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Letter Revolution: Epistolary Protest in Black American Women's Writing

by

Sarah Vause

A dissertation

submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

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To the Graduate Faculty:

The members of the committee appointed to examine the dissertation of
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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my husband, Zac Snow, and my children, Dahnika Walker, Gauge Vause, Marley Vause, Zeke Snow, Stella Snow, and Gwendolyn Snow. And to my three grandkids, Kailynn, Pursaiah, and Burgandy. Each one of you has been a support that I couldn't have done without. Your patience, understanding, sacrifice, love, kindness, and encouragement made this achievement possible, and you still love me in spite of it all. I am so proud of who each of you are and love you more than I can express in writing.

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and my scholarly research. The scholarship in this field is plentiful and continues to grow and I have been a beneficiary of the lives that have been spent researching, writing, and doing. There is so much to read and learn, that I doubt I will ever be able to read it all. That, in and of itself is a blessing. I am indebted to the lives of so many who fought for the opportunities of literacy. That so many were willing to lay down their lives in the cause for truth and justice, equitable opportunity, and God-given rights is a gift to this world.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures	ix
Abstract	xiv
Introduction: The Un-Voiced to Become Voiced Again	1
Chapter One: The Rhymes and Reasons to Epistolary Writing.....	9
Epistolary Theory and Form	10
The Female Epistle for Social Practice	11
Locating the Story Within the Letter.....	12
Narrative Theory	14
History and the Epistle	17
Truth or Fiction—Historical Narrative/Social Semiotics	22
Epistolarity and Literary Theory	23
The Past Narrates the Present.....	27
Chapter Two: To Be the First: The Epistles of Phillis Wheatley.....	29
Chapter Three: “The Truth Shall Make You Free”: Early to Mid-19 th Century	
Black Letters and Literature as the True Voice of America	62
Chapter Four: The Dying Light from the Embers of Reconstruction:	
1865-1877 and 1878-1899	98
Chapter Five: The Unending Dawn of Black Lives in 20 th Century America	132
Chapter Six: The Quiet Before the Storm	178
Chapter Seven: Social Justice: The Gross Misunderstandings of Meaning.....	220
References	242

List of Figures

Figure 1 Phillis Wheatley Letter to Earl of Dartmouth.....	32
Figure 2 Phillis Wheatley Letter to Col. David Wooster	36
Figure 3 “Letter from John Andrews to William Barrell” regarding Wheatley	38
Figure 4 Phillis Wheatley Bill of Sale	44
Figure 5 Front matter for Wheatley’s collected works (1802 ed.).....	46
Figure 6 Phillis Wheatley Letter from Samson Occum	49
Figure 7 Portraiture of His Excellency George Washington	56
Figure 8 Letter from Vilet Lester to Patsey Patterson p. 1.....	63
Figure 9 Letter from Vilet Lester to Patsey Patterson p. 2.....	64
Figure 10 Woodcut of Harriet Tubman.....	65
Figure 11 Harriet Tubman U.S. Postage Stamp 32¢.....	66
Figure 12 Harriet Jacobs Letter to Amy Kirby Post	71
Figure 13 Drawing of Amy Kirby Post.....	71
Figure 14 Letter from a Fugitive Slave, <i>New York Semi-Weekly Tribune</i>	86
Figure 15 Letter from a Fugitive Slave, <i>New York Semi-Weekly Tribune</i>	86
Figure 16 Letter from a Fugitive Slave, <i>New York Semi-Weekly Tribune</i>	87
Figure 17 Letter from a Fugitive Slave, <i>New York Semi-Weekly Tribune</i>	87
Figure 18 Letter from a Fugitive Slave, <i>New York Semi-Weekly Tribune</i>	88
Figure 19 Letter from a Fugitive Slave, <i>New York Semi-Weekly Tribune</i>	88
Figure 20 Letter from a Fugitive Slave, <i>New York Semi-Weekly Tribune</i>	89
Figure 21 Photograph of Harriet Jacobs	91
Figure 22 Clara Bashop Newspaper Advertisement	100

Figure 23 Clara Bashop searching for her daughter.....	100
Figure 24 Newspaper Clipping Abraham Blackburn finds his mother.....	101
Figure 25 Report Pratt Mines Entry for Ezekiel Archer [<i>sic</i>]	103
Figure 26 Letter from Ezekiel Archey and Ambrose Haskins p. 1	105
Figure 27 Letter from Ezekiel Archey and Ambrose Haskins p. 2	106
Figure 28 Letter from Ezekiel Archey and Ambrose Haskins p. 3	107
Figure 29 Letter from Ezekiel Archey and Ambrose Haskins p. 4	108
Figure 30 Letter from Ezekiel Archey and Ambrose Haskins p. 5	109
Figure 31 Orders of Alabama Prison Board Discharge of Ezekiel Archie [<i>sic</i>]	110
Figure 32 Photograph of Members of Colored Women Voters	112
Figure 33 Photograph of The Christian Recorder Office Building	114
Figure 34 Print of <i>Autographs for Freedom</i>	116
Figure 35 Print of <i>Autographs for Freedom</i>	117
Figure 36 Poem by Annie Parker.	118
Figure 37 Poem by Annie Parker	119
Figure 38 Newspaper Article about Victoria Earle Matthews	122
Figure 39 Photograph of Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin.....	124
Figure 40 Photograph of Charlotte Forten Grimke	125
Figure 41 Photograph of Brick Church near Frogmore, SC	127
Figure 42 Drawing of Katherine D. Chapman Tillman	129
Figure 43 Photograph of Ida B. Wells.....	130
Figure 44 Photograph of Robert White Lynching Site	140
Figure 45 United States Census Entry for Robin White, Jr. and Osillis White	141

Figure 46 a Newspaper Clipping Detailing the Pardon of White Lynchers.....	142
Figure 46 b Newspaper Clipping Detailing the Pardon of White Lynchers	143
Figure 47 Photograph Mary Church Terrell.....	146
Figure 48 Witness Statement from Pat Hill p.1	147
Figure 49 Witness Statement from Pat Hill p. 2	148
Figure 50 The Official Pardon of John W. Pace p. 1	149
Figure 51 The Official Pardon of John W. Pace p. 2	149
Figure 52 Letter from Mentha Morrison to President T. Roosevelt p. 1.....	153
Figure 53 Letter from Mentha Morrison to President T. Roosevelt p. 2.....	154
Figure 54 Letter from US Attorney E. A. Angier to AG Philander C. Knox.....	155
Figure 55 Letter from US Attorney E. A. Angier to AG Philander C. Knox p. 1.....	156
Figure 56 Letter from US Attorney E. A. Angier to AG Philander C. Knox p. 2.....	157
Figure 57 Letter from US Attorney E. A. Angier to AG Philander C. Knox p. 3.....	158
Figure 58 Carrie Kinsey Letter.....	160
Figure 59 Photograph of Child Convicts in Field	161
Figure 60 Letter from Vina Malone to District Attorney, Col. E.A. Angier p.1.....	163
Figure 61 Letter from Vina Malone to District Attorney, Col. E.A. Angier p.2.....	164
Figure 62 Letter from Mrs. Daley to Mr. Russell, 17 Dec 1907 p.1	169
Figure 63 Letter from Mrs. Daley to Mr. Russell, 17 Dec 1907 p. 2	170
Figure 64 Letter from Mrs. Daley to Mr. Russell, 17 Dec 1907 p. 3	171
Figure 65 Letter from Mrs. Daley to Mr. Russell, 17 Dec 1907 p. 4.....	172
Figure 66 Letter to AG of the U.S. from Mrs. Emma Polite p. 1.....	173
Figure 67 Letter to AG of the U.S. from Mrs. Emma Polite p. 2.....	174

