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"Frequently Plunged into Slavery": Free Blacks and Kidnapping in Antebellum Boston[1]

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In July of 1836, David Ruggles, a prominent Black abolitionist and founder of one of the North's first and largely African-American vigilance committees in New York City, exhorted:

> My depressed countrymen, we are all liable; your wives and children are at the mercy of merciless kidnappers. We have no protection in law, because the legislators withold justice. We must no longer depend on the interposition of Manumission or Anti-Slavery Societies, in the hope of peaceable and just protection; where such outrages are committed, peace and justice cannot dwell. While we are subject to be thus inhumanly practised upon, no man is safe; we must look to our own safety and protection from kidnappers, remembering that "self-defense is the first law of nature."[2]

Ruggles neatly encapsulated a problem which was nothing new in 1836 to the free Black communities of the North. Not only had it been an urgent issue for these communities since their inception in the North in the late eighteenth century, but it was a problem that they had to confront largely on their own. In a country where the domestic trade in unregistered slaves was lively and profitable and where an African-American's status as free was always suspect if

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1. This paper was prepared for delivery at the 1991 annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians.

2. The Liberator, August 6, 1836.

the proper documentation could not be produced to substantiate it, free blacks in the North were vulnerable to being kidnapped and sold. Thus the threat of kidnapping was one of the leading problems confronting their communities. Yet faced with a negligible police force, unsympathetic courts, and a white populace which denigrated the character of African-Americans and which feared the impact of their presence upon the town's physical and moral health, Blacks had to rely almost exclusively upon themselves for protection.

This threat was particularly bad in such northern seaport cities as Philadelphia, New York, and Boston, where large numbers of blacks — not only the recently emancipated but also many fugitives — had come to form fledgling communities in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The threat of kidnapping in Boston, while an ever-present one, was not as great as it was in Philadelphia or even New York, and for one main reason: proximity to the South and to the important slave markets in Baltimore, Richmond, and the District of Columbia. Philadelphia in particular, with its large, thriving African-American community, was vulnerable to kidnappings because a victim could be quickly removed to Delaware, Maryland, or even Virginia, either by land or by water, down the Delaware River.

Such was not the case in Boston. The overland route to the South was impractical because of its length and because of the real possibility of being pursued by concerned Blacks from Boston. The ability to put distance between the victim and his or her community as quickly as possible was essential to a successful kidnapping. While this requirement acted to diminish the number of abductions in Boston, as compared to Philadelphia, it also meant that boats would become an essential tool of the kidnapper in New England. The lively maritime world of antebellum Boston unfortunately worked to increase the kidnapping problem in that port. As we shall see, this circumstance could generate a crisis, for shipping-out as seamen was the leading form of employment for Boston's young male African-Americans.

This paper will consider as kidnappings not only the abductions of legally free blacks but also those of fugitives who lacked freedom papers and who had settled in the Boston area. Although legally not considered as kidnappings — especially if the captive was processed through the court — the entrapment of fugitives often netted longstanding members of Boston's African-

American community, who for all intents and purposes were seen as inhabitants of importance equal to that of free Blacks. Fugitives comprised a significant percentage of the African-American population in Boston, and the community had specifically organized itself to defend them zealously. For Blacks, the entrapment of a fugitive was seen as a threat to the integrity and security of the community, and it was treated as a kidnapping. This paper will also focus on the period prior to 1850 for two reasons. First, the more celebrated capture of such fugitives as Shadrach, Thomas Sims, and Anthony Burns in the 1850s are well known, while earlier incidences still need to be highlighted in order to establish the commonness and persistence of this threat throughout the antebellum era. Secondly, the most fruitful period for exploring Black defenses against kidnapping is that before the late 1840s, when they were almost wholly dependent upon themselves to provide protection. While white abolitionists in Philadlephia had a long history of aiding fugitives and kidnap victims, those in Boston become more involved in vigilance activities only after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850. Prior to that time, white activism in Massachusetts was nearly non-existent. By studying the pre-1850 period, one can examine defensive measures which were almost exclusively Black-initiated.

