

City University of New York (CUNY)

## CUNY Academic Works

---

Dissertations and Theses

City College of New York

---

2014

# The Black Vigilance Movement in Nineteenth Century New York City

Jamila Shabazz Brathwaite  
*CUNY City College*

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cc\\_etds\\_theses/264](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cc_etds_theses/264)

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

---

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).  
Contact: [AcademicWorks@cuny.edu](mailto:AcademicWorks@cuny.edu)

**THE BLACK VIGILANCE MOVEMENT  
IN NINETEENTH CENTURY NEW YORK CITY**

---

**Jamila Shabazz Brathwaite**

**Dr. Greg Downs  
Advisor**

**May 9, 2011**

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of (Fine) Arts of the  
City College of the City University of New York.

## Table of Contents

---

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Man-Stealers!</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Constructing Black Vigilance</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Awake! Beware of these Slave-catchers!</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>In this One Matter Be United!</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Shall We Be Freeman or Slaves?</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>47</b>

**“Let parents, and guardians, and children take warning. Our city is infested with a gang of kidnappers—Let every man look to his safety. Look out for the CUSTICES, for WADDY, BARNES, OWEN, RUTHERFORD, and young WOLFOLK!”**

**Emancipator, Nov. 1836**

---

## **Introduction**

During the antebellum era, New York City became an even more dangerous place for African Americans. Slave hunters scoured northern cities in search of black men, women and children who could be trapped and sold into slavery. The African American community throughout the North became accustomed to warnings such as the notice in the *Emancipator*. The carefully worded cautions alerting the free as well as fugitive blacks to kidnappers, blackbirders and slave agents could be found in newspapers and on broadsides, or announced in churches and at organizational gatherings. Children often became the frequent targets of kidnappers since they could not easily defend or articulate their status. Young adults in their prime laboring years garnered the best prices on the auction block. An 1842 report from the New York Committee of Vigilance (NYCV), an organization formed to defend New York City’s black community, explained another method of selling free black children into slavery. “Children are bound out from almshouses in the free states, as apprentices, to persons who take them to the slave states, and hold them as slaves for life or sell them as such.”<sup>1</sup> Children went missing as they ran daily errands or fetched water from pumps.

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Fifth Annual Report of the New York Committee of Vigilance for the Year of 1842* (New York, May 1842), 36

Black communities throughout the North and the South reported kidnappings. Free blacks living in the South experienced a special kind of jeopardy since they existed in slave societies well rooted in violence, racism and oppression. New York Committee Vigilance (NYCV) members noted, “Colored persons traveling in the [south,] are often arrested and sold as slaves. Colored persons convicted of petty offences, are often sold”<sup>2</sup> into slavery for a lifetime. African Americans seized in New York and other northern territories could be quickly shipped to the South without a hearing before authorities. Slave hunters, kidnappers and those looking to make a quick profit moved throughout the states freely in search of black captives.

Organized vigilance and self-defense organizations began forming in the North during the 1830s as kidnappings and fugitive slave seizures increased. The development of these organizations is noteworthy because their existence illustrates that kidnapping became a significant problem that required an organized and radical response from the black community. The growth of black vigilance and self-defense provides insight into the early political organizing of African Americans. Involvement in vigilance organizations also demonstrates black participation in an antislavery movement that coalesced into the networks known as the Underground Railroad. Examining the enclaves of blacks that developed organized and individual self-defense efforts in New York City tests historian Steven Hahn’s notion that northern communities of self-emancipated and free blacks resembled maroon societies. These settlements of mainly fugitive slaves developed in the American South, the Caribbean and South America.

---

<sup>2</sup> *The Fifth Annual Report of the New York Committee of Vigilance for the Year of 1842* (New York, May 1842), 36

This paper demonstrates the usefulness of imagining this important segment of New York City as a maroon society but with a few important exceptions. Hahn argues that these enclaves of northern residents of African descent “resemble maroons not simply because they included substantial numbers of fugitives but also because of the ways in which they developed in relation to the larger world of slavery around them.”<sup>3</sup> Hahn distinguishes maroon societies as sites of significant cultural, social and political developments. Some maroon societies successfully negotiated with the white majority and gained certain allowances, but as Hahn concludes, most settlements were “perpetually harassed.” Maroons are defined as individuals that liberated themselves from slavery. In the United States, the Caribbean and South America, these enclaves most often found safety in inaccessible areas, predominantly in forest and swamplands. Others lived near plantations, farms and towns that maroons raided for needed food and supplies. These maroon communities served as a constant annoyance to white residents. Slave owners, their agents and the military hunted for fugitives throughout the hinterlands and attacked maroon communities, subsequently destroying them. This state of being under siege demanded that maroons develop self-defense strategies and this became a critical element of maroon life.

The maroon analogy is important to the examination of black communities in the North as it allows for new interpretations regarding the development of these settlements and their politics. A broader understanding of the liberties and limitations of freedom in the New York City can be attained through a maroon analogy. The role of blacks in antislavery, radical abolitionism and the growth of black consciousness and black political thought are reconsidered when these communities are regarded as maroons. Black leaders as well as ordinary black citizens

---

<sup>3</sup> Steven Hahn, *The Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 30

constructed self-defense mechanisms that gain new meanings when these groups are considered as maroons.

Self-defense mechanisms and the development of organized leadership are key to the structure of maroon societies. Similar to the systematized self-defense operations that developed in maroon settlements, African Americans of varied classes and educational backgrounds created support networks and organizations to protect themselves and fugitive slaves. But, they also labored to change the legal system by petitioning for jury trials and they raised funds to aid in the legal defense of those captured. Within these African American settlements, a more radical political voice developed in the wake of black vigilance. African Americans in New York City constructed complex social networks and spheres of interaction that gave power to black vigilance and black self-defense. Reminiscent of maroons, blacks in New York existed outside of the status of citizen and without political power. They created extralegal measures to defend their community. Viewing this development while utilizing Hahn's maroon analogy provides a new framework and method of understanding this process.

While it is tempting to characterize northern black communities as maroon societies, there are limitations to this comparison as well. Unlike typical maroon settlements, geographical isolation did not exist between blacks and whites in New York. Black New Yorkers found it necessary to participate in a few violent confrontations, but they paled in comparison to the conflicts waged between maroons and whites in other regions of the Americas. Most often maroons operated in opposition to whites; however, black vigilance organizations in New York, while operated by

blacks, had the support of some whites that believed in the cause.

This study examines kidnapping, fugitive slave captures and the growth of black vigilance organizations. Some historians have made distinctions between the kidnappings of free blacks and those alleged to be fugitive slaves. Often, these captives did not have the opportunity to prove their status as a free person. Certainly, there existed an unknown number of free people sentenced to slavery. As well, this inquiry supports the argument made within William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator* that all slaves had been kidnapped. The writer asserted, "We affirm, that every native of the United States was born free. The slave must have been kidnapped; therefore the holder of that slave is a Man-Stealer, or an accessory, or a receiver of stolen goods, or a purchaser of a human being whom he knew was stolen."<sup>4</sup> This paper also provides a view of several kidnapping cases in New York, as well as, the legal and extralegal responses used to protect individuals from kidnapping. As the decades unfold, the attention shifts to illustrate the changes in leadership and tactics of black vigilance in the City. During the 1840s, a legal victory is won allowing jury trials for those accused of being fugitives from slavery. However, by the 1850s the focus shifts when gains realized in the previous decade are erased by new federal legislation. Lastly, this paper will examine the changes in federal legislation that inflamed the black community and gave rise to new self-defense organizations in New York City.

---

<sup>4</sup> "An Incendiary Fanatic," *The Liberator* (Boston), April 20, 1833, and Carol Wilson, *Freedom at Risk: The Kidnapping of Free Blacks in America-1780-1865* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 5



## **Man-Stealers!**

Beginning in 1793, slave-hunters sanctioned by Congress through the Fugitive Slave Law apprehended suspected fugitives throughout the nation and returned them to slavery without due process of the law, however; the practice of hunting slaves existed long before this act. In this quest for the return of property, legally free people of African descent were caught in these convoluted dealings. As early as November 1784, the New York Journal reported that man-stealers “for {ed}” a group of free blacks “on board a vessel in this harbour, destined either for Charleston, or the Bay of Honduras.”<sup>5</sup> Local authorities intervened in the case, however, many other cases occurred where authorities did not intercede. Historian David Gellman maintains that this incident is as an example of the prevailing notion that race determined status as a slave.

Black men who often could not find work within cities and towns found work as seamen. This work separated men from their families for long periods of time, but survival necessitated this type of employment. Ruthless captains took advantage of young black seamen once across the Mason-Dixon Line, selling them to slave agents who used brutality to subjugate their captives. Considering the time that seamen spent away from home, it could take many months before a family realized their loved one had not returned. The 1837 kidnapping and subsequent sale of Stephen Dickerson, Isaac Wright and Robert Garrison as slaves came to the attention of black New Yorkers through the New York Committee of Vigilance (NYCV). The free black sailors worked on the steamer Newcastle and were sold by Captain Wilson to a slave trader named Betts. Brutally beaten and whipped into submission, each went to different buyers at auction.

---

<sup>5</sup> David N. Gellman, *Emancipating New York, The Politics of Slavery and Freedom 1777-1827*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 47

Stephen Dickerson served as a slave in New Orleans. Dickerson's father brought the matter to the attention of the NYCV and in 1838 David Ruggles, the Secretary of the organization, published articles, held mass meetings about the kidnappings and raised funds to help pay for the return of the sailors. This case made the danger of kidnapping extraordinarily real for the entire black community.