Figure 68 1900 US Census. Emma Polite and Daniel Polite	174
Figure 69 Letter US A.G. from Mary C. Barker, January 23, 1910.....	187
Figure 70 Death Certificate of John William Rust.....	188
Figure 71 Photograph of RR Station, Glen Alum, West Virginia	189
Figure 72 Letter from John Rust to Ethel Rust	189
Figure 73 Ethel Rust Sworn Statement p. 1	190
Figure 74 Ethel Rust Sworn Statement p. 2	191
Figure 75 Ethel Rust Sworn Statement p. 3	192
Figure 76 Ethel Rust Sworn Statement p. 4	193
Figure 77 Letter from Annie Castleberry to Department of Justice p. 1.....	194
Figure 78 Letter from Annie Castleberry to Department of Justice p. 2.....	195
Figure 79 Letter from Annie Castleberry to Department of Justice p. 3.....	196
Figure 80 Letter from Annie Castleberry to Department of Justice p. 4.....	197
Figure 81 United States Census, 1900, Lilla Castlebury and Jerry Castlebury	198
Figure 82 Letter from Annie Castleberry to Department of Justice p.1.....	199
Figure 83 Letter from Annie Castleberry to Department of Justice p. 2.....	200
Figure 84 Letter from Annie Castleberry to Department of Justice p. 3.....	201
Figure 85 Letter from Annie Castleberry to Department of Justice p. 4.....	202
Figure 86 Letter from Mary Haggard to Department of Justice p. 1	203
Figure 87 Letter from Mary Haggard to Department of Justice p. 2	204
Figure 88 Letter from Mary Haggard to Department of Justice p. 3	205
Figure 89 Letter from O.R. Luhring to Mary Haggard	206
Figure 90 Lois Campbell Letter to President and First Lady F.D. Roosevelt p. 1	207

Figure 91 Lois Campbell Letter to President and First Lady F.D. Roosevelt p. 2.....	208
Figure 92 Lois Campbell Letter to President and First Lady F.D. Roosevelt p. 3.....	209
Figure 93 Lois Campbell Letter to President and First Lady F.D. Roosevelt p. 4.....	210
Figure 94 Lois Campbell Letter to President and First Lady F.D. Roosevelt p. 5.....	211
Figure 95 Lois Campbell Letter to President and First Lady F.D. Roosevelt p. 6.....	212
Figure 96 Lois Campbell Letter to President and First Lady F.D. Roosevelt p. 7.....	213
Figure 97 Lois Campbell Letter to President and First Lady F.D. Roosevelt p. 8.....	214
Figure 98 Letter from J. Keenan to Lois Campbell.....	215
Figure 99 Ada Gilmore Letter to President F.D. Roosevelt p. 1.....	216
Figure 100 Ada Gilmore Letter to President F.D. Roosevelt p. 2.....	217
Figure 101 Ada Gilmore Letter to President F.D. Roosevelt p. 3.....	218
Figure 102 Letter from Franklin D. Roosevelt to Arthur B. Spingarn.....	219

Letter Revolution: Epistolary Protest in Black American Women's Writing

Dissertation Abstract—Idaho State University (2021)

This dissertation examines the rhetorical purpose of letters written by African American women in the United States protesting the system of slavery, understood broadly, through the Jim Crow Era. By writing letters, all of which contain both information and narrative, these women broadened the movement for social justice available to women, particularly women of color. This dissertation evaluates the use of the epistolary genre, and includes diaries, newspaper articles, or other story modes that utilize letters to tell the story.

This dissertation explores actual historical letters, published and recognized by literary scholars, but also includes some located in the National Archives. These letters, heretofore unstudied and unexamined, served very specific purposes: to protest against, and to plead for help, for re-enslaved Black men in the rural south, caught in a system which author Douglas A. Blackmon, has termed “neo-slavery,” otherwise known as convict leasing or penal servitude. This study also includes letters from women who were also taken into servitude, appealing for clemency by writing from inside the system. These letters represent acts of defiance and protest, and were smuggled out to alert others of the horrific physical and mental abuse, including rape, which they routinely experienced. To set the context for the protest letters that emerged from the convict leasing system, this study begins with pre-Civil War writings of figures like Harriet Jacobs and Phillis Wheatley. The concluding discussion explores current debates on teaching race and how individual narratives intersect with the historical moment in which we now teach.

Keywords: Letter writing—social practice, literacy, American letters, African American literature, African American Women—slavery, reconstruction, civil rights, social conditions, power—race relations, convict leasing, family separation—letter writing as protest.

Introduction: The Un-Voiced to Become Voiced Again

This project began long before it was formalized in writing. For most of my life I have been given the support needed to know that I can accomplish whatever it is I set my mind to. I have also been a student of literature from the time that my parents read stories and sang lullabies to me and my siblings as very young children. Most of the lullabies that we heard came from some of the best poets in the history of The United States. I recall my mom singing “Go Tell It on the Mountain” and my dad singing “Puff the Magic Dragon.” Both of these songs/poems spoke of childhood innocence turned quickly into the loss of innocence and estrangement from the ideas that maintained and allowed the world to be one of adventure full of pirate ships, giants’ rings, and friendship. Eventually I began to recognize that many of the songs I heard in my youth spoke of emancipation, equality, by which I could imagine a world that could be one of opportunity for all, regardless of race, religion, economic, or class status. Songs like “Chimes of Freedom” and “The Times, They are A’Changin,” both of which were once lullabies to me, became anthems to me, and introduced the idea of “upstanding” and fighting against injustice and oppression. These very early introductions to the literature of Social Justice propelled me forward to learning more and more about the oppression spoken of by men and women like Bob Dylan and Peter, Paul, and Mary.

As such, I have always been inspired by women who have been strong leaders, tackling feats that previously had been reserved for men, and who fought through adversity, with the courage and tenacity to overcome every challenge. This school of thought led me, during my graduate studies, to write a Master’s Thesis on the female voice, through narrative, of mountain climbers. For centuries the stories of male climbers have been recorded and told many times over. Why not then women’s’ stories? As I read book after book, story after story, written by

female climbers I came to understand that while their experiences were similar to their male counterparts, the telling of their experience differed vastly and added something unique and special to the canon of mountaineering literature. As I completed my thesis and Master's degree I continued on to a career in teaching. I have continued to be fascinated by the function of a female storyteller in contrast to their male counterpart. I have, however, also become seriously engaged with literature that surrounds civil rights, and not just for women but for other oppressed groups, especially a uniquely American Literature by African American men and women.

It was during my junior year of high school that I took an honors American History course. I found myself very interested in the literature that was written by historically oppressed groups. One of my first introductions to Civil War Literature came from reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin* written by a woman, Harriet Beecher Stowe. I was told that when President Lincoln met Stowe, he exclaimed "ah, the little woman who started the Civil War." While this statement is entirely apocryphal, it told me that literature had power to propel a war forward, which would eventually change the ideas and notions of ownership over others. Hearing this and later reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin* led me to understand and know that the voices of women were and are indispensable to the American Narrative of liberty, freedom, and the pursuit of happiness, as well as the Narrative of oppression, and enslavement defined by power, money, and greed.

Fast-forward a few more years and I was introduced to *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* in a "Masterpieces in Literature" taught by Dr. Loughton. The affect this masterpiece had on me is almost inexplicable. Douglass's narrative introduced me to the literature of the enslaved and oppressed; it also lit a fire inside of me to know more and more about this voice I hadn't heard or known until that moment. This interest was further stoked by a course titled "Literature of the Civil War" taught by Dr. Sessions. I knew that I wanted to know

more and that this narrative and the many others I would eventually read and study were the beginning of a life in which their voices would linger until I found something I could explore and contribute to, regarding the literature of the enslaved and oppressed. I have been supported emotionally, financially, and physically by my husband, parents, children, siblings, nieces and nephews, students, colleagues, my department chair, the Dean of my college, and kindness of countless friends and strangers who are strangers no more. Without question, the gift of encouragement, listening ears, and support unmatched of so many has propelled me to this moment. Without the love of every person in my life, the determination in me and in each one of them, I would not have gotten to the point where I could attempt to write this dissertation

Close to a decade ago, after I completed my Bachelor's degree in English with a minor in History, my Master's Degree in American Studies, and had been teaching for a number of years, I found myself still searching for that part of the narrative of the oppressed in America that could push me to limits I didn't know existed. In 2008, I came across a book in my local grocery store. I first noticed the cover; pretty nondescript, a red, white, and black cover, with a noticeable stamp in gold, which read "winner of the Pulitzer Prize." While that commanded some attention, what really got to me with the title of the book printed in large white letters, set in contrast to the black cover. The title, *Slavery by Another Name*, immediately got my full attention. From the moment I began, my reading was always accompanied with a pen and a highlighter, with which I underlined and took notes in the margins of many pages of my book. As such I spent a long time poring over the ideas presented by the author, Douglas Blackmon.