As early as 1788, kidnappers were preying upon vulnerable Blacks in Boston. In early February, 1788, a Captain Avery of Connecticut lured three Black men on board his ship in Boston Harbor with a promise of employment, a very attractive offer in a post-Revolution Boston plagued with an economic downturn. Once the three men were laboring in the hold, the captain unexpectedly weighed anchor and departed for the port of Salem, where he enticed still more Black men onto his boat. Soon he left Massachusetts' waters and headed for the Danish island of St. Bartholomew in the West Indies, where he intended to unload his kidnapped cargo. While being displayed for sale, however, one of the men from Boston informed a merchant that he had been kidnapped, and in the process the two men discovered that they were both Masons. Distressed by the account, the merchant contacted the governor of the island to prevent the sale, posted bond for their good behavior until further information regarding them arrived from Boston, and eventually saw to their safe return

home the following summer.   It is unknown whether the Salem
men were as fortunate.[3]
        Despite the actions of the Danish authorities, these sailors
may very well never have been returned if not for the speedy
action of Prince Hall, the leader of Boston's African-American
community, and those around him.   On February 27, 1788, Hall
and others sent a petition to the Massachusetts legislature, alerting
it to the kidnapping.   Had the petition not been sent and raised
the interest of important white men such as Governor John
Hancock, the situation of the three unknown men may have been
dismissed   as   insignificant   once   word   arrived   from   St.
Bartholomew.   Yet Hall's petition went beyond a mere recitation
of the specifics of the crime, to outline the crisis that kidnapping
posed for the free Blacks of Boston, especially for the numerous
African-American seamen.   Hall followed his account of the three
men with the observation that

> we can aseuer your Honners that maney of our free
> blacks that have Entred on bord of vessles as
> seamen and have ben sold for Slaves & sum of
> them we have heard from but no not who carred
> them away.[4]

The three men rescued from the West Indies were the lucky ones;
most who were kidnapped were lost permanently.   But Hall made
clear that the threat of kidnapping was not only a matter of bodily
security; it also could create an economic crisis for Black Boston.
He remarked "that maney of us who are good seamen are oblidge
to stay at home thru fear and the one help of our time lorter
about the streets for want of employ; wereas if they were
protected in that lawfull calling thay might get a hanceum livehud
for themselves and theres: which in the setturation thay are now in

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3. Information on this episode is drawn principally from two sources, William Cooper
   Nell, The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution (Boston, 1855), pp. 59-60;
   and Sidney Kaplan, The Black Presence in the Era of the American Revolution,
   1770-1800 (Boston, 1973), pp. 189-190.

4. Petition in Herbert Aptheker, ed., A Documentary History of the Negro People in
   the United States (New York, 1969), I: 20.

thay cannot."[5]   The fear of maritime employment placed a
tremendous hardship on the community, not only by increasing
poverty but also by increasing the number of visibly unemployed
whose presence furthered white doubts about the economic and
moral character of African-Americans, and at the time when they
were first establishing their freedom as a group.

