which precisely met the natural desires for which my soul had ever yearned since my earliest recollection. I could read a little but was not allowed to learn in slavery. I was obliged to pay twenty-

five cents for every letter written for me. I now began to feel that as I was free I could learn to write, as well as others.”⁷⁹

In publishing her plan for education, Jackson made three claims on behalf of African Americans. First, she challenged notions of black intellectual inferiority by asserting that she was educable and could learn to write as well as anyone else. Second, she rejected notions of black degradation and made the radical claim that the soul of an enslaved black child had always yearned for enlightenment. Finally, Jackson sought to eliminate any assumption of exceptionalism by including other former slaves in her claims of intellectual curiosity and capacity. Implicit in her desire to educate other blacks was the confidence that they also wanted to learn, and she encouraged them to do so. “Manage your own secrets, and divulge them by the silent language of your own pen,” she counseled. She hinted, too, that once educated, she would write a second book, with her own pen, recounting her experiences in slavery.⁸⁰ In Mattie Jackson's view, freedom, combined with education, would empower her to finally take control of her own life, keeping her secrets and speaking her mind.