In his book, Blackmon meticulously documents through narratives, court records, and government documents, how thousands of African Americans were in fact re-enslaved following the end of the Civil War up through the Second World War. I was sickened, horrified,

dumbfounded, disgusted, and at times in the pit of despair, as I read how injustice and corruption in local and national governments allowed a race of people to be re-enslaved, abused, killed, and left alone with no friend in the world to help them. Young black men were arrested on spurious charges and forced into slave labor, but what's more is that they were picked up, arrested, sold, and never heard from again. I found myself unable to leave the story of those left behind; fathers, mothers, sisters, wives, children, etc. How did they go on? What is their narrative? In Blackmon's book he cites from a letter from one Carrie Kinsey, whose brother, James Robinson, was one of those unfortunate young black men who was stolen from his life and family.

Blackmon recounts the following:

On July 31, 1903, a letter to President Theodore Roosevelt arrived at the White House from Carrie Kinsey, a barely literate African American woman in Bainbridge, Georgia. Her fourteen-year-old brother, James Robinson, had been abducted a year earlier and sold to a plantation. Local police would take no interest. "Mr. Prassident," wrote Mrs. Kinsey, struggling to overcome the illiteracy of her world. "They wont let me have him . . . He hase not don nothing for them to have him in chanes so I rite to you for your help." Like the vast majority of such pleas, her letter was slipped into a small rectangular folder at the Department of Justice and tagged with a reference number, in this case 12007. No further action was ever recorded. Her letter lies today in the National Archives.

(8-9)

This letter narrates a situation so steeped in the truth of American History that it has become the unvoiced and untold story of America; the legacy that slavery left touches every aspect of American life today. It's a chapter of American letters that is integral to understanding the

literature of the oppressed, yet remains one of the least understood and unexplored corpus of American writing today. I knew that there must be others who wrote letters to some of the most powerful leaders in The United States.

This dissertation has become much more than a requirement, it has become the beginning of a life and career dedicated to re-voicing those whose voice may only remain on the pages of a letter, written in the early stages of establishing true American Democracy. Three years after the Civil War ended, the 14th Amendment was passed granting citizenship to all those naturalized and born in the US. It also contained/s a promise of “equal protection under the law.” In 1868 this nation was still reeling from a war fought by and for American men and women. The necessity of repairing the war-torn South took precedence over establishing citizenship for those to whom it had newly been granted—Black men and women. For most of the Black Americans living during that time, and up to the early to mid-twentieth century, there are few records that maintain their existence. The letters lying in the National Archives, the Library of Congress, and among the relics of old courthouses, spread throughout the South and obscured by time and place, may very well be the only documentation left to testify that they were here. This dissertation is not just a requirement: it is now a promise to re-voice those whose existence hangs in the balance. For all the injustice that was their life, the injustice of their existence being erased from the record of humanity is unthinkable and immoral.

In order to accomplish this I will begin in Chapter One with the earliest known and published African American woman, Phillis Wheatley. Examining her poems and letters will set the stage for the beginning and long career of Black women writers in America.

Chapter Two will move chronologically into the next well-known African American writer, Harriet Jacobs. Her career as a writer and abolitionist began by writing letters that argued

against those in the opinion sections of various newspapers. Jacobs goes on to write and publish her autobiography in 1860. Her narrative and corresponding letters continue the argument of the incredibly important role letter writing played in the lives of oppressed Black women. Although Jacobs's work is the most recognized of female slave narrative, as the United States engages in a Civil War, her narrative gives way to the death and destruction of the new nation. However, her letter writing never stops and has been collected in a two-volume edition of her body of work.

Wheatley and Jacobs did much to open the door to new generations of Black women writers. Chapter Three examines the works of Black women, most of whom are educated and situated in the seeming "safety" of the North. In addition to the published works of Black women are the unpublished letters written by Black women in the South, most of whom are not educated and whose sole purpose is to seek help as the injustice of being Black in the South mounts to new heights of "legal" enslavement through peonage, convict leasing, and racially driven domestic terrorism of American Blacks.

Chapter Four continues with the letters of heretofore-unpublished letters of Black women in the rural South whose dreams of freedom, equality, and justice are marred through the systematic oppression of all Black citizens. These letters will cover the decade of 1900-1909. More often than not, many of the letters in this chapter, as well as additional chapters, are written by illiterate or barely literate wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters to the highest authority in the Nation—Presidents of the United States from President Ulysses S. Grant to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. It is unlikely that any of those letters ever reached the desk or gaze of the President. Instead, they were filed away with countless other documents in the National Archives, Peonage Files and the Library of Congress collections of the NAACP.

Chapters Five and Six follow the same chronological method, covering the decades 1910-1919 and 1920-1929. Both include images of letters I took at the National Archives, College Park Collection, and the Library of Congress, NAACP Collection, over the last five years.

To this end, I have visited, pulled, and touched every document in the Peonage collection at the National Archive in College Park, Maryland. I have photographed hundreds of documents, hand-written letters, and written testimonies of dozens of those who lived through this experience and wrote of it. My research has taken me to the Smithsonian African American Museum of History and Culture in Washington, D.C. on more than one occasion. While there, I spent hour upon hour and days upon days studying the narratives of an oppressed people. People who were once considered less than human, as property, whose body, mind, and spirit belonged to the enslaver; their worth recorded in the same ledgers that every other piece of property, including chairs, silverware, and livestock, were recorded and which gave value to the property and land upon which they stood.

I have transcended time and place connecting to Phillis Wheatley and her collection of poetry and letters, most of which protest the injustice of enslavement on American soil. A woman once hailed for her genius in her ability to write, speak, and think about the moral issues of the day, and who was celebrated in a land that was not her own, was then dismissed and rejected in one she called home. Her voice took me to The Schomburg Center for Black Studies in Harlem, where I touched pages that she, too, touched as she wrote of her desire for equality and an end to the legalized institution of slavery. She recognized the paradox of living in a land celebrated for the idea that “all men are created equal,” each “endowed with certain unalienable rights” that include “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” but one that also permitted the legal ownership of “othered” human beings. Her life ended as a free woman who died in squalor

and very much alone; not quite the realization of freedom and equality she had once written about. Even in this tragedy, other voices emerged.

The voice of Harriet Jacobs also took me to the largest repository of her letters in the National Archives, Harriet Jacobs Family Papers, and back to the Schomburg Center for Black Studies. Best known for her narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jacobs published under the pseudonym Linda Brent in 1860. As more and more readers consumed her narrative, she developed friendships with others fighting against the institution of enslavement, and carried on regular correspondence with many of them.

Following the publication and reception of Jacobs's narrative, voices of Black women in the South are almost entirely absent. The deafening silence led me to seek out the many voices of women who did in fact write, perhaps not as a means of publication, but as pleas for help in recovering their male counterparts who were arrested, charged, and plunged into the dark system of convict leasing, despite being "free." This system of re-enslavement continued as the US rebuilt after the Civil War to become one of the wealthiest nations and a leading global power. The practice lasted well into the 1940s and was formally abolished through the actions of President Franklin D. Roosevelt via "Circular 3591," issued December 12, 1941, one day after Germany officially declared war against America.