Despite Hall's eloquent complaint, the terror of kidnapping
continued unabated for Blacks in Boston. As late as 1829, a
correspondent in *Freedom's Journal* cautioned that individuals
operating out of one of our principal sea ports and who are
numerous in other places "have made a business of decoying free
people of Color on board their vessels, and of Selling them for
Slaves."[6]   In the early nineteenth century, Jude Hall, a Black
veteran of the American Revolution who lived in New Hampshire,
had all three of his sons kidnapped from New England vessels and
sold into slavery. While one managed to escape and write about
his experience, the whereabouts of the other two was unknown as
late as 1834. In 1816, Robert Barbadoes, the son of longtime
Boston activist, James Barbadoes, was kidnapped in New Orleans
along with others, robbed of his Seaman's Protection papers and
placed in jail in preparation for being sold. Robert certainly
would have been enslaved, if not for the arrival a few weeks later
in the same jail of a fellow Black mariner, who was released after
establishing his own freedom and then notified Barbadoes's
parents. That was not the fate of other Black sailors who were
kidnapped in New Orleans. One Black Boston mariner, for
example, who was imprisoned in that port in the early 1830s, and
was saved only by the fact that he could speak French, saw at
least nine Black sailors in the jail, all of whom he knew to be
free, and all of whom were from the Northeast. Presumably they
were sold soon after his departure. He concluded by warning that
there "is a continual stream of free colored persons from Boston,
New York, Philadelphia, and other seaports of the United States,
passing through the CALABOOSE [i.e. the infamous prison of
New Orleans] into slavery in the country."[7]

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5. Ibid., pp. 20-21.

6. Freedom's Journal, March 7, 1829.

7. The material in this paragraph came from The Liberator, June 7, 1834.

By no means were such perils confined solely to New Orleans. The ports of Wilmington (North Carolina), Charleston, and Savannah were also feared. All were known as places where a Black seaman could be readily kidnapped, deprived of his freedom papers, and with little trouble quickly ushered into slavery. The slave-hungry port of Charleston in particular was infamous for this reason in the early nineteenth century. But these ports became even more feared after the Negro Seamans's Acts began to be passed in 1822. After the uncovering of the Denmark Vesey conspiracy in Charleston in June of 1822, officials there took new precautions against the circulation of information among Blacks and against contact between local and visiting Blacks. Of special concern to them were the numerous black mariners who entered the port from the North and whose liberty was seen as a dangerous example to the local slaves, with whom they regularly associated. To remedy this problem, Charleston passed the Negro Seaman's Act, which required that all Black mariners entering the port of Charleston had to be declared and held in the local prison for the duration of their stay and at their captain's expense. If the captain refused to pay, they could be temporarily hired-out to defray the costs, or even be enslaved. While Savannah and Wilmington did not immediately follow suit, they — along with New Orleans — also adopted the measure in 1830, after copies of David Walker's fiery anti-slavery pamphlet, *An Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*, were found in their towns. Although this act raised havoc for northern shipowners, who relied heavily on Black seamen, it was an even greater burden for Black men whose livelihood was jeopardized if they were unwilling to submit to the humiliation of imprisonment in these towns.[8] But occupational pressures drove many to continue to make the trips.

Any number of things could happen to a "quarantined" Black seaman. He was often treated brutally and kept in filthy quarters. His captain might demand that he pay out of his own wages for a portion or for all of his detention. But these were not the greatest

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8. For an excellent statement by shipowners in 1823 against the Negro Seamen's Act for its threat to their numerous Black employees, for the subjecting of their ships to unconstitutional searches and seizures, and hindering their trade, see "Memorial of Masters of American Vessels," in Peter M. Bergman and Jean McCarroll, eds., The Negro in the Congressional Record, 1821-1824 (New York, 1970), VIII:144.

dangers.   As noted above, it was not at all unusual for Black
sailors to be deprived of their protection papers and thus to be
challenged as fugitive slaves.   Some captains refused to pay the
costs of imprisonment and abandoned Black seamen to southern
authorities.   Others were even known to sell black mariners once
they were jailed for quarantining, or even to sell those who had
escaped quarantining and were still on the boat. All of these acts
were in effect kidnapping and they led to enslavement.[9]

Efforts were made to challenge these acts.   In 1824, the
Supreme Court declared the Charleston law invalid, but in practice
it remained undisturbed.   Northern merchants involved in the
coastal trade as well as legislators and jurists attempted to reach
some accord with the Southern ports and failed.   Yet, these laws
remained in place — enforced until the Civil War — and were as
some have called them the first successful acts of nullification by
the South.   Blacks in Boston petitioned Congress and the
Massachusetts legislature in 1842 regarding the fact that no state
act was superior to that of Congress.   When the Boston lawyer,
Samuel Hoar, visited South Carolina in 1844 to discuss the
problem, rioters threatened to burn his hotel. African-Americans
also agitated against the laws.   William Powell of New York
demanded that Congress and the northern state legislatures make
clear whether they acquiesced to these southern affronts.[10]

