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Author(s): Abigail Epplert

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Abolitionist Broadsides and Anti-Slavery Imagery

By: Abigail Epplert

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Abstract: In the early nineteenth century, broadsides were a common form of mass media, which were produced in bulk and intended for single use – as such, few nineteenth-century broadsides have survived. Those preserved in collections give historians an inside look at the ideology of anti-slavery societies and pro-slavery institutions, along with documenting design sensibilities and imagery of historical propaganda. Broadsides published by anti-slavery societies advocated for immediate abolition. Surviving broadsides show their dedication to the cause, mixing established design with passionate writing and occasional imagery to capture and hold the reader's attention. Yet, this passion cannot mask the way their message emphasized the superiority of its intended highly educated Northern white audience.

Keywords: *broadsides, abolitionist propaganda, historical propaganda, mass media,*

In the first half of the nineteenth century, broadsides were a common form of mass media plastered throughout the streets of northern American cities. Produced in bulk and intended for single use, few nineteenth-century broadsides have survived. Those preserved in collections give historians an inside look at the ideology of anti-slavery societies and pro-slavery institutions, along with documenting design sensibilities and imagery of historical propaganda. Broadsides published by anti-slavery societies advocated for immediate abolition. They encouraged illegal activities, such as harboring freedom seekers, and announced upcoming anti-slavery conferences, rallies, and picnics. A combination of contemporary design and authoritative language allowed anti-slavery broadsides to proliferate throughout the North prior to the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment. Yet despite their radical messages, the language and imagery of these posters supported racial constructs and stereotypes held by many white, affluent abolitionists.

Anti-Slavery Societies and Target Audience

In 1807, the Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves banned the Transatlantic Slave Trade.ⁱ However, the legality of slavery was decided at the state level, though the federal government could overturn that state law. Anti-slavery societies flourished in the North prior to the Civil War. These organizations originally consisted of white male membership. Though, eventually, women and African-Americans were encouraged to join, society leadership continued to be dominated by those in power.ⁱⁱ The largest of these organizations was the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS), founded in 1833 and led by William Lloyd Garrison. The radical Garrisonian abolitionists led public protests, organized widely attended conferences, and gave compelling speeches to their white target audience.

Extant anti-slavery broadsides published by the AASS and similar societies mainly conform to the view of white, Garrisonian abolitionists. The language and design for these broadsides

catered to Northern, middle class and affluent audiences who could contribute financially to the AASS. Besides bolstering the ideology, broadsides further encouraged abolitionist activity, despite its status as a federal crime after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Design and Language of Nineteenth-Century American Broadsides

The invention of steam-powered presses and steel engravings allowed publishers to increase printing capacity vastly in the first half of the nineteenth century.^{iv} Broadsides from this period follow a repetitive design scheme, an attempt to make the greatest possible visual impact at the lowest cost. Cheap paper, an eclectic collection of bold typefaces, minimal color, and sparse imagery defined the style. Notices about slave auctions and escapees were indistinguishable from anti-slavery material until the viewer examined and read the broadside, forcing even the unsympathetic to take a closer look at the practice of slavery.

Broadside authors used hyperbole and purple prose vehemently arguing a heavily biased opinion. An example comes from this two-tone broadside published after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 [Fig. 1], which proclaims:

There are only two ways for slavery to be destroyed; one is to vote it down here at the North – this can be done peaceably, and without expense; the other way, by Amalgamation. The time is not far distant when the system will go down in a cloud of blood mingled with fire, unless the wisdom of the North timely prevents.

Abolitionist authors wrote for a white, educated audience, as they deftly combined their views on social issues with Biblical references. The phrase “a cloud of blood mingled with fire” is paraphrased from the King James Version of Revelations 8:7, “The first angel sounded, and there followed hail and fire mingled with blood...” This passage describing the start of the End Times would have been familiar to any casual passersby of the nineteenth century.^v The omission of the South demonstrates the author’s belief that Southerners were unwise, even uneducated, in addition to being “slavites,” the author’s word choice for supporters of enslavement.

As seen in the two broadsides, “American Slavery... Moses Roper” [Fig. 2] and “\$2,500 Reward” [Fig. 3], anti-slavery and pro-slavery broadsides share common mid-nineteenth-century designs. Both incorporate fat face fonts in the text and employ a mix of facts and exaggerations in descriptive paragraphs. Additionally, since illustrations required more time and ink, neither of these broadsides include detailed imagery, except for the simple yet graphic pointing hands on “\$2,500 Reward,” an objectifying symbol commonly used on lost-and-found broadsides [Fig. 4]. Because of the similarity in design between broadsides, and especially with the absence of imagery, readers needed to inspect the prints to understand the motivations and message of the designer.