Unscrupulous employers also bamboozled blacks into situations that eventually led to their enslavement. Domestics working within a household or hired for travel with the family sometimes found themselves sold into slavery. Hester Jane Carr, a free young woman about nineteen years of age, took a position as a "waiting-maid" to Mrs. Davies alias Nancy Haws. Carr believed she would accompany Haws on a trip to Columbus, Georgia, but once in Petersburg, Virginia, Haws offered her to a "negro buyer." Family and associates gathered affidavits stating that Carr had been born to free parents in Virginia, but to the dismay of the New York Committee of Vigilance, they found "the evidence of a free colored person cannot be received in the courts of Virginia in a case where a white person is concerned."<sup>6</sup> When the NYCV reported on Carr's case in 1837, they determined that she would never be returned from slavery.

The number of free people kidnapped into slavery is unknown; however, blacks certainly believed in the danger to the extent that vigilance committees developed in New York, Philadelphia, Boston and Detroit. Blacks working to cease kidnappings did not differentiate

---

<sup>6</sup> *The First Annual Report of the New York Committee of Vigilance for the Year 1837* (New York, 1837), 55-57 & Robert Smith, *The Friend, A Religious and Literary Journal*, Vol. I, 1837, 21

between the kidnapping of free blacks and those arrested as fugitives. All African Americans had the right to freedom regardless of their status. In 1836, one year after the official organization of the New York Committee of Vigilance, the leadership proudly announced they had “protected 335 persons from slavery.”<sup>7</sup> The practice of kidnapping was significant and endured through the Civil War. The organizations protected the community and aided runaway slaves to safety. The NYCV remained active until 1842 and officially assisted “1,373 people since the formation of the Committee ...”<sup>8</sup>

The NYCV had created auxiliary units throughout the neighborhoods and estimated that in the year 1842, two to three thousand persons had received direct assistance from the organization. Other organizations working to address kidnapping, such as the New York State Committee of Vigilance, announced that over one hundred and sixty people had been assisted between 1847-1848. The NYCV and others monitored cases involving kidnappings such as Hester Jane Carr and Stephen Dickerson and one involving a New York Army regiment. As late as 1863, two members of New York’s 99<sup>th</sup> Regiment were arrested for “capturing stray contrabands whenever a fair opportunity offered, and selling them to parties who run them South.”<sup>9</sup> The soldiers stationed in Norfolk kidnapped a free black man who later managed to free himself from his captures and alert authorities. Rumors of other kidnappings by soldiers had spread throughout the community, but until the apprehension of the soldiers from the 99<sup>th</sup> Regiment, no persons had been identified. The editors of the *Liberator* found it difficult to comprehend the motives of soldiers who betrayed the very people willing to provide intelligence and assistance to the

---

<sup>7</sup> *The First Annual Report of the New York Committee of Vigilance for the Year 1837* (New York, 1837), 84.

<sup>8</sup> *Fifth Annual Report of the New York Committee of Vigilance, For the Year 1842* (New York, 1842), 38.

<sup>9</sup> "Kidnapping Contrabands," *The Liberator*, March 27, 1863.

military. This kind of injustice had been fought by vigilance organizations throughout the country. By the time of this incident, the vigilance organizations in New York City had battled kidnappers for almost thirty years.

### **Constructing Black Vigilance**

By the 1830s, several northern states had ended slavery, but the gradual processes of freedom integrated lengthy indentures that kept some blacks in New York and New Jersey “locked in bondage or other forms of servitude until the mid-nineteenth century and beyond.”<sup>10</sup> Free blacks began to establish themselves as independent people, but many limitations to that freedom existed. Whites found black independence disturbing and often exhibited hostility towards the community. This antagonism led to discriminatory practices, violent acts and the enactment of legislation aimed at maintaining pre-emancipation social order. Emancipation in New York had not been enacted swiftly and the ideologies that proliferated within this slave society would not be easily be erased. Similar to maroon settlements, free blacks throughout the North as well as in New York City were literally under attack.

The community of African descent in antebellum New York City consisted of the free born, freed slaves and those who had stolen their own liberty. A number of African American New Yorkers were free southerners that willingly or unwillingly fled the South as laws changed to eliminate free blacks from southern states. As well, formerly enslaved and free blacks from the hinterlands of New York and New Jersey migrated to the area in search of opportunities and anonymity. Most lived on the fringes of society, subjected to the worst housing conditions in

---

<sup>10</sup> Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African American Slaves*, (Cambridge: Harvard College, 2003),104.

the city, experiencing frequent unemployment, job discrimination, as well as, racially motivated attacks. Through ingenuity, education and perhaps good fortune, some blacks elevated themselves beyond the status of the average African American in New York. Despite their successes, these blacks were no less susceptible to the anti-black devices of whites just as the poorest in the community. Testimonies of racially motivated attacks would come from some of the most prominent black families of New York. In addition, David Ruggles, Secretary of the New York Committee Vigilance (NYCV) argued that "...kidnapping was so extensive that no colored man is safe, be his age or condition in life what it may—by the sea and land, in slave states, or in those where colored men are considered free, in all the varied occupations of life they are exposed to the horrors of slavery.”<sup>11</sup>

Fugitive slaves gravitated to northern communities and cities and towns. In New York City self-emancipated slaves hid in plain sight among others in the black community. According to Dr. James McCune Smith, noted physician and abolitionist, self-emancipated blacks moved to cities in search of education. According to Smith, rural areas offered almost no opportunities for blacks to become educated. Smith explains that fugitives placed themselves in danger of recapture because “so deeply did they feel the want of education in themselves, that they would run all risks, make any sacrifice to secure it.”<sup>12</sup> Secondly, Smith suggests that the rural districts offered no more safety to the fugitive than the city and perhaps offered even less security than the urban environment. The fugitive slave, Harriet Jacobs found refuge in New York City, but wrote that she lived in a perpetual state of unease and fear in the city. Jacobs writes in her memoir, “What a disgrace to a city calling itself free, that inhabitants, guiltless of

---

<sup>11</sup> *The First Annual Report of the New York Committee of Vigilance for the Year 1837* (New York, 1837), 7

<sup>12</sup> Henry Highland Garnet & James McCune Smith, *A Memorial Discourse*, (Joseph M. Wilson Publishing, 1865), 27

offense, and seeking to perform their duties conscientiously, should be condemned to live in such incessant fear, and have no where to turn for protection.”<sup>13</sup> Afraid to walk the streets of New York City, Harriet Jacobs secluded herself inside the home in which she worked unless she was compelled to run errands. Jacobs writes that she used back routes and byways whenever she travelled the city for fear of kidnappers.

By 1830 the city of New York grew rapidly and the population nearly doubled from figures in 1820. Out of the population of 202,589 living throughout the burgeoning metropolis, the black community ranged from 13,976 – 14,953.<sup>14</sup> New York did not officially segregate its communities; however, census data reveals dwellings separated by race. Blacks in New York lived together, most often clustered in neighborhoods amongst white laborers. Steven Hahn contends that the residential clustering of free blacks and fugitives “served as the basis of social networks, of vital communication” that linked blacks across rural districts and to those that remained in slavery.<sup>15</sup> The black community in Manhattan was quite mobile due to a multiplicity of issues including maintaining employment and discrimination. Most often blacks took residence in the cellars of buildings, reminiscent of their days in slavery. The damp and dark conditions within the cellars encouraged the spread of diseases that disproportionately affected the African American communities. After emancipation, those who were not working as “live-in domestics, avoided settling in areas near the eastern tip of Manhattan, where the

---

<sup>13</sup> Linda Brent (Harriet Jacobs), *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, editor. Lydia Maria Francis Child (Boston, 1861), 287

<sup>14</sup> Jane E. Dabel, *A Respectable Woman: The Public Roles of African American Women in 19th-century New York*, (New York: NYU Press, 2008), 14-15, "Table," *The Colored American* (New York), March 25, 1837.

<sup>15</sup> Steven Hahn, *The Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 31

majority of slaveholding whites lived.”<sup>16</sup> African Americans, especially the laboring class, continually searched for better accommodations, although many remained in the same neighborhoods for years. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, leases expired each year on the first day of May. “Moving Day” afforded both black and white New Yorkers with an opportunity to find better accommodations, but “black leaders throughout northern cities argued that high rates of moving led to unstable black communities.”<sup>17</sup>

With each passing decade, black New Yorkers moved into wards further north. By the time the black community began organizing for protection against kidnapping in the 1830s, fourteen percent of the population lived in the Fifth Ward located on the lower Westside of Manhattan below Canal Street. Many of the organizations that would empower this community, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, Abyssinian Baptist Church, Phoenix Hall and its associated schools, as well as, the literary organization, The Philomathean Society based their operations in the Fifth Ward as well.<sup>18</sup> The Philomathean Society sponsored lectures, readings and debates for the black community. About 12.5 percent of the black population lived in the Sixth Ward, the Five Points district that gained a reputation for crime, disorder and unhealthy conditions. In this ward, the St. Philip’s Episcopal Church had been erected as well as The New York African Society for Mutual Relief (NYASMR).<sup>19</sup> The African Society collected funds to help its sick or widowed membership. It also helped to defray the cost of burials for its members. The NYASMR hall at 42 Orange Street served as more than just a meetinghouse; it became a

---

<sup>16</sup> Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 74

<sup>17</sup> Jane E. Dabel, *A Respectable Woman, the Public Roles of African American Women in 19th-Century New York* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 24.

<sup>18</sup> "Table," *The Colored American* (New York), March 25, 1837.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

sanctuary for fugitive slaves with a “secret room said to be the length of the building.”<sup>20</sup> By 1835, over eighteen percent of the black population still lived on the Westside of Manhattan, but moved further north into the Eighth ward. With few institutions of their own in this area, blacks connected to religious and social organizations would have to travel to the older neighborhoods.