I took hundreds of photographs to ensure my access to these forgotten voices beyond the space and time of my archival research. Preserving the voices of these women through their letters leads to the conclusion that those who have passed on are not forever silenced; the images of their written words gives them the chance to be heard again. The impetus behind my research is this: that for thousands whose freedom, life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness was taken in the most violent and egregious of ways might be given voice again, never to be forgotten or silenced.

Chapter 1: The Rhymes and Reasons to Epistolary Writing

Often they [letters] . . . exist as scenes of subversion and insurgency, a claiming of power that may or may not achieve effective social form. The letter is ever the locus of class markers: . . . levels of cultivation, grades of literacy. There is almost no portion of society to which the letter at some time does not belong.

—William Decker, *Epistolary Practices*

Epistolary writing takes its definition from the Greek word, *epistolē*, meaning “letter.”

The epistolary genre, which often pertains specifically to the writing of letters, also allows epistolarity to encompass the writings found in diaries, newspaper articles, or stories that utilize letters to tell a story. The use of letters in a literary context provides insights into the writers’ imaginations and minds, and into the details of their lives that create a unique relationship between reader and writer, much in the same way reading personal diaries does. Epistolary writing can be found in both fiction and nonfiction and serves a very specific purpose in each — to give voice to a person or character and to serve as their chief means of communicating a message to a larger audience.

Epistolary writing as studied in this dissertation serves as the vehicle through which oppressed women, particularly enslaved women and later, free Black women, were able to protest against the injustices of the time and situations they faced. Not only is the content of the letters explored, but also the language used to either subvert or rebel against those in power and, in addition, to maintain identity and enact their power and purpose through their own writings. The power of the epistle, as noted previously, is found in important works of fiction written by Black women of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, in which letters are written as a form of protest against subjugation.

Epistolary Theory and Form

I explore the genre of epistolary writing as a social practice in this dissertation. There are various ways to study the use of the letter and the unique role that it plays both in literature and in social practices. The letters under examination in this dissertation are unique in that they are written by women who are held in some form of captivity and are either asking for help, trying to expose a cruel form of treatment, or both. The subjects within this study do not fit into the prescribed purposes for writing letters, as in most cases the main message is a plea for help, written out of a sense of urgency, and thus are in many ways dangerous.

Letter writing functions as one the most democratic practice in which individuals can participate; anyone possessing the knowledge who can gain access to any type of paper, be it newspaper scraps, brown paper sacks, or even toilet paper, as well as any variety of writing utensil, can write notes and letters. While a certain demographic considers letter writing to be an artistic form of expression, requiring private space, a writing desk, ink well, quill pen, and wax sealers, and any number of writing tools, writing letters is a practice that can occur anywhere at any time and by anyone who has even the simplest set of writing skills.

David Barton and Nigel Hall's edited volume, *Letter Writing as a Social Practice*, explores the practice of letter writing much less as a form of art for the elite, but as a necessary form of writing for social progress. As Barton and Hall state, "the most revealing way of investigating letter writing is to view it as a social practice, examining the texts, the participants, the activities and the artefacts in their social contexts . . . the activity of letter writing itself" (1-2). Barton and Hall further suggest that, "[i]n analyzing letter writing as a social practice it is useful to distinguish the *texts*, the *participants*, the *activities*, and the *artefacts*, . . . [and] roles and identities that *participants* assume" (6, 7). By examining the letters from the perspective of

the participant, sender and intended receiver, the actual text, and artifacts these letters will illustrate how the cries for help from women who had few options, other than to write letters exposed a system of injustice.

The Female Epistle for Social Practice

Letter writing was and continues to be seen as a social practice, one in which class, gender, race, and age vary. David Barton and Nigel Hall in *Letter Writing as a Social Practice* assert “the importance of letter-writing” and “that letter writing is one of the most pervasive literate activities in human societies, and is currently widespread across a range of cultures, communities and continents” (1). In both *Epistolary Practices* and *Letter Writing as a Social Practice*, the authors emphasize the role of tools or artifacts as an absolute necessity. Nigel Hall outlines the material necessities of writing during the Victorian period, but notes that “the process would [not] have been identical for all people at all times during this period. The following merely serves as a general illustration” (91). Hall’s list addresses the necessary tools for a letter writer: A space and desk to write on; choosing a pen; selecting the writing paper; finding an envelope; posting; and accessories, including, but not limited to: seals, sealing wax, wax heaters, holders, and chisels; ink, ink wells; quills and quill pen machines, pen holder, pen cleaners, pen knives; stationary racks cases and boxes; blotting paper; and pencils (104). Each of the aforementioned tools varied according to the economic situation of the writer. However, with the rise of technology during the industrial revolution, “the evolution of an efficient, effective, speedy railway, accompanied by the introduction in 1840 of a national penny post system,” letter writing became a widespread practice, one that changed the hierarchical system in America—at least in terms of writing and communication.

In the infancy of American letter writing, the enslaved Phillis Wheatley, born in Senegal/Gambia and purchased at the age of seven in Boston, Massachusetts, emerges almost solely as the first woman, and, more specifically African woman writer in the newly formed United States. In the case of Wheatley, whose life and letters are examined in the following chapter, her tools/artifacts were given to her by her owners, John and Susannah Wheatley. With the death of Susanna Wheatley in 1774 and John Wheatley in 1776, Phillis faced the dilemma of most Black slaves who found themselves suddenly free in a world where they were not welcome. Her usual access to a place to write, and pen and paper to write on, disappeared, which made writing more difficult but exponentially more important. However, because she knew how to read and write, and had the desire to fight against the injustice of slavery, she continued her epistolary practice, writing letters to politicians about the inhumanity of slavery until her early death in 1784. Although writing by American women continued to emerge in the public sphere, the voice of the enslaved woman doesn't appear in publication until roughly 1861, with the publication of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, the anonymously published narrative of Harriet Jacobs.

Locating the Story within the Letter

In addition to examining the letters through the context of social practice as addressed by Barton and Hall, methods from the work of William Merrill Decker are indispensable to this study. In his book, *Epistolary Practices: Letter Writing in America before Telecommunications*, Decker encourages the reader of a letter to begin by locating the story found within the letter. He states that letters are valued “not only for what they allow us to construct of the past but for their capacity to tell the stories of individuals, their ability to create the illusion of individuals telling their own stories” (8). This dissertation will consider the “the stories of individuals” from a

historical, political, economic, and personal context through the language and use of their own letters. Decker advises the reader that “[a] major problem in the reading of letters has in fact to do with the way letters are made to cohere as a narrative. Letters tell stories centered in the experience of historically real individuals, but the stories they tell depend on the context in which they are read” (9). The letters used for this study vary in purpose and therefore in context. These texts remain united because they all address injustice, clarification of myths about the station of slaves, and pleas for help. They also are unified in their sense of urgency for social change and personal help. Decker examines letters that distinctly address the “American experience,” both male and female (10). The letters in this dissertation are also distinctly American but focus specifically on Black women writers. The convergence of the subjects, Phillis Wheatley, Harriet Jacobs, and various other Black women in the rural south following emancipation, show how epistolary writing allowed the expression of distressed circumstances, alerted others to the reality of enslaved lives, and how writing letters became an avenue to receive justice and help. It allows their stories to be heard today; without their letters, little remains to document their lives.

Another aspect of these letters is that their specific purpose is to affect the reader’s emotions so profoundly that they will be motivated to take action necessary to enact change. Some of the letters in this study are written not to please the recipient, but to get help. Because of the physical danger involved in writing these letters, there is no concern for preservation of the letter. Decker’s assertion, that “[t]here is almost no portion of society to which the letter at some time does not belong” (14), illustrates why these women are communicating through letters rather than through essays, books, public speaking, and so forth. Because these women had the “right” to write letters, letter writing was perhaps one of the safest ways they could communicate their situations. Decker asks the reader to consider the form in which letters are written. White

and Black women in this time period are writing for different purposes—and for Black writers, form goes by the wayside, but epistolary style remains intact. Urgency in the language, spelling, sentence structure, and voice are apparent in each of the letters. By using the methods of numerous epistolary scholars, this dissertation distinguishes these letters from others written during this time period, and offers greater understanding as to why, how, and with what purpose these letters were written.