Abolitionist Imagery

Abolitionists developed a vocabulary of imagery for memorabilia distributed at events. These materials supported a Eurocentric narrative that enslaved African-Americans could only be rescued by whites, a viewpoint openly criticized by Black journalists and publishers.^{vi} Among the most compelling was Fredrick Douglass, whose fame as an intellectual and relationship to Garrison led white abolitionists to portray him as one of the few self-reliant Blacks in derogatory white abolitionist imagery.

Similar to abolitionist writers, illustrators used Biblical references to support their argument, portraying white abolitionists as Christ-like savior figures, as seen in a popular Currier & Ives print depicting John Brown [Fig. 5].^{vii} In contrast, an illustrator chose to depict Nat Turner, a Black abolitionist, pejoratively barefoot and in torn clothing at the moment of his capture [Fig. 6].^{viii} Moreover, anti-slavery societies cavalierly sold almanacs as Christmas gifts at holiday fairs that depicted punishments inflicted upon the enslaved, auctions supporting their trafficking, and the separation of families [Fig. 7].^{ix} “Practical Illustration of the Fugitive Slave Law,” is particularly

egregious [Fig. 8]. Here, Fredrick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison are shown standing side-by-side, holding pistols. The work further purports a caricature of Black woman fleeing human traffickers.

Conclusion

White abolitionists in the American Anti-Slavery Society and similar organizations worked tirelessly in support of the abolishment of enslavement in America. Surviving broadsides show their dedication to the cause, mixing established design with passionate writing and occasional imagery to capture and hold the reader's attention. Yet, this passion cannot mask the way their message emphasized the superiority of its intended highly educated Northern white audience. Broadside authors employed language accessible only to those that were not only literate, but also had access to resources for further education, making biblical references that elevated white abolitionists to the position of saviors while belittling the South and discriminatingly delegating Blacks to a helpless and dependent class.

W.S. 1850 (22)

A CRUSADE AGAINST SLAVERY AND Counterfeit Christianity, BY A SPECTATOR. No. I.

**What has Slavery done in the U. States for the last two hundred years? Yes, what has it done? IT HAS
BLASTED AND CURSED THE LAND!**

Seven generations of the human race have come into existence and gone out of the same; they lived in ignorance and died in darkness: their strength and blood was given to their oppressors. More than three millions of their descendants now live and labor for heathen tyrants, without reward! Is the U. States a land of Missionaries and Bibles? and at the same time holds millions of human beings in worse than Turkish bondage; robbing them not only of their just dues for labor, but of themselves, even of their own individuality? In open defiance of heaven's laws, for teaching a slave to read, is a fine of five hundred dollars.

J. Wesley called Slavery "the sum of all villainies." One of you called it "the mystery of iniquity." Slavery combines all the abominations which are known on the earth; it has turned men into monsters, christians into infidels, and human beings into beasts of burden. This seven-headed monster has destroyed the vitality of a vast majority of the American Churches. The Pulpit and Press are paralyzed or nearly dumb! The Fugitive Slave Law of September 18th, 1850, was the crowning point of all!

WHOEVER REFUSES TO BOW DOWN TO THIS MONSTER MUST BE KILLED!

You, you must disobey the laws of your maker and your own humanity, or expose yourself to a fine of one thousand dollars and six months imprisonment. This law has been called, and rightly called, "The grand bill of abominations, a covenant with death, an agreement with hell, a treaty of peace, unity, and commerce with the infernal powers—yes, open rebellion against the God of eternity." When the report of this Act reached the dark regions, I think the demons of the pit must have held a Jubilee.

Even Satan would struggle his despair to quell
Hope almost blotted in the shades of hell!

All the halls of parliament must have been brightly lighted up in extra splendor. The Constitution of the U. States, by this Act, has been broken down, trodden under foot, in not less than twelve particulars; also, all the Constitutions and laws of every State, as far as liberty is concerned. It has sent fear, poverty, destruction, and dispersion into every colored family in the land. It has bound the hands of every benevolent man and woman, of every cast and color; thus, warring continually against heaven and humanity, it has transcended the worst laws of the Jews, Heathens, Turks, and Americans. Where are our Missionaries gone? we want them here! This Act of 1850 has brought shame, disgrace, sin, and reproach to our whole country; a blot on human nature—the darkest recorded that ever saw the sun. Tell it not to the Heathens in the East, that in

the land of Christian America there are infidel elegy-men who uphold and support all these abominations—who declare that the Fugitive Slave Law ought to be carried out and obeyed to the letter. Yes, this law must be carried into effect—greater than the laws of the great Creator. Shut! shut the Book of Life! Lo, these are only parts and parcels of this infernal system, but the volcanic thunders of the grand abomination, who can understand? Well might the Prophet of old exclaim: "A sinful nation, people laden with iniquity, a deed of evil, doers, children that are corrupters; your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul loatheth."