Steven Hahn maintains that nineteenth century northern blacks, such as those in New York City, lived within “besieged” communities. “And what organized that besieging world was not just racism, not just tempers of hostility and hatred. What organized that world was slavery.”<sup>21</sup> All Blacks, whether slave or free, were often perceived as property. The “enclaves of fugitives and free blacks... were the anomalies in a nation in which people of African descent were presumed to be slaves and in which the claims of slaveholders were generally conceded by courts and legislatures.”<sup>22</sup> Repeated reports of kidnappings happened in Buffalo, Boston, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Chicago, New York City, Rochester, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. African Americans living in states closest to the southern border experienced a high degree of peril. “Kidnapping was highly profitable and relatively free of risk; once shanghaied blacks landed in the South, who would believe their claims, unsupported by documentation that they were free?”<sup>23</sup> Even in the case of those thought to be fugitives, only a fortunate few are thought to have received some semblance of justice.

---

<sup>20</sup> Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 857.

<sup>21</sup> Steven Hahn, *The Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 34.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 34

<sup>23</sup> Shane White, *Stories of Freedom in Black New York*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 25



“For the majority of free blacks living in the United States between 1788 and 1860, kidnapping was a serious danger, one which many were forced to confront at some time in their lives. Forcible abduction was common, as was tricking or luring a person into captivity. Other means of forcing free blacks into slavery included failure of a former master to abide by manumission agreements and the sale of imprisoned free blacks for payment of jail fees or other debts.”<sup>24</sup>

With the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825, New York City became a major commercial city and shipping port. A constant stream of vessels headed throughout the world made possible the process of stealing away free blacks and swiftly returning fugitives to their owners. Black vigilance committees developed during the 1830s when the cotton agricultural boom produced a need for an enlarged slave labor force. Planters with slaves in the Chesapeake and low country areas transported some slaves to the lower South, but others “depended upon smugglers, kidnapers, and traders to build their labor force.”<sup>25</sup> During the 1830s, the United States became the cotton producer of the world. As planters settled throughout the low country and westward to generate wealth in the cotton business the demand to quickly create a labor force assured a high market price for slaves. Although selling slaves, whether imported illegally from Africa or the Caribbean or by kidnapping free blacks, proved to be a profitable venture, “neither smuggling Africans nor kidnapping African Americans could satisfy the demand for laborers...and provided just a small fraction of the plantation labor force.”<sup>26</sup> Even if kidnapping did not solve the labor issues of the plantation, slave catchers continued their work and kidnapers continued to be a threat to free blacks. Along with the rising cost of slaves, slaveholders became increasingly aggressive in their quest to have runaway slaves returned.

---

<sup>24</sup> Carol Wilson, *Active Vigilance is the Price of Liberty: Black Self-Defense Against Fugitive Recapture and Kidnapping of Free Blacks* (University Press of Kentucky), 1999 in John R. McKivigan & Stanley Harrold, *Antislavery Violence: Sectional, Racial, and Cultural Conflict in Antebellum America*, (University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 110.

<sup>25</sup> Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African American Slaves*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 166-167

<sup>26</sup> Ibid

New York Commerce depended upon business with the South. Planters in need of cash to purchase new lands or to extend their businesses until crops sold found funding through New York banks. Products and raw materials developed with slave labor were at the center of industry in New York. New Yorkers thrived upon markets that interconnected or depended upon slavery. They also enjoyed the products made by slaves such as sugar, molasses, cotton fabrics, rice and indigo. Some residents of the city happened to be residents of the South who brought slaves “temporarily” into New York City. This loophole in the law allowed for slave owners to travel through New York with slaves and live temporarily in the “free” state while holding slaves. New York was no longer a slave state but continued to be irrefutably linked to the South and to slavery. Considering the relationship of New York powerbrokers and merchants to the South, free independent blacks were viewed with disdain by many white New Yorkers. Even white abolitionists who believed that no human being should be held as another’s property, differed regarding the issue of people of African descent as full citizens and equals.

Within the New York City legal system there existed southern sympathizers and those apathetic to the plight of blacks arrested as fugitives or those kidnapped. Some held the African American community in utmost contempt, making it difficult for blacks to have the law applied fairly in most cases. In later years, leaders involved with the New York Committee of Vigilance complained that they could not trust city recorder, Richard Riker who presided over fugitive slave cases. New York judges had been known to be dismissive of leaders attempting to obtain writs to save blacks held captive on southern bound ships. But all too often, slave agents sent their captives to the South before anyone could be notified to aid in their defense. Even with the opportunity to have a hearing, documents disclosing the free status of a black person could be

destroyed by the slave-catcher or deemed fraudulent by the authorities. Claimants sometimes paid white sympathizers to make claims supporting that the captive had been held as a slave. A black person would have to depend upon another white person to corroborate their free status. Normally, only the testimony of whites had any bearing in these decisions.

Certain numbers of the black community recognized that they must organize to advance the goal of ending kidnapping, to attain full freedom and citizenship. The vigilance organizations became an outgrowth of the early ad hoc efforts to protect African American communities. According to historian Graham Russell Hodges, “The Committee of Vigilance grew out of the street brawls between slave catchers and blacks defending runaways.”<sup>27</sup> Community leaders or individuals with more resources than the average black citizen, be it educational or monetary, ran black vigilance organizations. These organizations sought the support of legal experts associated with the white-run abolitionist associations, such as the New York Manumission Society. Over the years, the small population of blacks became dependent upon the white abolition organizations, but could not officially become members. During the 1830s, abolitionist organizations began to accept the membership of some blacks, and the African American community began to support the work constructively.

Organizers of the New York Committee of Vigilance understood their white sympathizers to be “cordial” but not enthusiastic about the mission of their organization or completely apprehensive and fearful about the undertaking. Many “friends” to the Committee found their “attempts as not

---

<sup>27</sup> Graham Russell Hodges, *Root & Branch: African Americans in New York & East Jersey, 1613-1863* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 246

only hazardous, but hopeless.”<sup>28</sup> Though white abolitionists sympathized with the plight of kidnapping free blacks, they mostly concerned themselves with general emancipation. The New York Manumission Society had a longstanding policy that explains the organization’s stance regarding kidnappings. Members had concerns for the maintenance of the law and slavery happened to be an enforceable law. An 1809 Manumission Society report maintained:

“...we should suffer no one to linger in slavery whom the laws have pronounced free...we should never outstrip the laws by making inroads into private right... Hence the first object is to give perfection to our statutes regulating slavery, and the next to see their emancipating provisions strictly and equitably enforced.”<sup>29</sup>

Abolitionists believed that kidnapping would “only end with slavery itself: destroy the market and you destroy the trader.”<sup>30</sup> The New York Manumission Society was the local organization taking legal action against kidnapers, and circulating information in the black community, but David Ruggles, Secretary of the New York Committee of Vigilance (NYCV), later insisted upon much more aggressive action. When possible, Ruggles would take extralegal action if working within the law failed. The fact that the black community was under siege required an active by-any-means-necessary approach. Ruggles and the NYCV alerted the black community to dangers, kept watch on the docks for ships with black captives aboard, confronted kidnapers, and pushed for jury trials in fugitive slave cases. Working exclusively to change the law destined many free black people to slavery and assured the return of fugitive slaves. This new radical black thinking corresponds with the maroon analogy. The enclaves of oppressed people in New York resorted to extreme measures due to the perpetual attacks against their community.

---

<sup>28</sup> *The First Annual Report of the New York Committee of Vigilance for the Year 1837* (New York, 1837), 5

<sup>29</sup> American Convention Minutes, 1809 Meeting (Philadelphia: Bouvier, 1809), pg. 7 as quoted in Carol Wilson, *Freedom at Risk: The Kidnapping of Free Blacks in America-1780-1865* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 97

<sup>30</sup> Henry Highland Garnet & James McCune Smith, *A Memorial Discourse*, (Joseph M. Wilson Publishing, 1865), 27

The New York Committee of Vigilance For The Protection of The People of Color (NYCV) officially organized on November 20, 1835 by friends of “Human Rights.” This group consisted of many prominent blacks in the community and a few whites that did not fear the group’s mission. The organization came in response to repeated reports of kidnappings and fugitive slave captures. The organizers of the NYCV believed that the rising cost of slaves was causing the increase in kidnappings. One of the major goals of the group was to ascertain the number of kidnappings in the city for a complete understanding of the impact upon the black community. During the first meeting the organization made it clear that “any colored person within this State is liable to be arrested as a fugitive from slavery and put upon his defense to prove his freedom, and that any *such* person thus arrested is denied the *right of trial by jury*...”<sup>31</sup> David Ruggles, William Johnston, Robert Brown, George R. Barker and J.W. Higgins comprised the NYCV’s first Executive Committee. Later, other prominent members of the African American community would join including: Theodore S. Wright, the first African American graduate of an American theological seminary (Princeton), minister of the First Presbyterian Church on Prince Street and agent of the New York Underground Railroad; Thomas Vanrensselaer, owner of the restaurant, the Temperance House, and an active abolitionist and former slave from the Mohawk Valley; and Samuel E. Cornish, Presbyterian Minister and Editor of America’s first black newspaper, *The Freedman’s Journal* as well as *The Colored American* newspaper.

The philosophy of these men varied from the conservative Cornish to the more moderate Vanrensselaer to the more deeply radical vision held by the younger David Ruggles. Theodore S. Wright used his home on White Street in Lower Manhattan as a safe haven for self-emancipated slaves, worked with other blacks in this network such as abolitionist Charles B. Ray and both

---

<sup>31</sup> *The First Annual Report of the New York Committee of Vigilance for the Year 1837* (New York, 1837), 3

helped remove refugees to Canada. Ray, Cornish and Wright believed deeply in nonresistance and moral reform. Their ideas regarding tactics and methods over the life of the NYCV would contrast deeply with the fiery and militant David Ruggles. Though the leadership of this organization derived from a cross section of the better-educated and more affluent community, without the efforts of blacks on the ground level the work of the Committee would not have been possible.