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9. Benjamin Quarles, Black Abolitionists (New York, 1969), p. 151; James and Lois
    Horton, Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Struggle (New York, 1979),
    pp. 97-98; F. N. Boney, ed., Slave Life in Georgia: A Narrative of the LIfe,
    Sufferings, and Escape of John Brown, A Fugitive Slave (Savannah, 1972), p. 33;
    Philip S. Foner, "William P. Powell: Militant Champion of Black Seamen," in
    Foner, Essays in Afro-American History (Philadelphia, 1978), pp. 91-93. For an
    example of a Black Boston seaman who successfully challenged a captain's efforts
    to deduct detention charges from his wages, see Helen Catterall, ed., Judicial Cases
    Concerning American Slavery and the Negro (Washington, D.C., 1936), IV: 511; for
    a chilling example of a ship captain from New York selling Black sailors to slave
    traders in New Orleans, see the account of Stephen Dickerson, Jr., in John
    Blassingame, ed., Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews,
    and Autobiographies (Baton Rouge, La., 1977), pp. 690-695.

10. James and Lois Horton, Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Strugle
    (New York, 1979), pp. 97-99; Philip S. Foner, "William P. Powell: Militant
    Champion of Black Seamen," in Foner, Essays in Afro-American History
    (Philadelphia, 1978), pp. 91-93; The Liberator, November 4, 1842.

The combined effect of the threat of kidnapping in southern ports and the existence of the Negro Seaman's Acts — which increased that threat — had a devastating impact on Blacks in Boston. It was extremely difficult for a Black Bostonian to secure employment with pay even slightly above the subsistence level, and with some skill and status attached to it. Unlike Blacks in such leading ports as New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Wilmington, and Charleston, African-Americans in Boston had traditionally been excluded from practicing skilled trades and worked largely as laborers. The overwhelming majority of Blacks in antebellum Boston were poor and employed in unskilled or semi-skilled labor. Regarding artisanal work, one commentator observed in 1827 that among Black Bostonians, "very few are mechanics; and they who are, almost universally relinquish their trades for other employments. This . . . is principally owing to the want of patronage on the part of the public."[11] Edward Abdy, an English traveler, reported in 1834 that a Black individual he knew in Boston "had experienced great difficulty in obtaining an employment in which he could get his bread decently and respectably: with the exception of one or two employed as printers, one blacksmith, and one shoemaker, there are no colored mechanics in the city."[12] As Jeffrey Bolster has admirably explicated in his article on Black seamen in the antebellum North, such restricted job opportunities made shipping-out very attractive to young African-American men, who went to sea in numbers far surpassing the level of black representation in their towns.[13]

The *Boston City Directory* of 1826 indicated that at least thirty-one Black men were mariners, or approximately twelve percent of the 259 adult Black males who were listed in the book along with their occupations (282 men were listed altogether).[14] While this sample obviously does not include all Black males from the roughly 1,800 African-Americans then resident in Boston, it

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11. Freedom's Journal, November 9, 1827.

12. Edward Abdy, Journal of a Residence and Tour in the United States of North America from April, 1833, to October, 1834 (London, 1835), I:121.

13. W. Jeffrey Bolster, "'To Feel Like a Man': Black Seamen in the Northern States, 1800-1860," Journal of American History, LXXVI (March, 1990): 1173-1199.