The Bible overflows with denunciations against the oppressors of suffering humanity; they blaze in characters of fire mingled with blood; still the great body of the people, both in Church and State, like the Jews of old, believe it not, but cry "all is well." I would here remark, that every great nation which has gone down fell itself secure on the very eve of its fall; its destruction came in a moment, unexpected, and unprepared. This nation has been warned like the nations of old, still a vast majority slumber and sleep, as it were, over a volcanic fire. Slavery, with a mountain weight, in all its forms, is carrying the country down to destruction. Remember, the North or the nominal Free States are the grand stronghold of American involuntary servitude. But what can I do? says one:

What can be done to overthrow this Mystery of Iniquity?

Ask the twenty thousand elegy-men, with more than two millions of church-members in the North, what they might have done, and what they ought to have done, and what they must do without delay, or fall under their own condemnation. I would here ask this powerful and influential body, how many of your meeting-houses and other public buildings can we have in which to plead the cause of suffering down-trodden humanity? Remember, if you shut your hearts and your pulpits against the slave and his best friends, you stand in a fearful place; without deep repentance the gates of mercy will be closed against you.—Blessed are the merciful, "with our Lord, for they shall obtain mercy." I know that many of you, like Adam of old, are hiding yourselves behind organizations, but this plea will be no shelter for you. When the Rev. E. B. Lovejoy was murdered in Alton, by a lot of slaves, November, 1837, had nineteen-twentieths of the northern clergy come out, and blown the Gospel trump, washed their pulpits clean from the blood of a martyred brother, with millions of slaves, the juggernaut of slavery, before this would have been destroyed. It will be in vain to expect that the South as a general thing, will emancipate their slaves as long as the North, with a death-like struggle both in Church and State, support the system. But the

question returns—What can I do? What did Mrs. H. B. Stone do when the report of the Socratic Slave Law of 1850 was known? It electrified her soul! she waked up Uncle Tom from his Cabin, with a blast that has almost shook the globe! "Go thou and do likewise." You can write, print, preach, and pray for suffering humanity. You can rectify your own and public opinions. You can and ought to labor for the purification of the Christian Church. Many of you can vote for liberty instead of slavery. You can organize committees of safety in every town, city, and State in the great North. There is no time to be lost, the slaves neither slumber nor sleep; they must be met at the ballot-box, and their power overcome! They intend to have the Isle of Cuba annexed to this Union, in order to strengthen the slaveholding power in Congress. In order to stop this plan, we must have, if possible, one hundred men elected to the next Congress, from the North; men like Giddings, Chase, Seward, Hale, Sumner, and Mann: men who are fearless, talented, and well-informed; such men as these will be likely to do honor to themselves and their country. These men deserve well of their country and all mankind, and ought to be re-elected to Congress, with many more of a like stamp. If you intend to overthrow Slavery, you must

COME OUT FROM WHIGGERY, FREE SOILISM, DEMOCRACY, FREE DEMOCRACY,

CHURCH ORGANIZATIONS, and all other names and parties, and establish one uniform standard at the ballot-box. Vote for Liberty! the other party will vote for Slavery, of course. The people will know much better how to vote than they do now; the lines between freedom and slavery will then be fairly drawn. Keep it in mind that we must have an Anti-Slavery President and Vice-President at the next election; our country has been blasted long enough by slaveholding rulers. Whenever the administration of the country is changed from slavery to freedom, the Supreme Court of the U. States will no longer tell us that the Constitution binds the whole nation to render up escaping slaves; nor will slaves threaten to dissolve the Union, and hang every friend of humanity by the neck if he should enter a Southern State. No, they will stop their boasting and threatening whenever they find themselves overpowered. Yes, they will be still as mice—your humble servants; their cry then will be,—"Oh, Mr. North, pray do not

dissolve the Union. If you do, we are all ruined!" Remember, there will be a long struggle between right and wrong—Liberty and Slavery. There are ignorance, Prejudice, Selfishness, Sectarianism—powerful oppressors—Moloch, Mammon, and spiritual wickedness, in high places: all these must be overcome. Keep it in mind, that nine of the largest States, here at the North, can choose a President of the U. States, if they are so determined. Remember, there is more power in small strips of paper of the right stamp, thrown into the ballot-box, than there is in leaden bullets. There are only two ways for Slavery to be destroyed; one is to vote it down here at the North—this can be done possibly, and without expense; the other way, by Amalgamation. The time is not far distant when the system will go down in a cloud of blood mingled with fire, unless the wisdom of the North timely prevents. In conclusion, I would say

"Blessed is that Servant who shall be found at the coming of our Lord, faithfully doing his Master's will!"