In New York, the common black citizenry sustained The New York Committee of Vigilance (NYCV). This group of poor laborers could be called upon to support the formal organization, but also acted informally, sometimes mobilizing to rescue blacks from authorities, often to the displeasure of black leadership. While the New York communities offered some sanctuary, a great element of danger existed, as those who made fugitive slave catching and kidnapping their business understood the city to be ripe with possibilities. David Ruggles, Secretary of the organization, made it clear to readers of *The Liberator* that the time had come for the African American community to take their problems into their own hands. Ruggles wrote, “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.” Ruggles happened to be the most outspoken and radical of the NYCV members. Considered brash by some, he had an aggressive and bold manner. Ruggles beckoned the black community to adopt a vigorous and more radical form of self-defense. Within the pages of *The Liberator* he instructed readers that, “... we must look to our own safety and protection from kidnappers; remembering that [self-defence] is the first law of nature.”<sup>32</sup> Ruggles stressed

---

<sup>32</sup> “Kidnapping in the City of New York,” *The Liberator*, (Boston) August 6, 1836.

further that the black community must develop a “remedy” and apply that “remedy” whenever required. Ruggles urged people of African descent to organize for direct resistance. Awakening the political consciousness of the entire black community became critical to the success of black vigilance as a movement. David Ruggles had an objective to persuade and induce ‘his depressed countrymen” to not only become conscious but to actively engage in their own protection.

Similar to the maroon societies, self-reliance would be the ideological cornerstone of the movement. Yet, total self-reliance would be virtually impossible in combating kidnappings and fugitive slave captures. The black community had to rely upon the legal expertise of white lawyers attached to the local abolitionist organizations. Throughout the life of the organization, the NYCV found support from sympathetic friends, Isaac T. Hopper, William Lloyd Garrison, Arthur and Lewis Tappan, as well as, attorneys William Jay, Barney Corse and Horace Dresser.

Monthly public meetings became an opportunity to discuss the work, progress and failures of the New York Committee of Vigilance. The group shared information regarding kidnappings and fugitive slave seizures with the community. In addition, meetings served as a vehicle to boost the membership of the NYCV and to raise funds. An article in *The Colored American* announced the March 13, 1837 meeting held at Phoenix Hall on Chapel Street in the Fifth Ward of Manhattan. This location had great meaning, as the development of the Phoenix Hall had been an outgrowth of the Phoenix Society formed by the African American community’s men of stature and their white friends. Christopher Rush, Boston Crummell, Rev. Theodore S. Wright, and Thomas Jinnings were leaders of the organization while Arthur Tappan, along with his

brother Lewis, subsidized the endeavor until 1837.<sup>33</sup> The Phoenix Society opened “a library, reading rooms, held book discussion and a course of lectures.” As well, the organization “formed subordinate ward societies” to promote literacy, “urge the benefits of education and intellectual development.”<sup>34</sup> The New York Committee of Vigilance used a similar strategy as the ward societies to raise funds throughout the community. Certainly the NYCV benefitted from its alliance with the Phoenix Society since undoubtedly frequenters of Society activities would have found the work of the NYCV of importance. The Phoenix Society gained a reputation for its anti-slavery activities and this may have been due to a certain extent from its relationship with the NYCV and to its members such as abolitionists Arthur Tappan, Theodore S. Wright and Thomas Downing and Phillip A. Bell.

Friends and family members gathered at the March 13<sup>th</sup> meeting to learn about the latest victims of kidnappings. The leadership reported that Thomas Bryan, a free young boy from the City, had been “confined to prison at Vicksburgh, Mississippi” and was scheduled “to be sold for his jail fees.”<sup>35</sup> A man named Thomas Oliver had also been sold as a slave in New Orleans. A distraught family looked for more information about an eight or nine year old “mulatto boy” named John Robinson Welch, missing since February of that year. These stories had become familiar to the hundreds and at times thousands of blacks along with some whites that met in the Phoenix Hall, the Broadway Tabernacle, Zion African Methodist Episcopal Church and other New York meeting places in support of the NYCV.

---

<sup>33</sup> Jane H. Pease & William H. Pease, *They Who Would Be Free: Blacks Search for Freedom, 1830-1861*, (University of Illinois Press, 1990), 135.

<sup>34</sup> Craig Steven Wilder, *In the Company of Black men: the African Influence on African American Culture in New York City*, (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 130.

<sup>35</sup> “Important Meeting of the New York Committee of Vigilance.” *The Colored American*, (New York), March 11, 1837.



## **Awake! Beware of these Slave-catchers!**

The New York newspaper, *The Colored American*, like its predecessor, *Freedom's Journal*, played a large part in informing the African American community about slavery, kidnapping and fugitive slave-hunting, as did William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator* and Frederick Douglass' *The North Star*. Reporting and circulating information to the community was a key component of black vigilance and self-defense. Within maroon societies the circulation of information was vital to its defense. African Americans in New York developed the first black newspaper in the country to educate, enlighten and inform the community. Other journals would follow and in addition, leaders utilized abolitionist papers published by others to communicate inside and outside of their community.

Reverend Samuel Cornish, Phillip Bell and Charles Bennett Ray published *The Colored American* from 1836 to 1842. Each of these men engaged heavily in abolition work. Also an NYCV member, Charles Bennett Ray was so widely known as an agent of the Underground Railroad that self-emancipated blacks often found their way to his home for aid. Reportedly one summer morning, fourteen fugitives arrived at one time to the Ray home. An article in *The Colored American* reported that The New York Committee of Vigilance had been formed in 1836 to "protect defenseless and unoffending persons against kidnapping and other oppressions to which their color subjects them from courts, civil officer and land pirates..."<sup>36</sup> During David Ruggles' term as Secretary of the NYCV, he wrote many articles informing the public of the activities of kidnapers, slave catchers, judges, city officials and others who aided in the

---

<sup>36</sup> "The New York Vigilance Committee." *The Colored American* (New York), April 8, 1837.

shipping of free and self-emancipated blacks to the South.

The NYCV utilized the pages of black and abolitionist papers to communicate the activities of slave hunters and to warn African Americans about suspicious persons. One such notice appeared in the November 2, 1836 edition of the *Emancipator*. The article warned the community against dealings with David Holliday, a Southern slave working with slave agents to betray children, men, and women into slavery. Intelligence information concluded that Holliday assisted the slave hunters in an attempt to purchase his own freedom. Within the same notice appeared a warning that John Wallace of Staten Island had attempted to steal a woman named Eliza Drumblings by “betraying her with a kiss.” While Eliza was in hiding, Wallace obtained an order and took her possessions estimated at over one hundred dollars. Wallace’s co-conspirator was also a black man, named Ned Shores of Philadelphia who had a number of aliases.

*The Colored American* “cautioned against trusting a man by the name of C.V. CAPLES, late from Boston. He is a mulatto, and sometimes passes for a Spaniard Beware of him.”<sup>37</sup>

Communication was a vital element within the black vigilance movement and is the component that connected free, fugitive and slave. In later years, the NYCV would cite providing communications as one of the organizations important services. Agents worked to provide information to the relatives of northern free persons still enslaved in the south. This vital communication provided the information needed to escape slavery. The NYCV became “...the

---

<sup>37</sup> "Caution," *The Colored American* (New York), May 27, 1837.

medium of communication between them and their friends in the South...”<sup>38</sup> As Steven Hahn suggests, communication, whether rumor, ideas or intelligence, moved back and forth between the fugitive communities in the North and the slave communities in the South. Slaves gained knowledge about “the fugitive settlements where semblances of freedom were to be had, about allies, white and black who spoke and mobilized against slavery...”<sup>39</sup>

Ruggles fearlessly boarded ships in the New York harbor in search of black captives or for signs of participants in the illegal slave trade. He published a list of Northern actors who he believed participated in the kidnapping of free blacks. He assisted fugitives to safety and guided them on to points North or to freedom in Canada. He along with others in the vigilance network petitioned for jury trials in the cases of those arrested as fugitives. This work would not have been possible without the efforts of the black community on the ground level. The unnamed men and women passed along intelligence, fed, clothed and helped to shelter fugitives. They also reached into their shallow pockets to financially support the movement. The NYCV depended upon informants who as they went about their daily lives took note of suspicious activities and people. The men who worked the wharves had special access to ships moving in and out New York’s harbors. They could provide critical information regarding blacks captured and spirited upon ships headed south and to plantation societies outside of mainland North America. Women working in domestic capacities that moved about the city carrying out errands or who worked in hotels and boardinghouses provided vital information regarding distrustful visitors to the city or overheard conversations. New York’s clustered communities of color became a conduit for information to pass throughout the neighborhoods and they increasingly

---

<sup>38</sup> *The Fifth Annual Report of the New York Committee of Vigilance for the Year of 1842* (New York, May 1842), 38

<sup>39</sup> Steven Hahn, *The Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 48.

became magnets for the self-emancipated that secreted themselves amongst the urban black population.