Narrative Theory

The examination of voice as an element of narration is explored in the letters throughout this study. I apply a definition of “voice” within the context of narrative theorists such as Porter Abbott, who states that “[the] grammatical person is an important feature of voice in narration, but more important still is our sense of the kind of character . . . it is whose voice colors the story it narrates. In this sense, narrative voice is a major element in the construction of a story” (72). He continues to discuss the centrality of the voice’s mechanism when he writes, “it is therefore crucial to determine the kind of person we have for a narrator because this lets us know just how she injects into the narrative her own needs and desires, and limitations” (72). Voice functions as an intrinsic element of the context, style, and epistolary form each of these letters utilizes.

Letter writing is a social practice, and very often a form of protest. The letter became, in many instances, the only way in which oppressed people were able to communicate, expose injustice, and become part of the literary tradition, one that would otherwise be left out and possibly silenced. Writing around the letter allows for a larger and more coherent narrative to be constructed, i.e. fictive history = history as literature. With the freedom of historical fiction, a writer can take the remnants of history and create a narrative that gives a story to each voice that has hitherto been silenced. The letters written specifically by Black women give insights into the

difficulties they faced; this includes the slave narrative format, which may contain inaccuracies due to the use of an amanuensis—someone else recording their story—because literacy was often reserved for whites. The use of an amanuensis at times led to partly fictionalized narratives because the speaker often couldn't read or confirm their true stories.

Letters written by women from the early twentieth century who were locked in the bonds of a new kind of slavery—the convict leasing system—have, against tremendous odds, been preserved; however, their stories are still incomplete. A corpus of letters that exceeds more than 100 samples has been left behind—filed in The National Archives, under “The Peonage Files,” in College Park, Maryland, and remains virtually untouched. These letters necessitate the use of refracted testimony, meaning that because many of the letters, written by different women, all express the same concerns: there is a continuity to the narrative that can be pieced together. Some inferences have to be made in order to go forward, and with such a vast corpus certain story elements can be accepted by virtue of the sheer volume of letters addressing the same topic.

The letter thus begins to frame the bare bones of the larger narrative, which thus far has remained relatively silent. In most cases, these artifacts represent the only documentation of the desperate situation Black women faced in the rural South. This study includes some of the letters that have been found, and which now must be *re-voiced*. It is clear that each woman in this dissertation has her own unique voice and does not need to be *given* voice. The purpose is to draw their voices and narratives into a place where they can be read, studied, heard, and therefore acknowledge the hidden space in which their existence remains. This dissertation does not contain a comprehensive study of all letters but gestures at the untold number of letters that remain undiscovered. Taking the fractured truth allows for writers to create a story that is plausible and does indeed reflect truth and life.

Historian David Harlan believes that writing the history of the American past allows for moral reflection and sentiment to emerge, again allowing for the reflection of truth and life. In *The Degradation of American History*, Harlan states,

For thirty years Hayden White [American historian best known for his work on meta-history] has been trying to free historical writing from the assumptions and limitations of nineteenth-century realism. In three major books and a long series of articles he has tried to make the rest of us see what now seems obvious to almost everyone; that a historical account is basically an act of the moral imagination, that is, a search for predecessors, and ordering of value, a conversation with the dead about what we should value and how we should live” (Harlan 105).

This research then, through an act of “moral imagination” begins to reconstruct a narrative based on the aforementioned archive. Because this archive spans the years between 1867-1950, information on many authors of these letters does not exist. This is due in large part to the enormity of repairing a national identity of unification and moralism, the tremendous task of repairing war-torn land that with its destruction came the fall of the agrarian economy, and exposed wholesale racism and sexism as part of the societal structure.

With the ratification of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments—the abolishment of slavery except as punishment for a crime, the right to citizenship and protection under the law, and the right of all men to vote, respectively—also came the need to find ways to account for the four million formerly enslaved new American citizens, to protect their God-given rights, and to combat the centuries of racist and sexist beliefs that established this indivisible “Nation Under God.” There was very little desire on the part of those who helped to enforce

reconstruction, a period of only seven years, to document and report to the census the millions of new Americans. The documentation of citizens using birth certificates and social security numbers would not become a reality until almost halfway through the twentieth century. Therefore, there is a solid case for the letters of many Black Americans, particularly in the rural South, serving as the only vital documentation for each individual who had the courage to write letters. It then becomes incumbent on researchers now to preserve their narrative and life history and ensure their existence does not vanish from the record of humanity; the narrative has been there, however, it has been concealed through the overt apathy for the plight of Black Americans by the recipients of these letters who could have done something to end their nightmare. Simply put, they chose not to assist people who were begging for help.

History and the Epistle

Taking the fractured truth allows for writers to create a plausible story that does indeed reflect truth and life. Refracted Testimony = constructive imagination (White 479). Historical interpretations allow for the reconstruction of a narrative through the body of work available and artifacts yet to be found. In the case of “The Carrie Kinsey Letter,” written in 1903 and explored to a fuller extent in Chapter Five, little to no meaning can be assigned without the historical context of place, time, and the direct request from the sender. Such narrative elements play an essential role in what cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner refers to as “the narrative construction of time” (qtd. in Bresco “Giving National Form” 1). The most exciting part of the “narrative construction of time” is that readers are invited to participate in creating the narratives of individuals, families, and communities, according to what is known. Our ability to tell these stories is what “gives shape and continuity to past and present events” (1). In order to reconstruct the narrative of the past, writers must draw from a schematic template. In this case, the

form of “letters” provides the schematic template from which a narrative is constructed. History dictates that the artifacts are examined from the time period in which they were produced, not through the cultural construction of meanings today.

Narratives rooted specifically in history are reconstructed through a series of events. These events may have been recorded in numerous forms, many of which will not be reflective of narrative writing, meaning the re-construction would occur through the utilization of the historical or primary documents remaining. Part of the narrative of the United States has yet to be reconstructed. When a nation offers equality to all men, excepting “othered” groups, a narrative from the perspective of the “othered” is not often part of the national memory. The American story is rooted in discrimination, physical and emotional abuse, hidden in and enacted out of laws created in a “free nation,” laws which were used to re-enslave the “othered.”

Enslavement in the United States came by way of owning humans as property, while also disallowing Blacks equal opportunity for education, most specifically literacy; literacy was perceived as dangerous and deliberately kept from those who “needed to be controlled.” Many American leaders understood that knowledge is power and that as long as they could control the narrative, they could silence those with conflicting narratives; without the ability to write, those differing stories would not be recorded, and thus obscured by the dominant narrative. Thousands of individual stories would be lost to time, some never to be recovered.

In a quest to “recover” such lost stories, social psychologist Ignacio Bresco de Luna believes those attempting to reconstruct stories should consider the following questions: “Where do events come from? Are they ready-made entities that exist out there, charged with their own meaning waiting to be translated into narrative form? Do they become apparent in the form of ready-made stories whose plot and meaning has to be discovered by the vigilant historian?” (3).

By using these tools, Bresco suggests a way to construct a historical narrative of “The Carrie Kinsey Letter.”

The first time I encountered “The Carrie Kinsey Letter” in Blackmon’s *Slavery by Another Name*, I felt there was a ready-made entity in which a new narrative could be constructed. I obtained reels of microfilm from “The Peonage Files” via inter-library loan and found dozens of similar letters written by women, in similar places and circumstances, spanning a nearly eighty-year period. The majority of letters demonstrated language and punctuation skills that indicate a very low level of literacy—history testifies to that as well. In history, deductive leaps are made often. If there is a substantial body of work that speaks to the same or similar issues, historians may then take the corpus and begin to reconstruct a historical narrative. The original Kinsey letter reads:

Bainbridge, Georgia, July 26, 1903.