J. S. Potter & Co., Steam Job and Decorative Printers, 2 Spring Lane, Corner of Washington Street, Boston.

Fig. 1. J. S. Potter & Co., printers. A Crusade against Slavery and Counterfeit Christianity. 1850. Image. <https://digitalcollections.library.harvard.edu/catalog/990050995450203941> (accessed May 25, 2022).

**American
SLAVERY.**

ON TUESDAY, OCTOBER 8, 1839,
To commence at Half-past Six o'Clock in the Evening,

Moses Roper,
Who made his escape from Slavery,

WILL DELIVER

AN ADDRESS
IN THE PUBLIC ROOMS,
Jarratt-Street, Hull,

When he will give an account of his Personal experience of Slavery
as it now exists in the

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,

And will in the course of his Lecture, exhibit several Instruments of Torture—facsimiles of those
which are mentioned in his "Narrative."

After the Address, "A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of MOSES ROPER, from
American Slavery," the Third Edition, with a Portrait of the Author, engraved on Steel, may be had,
Price Two Shillings and Sixpence ; and also at Mr. J. PURDON'S, Bookseller, Market-Place.

M R. is pursuing his studies at "University College, London," and he is now, during the vacation,
travelling to expose the system of American Slavery ; and, at the same time, by the sale of his Book, to
provide himself with the means of obtaining further education, or continuing his studies Two Years
longer, with the view of making himself useful among the African race. He had no education before
he escaped from Slavery.

J. PURDON, PRINTER, MARKET-PLACE, HULL.

SCHOMBERG COLLECTION

Fig. 2. *American Slavery. Moses Roper.* October 8, 1839. Image.

<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47df-c9e4-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99> (accessed May 25, 2022)

Modern copy -

\$2,500

REWARD!

RANAWAY, from the Subscriber, residing in Mississippi county, Mo., on Monday the 5th inst., my

Negro Man named GEORGE.

Said negro is five feet ten inches high, of dark complexion, he plays well on the Violin and several other instruments. He is a shrewd, smart fellow and of a very affable countenance, and is twenty-five years of age. If said negro is taken and confined in St. Louis Jail, or brought to this county so that I get him, the above reward of \$1,000 will be promptly paid.

JOHN MEANS.

Also, from Radford E. Stanley,

A NEGRO MAN SLAVE, NAMED NOAH,

Full 6 feet high; black complexion; full eyes; free spoken and intelligent; will weigh about 180 pounds; 32 years old; had with him 2 or 3 suits of clothes, white hat, short blue blanket coat, a pair of saddle bags, a pocket compass, and supposed to have \$350 or \$400 with him.

ALSO---A NEGRO MAN NAMED HAMP,

Of dark copper color, big thick lips, about 6 feet high, weighs about 175 pounds, 36 years old, with a scar in the forehead from the kick of a horse; had a lump on one of his wrists and is left-handed. Had with him two suits of clothes, one a casinet or cloth coat and grey pants.

Also, Negro Man Slave named BOB,

Copper color, high cheek bones, 5 feet 11 inches high, weighs about 150 pounds; 22 years old, very white teeth and a space between the centre of the upper teeth. Had a blue blanket sack coat with red striped linsey lining. Supposed to have two suits of clothes with him; is a little lame in one ancle.

\$1,000 will be given for George---\$600 for Noah---\$450 for Hamp---\$450 for Bob; if caught in a free State, or a reasonable compensation if caught in a Slave State, if delivered to the Subscribers in Miss. Co., Mo., or confined in Jail in St. Louis, so that we get them Refer to

**JOHN MEANS &
R. E. STANLEY.**

ST. LOUIS, August 23, 1852.
(PLEASE STICK UP.)

Fig. 3. Means, John, and R. E. Stanley. \$2,500 Reward. August 23, 1852. Image. <http://collections.mohistory.org/resource/216610> (accessed May 25, 2022)

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Pocket Book LOST!!