The blackbirders had proslavery whites on their side and could occasionally coerce unscrupulous blacks into luring unsuspecting targets into danger. Peter John Lee of Greenwich, Connecticut was lured by a black man to a rendezvous point in Westchester County, New York. Upon arrival, the “New York Kidnapping Club” as the black community referred to the men, subsequently gagged, chained and transported him to the South.<sup>40</sup> The kidnapping club’s membership included the infamous Daniel Nash, Tobias Boudinot, “John Lyon, and two Virginians, Edward R. Waddy, a Deputy Sheriff from Northampton and F. H. Pettis, an Orange County lawyer.”<sup>41</sup> The group gained a reputation for “re-enslaving fugitives as well as enslaving some free blacks. Nash, Waddy, Lyon and Pettis acted individually or in concert as agents for slave owners, advertising their services in southern newspapers and seizing suspected fugitives on the streets of New York.”<sup>42</sup> Tobias Boudinot, a former butcher became the Third Ward constable of the City of New York and acquired the nickname “The Negro Catcher” from the black community because of his ties to the kidnapping club. As Constable, Boudinot was empowered by a requisition given to him by William L. Marcy, Governor of the State of New York that gave Boudinot the right to arrest black persons that “Waddy may point out to him named Jesse, Abraham, Peter or Silvia and send him or her South, without taking such a person before a magistrate...”<sup>43</sup> Needless to say, any black person that became a target would fit the

---

<sup>40</sup> Peter C. Ripley, *The Black Abolitionist Papers, The United States, 1830-1846*, (University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 180

<sup>41</sup> Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 201

<sup>42</sup> Ibid

<sup>43</sup> *The First Annual Report of the New York Committee of Vigilance for the Year 1837* (New York, 1837), 76

description of the alleged fugitive.

The NYCVC had to endure the cost of secluding, clothing, feeding, transporting and communicating with self-emancipated blacks. Legal fees also had to be raised for the kidnapped that were fortunate enough to be afforded a hearing. In addition, the NYCVC needed to pay the small stipends allotted to the agents of the organization, which most often was David Ruggles. Funds for the NYCVC came in large part from the penny program organized by women involved with the organization. The women organized themselves to collect one penny per week from a group of friends<sup>44</sup> and were referred to as the Effective Committee. Each fundraiser kept a book of donations to track payments and pledges. Those who could pay more would do so. The ladies invited “twelve persons from whom they would collect a penny or more...bringing the total of participants involved to more than one thousand.”<sup>45</sup> The ability to fulfill this role must have been quite empowering for black women during this period. Within the first year, the NYCVC reported that the “principal part of the subscriptions”<sup>46</sup> derived from the fundraising efforts of the ladies.

Participation in the Effective Committee gave women an important role to play despite the fact that women were not permitted to take part in the organizational leadership. Within their own neighborhoods, associations or churches, black women had the opportunity to become an integral part of the cause. Outside of collecting funds, these women spread the news concerning the work of the NYCVC, warned other women about the dangers to their families and collected vital

---

<sup>44</sup> *The First Annual Report of the New York Committee of Vigilance for the Year 1837* (New York, 1837), 84

<sup>45</sup> Graham Russell Hodges, *David Ruggles: A Radical Black Abolitionist and the Underground Railroad in New York City*, (UNC Press Books, 2010), 89

<sup>46</sup> *The First Annual Report of the New York Committee of Vigilance for the Year 1837* (New York, 1837), 84

intelligence while in the field. Perhaps information regarding a family's free status and needs would be ascertained. This grassroots organizing allowed women to lead within their own spheres and gain meaning from their active rather than passive participation in the black vigilance movement.

The record regarding the contributions of black women during this period is scant. Victorian women of all races were expected to adhere to traditional gender roles, although most black women never fit neatly into this position. The circumstances of slavery demanded that black women perform difficult labor alongside men. In addition, their lives in freedom often necessitated that they take on the role of head of household, making traditional gender roles impractical. Rev. Samuel Cornish, a member of the NYCV Executive Committee, who undoubtedly had much influence within the organization, "particularly championed gender roles as an aspect of moral reform." Women should be "deferent, unassuming and at home,"<sup>47</sup> wrote Samuel Cornish in *The Colored American* newspaper. In spite of the patriarchal attitudes held by most of the men in the abolitionist movement, David Ruggles proved to be a proponent of women's rights and worked with the African Dorcas Society, a black women's uplift organization. The African Dorcas Society provided proper clothing for poor black children so that they could attend the African Free schools. The African Dorcas Society also provided forums for Ruggles to speak. A few Black women such as Hester Lane, one of the Dorcas Society managers, gained a reputation for operating outside of the prescribed woman's role.

---

<sup>47</sup> *The First Annual Report of the New York Committee of Vigilance for the Year 1837* (New York, 1837), 204

Hester had been enslaved, but by 1830 was listed in the Federal Census as a Free Black Head of Household.<sup>48</sup> An entrepreneur and abolitionist, Lane was responsible for Dorcas fundraisers that benefitted the NYCV. In addition to assistance from the Dorcas Society, “The Colored Ladies Literary Society...did not hesitate to pledge money to help fight for black rights in the city.”<sup>49</sup>

The Effective Committee helped to provide the organization with the much needed funds to conduct its work in providing legal services, disseminating information throughout the black community, providing food, clothing, shelter and safe passage to points north and Canada. In 1838, the NYCV chair, Thomas Van Rensselaer conveyed “The Colored people of the city [are] awake... [I] never saw them pay in their money so freely and so promptly as to this committee. [I suppose] that the reason [is] that this [is] practical abolition.”<sup>50</sup> Local black churches raised funds from the congregations, sponsored fairs and special events all to support the defense of the African American community. Despite their best efforts, the NYCV consistently struggled with finances. As the organization’s reputation grew and the word of their good deeds and trustworthiness circulated throughout and beyond the local enclaves, the number of souls in need of protection increased with each day. Ruggles wrote in the pages of *The Colored American*, “As colored men, we should rather go with one shirt and one coat, than see the Committee fail ... the first claim upon us, after the bread and clothing of our families, is, the protection of our down-trodden fellow-citizens, in their personal liberty.”<sup>51</sup> Ruggles appealed to black men,

---

<sup>48</sup> Alice Eichholz & James M. Rose, *Free Black Heads of Households in the New York State Federal Census, 1790-1830* (Genealogical Publishing Com, 2003), 159

<sup>49</sup> Graham Russell Hodges, *David Ruggles: A Radical Black Abolitionist and the Underground Railroad in New York City*, (Chapel Hill: UNC Press Books, 2010), 83

<sup>50</sup> Leslie, M. Harris, *In The Shadow of Slavery, African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 212

<sup>51</sup> "Office 36 Lispenard Street," *The Colored American* (New York), July 21, 1838.

asking them to take on the responsibility of financing the NYCV by sacrificing as much as possible.

### **In This One Matter Be United!**

People living in maroon settlements had to take direct action to protect themselves from outside attacks. African Americans in New York at times organized impromptu vigilance committees sometimes in direct response to an assault, but at other times as a response to what they viewed as inequality. The case that follows provides us some understanding of the dangers black vigilance agents had to confront. It also demonstrates that ad hoc self-defense groups at times developed as a response to injustice.

During January of 1837, black New Yorkers would be informed that “The New York Kidnapping Club” had attempted to capture one of the most ardent defenders of the black community. David Ruggles experienced issues with kidnapers during his investigation of a Brazilian owned brig called the *Brillante*. The ship reportedly a slaver, docked in New York to be outfitted for an African voyage. Aboard ship, Ruggles found a number of African captives. He received word that several others had already been taken to the South and auctioned. Ruggles believed that the owners and Captain of the *Brillante* had violated the 1808 act prohibiting the importation of slaves into the United States. Ruggles involved the local authorities and caused the arrest of the Captain of the *Brillante*, Joas E. de Souza. This action, in addition to Ruggles publishing the names of Waddy, Nash, Boudinot and Lyon as kidnapers associated with the case of Peter John Lee, clearly angered proslavery forces in New York. An armed Daniel Nash and Tobias Boudinot along with a mate from the *Brillante* and others broke



into Ruggles' home in an attempt to arrest him, but he eluded the gang. The next day, Ruggles visited City Hall to pay Nash a visit or to make a statement. But Tobias Boudinot arrested Ruggles under the pretense that he had boarded the brig *Brillante* one night to free the Africans, assaulted the Captain of the *Brillante* and incited a riot. Friends subsequently bailed Ruggles out of jail. After this incident, it remained his contention that the "Kidnapping Club" had planned to send him South with the southern slave agent Edward R. Waddy, who sailed for the South hours after the attempted kidnapping. Ruggles maintained that he and the NYCV had no role in any disturbance aboard the *Brillante*.

The NYCV often attempted to use the writ of habeas corpus, a judicial mandate requiring prisoners to be produced in court. In the matter of the *Brillante* captives, the NYCV requested the writ in an attempt to obtain a hearing, which was not required under the law. The 1793 Fugitive Slave Law sanctioned slave owners or their agents to apprehend suspected fugitives from slavery in any territory, to hold them and allowed for the return of these individuals without due process of the law. Proof of one's status, as a slave was not required. The law also did not provide for jury trials. A local magistrate heard cases, made final decisions and there was not an appeal process. After several attempts to compel authorities for a hearing, local magistrates sided with the Brazilians and sent the Africans back to the ship where a life of slavery surely awaited. Enraged by the injustice, Black New Yorkers once again had to accept another loss. Though not Americans, the community recognized that these wrongs had an effect upon all black people. In response to the order of the court, some in the community organized a party of "colored men to rescue some of the slaves from onboard the vessel."<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> *The First Annual Report of the New York Committee of Vigilance for the Year 1837* (New York, 1837), 47

The group that descended upon the brig *Brillante* exemplifies the ad hoc organizing that developed in response to kidnapping attempts.

“Black mobs openly battled illegal seizures and on several occasions in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century blacks working with the New York Manumission Society rescued blacks enslaved by kidnapers. Riots against slave catchers first happened after the Revolution and continued into the early national period and then into the 1820s.”<sup>53</sup>

The black community at times utilized self-defense tactics rejected as a rule by the conservative members of the leadership, such as Samuel Cornish. These conservative leaders believed that the African American community should follow their daily routines and not gather at hearings, thus allowing those in the leadership of the movement to act. Any woman that became involved in these mass gatherings especially appalled Rev. Cornish. Groups of African Americans had been known to crowd outside of hearings, to cause disturbances and to assist arrested blacks in escaping from their captives.