14. Boston City Directory (Boston, 1826).

offers a fairly accurate reckoning of the level of representation of
sailors among them.   Indeed, the percentage is probably an
underestimate. It is impossible to determine how many of the 126
Black men who were listed simply as laborers, might occasionally
ship out, as was common, or how many were not listed because
they were at sea when the directory was compiled.[15]   It is
reasonable to estimate that twenty percent or more of all the Black
men of Boston shipped out at any given time in the early ante-
bellum decades.   Some estimates of their maritime employment
have actually gone as high as forty percent for the same era.[16]
Yet, this was over a span of several decades, when the proportion
of Blacks in the total Boston population never surpassed four
percent.

While brutally removing black men from their families,
maritime kidnapping also threatened to eliminate one of the few
job opportunities available to Blacks in Boston.   Indeed the
passage of the Negro Seamen's Acts appears to have done just that:
by the 1830s, a discernible increase in Blacks shipping-out from
Newport for foreign ports is evident and may have been related to
a new fear the consequences of entering southern ports.[17] By the
late 1840s, Bolster finds an unmistakable whitening of the
seagoing labor force. While he relates this to several factors, such
as a growing racism on ships, which were hiring fewer blacks and
placing them in the most menial jobs, as well as a degradation in
the status of mariners as a whole, there is no question that it was

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15. Gaddis Smith also acknowledges this problem with undercounting. He has written
    that "pre-Civil War census figures on occupation underestimate the number of
    mariners, because sailors at sea were not counted unless they were heads of
    families residing at an established address. Few seamen fitted that description.
    City directories were similarly biased in favor of landsmen with established
    addresses." Gaddis Smith, "Black Seamen and the Federal Courts, 1789-1860," in
    Timothy J. Runyan, ed., Ships, Seafaring and Society: Essays in Maritime History
    (Detroit, 1987), p. 334, note 4.

16. Bolster, "'To Feel Like a Man,'" p. 1178, note 9. Martha Putney has documented
    similarly high levels of Black male employment in the maritime industry in
    Newport, where their representation on ships far surpassed their proportions in
    the local population. See Martha Putney, "Black Merchant Seamen of Newport,
    1803-1865: A Case Study in Foreign Commerce," Journal of Negro History LVII
    (1972): 156-168.

17. Putney, "Black Merchant Seamen," p. 167.

also related to Black fears of being abused or enslaved while in southern ports, which were the principal destinations of these ships. Kidnapping of black seamen was not simply a problem for mariners. It also posed a crisis for the young and vulnerable Black community as a whole, especially one that was as economically fragile as that of Boston. No one made this clearer than did Prince Hall when he bemoaned the idle young Black men on the streets who feared going to sea. The problem of kidnapping quickly became a principal concern for Black Bostonians.

Because of Boston's distance from the South and the number of blacks employed on ships, African-Americans there had the curious experience of being endangered by an activity which very often did not occur on their own soil. This is not meant to obscure the equally significant threat of kidnapping in their own community. This also was an ever-present problem. At various times during the antebellum era, it was not at all unusual to find placards posted throughout Black sections of Boston warning the residents of the presence of potential kidnappers. Particularly threatened were Black children. Their entrapment in Philadelphia was legendary, but apparently they were selected also in the more northern states because it was believed that they could be intimidated and moved to the South. The preferred route in New England for absconding with children was first to hire them as domestics, take them South, supposedly as help, and then sell them as slaves. In the late 1830s in Worcester, two men were involved in kidnapping African-American boys under just such pretenses. One of the two indicated that "if he could get free colored persons from Massachusetts into Virginia, [he would] sell them there as slaves." Such ruses were also suspected in Boston, in 1827, 1836, and 1841. In those cases, several African-Americans attempted to prevent Black children who were servants in local families from moving to the South with them.[18] One group of Black defendants even went so far as to take a child and not return it when it was demanded. Numerous Black children appeared before David Ruggles' New York Committee of Vigilance in the late 1830s to

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18. The Colored American, October 19, 1839; Catterall, Judicial Caes Concerning American Slavery, pp. 501-510.