THE subscriber **LOST** in the City of Alton, or on the road from thence by way of the River to Chippewa,

ON SATURDAY LAST,

A Dark Blue Morocco **POCKET BOOK**, figured on the outside, containing about Ten or Twelve Dollars in Bank bills; and Two Notes of hand, one drawn by A. R. Skidmore, for \$43 52; and the other drawn by Silas Reed, for \$35 00; both made payable to the subscriber. Also, some other papers, of no value to any person but myself.

Any person returning the same, or any information respecting it, to the subscriber at *Chippewa*, or to **A. BOTKIN, Alton**, shall be liberally *Rewarded* for the same.

Dec. 16, 1839.

J. W. CALL.

Fig. 4. Call, J. W. *Pocket Book Lost!!* December 16, 1839. Image.
<https://www.loc.gov/item/rbpe.01501900/> (accessed May 25, 2022)

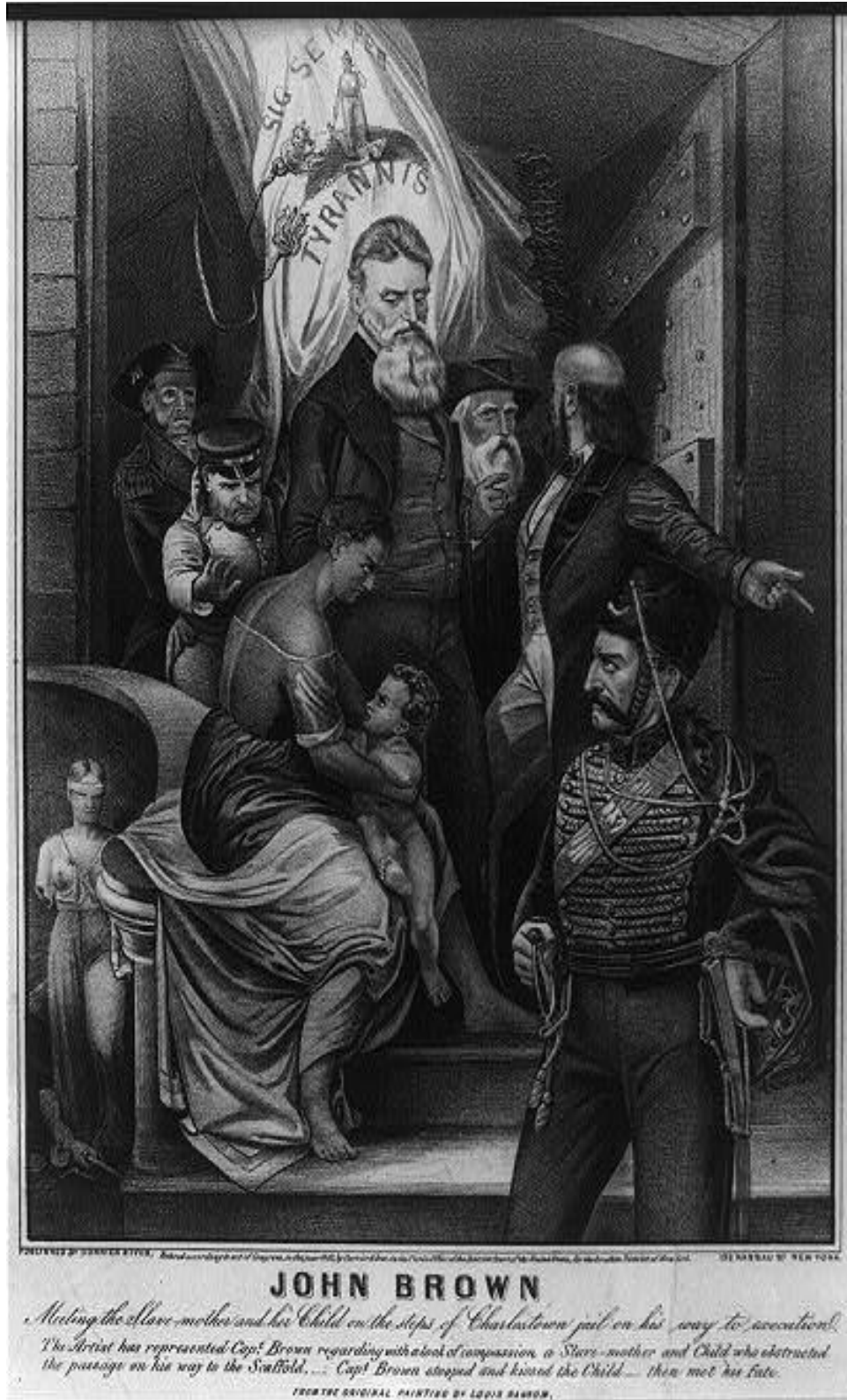


Fig. 5. Currier & Ives. "John Brown Meeting the Slave Mother and Her Child on the Steps of Charleston Jail on His Way to Execution", 1863. <http://loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3a06486/> (accessed May 25, 2022)