During 1837, the NYCV became involved with a fugitive slave case involving William Dixon. This case proved to be an important step towards gaining the first personal liberty laws that secured alleged fugitives the privilege of the writ of habeas corpus and a trial by jury. This case created a tremendous amount of interest amongst both black and white New Yorkers. It also offered the community of African descent and opportunity to defend one of its own. The large gathering outside of the court house reportedly swelled to over a thousand and provided cover for supporters to pass on a “ a large dirk and a Spanish knife.” Dixon made his escape, but was

---

<sup>53</sup> Graham Russell Hodges, *David Ruggles: A Radical Black Abolitionist and the Underground Railroad in New York City*, (Chapel Hill: UNC Press Books, 2010), 36

recaptured. "Several men and women were seized and thrown into prison for aiding him to escape, and for concealing him; though no violence was done to any one..."<sup>54</sup>

Black New Yorkers may not have won this particular battle, but they had organized and worked together to protect one of their own. They had asserted themselves and heeded the call of David Ruggles to take control of their own destiny and develop their own "remedy." As equally important as helping their fellow brethren, was the message this action conveyed to mainstream New Yorkers. The black community although oppressed and living in fear, at times acted aggressively. Conservative African Americans found the riot embarrassing. Cornish called the riots "disgraceful" and declared that "illiterate people...congregated together under circumstance of great excitement lose self-government, and become mere subjects of passion." Cornish's generation of men believed equal rights for blacks could only be achieved through temperance, moral reform, education and nonresistance.

The New York Committee of Vigilance published the organization's first annual report for the year of 1837, and announced that they had raised nearly \$840 dollars to support their work. Although their fundraising had been successful, the organization completed the year in debt. Funds were use to cover fees for lawyers, to provide food, clothing, shelter and transportation for fugitives. The NYCV also spent funds to recover blacks detained in the South and pursued the recovery of property owed to blacks due to bequeaths from whites. Fundraising was complicated by a financial panic that gripped the nation and the financial capital of New York City. Arthur and Lewis Tappan, financial supporters of abolition causes, lost their importing business during

---

<sup>54</sup> "Kidnapping in New York," *The Liberator* (Boston), April 21, 1837.

this crisis. As New York City dealt with a financial crisis, the NYCV had more difficulty raising much-needed funds.

As cotton planters struggled, plantations failed and enslaved blacks were sold to meet debts. Historians argue that “the need for cash, the opening of the Texas slave market, and the high price of cotton pushed the numbers of kidnappings to higher and more brazen levels.”<sup>55</sup> The New York Committee of Vigilance agreed that the financial times promoted the crime of stealing men and women. Speculators asked as much as “two thousand dollars a head for able bodied slaves in Florida.”<sup>56</sup> The financial times and greed continued to fuel the kidnapping and fugitive slave hunting.

Consistent with notions regarding independence within maroon communities, those active in New York Black Vigilance and abolition at times dealt with a potential criminal case involving a member of their own community. The Hester Lane case gives power to the notion that northern societies of freed and fugitive people attempted self-governance much like southern maroons. However, this case also illustrates the limitations of this control, as the masses did not always support decisions made by the leadership. In late January of 1838, a “Committee of Investigation” with Samuel Hardenburgh appointed as Chair, met at the home of David Ruggles to investigate accusations that Mrs. Hester Lane, an African American woman, had participated in the kidnapping and sale of slaves. Hardenburgh’s selection as Chair may have been due to his prominent leadership in African American celebrations and his work in the Conventions of Free Colored People, an organization that opposed the African Colonization Society. Black

---

<sup>55</sup> Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 502-4 as quoted in Graham Russell Hodges, *David Ruggles: A Radical Black Abolitionist and the Underground Railroad in New York City*, (Chapel Hill: UNC Press Books, 2010), 104

<sup>56</sup> *The First Annual Report of the New York Committee of Vigilance for the Year 1837* (New York, 1837), 75

leaders Samuel Cornish and Edward V. Clark attended. Thomas Downing, Theodore S. Wright both active agents of the Underground Railroad and other influential members of the community were present. Rather than involve law enforcement, the local leadership handled the inquiry of the charges into Mrs. Lane's activities.

Hester Lane gained a reputation as a successful businesswoman due to "discovering a new mode of coloring walls."<sup>57</sup> In 1828, Lane is listed in the New York Directory as a whitewasher living at 33 Sullivan Street. Perhaps, Lane learned how to add pigments to her whitewash, creating colored wash for walls. Also acknowledged in abolitionist circles as a philanthropist, she purchased slaves for the purpose of emancipating them. Lane had also been enslaved, possibly in Maryland, where all of her purchases of enslaved blacks had taken place. At the inquiry, both Mrs. Lane and Martha Johnson, the party that allegedly accused Lane of kidnapping, participated in the meeting. "Mrs. Johnson denied having any knowledge of, or participation in the slanderous report, and she declared her willingness to testify to the same, in any public meeting that might be called in this city."<sup>58</sup> Johnson's trouble had begun with a dispute over the premises she rented from Mrs. Lane. After the Investigative Committee made their decision in favor of Mrs. Lane, a letter was written exonerating Hester Lane of the charges and Martha Johnson agreed to make her mark.

In February of 1838, the Investigative Committee held a mass meeting at the Asbury Church to report the findings of the committee. The Asbury Church was located in the Fourteenth Ward

---

<sup>57</sup> E.S. Abdy, *Residence and Tour of the United States of North America: From April, 1833 to October, 1834*, Vol. II, (London, 1835), 32-33

<sup>58</sup> "Slander," *The Colored American* (New York), February 10, 1838.

north of the old Fifth and Sixth Wards where so many of the black population still lived. The Fourteenth Ward neighborhoods had a burgeoning African American community that continued to increase through the turn of the century. Capable of accommodating “twelve to fifteen hundred people, the respectable frame building in Elizabeth Street, located in a desirable part of the city” became the scene of an unexpected melee surrounding Hester Lane. The mass meeting quickly took a disastrous turn given that Martha Johnson did not attend as she had previously agreed. The group dispatched David Ruggles and Theodore S. Wright to Johnson’s home for the expressed purpose of compelling her attendance. However, upon their return to Asbury, the attendees were informed that Mrs. Johnson could not attend due to illness. After the announcement of Lane’s acquittal, “a large portion of the congregation was dissatisfied, and pursued her in the streets.”<sup>59</sup> Convinced that the woman had made a great deal of money from this illicit activity, the group trailed Hester Lane until she took refuge in the “Eldridge Street watch-house.” According to a published account, the two factions heatedly argued over Lane’s guilt or innocence outside the police station. The crowd escalated into quite an agitated state and reportedly desired to “lynch” Lane. After the group caught sight of armed militia returning from drills, they dispersed.

Following the mass meeting debacle, the committee published its report and the letter stating Lane’s innocence in *The Colored American*. It was clearly an attempt to persuade the black community that the charges had been false and that the committee had properly fulfilled its duties. The published report stated, “The Committee on the false and slanderous charges, made against Mrs. Lane, have thoroughly investigated the subject, and found her to be an innocent and

---

<sup>59</sup> "At one of the African Churches up Town, a trial," *The Colored American*, February 10, 1838.

injured woman.”<sup>60</sup> The group resolved that those responsible for spreading the rumor should garner public reprimand.

Steven Hahn cites rumor as a fundamental component of slave and freed politics. Rumor “enabled organization and solidarity,”<sup>61</sup> yet in this case, the large cohesive and spirited group was empowered by the rumor that charged one of their own with profiting from kidnapping. Hahn argues that highly repressed people depended upon rumor and often gave credence to this “energizing and politicizing,” discursive practice. Once again, against the judgment of black leadership, an impromptu vigilance group formed to provide their own brand of justice. Distrust due to issues of class also may have fueled the disagreement and influenced the rebellion.

The struggles of the movement would eventually take a toll on Ruggles’ health. He had sacrificed more of himself than anyone. He had experienced multiple stints in jail and had been beaten by slave agents. Funds became quite problematic as the NYCV had more people seeking assistance from the organization than they could handle financially. During this time, Ruggles began to search for cures for his multiple medical issues and failing eyesight. He seriously considered seeking treatment abroad. To add insult to injury, a very public disagreement with Samuel Cornish over a libel case and with leaders in the NYCV over missing funds further impaired Ruggles and the work of the committee. The libel case arose over accusations that a black man named John Russell, “described as a seaman’s landlord,”<sup>62</sup> had attempted to sell into

---

<sup>60</sup> "Slander," *The Colored American* (New York), February 10, 1838.

<sup>61</sup> Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South, From Slavery to the Great Migration*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 53

<sup>62</sup> Dorothy B. Porter, "David Ruggles, an Apostle of Human Rights," *The Journal of Negro History* 28, no. 1 (January 1943): 23-50, accessed December 31, 2010, JSTOR, 40

slavery three Africans brought from Gambia to New York. Joseph Gavino wrote to David Ruggles that in August of 1836, he was a passenger on a ship bound from New York City to New Orleans and that John Russell had forced the Africans aboard for sale in the South. Gavino described the Africans as having been abused, possessing no money and without clothing. Ruggles investigated and determined the letter and its assertions to be genuine. Ruggles gave the letter to Samuel Cornish to publish and on October of 1837, it ran in *The Colored American* and *The Weekly Advocate*. Cornish later claimed that he published the letter without conducting his own investigation because he trusted Ruggles. Joseph Russell sued *The Colored American* for libel and the paper lost the suit, owing six hundred dollars in fines and court fees. Cornish claimed that the New York Committee of Vigilance and David Ruggles should be accountable for the costs, not *The Colored American*. Neither Ruggles nor the financially struggling NYCV had the ability to pay the fees. The suit began a two-year public disagreement that dissolved working relationships within the black vigilance movement and changed the face of the NYCV.