Mr. President, I have a brother about 14 years old. A colored man came here and hired him from me, and said that he would take good care of him, and pay me five dollars a month for him—and I heard of him no more. He went and sold him to McRee, and they has been working him in prison for 12 months and I has tried to get them to send him to me and they won’t let him go. He has no mother and no father. They are both dead, and I am his only friend and they won’t let me have him. He has not done nothing for them to have him in chains, so I write to you for you to help me get my poor brother. His name is James Robinson. And the man that carried him off, his name is Dan Cal. He sold him to McCree at Valdosta, Georgia. Please let me hear from you at once.

Carrie Kinsey

In my study of Carrie Kinsey and her letter, I focused on finding similar letters, specifically those written by Black women in the rural South who were left behind and whose narrative is not yet rediscovered and re-voiced. As I read further examples of this letter, with the same plea from many other women, I could not help but wonder what happened to the women who were left behind after their relatives were again stolen from them, convicted, and sold. This narrative of Neo-Slavery is amplified after the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment, which explicitly states: “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction” (US Constitution, Amd. XIII, Sec. 1).

Understanding that the Thirteenth Amendment left a gaping loophole open concerning the possibility of re-enslavement was new to me and felt incomplete; a deafening silence replaced what should have been a resounding voice of Black women’s narratives. What was their story and could it be reconstructed? Without question at least parts of their lives individually or collectively could be found, offering further insight into a time of sheer terror for Black men and women. Their lives were saturated with blatant prejudice, legal discrimination, and the continued genocide of an American people, a practice not entirely new to the nation’s founders and well-documented in the story of America. In almost any medium of writing, the disdain, disgust, and superiority of a white upper-class can be found; journals, letters, national and state constitutions, medical research, art, and literature—in piece after piece—speak to the belief many held on the inferiority of Blacks, both African and African American.

The same author of *Slavery by Another Name*, journalist/historian, Douglas Blackmon, reappeared in my search for answers four years after his 2009 book. In an article for *Alternet*, an online publication with a focus on civil liberties, Blackmon writes about Carrie Kinsey and the

practice of convict-leasing that permeated the South for close to eighty years. The article fleshes out countless details about Carrie Kinsey's story that his book had merely outlined. As a result of what I believed was a different telling of the Kinsey letter, I made a deductive leap leading me to believe new information had surfaced about her and her brother, James Robinson. The description in this article led me to question certain elements about the text of the Kinsey letter and the context of her life. When I read the following I was surprised to read a new iteration of the Kinsey narrative, one more complete in its details of injustice. As Blackmon's article recounts:

Kinsey had already asked for help from the powerful white people in her world. . . . No white official in this corner of the state would take an interest in the abduction and enslavement of a black teenager. Confronted with a world of indifferent white people, Mrs. Kinsey did the only remaining thing she could think of . . . Mrs. Kinsey decided that her only remaining hope was to beg the president of the United States to help her brother . . . Considered more than a century later, her letter courses with desperation and submerged outrage.

(*Washington Monthly* "America's 20th Century Slavery")

In my personal correspondence with Mr. Blackmon, I asked if he had found additional records on Carrie Kinsey because the tellings of her story in his book and in this article seem to vary dramatically. He responded that he used a method called "refracted testimony" as he compiled research for his book, and as he continued his research after the publication of his book (27 November 2017). Refracted testimony essentially allows for the construction of a narrative through the collective writings and experiences of those whose letters lie among hundreds of similar letters in the National Archives, but whose narrative may be a very small piece of the

collective narrative. All combined, their contribution, like a single mosaic tile, adds to the growing testimony of others and leads to a collective narrative. The lack of official documentation of the lives of the writers leaves little from which to draw emphatic conclusions, which may then lead to interpretations based on the perspective, knowledge, and critical analysis of each letter. This presents a problem, but one that can be addressed, if not overcome, through the multiplicity of critical approaches to reading and understanding the literature, and in this case, the letter.

Truth or Fiction—Historical Narrative/Social Semiotics

One of the problems with historical narrative is found in the following statement by Bresco de Luna: “[B]oth historical and autobiographical narrative suffer from a never-ending transformation” (2). Because readers are encouraged to read through their own lens, the story or narrative continually shifts in meaning and in scope as perspective after perspective is applied to the text. Bresco de Luna also argues that “Our viewpoint in relation to this matter is that *anything that happens* can become the reference point for an event. However this requires a narrative structure *to be added*” (6, emphasis mine). Viewing the Kinsey letter from a historical lens permits the creation of a back-story that may or may not be accurate; there is really no way to tell. This is where the idea of “refracted testimony” comes into play—if the actual happening or records about the happening cannot be located, historians take the rest of what they know and plant the narrative where it seems to fit.

In terms of what epistolary writing encompasses, this type of historical writing is problematic. However, the discipline of social semiotics shares similar methods historians use that enable further room for the reconstruction of the narrative. Social semiotics is defined as an “approach to communication that seeks to understand how people communicate by a variety of

means in particular social settings” (Mavers n.p.). Social semiotics addresses the letter writing of Carrie Kinsey, as well as other Black women in similar circumstances, as a social act. The letters analyzed in this study are unique in almost every way. The artifact itself leaves few details about the tools used to write, for instance where paper and pencil could be obtained, and whether they had a space to write. However, through the use of social semiotics the act of writing itself can be analyzed and data can be drawn, leading to conclusions about the action. Beyond “the act,” a story can be located and analyzed through a literary lens.

Epistolarity and Literary Theory

Epistolary writing has been a part of literary studies for centuries, the purpose of which is to study, evaluate, and interpret literature. Beyond being letters, they are also narratives. Letters usually tell a story—voice is apparent, there is a setting, a conflict, and a resolution. The story in the Kinsey letter begins with what seems like a good employment opportunity for James Robinson, Kinsey’s brother. As the reader goes on, the plot gets more complicated and becomes more real. Kinsey learns that her brother is being held against his will, and the fact that she can’t get anyone to help her release him creates serious conflict. Another source of conflict appears when Kinsey describes how her brother is “in chanes [*sic*] . . . an [*sic*] they wont [*sic*] let me have him.” In the end Kinsey is resolved to get help in any way she can, and in her mind, that is through the President of the United States.

Because this letter is not a work of fiction, the narrative is even more painful when one realizes that there are dozens and dozens of letters, just like the Kinsey letter. The language these women use in each letter to share their individual and collective pain indicates that by refusing to hear their voices, they feel their communities and their nation have betrayed them. For some, the only physical remnant of their lives are the letters sitting in some green box in a vast repository

of both related and unrelated material. Everyone has a story to share, and in the end Carrie Kinsey's and so many others like hers are the ones that need to be heard.

For some reason it doesn't feel natural to analyze letters written by Black women in desperate circumstances in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries as literature, unless they are viewed as pieces of narrative non-fiction. According to Erik Larson, awarding-winning author of narrative non-fiction, the writer becomes "an animator of history" and should then "sink into the past and emerge with a sense of having lived in the past for a time. That is the great paradox in writing and reading—even though the ending is known, suspending belief for a time to allow falling back into the past, while being gripped by the wonder [or terror] of what will happen in the end, is so paradoxical, it is magic" (qtd. in Scutts). Each of the letters in the collection should be read within the context of the lived reality in which they are written—as testimonies, cries for help; it is obvious that they are not the products of orators or prolific writers. The syntax is all over the place and they are difficult, at times, to read. However, if epistolary writing exists in the discipline of literary studies, then these letters can be viewed as just that. They are stories, and it was the story in Kinsey's letter that drove me to find a larger unvoiced narrative. The letters addressed in the sections on Phillis Wheatley and Harriet Jacobs offer stronger evidence with which to make this argument. There are innumerable questions to ask about the text of this body of letters, and as an academic in the discipline of English it becomes my job to find meaning by "think[ing] through it independently—and to arrive at [my] own conclusion" (Leeuwen xi).