testify that they had been hired as domestics and then taken to the South to be sold into slavery.[19]

Older free Blacks who were employed as domestics in Boston were also endangered. William Faux, an Englishman travelling in America in 1819, recounted how in Boston and the surrounding area, it was "no unusual thing for some of the people . . . , on going to Charleston, to take their free negroes with them and sell them for slaves . . . ."[20]

Yet the group in Boston most fearful of being kidnapped was the large body of fugitive slaves who had settled there. Precisely what their numbers were is very difficult to estimate. In October, 1850, Theodore Parker approximated that there were from four hundred to six hundred fugitives in Boston, where the total Black population stood at 2,000.[21] While the source of his figures is unclear, it was clear that for decades large numbers of fugitives had been funneled into that port. The fact that Boston vessels were common in all southern ports and that a significant portion of their crews were often Black made them very attractive vehicles for runaways. As Wilbur Siebert, the great chronicler of the Underground Railroad, had observed: "No town on the entire New England coast received a larger number of fugitive slaves than Boston. Most of them came as stowaways on vessels from Southern ports. . . ."[22] Among the least known participants in this loosely structured railroad were Black sailors who were known to hide fugitives on their ships, bring them to northern ports and, once there, help them get oriented. William Grimes made his escape from Savannah in the early 1820s in that way.[23] Perhaps Black mariners viewed these rescues as revenge for their own vulnerability in the southern ports. The Black community in Boston appears to have been unusually sympathetic to the fugitive

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19. Benjamin Quarles, Black Abolitionists (New York, 1969), p. 151.

20. William Faux, Memorable Days in America (London, 1823), p. 37.

21. Wilber Siebert, The Underground Railroad (New York, 1898), p. 235.

22. Wilber H. Siebert, "The Underground Railroad in Massachusetts," Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society, new series, XLV (1935): 39.

23. William Grimes, Life of William Grimes, the Runaway Slave (New York, 1825), pp. 50-53.

slave, regularly opening its doors to shelter the runaway and to offer meager contributions of food, clothing, and pocket money. Harriet Beecher Stowe remembered seeing thirteen fugitive slaves at one time in the home of black activist, Lewis Hayden, while another member of the Black community recalled "that her father's little cottage often sheltered as many fugitives as it could hold, and that the situation was the same in many other Negro homes."[24]

It is also important to remember that one of the first attempts to enforce the Fugitive Slave law of 1793 occurred in Boston in the same year, and not only did it fail in court but it also provided the setting for local Blacks' first rescue of a fugitive from the authorities. After the law's dramatic failure in Boston, many believed that it would not be enforced in the state because popular sentiment was strongly opposed to it, and because the port had become a particularly safe refuge for runaways.[25] All these factors combined to make Boston a very attractive haven for fugitives, and consequently to swell their numbers in the city.

This characterization, however, did not keep kidnappers from plying their trade in Boston, nor did it prevent slaveholders' agents, both Black and white, from seeking to retrieve their employers' property. Kidnappers and people willing to inform them about local fugitive slaves were always present in Black sections of Boston, and community members kept a sharp look-out for them. In 1829, David Walker outlined the devious methods these informants used, and then cautioned that there

> are at this day in Boston, New-York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore, coloured men, who are in league with tyrants, and who receive a great portion of their daily bread . . . from the blood and tears of their more miserable brethren, whom they

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24. Horton, Black Bostonians, p. 55; John Daniels, In Freedom's Birthplace: A Study of the Boston Negroes (Boston, 1914), p. 57, note 2.