It was unfortunate that Samuel Cornish chose to wage a battle with David Ruggles through the pages of *The Colored American*. During the disagreement over the lawsuit, Ruggles was also accused of misappropriating \$300 in NYCV funds. Ruggles countered that he had not been paid his appropriate salary over the past two years and denied that he had embezzled funds. NYCV Executive members, Samuel Cornish, George Barker, William P. Johnson, and Theodore S. Wright led the accusations against Ruggles. Due to their public disagreement that became quite vicious, the public learned that Ruggles had considerable more concern for the oppressed than for the accounting records of the organization. He helped those he believed needed financial assistance and undoubtedly was more concerned with advocacy and saving blacks from the grips



of slavery than attending to the NYCV's accounts. Because of the allegations, Ruggles stepped down from his post in February of 1839. The organization would continue without him, but it was missing a radical, unafraid and unapologetic voice that insisted on resistance above conciliatory measures. Ruggles was a maroon warrior. He battled slave agents and judicial members in the press, he confronted slave owners and kidnappers, hid slaves, raised funds throughout New York and helped everyday black citizens to realize they too had a role in the protection of their community. Similar to a maroon leader, Ruggles appealed to the common man and included these people in the work of black vigilance. Perhaps it was his tactics, his radicalism and brash manner that alienated him from some former comrades and supporters who eventually joined Cornish in criticizing Ruggles. Unfortunately, the leaders of the NYCV had forgotten Charles B. Ray's 1837 appeal printed in *The Weekly Advocate* newspaper that warned the black community to "AWAKE! Beware of the Slave Catchers! And while you are freely allowed to differ among yourselves on other points: in this one matter be united!"<sup>63</sup> This public battle not only damaged the reputation of David Ruggles, but must have certainly damaged the reputation of the NYCV in the eyes of donors. Eventually, Ruggles would be exonerated of the charges, but the damage was done and he would not return to the organization.

### **Shall We Be Freeman or Slaves?**

The change in NYCV leadership was apparent with the writing of the 1842 report. William Johnston, an English-born abolitionist signed the report and evidently took a more active role in the organization. When the New York Committee of Vigilance published its report for the year of 1842, the tone had dramatically shifted. The overt radicalism that was present during the time

---

<sup>63</sup> "READ THIS," *Weekly Advocate* (New York), January 14, 1837.

Ruggles served the committee was no longer present. Reverend Theodore S. Wright became the president of the organization. Wright belonged to the Anti-Slavery Society and led the First Presbyterian Church. Reverend Wright became a dedicated agent of the Underground Railroad (UGRR), but he was not a radical. The NYCV Treasurer, William Johnston, who moved from England to New York City in the mid 1830's was also a member of the foreign and American Anti-Slavery societies.<sup>64</sup> The 1842 NYCV report lacked the outrage Ruggles directed at slave owners, kidnappers and proslavery advocates. Ruggles had been meticulous in documenting, foreigners who brought slaves into the state, kidnappings of free blacks, fugitive slave captures, and the illegal slave trade, but under the leadership of Wright the tone of the report dramatically changed. The pages had a few concise narratives regarding fugitive slaves, the horrors of slavery and difficulties of escape. Conspicuously missing were the names of kidnappers, corrupt authorities or slave agents. Rather than a confrontational tone that demanded freedom and justice, the 1842 report illustrated that the Committee's tactic had changed to ushering self-emancipated slaves to safety along the Underground Railroad. No indignation flowed through the retelling of the kidnapping of James Seward; a free black man arrested as a fugitive, but under the newly instituted 1840 state law, was entitled to a trial. Though Seward had "reputable witnesses" he remained in jail serving a sentence of sweeping the streets in leg irons by day, until free papers could be presented to the court. Only brief coverage of the "nine months' law" repeal existed. The abolishment of the law that allowed slave owners to live in New York with their slaves for a period of nine months certainly was a step towards severing the cities ties to slavery.

---

<sup>64</sup> Peter C. Ripley, *The Black Abolitionist Papers, The United States, 1830-1846*, (University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 178

Remarkably, the Committee failed to engage in a detailed discussion regarding the important Prigg decision. The report only referred to the subject as “the late decision of the supreme court,” and stated in reference to fugitives “no protection but that arising from personal energy, or aid of this and similar institutions, can preserve them from bondage.”<sup>65</sup> After a summary of the decision, the NYCVC concluded that the “decision throws the colored people at the foot of the slaveholder, and destroys the foundation on which they rested their hopes...”<sup>66</sup> From the tone of the report, the NYCVC appeared to be leaning towards more aggressive work on the Underground Railroad, rather than directly fighting power structures. The Prigg vs. Pennsylvania ruling declared that a state could not supersede federal law or the constitution. Slaveholders or their agents had renewed powers to seize and remove slaves from any state. And the gains that had been made over the years, “the trial by jury, the protection of state courts—granting or refusing a certificate for removal, the writ d’homini replegiando, has been declared null and void.”<sup>67</sup>

The Committee reported they had not only protected fugitives and recovered victims of kidnapping, but had rendered a variety of services including communicating and guarding individuals from danger and helping the relatives of those already free to escape. The auxiliary committees working directly in neighborhoods would assist thousands more. The radical black vigilance exhibited by David Ruggles may have dissipated during the 1840s, but the Prigg decision had opened the door for a new law that would shake the foundation of the anti-slavery and black vigilance movement. In response, a new generation of leaders and grassroots agitators

---

<sup>65</sup> *The Fifth Annual Report of the New York Committee of Vigilance for the Year of 1842* (New York, May 1842), 37

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 37

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 37

would take center stage during the next decade.

The Prigg decision angered those working in the anti-slavery movement, to the degree that “some states flatly refused to participate in the federal slave proceedings” required by the act. “In 1843 Massachusetts passed an act that forbade any state official from participating in the return of a fugitive slave under the 1793 federal law. Other Northern states passed similar acts.”<sup>68</sup> The consequence to opposing the law produced the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law that increased restrictions and eliminated the nebulous areas of the law, which states used to their advantage to assist runaways after the Prigg decision. The 1850 law challenged the stability of the black community, erased their personal liberties and as a result gave rise to new vigilance organizations. The new legislation placed the entire black community in danger. Similar to maroon societies the African American community would have to reorganize for the assault that would follow.

The 1850 Fugitive Slave Law was designed to “appease southerners” and gained the support of “New York merchants that feared southern secession...”<sup>69</sup> New York merchants with ties to the cotton south created The Union Safety Committee to show their support for the Compromise of 1850 and the new Fugitive Slave Act. The production of cotton in the South increased by nearly 800,000 bales between 1841 and 1851 and the value of the cotton produced during the

---

<sup>68</sup> Prigg v. Pennsylvania, <http://law.jrank.org/pages/9372/Prigg-v-Pennsylvania.html>

<sup>69</sup> Leslie M. Harris, *In The Shadow of Slavery, African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863*, (University of Chicago Press, 2004), 273

year 1850 was \$105,600,000.<sup>70</sup> New York merchants wanted to protect their profits and had no desire to jeopardize business, especially for African Americans.

The 1850 fugitive slave law further empowered slave owners to recapture their property, it increased penalties for those who enabled alleged fugitives and denied those arrested a jury trial or the ability to bear witness in their own defense. Officials who made decisions in these cases received twice as much pay if the black person was deemed a fugitive. Black New Yorkers responded to the law with intense anger and by disappearing from the city. They fled to rural areas, some took flight to California, and others crossed the border into Canada. “In the five years following the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, the black population in New York City declined by two thousand and hit its lowest point since emancipation to less than twelve thousand.”<sup>71</sup> Mass meetings were held throughout the community and were attended by thousands who espoused various ideologies from violent insurrection to leaving the country.

The New York Vigilance Committee disbanded after 1842 and by 1847, the New York State Vigilance Committee came into existence. Isaac T. Hopper, a Quaker had been a member of the New York Manumission Society for years became the president. Hopper had been a friend to Ruggles and had worked in the abolitionist movement for years. Nevertheless, blacks no longer led the new organization, although fifty percent of the membership was people of African descent. A year later, the organization would be reorganized again with white abolitionist, politician and philanthropist Gerrit Smith as President. Charles B. Ray took on the position of

---

<sup>70</sup> *Report on the Internal Commerce of the United States, United States*. (Dept. of the Treasury, Bureau of Statistics), 1881, 185

<sup>71</sup> New York State Census as quoted in Leslie M. Alexander, *African or American?: Black identity and political activism in New York City, 1784-1861* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 123

Corresponding Secretary. The Committee labored to assist fugitives and assisted with legal maneuvers to free slaves that had been brought into the state of New York by their masters. At a meeting and anniversary celebration held on May 15, 1850 at the Shiloh Presbyterian Church, State Vigilance members gave an accounting of their successes during the past year. Reportedly, the group assisted 151 fugitives and was involved with legal cases in the South. The Committee was also working to free a large family of “seven children and eight grandchildren”<sup>72</sup> whose free grandmother had been kidnapped. A sizeable sum of \$4,500 needed to be raised for bonds and legal fees. In a speech that was more than likely given by the abolitionist, minister and journalist Samuel Ringgold Ward, the sentiment was clear that the State Vigilance Committee had committed to assisting fugitives. Ward understood the plight of the fugitives since his entire family had been slaves on Maryland’s eastern shore. Reminiscent of the early life of abolitionist Henry Highland Garnet, Ward’s entire family escaped slavery and eventually settled in New York State. Ward explained to the audience that nothing in the Constitution prohibited the Committee from assisting fugitive slaves. During his speech he received a great deal of approval from the audience. Nevertheless, hecklers repeatedly interrupted the meeting and there was even an attempt to bring the meeting to a close by shouting “fire.” The enemies of organization became embolden and evidently felt empowered to cause such disturbances.