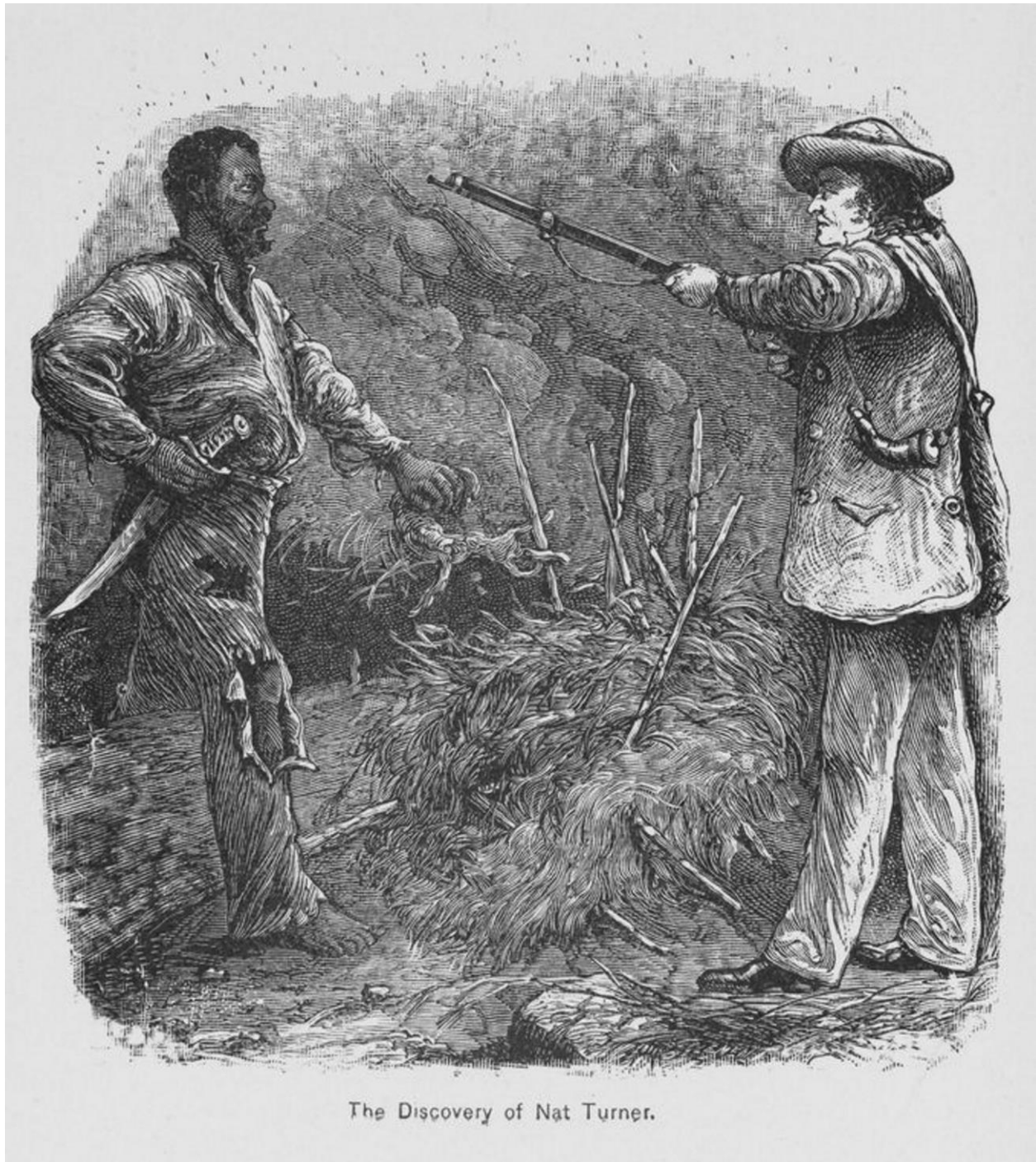
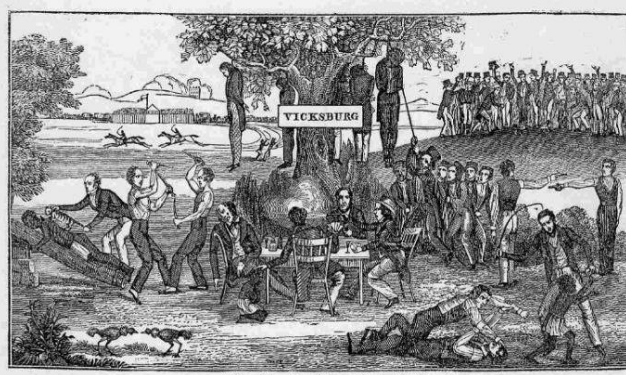