25. Marion Gleason McDougall, Fugitive Slaves (1619-1865) (Boston, 1891), p. 35, and p. 35 note 1.

> scandalously delivered into the hands of our *natural*
> enemies!!!!!![26]

African-Americans in New York were warned in 1828 that

> most of those who have [recently] been carried
> back into bondage, have generally been betrayed by
> *coloured persons* — brethren of the same flesh and
> kindred, for the sake of paltry lucre.[27]

He concluded by emphasizing that this was a problem in
Philadelphia and Boston as well. In 1836, *The Liberator* alerted
Blacks in Boston and Salem that two men claiming to be associates
of William Lloyd Garrison were circulating in the communities
seeking to find a man whom the paper believed they wanted to
return to slavery.[28] The ruses and disguises of these figures were
numerous and their all too frequent appearances were
demonstrated by the regular plastering of the neighborhood with
broadsides announcing their presence. Legal efforts, some of
them celebrated, to return fugitives to slavery were waged with
some regularity. In 1827, Seymour Cunningham, a fugitive who
had recently settled in Boston, was captured and returned to his
master in Alexandria, Virginia, despite having maimed his body to
make it conform to the descriptions of deformities on his
borrowed freedom papers. In another case, two female fugitives
who for a long time had been residents of Boston, were tricked
into surrendering their papers in 1836, taken to court "for
processing," and only narrowly escaped re-enslavement. In 1842,
the famous fugitive, George Latimer, was arrested, tried, and was
about to be returned to Norfolk, Virginia, when Boston's Blacks
purchased his freedom.[29] While the outcome for these four

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26. David Walker, <u>Appeal</u> <u>to</u> <u>the</u> <u>Colored</u> <u>Citizens</u> <u>of</u> <u>the</u> <u>World,</u> <u>But</u> <u>in</u> <u>Particular,</u>
    <u>and</u> <u>Very</u> <u>Expressly,</u> <u>to</u> <u>Those</u> <u>of</u> <u>the</u> <u>United</u> <u>States</u> <u>of</u> <u>America</u>, ed. by Charles W.
    Wiltse (New York, 1965), pp. 22-23.

27. <u>Freedom's</u> <u>Journal</u>, November 7, 1828.

28. <u>The</u> <u>Liberator</u>, August 6, 1836.

29. <u>Freedom's</u> <u>Journal</u>, May 25, 1827; Leonard Levy, "The Abolition Riot: Boston's
    First Slave Rescue," <u>New</u> <u>England</u> <u>Quarterly</u>, XXV (March 1952): 85-92; <u>The</u>

individuals was fortunate — Cunningham was purchased a year later by Blacks in Boston — the threat of legal force backing their entrapment was a serious one.

One of the most important functions performed by numerous individuals in the community during the antebellum era was to protect its members from the relentless threat of kidnapping and re-enslavement. Ever since the action orchestrated by Prince Hall in 1788, many Black Bostonians had worked to prevent kidnappings, to aid fugitives, and to alert the neighborhood to the presence of kidnappers and to their movements. African-Americans had to depend almost totally on themselves to provide these defensive measures, especially prior to 1850 and the passage of the new Fugitive Slave Law, which for the first time drew a number of white abolitionists into anti-kidnapping Vigilance Committees.

Numerous methods were employed to alert African-Americans to a present threat of kidnapping. Placarding the community was one means. Another way was to publish announcements in such newspapers as *Freedom's Journal*, *The Liberator*, *The Colored American*, and other newspapers read by local Blacks. Assorted individuals also closely watched the movements of known kidnappers and informants. Often, these people had brought attention to themselves when they went into the heart of the Black community, where they were strangers, and asked suggestive questions about the whereabouts of particular individuals. They were commonly followed and the person whom they were pursuing was hidden until they departed in frustration. Violence was rarely, if ever, used against the kidnappers.

The overwhelming majority of support for those threatened by kidnappers and agents was given by members of the Black community. As noted, numerous individuals in black Boston opened their doors to fugitive slaves and to those who were being sought by the kidnappers. As an important waystation on the loosely-organized Underground Railroad, Boston was outfitted largely by Black conductors and guardians. Even after 1850, when certain whites became more involved in assisting fugitives, most support was still given by Blacks, many of whom were

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Liberator, August 6, 1836; Catterall, Judicial Cases Concerning American Slavery, pp. 510-511; Horton, Black Bostonians, p. 99.

reimbursed for their expenses by these white abolitionists.[30] Prior to the late 1840s, assistance was almost exclusively provided by other African-Americans.