The letters analyzed in this study are unique in almost every way. In his book, William Decker writes that, "[o]ften they [letters] . . . exist as scenes of subversion and insurgency, a claiming of power that may or may not achieve effective social form. The letter is ever the locus

of class markers: . . . levels of cultivation, grades of literacy” (14). The letters in this study certainly grade the literacy of the writers, who are women of color, most barely literate, and whose letters and lives are in constant conflict, yet they present an interesting paradox. The paradox can be explored by noting the addressee and where the writers are situated in that moment. Most of the letters appeal to the highest authority in the United States, the President, and come from perhaps the least valued (or counted) Americans at that time: Black women.

As a result, Black women of the rural South began writing letters for reasons mentioned, in part, in *Epistolary Practices* and *Letter Writing as a Social Practice*. Letters addressing social ills were not the kind of letters that were “safe and appropriate” for women to write. Letters like Carrie Kinsey’s were dangerous. Had President Theodore Roosevelt actually read it, the government may have done more to stop the practice of convict leasing in its infancy; exposing this system through writing letters was a threat to those institutions of power who were growing more powerful through the terroristic and back-breaking practice of the lucrative convict leasing system. The hope women had, who put themselves in grave danger by writing letters, was stronger than the fear of retaliation they also carried. Many of the authors asked to remain anonymous; they feared for their lives and the lives of their loved ones caught in a new kind of harrowing and terroristic enslavement during the technological rise of the twentieth century.

Evaluating the Kinsey letter from the standpoint of letter writing as a social practice holds strong, depending on how “social” is defined. If writing “socially” means writing friendly letters of little consequence to anyone but the recipient, then the lens of social semiotic practice offers few historical insights. However, if “social” is defined as an act of bringing attention to an unjust institution such as convict-leasing, then these women stand alone in their writing and have authored an unexplored corner of epistolary writing. Although impossible to know for certain,

Carrie Kinsey likely did not have the proper tools for writing. Her letter was hand-written in pencil on tattered paper. She writes partly in cursive, indicating some level of literacy, however, the construction of her sentences and spelling indicate that she did not have extensive, if any, formal training. Likely, she was taught by a friend or self-taught, but she could write and her letter carries with it a sense of urgency and a genuine plea for help that echoes centuries later. The tool that she most effectively uses is her voice; a tool not mentioned by Hall. This letter is written in a way that readers can almost hear when reading it. She is humble yet commanding in her request to President Theodore Roosevelt, to “Please let me hear from you at once” (Kinsey Letter). She may have had to write this letter in darkness with just the light of a single candle to avoid capture, which would have led to more trouble for her family and her brother. One assumes she was older than her brother and married, given her last name, Kinsey, differs from her brother’s, Robinson. She may have had the protection of her husband, though he could just as easily have been arrested, and lost to time and memory.

Because the official narrative or documentation of Kinsey’s life is unknown, it becomes a matter of filling in with working knowledge of the past, and from there we can begin to let her letter, along with hundreds of other letters, narrate the past. Roger Schank, a Linguistics PhD and Chief Education Officer of Carnegie Mellon’s West Coast campus, has worked tirelessly on constructing “Story-Centered” courses instead of course-centered. Schank believes that watching someone tell a story offers insight into that person’s identity. In the scope of this dissertation, the letters under examination contain stories of those who can no longer audibly narrate their own voices. Schank’s approach to understanding the past, present, and the larger world around us become integral to the construction of stories like that of Carrie Kinsey.

The Past Narrates the Present

In examining incomplete stories, Schank questions the storyteller's motivation when he writes, "People are constantly questioning themselves and each other to discover why someone has done something and what the consequences of that action are likely to be. We want to know *why*. Asking ourselves why something happened, or why someone did what they did, helps us create new indices on which to search for old stories that will help us process what we are attempting to understand" (92). The reason for letter writing in the case of Phillis Wheatley was to call the practice of slavery into question, but also to take part in the larger discourse that would determine the destiny of the Black American, both male and female. The recognition of being a brilliant writer lasted as long as she was a "slave" in the Wheatley home. After the last member of the Wheatley family died, so did her readership and reputation. Wheatley, who is arguably the most famous writer among the authors explored in this dissertation, died in abject poverty with few to mourn her death. As property, her worth was great, but free, her worth dwindled to almost nothing.

Harriet Jacobs, conversely, wrote while in hiding after accusations of theft—the theft of her own body, which she did not own. Her letters also serve the purpose of fighting against the injustice of slavery, but their anonymous publication kept her "free" for seven years though she was confined to the space of her mother's attic. She was free from the sexual assault and physical punishment of her enslavers, but in order to share her narrative she had to remain in hiding, separated from her children and from the earth itself. She was not afforded fresh air, or enough room to stand upright and walk; she couldn't smell flowers in bloom, feel the sun's warmth on her skin, or the breeze in her hair or across her body. She suffered injustice from a system that would re-enslave her if she ventured from the protective physical enclosure of the attic.

The writings of little-known women follow the formal writings of Wheatley and Jacobs with fragmented and incomplete letters, which emerge to narrate a new story of Black people in America. Set in a new world in which slavery was no longer legal, this is a horror story; terror worse than they had known under hundreds of years of enslavement occupied the space and psyche of Black Americans. Just by writing letters, enslaved Black women found a way to subvert a system of tyranny and subjugation and to contribute to a movement that would lead to freedom and, in some ways, equality for African Americans and women. An organized movement by Black women would not have been tolerated in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries. By striking out against a system that forbade Black women from writing, the brave authors featured in this dissertation gave voice to this unvoiced narrative and provided themselves with a lasting legacy, one in which they gave themselves a voice, not to be erased by man or space or time.

Chapter 2: To Be the First: The Epistles of Phillis Wheatley

*The exceptional career of our women will yet stamp itself indelibly
upon the thought of this country (xxiii)*

—Fannie Barrier Williams

The earliest letter of protest written by a slave woman in the United States is found in the works of Phillis Wheatley. Captured at the age of seven in the region of Senegambia, modern-day Senegal and Gambia, and brought to Boston, Massachusetts, Wheatley gives the first published account by an African American of protest against slavery and the grave injustices and abuses suffered by the enslaved, through her poetry and her letters.

Phillis Wheatley was born circa 1753 in West Africa, and like millions of other Africans, was captured, sold to slave traders, survived the crossing of the Middle Passage, and eventually ended up on an auction block in Boston, where John and Susannah Wheatley first saw and purchased her. Prior to Phillis' arrival, John and Susanna lost a daughter, who died at age seven. It was because of this circumstance that the Wheatleys were drawn to purchase an enslaved girl who reminded them of their deceased daughter, and upon whom they bestowed affection and love after her purchase. Noted African American scholar Ibram X. Kendi adds affective details to an already emotionally charged event when he writes, "Susanna Wheatley . . . laid her eyes on a sickly, naked little girl, covered by a dirty carpet. Some of the seven-year-old captive's front baby teeth had come out, possibly reminding Wheatley of her seven-year-old daughter, who had died. Susanna Wheatley was mourning the ninth anniversary of Sarah Wheatley's tragic death" (*Stamped* 92). They named her "Phillis," after the ship that bore her to America.

She was bought to become a domestic servant in the Wheatley house, however, by the age of seven both her master and mistress recognized her talent for learning and taught her to

read and write. Phillis was schooled in English and Latin, history, philosophy, and literature, and was encouraged in her writing with an opportunity for publication by age thirteen.