Fig. 6. "Discovery of Nat Turner", Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Jean Blackwell Hutson Research and Reference Division, The New York Public Library. New York Public Library Digital Collections. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47df-a10b-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99> (accessed May 25, 2022)

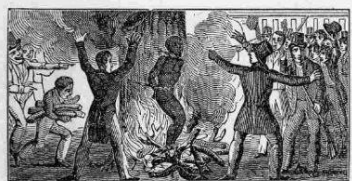
Illustrations of the American Anti-Slavery Almanac for 1840.



"Our Peculiar Domestic Institutions."



Northern Hospitality—New-York nine months law. [The Slave steps out of the Slave State, and his chains fall. A Free State, with another chain, stands ready to re-enslave him.]



Burning of McIntosh at St. Louis, in April, 1836.



Showing how slavery improves the condition of the female sex.



The Negro Pew, or "Free" Seats for black Christians. Mayor of New-York refusing a Curman's license to a colored Man.



Savagery of the Northern States in arresting and returning fugitive Slaves.



Selling a Mother from her Child.



Hunting Slaves with dogs and guns. A Slave drowned by the dogs.



"Poor things, they can't take care of themselves."



Mothers with young Children at work in the field.



A Woman chained to a Girl, and a Man in irons at work in the field.



Branding Slaves.



Cutting up a Slave in Kentucky.



Paid.

Unpaid.

Fig. 7. American Anti-Slavery Society, "Illustrations of the American anti-slavery almanac for 1840," (1840). Print. <https://www.loc.gov/item/rbpe.24800100/> (accessed May 25, 2022)