Blacks were also the first in Boston to form an organization with the explicit objective of aiding fugitive slaves. As early as 1828, when Blacks in Philadelphia had formed a "Protecting Society" for the prevention of kidnapping, African-Americans in the northeast had considered creating such formal groups.[31] David Ruggles and others formed a similar group in New York City in 1836. Under mounting pressure to aid the growing number of fugitive slaves in Boston, William Cooper Nell, Henry Weeden, and other local Blacks came together in 1842 to form the New England Freedom Association, in order to aid all fugitive slaves who sought their assistance. Apparently in existence for five years, the Association provided recent arrivals with food and temporary shelter, as well as employment counseling.[32] The African Masonic Lodge, the African Baptist Church, and the short-lived Massachusetts General Colored Association were other local organizations which also regularly assisted those who were threatened with kidnapping.

But frankly the most important networks for aiding the endangered and for defending the community against kidnappers were informal ones. When two women were tricked into surrendering their freedom papers and held on board a ship as runaway slaves in 1836, the news quickly spread throughout the Black community and a large number of angry Blacks massed at the wharf near the boat. Such an expression of spontaneous sympathy for the afflicted was easy to generate in a community where so many were either fugitive slaves themselves or were from the South and knew from personal experience what slavery was like. When those same two women were brought to trial, "several hundred" African-Americans appeared both in the courthouse and outside of it, to support the women and eventually

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30. Siebert, "Underground Railroad in Massachusetts," pp. 75-76.

31. Freedom's Journal, December 5, 1828.

32. Quarles, Black Abolitionists, p. 153; The Liberator, December 12, 1845.

to create the confusion necessary to effect their escape.[33]   This
crowd comprised from fifteen to twenty percent of the total Black
population of Boston at that time, which stood somewhat in excess
of 2,000 people.   While autonomous Black organizations did exist
in Boston to protect African-Americans, the defensive measures
employed usually had a much more *ad hoc* character to them.
Someone knew of someone else who at the time could shelter a
fugitive.   Support for a demonstration at a court house was readily
secured without relying on any formal group to orchestrate it.   A
loose but efficient chain of communication and sympathy
extended throughout the Boston Black community, that could
quickly rally a large number of individuals from a populace
sharing in poverty, discrimination, and an insecure freedom.
     From the inception of a separate Black community in Boston
in the late eighteenth century, kidnapping was one of the main
problems confronting its members.   Not only did it endanger
individuals' bodily integrity, but the economic health of the Black
populace as well.   Violence, verbal and physical, was a daily issue
confronting African-Americans in Boston.   In 1828, David Walker
spoke sardonically of the pervasive "derision, violence and
oppression, with which we as a part of the community are treated
by a benevolent and Christian people."[34]   Marked by their color
with the legacy of slavery, and excoriated for their poverty and
for attendant problems with demoralization, Black Bostonians were
regularly indicted by white Bostonians as being unfit citizens
whose presence was at best tolerated.   Indeed free Blacks had been
legally but unsuccessfully banned from Boston in 1788 and again
in 1800.   Under such social and moral antipathy, violence was not
only condoned against Blacks, but it was expected.   Blacks
throughout antebellum Boston found themselves in a situation
where they would either have to assume the responsibility for
defending themselves, or else they could be prey to the regular
depredations of whites.   Through a study of the most dramatic
form of violence levelled against them — the threat of kidnapping
— it is clear that the Black inhabitants of Boston coalesced into a
community for reasons of security and defense, as much as they
did for cultural and racial continuity.

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33. Levy, "The Abolition Riot," pp. 85-92.

34. Freedom's Journal, April 25, 1828.