African Americans in New York created an alternative organization in the wake of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law passed by Congress on September 18, 1850. Shortly after the arrest of James Hamlet the organization formed under the name, “The Committee of Thirteen.” Familiar names such as Charles B. Ray, Samuel Cornish and Phillip Bell attached to the organization. Names

---

<sup>72</sup> “From the N.Y. Tribune,” *The North Star*, (Rochester), May 16, 1850.

not previously associated with the old NYCV appeared on the roster. Abolitionist John J. Zuille, a printer by trade and William Powell, proprietor of the Colored Seaman's home took on important roles within the operation. John J. Zuille would head the new organization as Chairman. The Committee of Thirteen held mass meetings and invited the community to share their grievances. The Committee's activities are somewhat reminiscent of the old New York Committee of Vigilance with a few exceptions. The Committee of Thirteen sought to protect blacks from slave catchers, assisted those who had stolen their own liberty to safety in Canada and denounced colonization as well as racial prejudice. Two additional wings of the committee also organized in Brooklyn and Williamsburg, New York. Though the New York State Committee of Vigilance continued defending fugitives, the community of African descent apparently desired an independent organization with a mission that addressed the multiplicity of concerns facing the entire black community and that had a more radical approach to these issues. The 1850 Fugitive Slave Law eliminated two decades of progress made by the anti-slavery societies and black vigilance organizations. This law gave slave owners more power than at any other time to besiege African American communities. It also bound northern officials to support the law and aid in the capture of alleged fugitives. Heavy fines would be imposed upon those who refused to comply. This law demonstrates that "slaveholders and their allies wielded enormous power in the federal government, dominating the presidency, the Supreme Court, and the diplomatic corps through the 1850s."<sup>73</sup>

The Committee of Thirteen committed to violating the fugitive slave law and organized a meeting on October 1, 1850 at the Zion Chapel on Church Street to discuss their goals with the

---

<sup>73</sup> Steven Hahn, *The Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009),13

community. The 1500 seat church filled beyond its capacity with people of African descent and a “sprinkling” of whites. Some of the most notable black abolitionist and activists attended such as, George T. Downing, restaurant owner and abolitionist, Dr. James McCune Smith and Jeremiah Powers. Far removed from the tone of the Vigilance meeting four months previous, the passage of the slave bill detonated radicalism. A spirit of resistance and self-defense permeated the space as John Zuille led the incensed group. “Shall we sit down and tamely submit our necks to the halter, and our limbs to the shackles, and clank our chains to the sweet music of passive obedience, (No, no)! This covenant with and agreement with hell, must be trampled under foot, resisted, disobeyed, and violated at all hazards (cheers)...”<sup>74</sup> The roster of speeches included fugitive slaves to well established black entrepreneurs. The radical tone of these speeches indicates that some blacks had pledged to engage in armed resistance. John S. Jacobs, a fugitive slave addressed the group suggesting that they “show a front to our tyrants, and arm yourselves...and I would advise the women to have their knives too.” The Reverend Charles Gardener “advised his brethren and sisters to be on their guard, and take the life of every man that attempted to deprive them of their liberty.”<sup>75</sup> In addition to the revolutionary rhetoric, the group raised \$800 to help free James Hamlet the first black person arrested in the city after the passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law. James Hamlet was an example of how kidnapping affected every black person. Hamlet was born to a free woman and therefore he should have been entitled to his freedom. Yet, he was arrested on the word of a Baltimore slave owner, not allowed to testify in his own behalf and hurriedly ushered to the South.

---

<sup>74</sup> "Meetings of Colored Citizens of New York," *The North Star* (Rochester), October 24, 1850.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*



After the community purchased Hamlet's freedom, the African American community took the opportunity to celebrate his return. The North Star reported on October 24, 1850, "The Reception Meeting given to Hamlet, who had been purchased by contributions made through the Journal of Commerce office, and who was brought back on Saturday, was the first public meeting ever held by colored people in the Park. It numbered several thousands, and went off with the greatest enthusiasm." This community gathering at City Hall Park gave people of African descent an opportunity rejoice. Perhaps this moment gave them strength to continue their work and encouragement that their efforts had meaning.

The Hamlet case unfortunately would remain the exception, not the rule. Kidnappings and fugitive slave seizures continued. Slave owners and their agents besieged the black communities of the North to such an extent that they had to live in a state of "sleepless vigilance," always on guard, always suspicious. This state of being led the normally composed Frederick Douglass to suggest in 1854 that the only way to deal with the Fugitive Slave Law was with "a good revolver, a steady hand, and the determination to shoot down any man attempting to kidnap."<sup>76</sup> The popular abolitionist and minister, J.W.C. Pennington lost his brother and nephews to slave catchers in New York. His family was returned to the South and slavery in 1854. Pennington would be able to secure the return of his brother, but the sons, then at prime laboring age, remained in slavery. In 1858, kidnappers stole George Anderson, a free young man about 20 years of age from the city. One month later, kidnappers seized a young girl named Sarah Taylor and took her to Washington D.C. to be sold as a slave. Lewis Tappan and Dr. James McCune Smith had the culprits arrested and brought back to New York for trial. Sarah, being a free

---

<sup>76</sup> "The True Remedy for the Fugitive Slave Bill," *Frederick Douglass Paper*, June 9, 1854.

person happily returned to her mother. In 1861, the kidnapping of John Thomas received press. Again, a member of the community was taken from the city and transported to Virginia without a warrant or a hearing. Due to the Fugitive Slave Law, the work of black vigilance became more clandestine and their energies became directed towards resettling fugitive slaves via the Underground Road networks.

## **Conclusion**

Within these pages are but a sampling of the cases that are known because often people of African descent would disappear without anyone's knowledge, without a news story or hearing. These cases continued in New York and throughout the North. Only full emancipation would bring the kidnappings and illegal seizures to an end. Ties to the South through commerce, and the labor needs of the plantation south fueled kidnapping. Black vigilance became the response to kidnapping and is where African Americans in New York cut their political teeth. This movement helped them to create awareness in the community. Certainly, without the formation of black vigilance organizations, northern blacks remained at the mercy of their enemies.

African Americans developed important channels of communication both formal and informal, built alliances with legal minds within abolitionist circles, raised funds, petitioned for changes in state law, aided fugitives to safety and sometimes physically defended captives. Black vigilance equated a political statement; it became the only political power that the community of African descent could employ against kidnappings. This movement involved awakening others in their enclaves, indentifying enemies, challenging authority and self-protection. It combined a civil rights movement and a black power movement at the same time. Black vigilance allowed the free and self emancipated community to bond through a common cause. Black vigilance was

equal to black self-reliance. “As James Horton has pointed out, radical black abolitionism became a key component of an emerging sense of black manhood in this period.”<sup>77</sup> Through this movement, the African American community was able to envision possibilities that were of their own making.

The black community in nineteenth century New York does not neatly fit into the maroon analogy. The complexities of southern “maroonage” and northern black communities make straightforward comparisons complicated. Yet, these discrete communities of fugitives and free blacks share similarities that with further study may provide an in-depth understanding of the development of black communities during the antebellum era. Similar to maroons, the New York enclaves depended on vital communication and at times were charged to action by rumor. The networks reached beyond the local communities and penetrated southern boundaries, as it was imperative that black New Yorkers maintained ties with their enslaved brethren in the South. While Harriett Jacobs was enslaved and in hiding within her grandmother’s North Carolina home, communication flowed between her friends and family that had escaped to the North. After her escape and while living as a fugitive in New York City, Jacobs stated, “Every evening I examined the newspapers carefully, to see what Southerners had put up at hotels. I did this for my own sake... I wished also to give information to others...”<sup>78</sup> Jacobs’ life in freedom was certainly improved from her experience in slavery; nonetheless, she lived as a maroon, under siege, living in state of constant vigilance, apprehension and fear.

---

<sup>77</sup> Graham Russell Hodges, *Root & Branch: African Americans in New York & East Jersey, 1613-1863* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 246

<sup>78</sup> Linda Brent (Harriet Jacobs), *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, editor. Lydia Maria Francis Child (Boston, 1861), 287

The communities of African descent organized, but unlike maroon settlements that attempted to mirror African society, black New Yorkers created their own social, cultural and religious organizations that borrowed from the organizations of whites. Yet, these organizations became characteristic of African American's distinct cultural style. African Americans built political organizations, but the vigilance committees found the legal assistance and funding of whites necessary. During the black vigilance period, no person of African descent was trained to take on the role of legal counsel and along with that, the legal system was satiated with southern sympathizers. This did not make the organizations that this group built any less significant. Blacks had to become adept at networking with receptive whites and balance those relationships while maintaining power at the same time.

Black New Yorkers mobilized to defend their communities, as did maroons, however; they found it impractical to engage in violent combat with whites, except for infrequent occasions. As the community began to feel even more oppressed, their rhetoric did become quite violent. Perhaps after the passage of the 1850 fugitive slave law, African Americans in New York lived lives more similar to maroons than at any other time since emancipation. At times, black New York communities resembled maroon enclaves. Rather than hiding their fugitives in the brush or swampland, they were hidden amongst crowds in plain sight. Together African Americans free and fugitive created settlements that were important "political meeting grounds." They created "a place where new meanings, thinking, strategies and debates were developed and shared."<sup>79</sup> Throughout the hardships, this community continuously worked towards constructing ideal lives unencumbered by the limits of race and locality.

---

<sup>79</sup> Hahn, Steven, *The Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 43