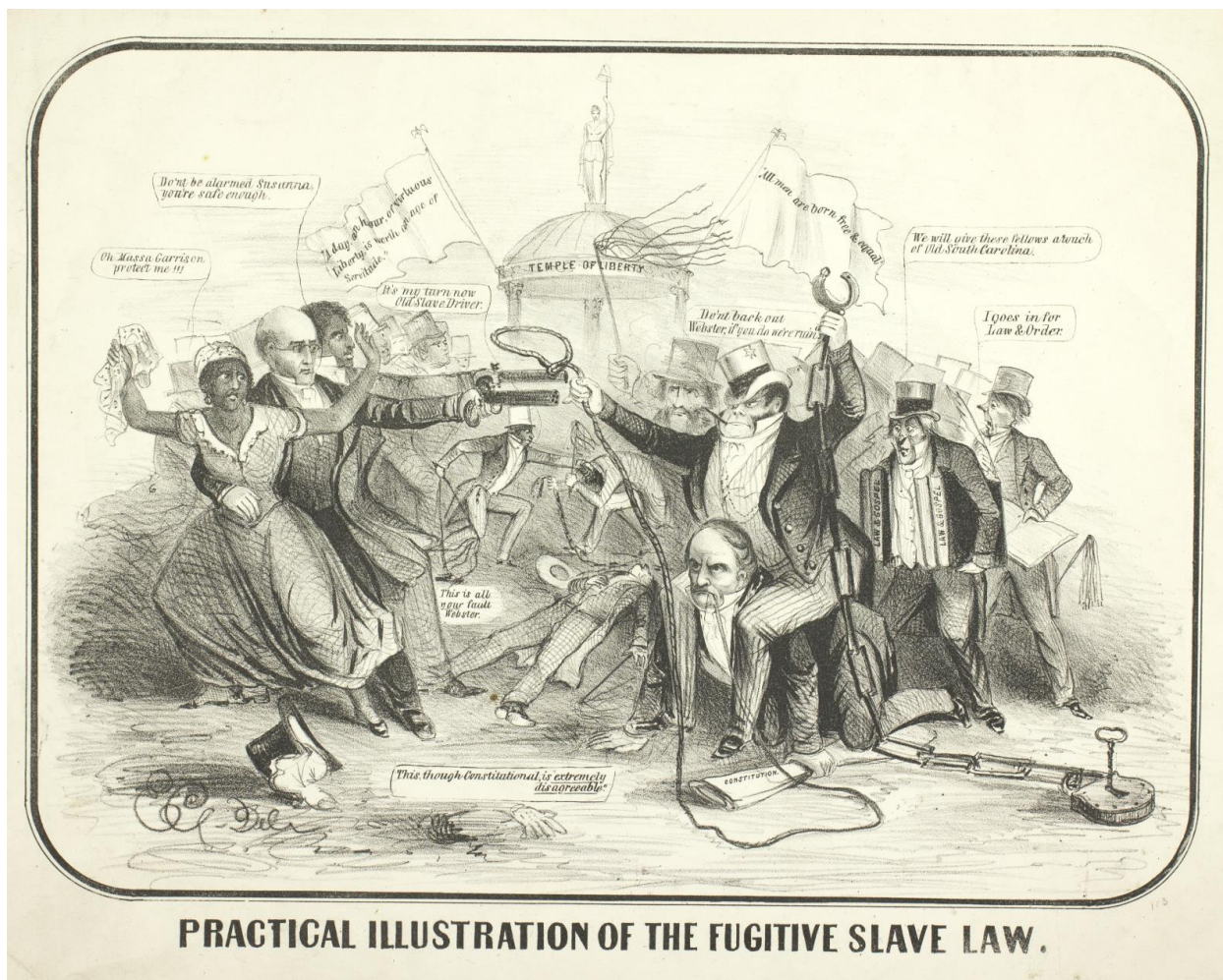


Fig. 8. *Practical Illustration of the Fugitive Slave Law.* Illustration. Boston, MA, 1851.
<https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2008661534/> (accessed May 25, 2022).

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Endnotes

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- ⁱⁱ Dorothy Sterling, “Ahead of Her Time: Abby Kelley and the Politics of Antislavery,” (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994).
- ⁱⁱⁱ Senator Daniel Webster of Massachusetts sponsored the Compromise.. Webster’s other contribution to American politics include rebranding the English Separatists of Plymouth Colony as the Pilgrims to support his doctrine of “Manifest Destiny,” a belief that Euro-Americans were predestined by God to colonize North America, thereby enacting a genocide against Native Americans. PBS, “The Compromise of 1850 and the Fugitive Slave Act,” *PBS: Africans in America* (undated). <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p2951.html> (accessed May 25, 2022)
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- ^v Outline of U.S. History, “The Second Great Awakening,” *Anchor: A North Carolina History Online Resource* (undated). <https://www.ncpedia.org/anchor/second-great-awakening> (accessed May 25, 2022).
- ^{vi} Phillip Lapansky. “Graphic Discord: Abolitionist and Antiabolitionist Images” in *The Abolitionist Sisters*, edited by Jean Fagen Yellin and John C. Van Horne, 201-30 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 212; Library of Congress, “About this Collection,” Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/collections/broadsides-and-other-printed-ephemera/about-this-collection/> (accessed May 25, 2022).
- ^{vii} See fig. 5. Brown was executed after inciting a rebellion in Harpers Ferry, Virginia in 1859. In the lithograph, Brown looks down at a Black woman and her child who are seated by his feet. Dignified even as he is led to execution, the image reinforces the notion that Brown was a martyr in the fight for freedom, a concept also portrayed in the poem, “John Brown’s Body” that states: “John Brown was John the Baptist of the Christ we are to see, / Christ who of the bondmen shall the Liberator be.” Plebs, “War Songs for the Army and the People, No. 2,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, (December 16, 1861): 3. <https://www.loc.gov/item/sn84031490/1861-12-16/ed-1/> (accessed May 25, 2022).
- ^{viii} Turner was an enslaved Black preacher who led a rebellion in Virginia in 1831. “Discovery of Nat Turner”, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Jean Blackwell Hutson Research and Reference Division, the New York Public Library. New York Public Library Digital Collections. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47df-a10b-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99> (accessed May 25, 2022).
- ^{ix} Events such as the New England Christmas Boston Bazaar, hosted by the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society and the December Fair in Philadelphia connected the birth of Christ to the abolitionist movement and gave abolitionists the opportunity to raise money for their cause while distributing anti-slavery material. For the perspective of a free woman of color, see Kristen Hillaire Glasgow, “Charlotte Forten: Coming of Age as a Radical Teenage Abolitionist, 1854-1856” dissertation (Los Angeles, CA: University of California, Los Angeles, 2019). proquest.com/docview/2354422734 (accessed May 25, 2022).