As a Puritan family, the Wheatleys had little tolerance for slavery as a means to support their posterity, but instead treated Phillis like a member of the family, even though she was technically enslaved. It was not customary to teach any enslaved person to read or write, much less to provide the comprehensive education Phillis received. Wheatley's access to education, along with the endorsement and encouragement of her writing by the Wheatley family via access to paper and ink, as well as a desk and private space in which to write, allowed her to produce enough writing to publish a book. By age nineteen, Wheatley's first book of poetry was endorsed by her owner, John Wheatley. In order to prove that she was in fact the author of the text, an arduous process ensued, including an hour-long question-and-answer session between Wheatley and some of the most important minds in Massachusetts at the time. Her book was eventually published in 1773. In his book, *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. writes: "Wheatley's oral examination was so important [because] [i]f she had indeed written her poems, then this would determine that Africans were human beings and should be liberated from slavery . . . Essentially, she was auditioning for the humanity of the entire African people" (27). In addition to this oral "audition," Wheatley would prove her abilities in literacy through the writing of letters. As Thomas Woolbridge, an emissary of the earl of Dartmouth, wrote:

"While in Boston I heard of a very Extraordinary female Slave[.] ...I visited her mistress and found by conversing with the African that she was no Imposter; I asked if she could write on any Subject; she said Yes; . . . She, immediately, wrote a rough Copy of the inclosed Address & Letter. I was astonished and could hardly believe my own Eyes. I was present when she wrote, and can attest that it

is her own production; she shewed me her Letter . . . They [the letters] are all wrote in her own hand.” (Gates 28)

This book of poetry became a “credit” and manifestation that Blacks could become part of white culture through either assimilation or through what Kendi refers to as “uplift suasion” which was to “uplift the inferior free Blacks to ‘an equality with whites’” (*Stamped* 176). Although this idea of “uplift suasion” wouldn’t be defined until 1833 with the formation of the American Anti-Slavery Society, it was a concept that permeated Wheatley’s life. What Wheatley did with her poetry was nothing short of genius. Despite the literary quality of Wheatley’s 1774 poems, the book was overlooked for nearly a century after it was written, defended in front of Boston’s most revered scholars by Wheatley herself, and published in 1774.

The earliest documented letter was written to the Earl of Dartmouth in 1772 and was signed Phillis Wheatley; A poem written to the Earl of Dartmouth titled, “A Farewell to America,” follows the letter. Combining the texts of both letter and poem with the 1772 Mansfield ruling in Great Britain leads to a reading that expresses a fierce stance, as Lord Mansfield’s ruling and subsequent writings contributed directly to the abolishment of slavery in England in 1833. In his book, *Phillis Wheatley: A Biography of a Genius in Bondage*, Vincent Carretta emphasizes that “a slave brought to England from the colonies could not legally be forced to return to the colonies as a slave . . . Any slave coming from the colonies to England in 1773 would understandably be ‘intoxicated with Liberty’ to discover a society without the colonial laws and curfews discriminating against people of African descent, and one in which a slave could in effect free herself by running away from her owner and refusing to return to the colonies” (109, 113).

Figure 1 Phillis Wheatley Letter to Earl of Dartmouth. (Reprinted with permission from the Massachusetts Historical Society.)

My Lord

The Joyful occasion which has given me this Confidence in Addressing your Lordship with inclosed piece will, I hope sufficiently apologize for this freedom in an African who with the now happy America exults with equal transport in the view of one of its greatest advocates presiding with the Special tenderness of a Fatherly Heart over that Department.

Nor can they my Lord be insensible of the Friendship so much exemplified in your Endeavours in their behalf during the late unhappy Disturbance

I sincerely wish your Lordship all possible success in your Undertaking for the Interest of north America

That the united blessings of Heaven & Earth may attend you here and the endless Felicity of the invisible State in the presence of the ^{divine} Benefactor may be your portion hereafter is the hearty Desire of

My Lord
Your Lordships
Most Obedient
Hble Servant

Boston N. E. Octo. 10th. 1772 Phillis Wheatley

The political climate in which the letter and poem are situated lends a more emphatic tone to this pair of readings. One might even argue that these two pieces are among the most politically based writings of Phillis Wheatley. The text of the letter reads:

The Joyful occasion which has given me this Confidence in addressing your Lordship in the enclos'd Piece [*sic*] will, I hope Sufficiently apologize for this freedom from an African, who with the (now) happy America, exults with

equal transport, in the view of one of its greatest advocates Presiding, with the Special tenderness of a Fatherly Heart, over the American department.

Nor can they, my Lord, be insensible of the Friendship so much exemplified in your endeavours in their behalf, during the late unhappy disturbances. I sincerely wish your Lordship all Possible Success, in your undertakings for the Interest of North America. (qtd. in Carretta *Genius in Bondage* 131)

The excerpt included in the letter to the Earl, of Wheatley's poem, "To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth" reads:

No more, *America*, in mournful strain
Of wrongs, and grievance unredress'd complain,
No longer shall thou dread the iron chain,
Which wanton *Tyranny* with lawless hand
Had made, and with it meant t'enslave the land.

Should you, my lord, while you peruse my song,
Wonder from whence my love of *Freedom* sprung,
Whence flow these wishes for the common good,
By feeling hearts alone best understood,
I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate
Was snatch'd from *Afric*'s fancy'd happy seat:

What pangs excruciating must molest,
What sorrows labour in my parent's breast?
Steel'd was that soul and by no misery mov'd
That from a father seiz'd his babe belov'd:
Such, such my case. And can I then but pray
Others may never feel tyrannic sway?

--(Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, "Phillis Wheatley's poem on tyranny and slavery, 1772.")

While publication of *Poems on Various Subjects: Religious and Moral* (1773) positions Wheatley as the first published African poet in the US, her letters offer an abundance of protests made more plainly manifest than in her published poetry. She describes how the abhorrent practice of slavery engulfs the people of Africa to fuel the rising prosperity in the United States.

Carretta explicates both the letter and the poem to draw a compelling conclusion about Wheatley's intentions in writing to the Earl of Dartmouth. As he suggests:

The revised version of 'To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth' . . . is one of the most carefully crafted poems in the 1773 volume. Wheatley re-appropriates the concept of *slavery* from its common metaphorical use in the colonial discourse of discontent, which described any perceived limitation on colonial rights and liberty as an attempt by England to 'enslave' (white) Americans" (131-32). Both the letter and the poem raise the question "for the first time the hypocrisy of owners of chattel slaves protesting metaphorical slavery." (*Genius in Bondage* 132)

Carretta further implies that for Wheatley "[c]omplete 'Freedom'—political, social, and religious may be realized and restored by the new political order that the poet hopes Dartmouth represents" (*Genius in Bondage* 133). This poem, which later appears in her collection *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, first appeared in various publications, including several Boston newspapers and in *The London Chronicle* just two weeks after she arrived in London. Published as a frontispiece to the poem in *The London Chronicle* is the following note:

Sir,

You have no doubt hear of Phillis the extraordinary negro girl here [i.e., in Boston], who has by her own application, unassisted by others, cultivated her natural talents for poetry in such a manner as to write several pieces which (all circumstances considered) have great merit. This girl, who is a servant to Mr. John Wheatley of this place, sailed last Saturday for London, under the protection of Mr. Nathaniel Wheatley; since which the following little piece of her's [sic] has been published. (Carretta *Genius in Bondage* 133)

Here, the author leverages the power of semantics by describing Phillis as a *servant*, not as a piece of chattel property, and plainly names Nathaniel Wheatley as her *protector* rather than her enslaver. Nathaniel was thirty years old when he accompanied Phillis. Carretta argues that as Wheatley sailed to London she did so knowing of “the possibility of the restoration of her freedom” and her health: “The health that Wheatley locates in England in ‘A Farewell to America’ is not only physical. It is also social and political because in England she will face the opportunity to resurrect herself from the death of slavery” (135). Phillis Wheatley eventually returns to tend to Susannah Wheatley alone, as Nathaniel stays in England to be married, and forgoes the opportunity she has for freedom. She knows emancipation can be hers, but her love for Susannah overrides her desire for freedom, so she returns to her life of enslavement.

Shortly thereafter emerges a letter addressed to Colonel David Wooster, the customs inspector in New Haven, Connecticut, on October 18, 1773. Its contents create speculation that “the promise of freedom was probably a concession Phillis Wheatley coerced from Nathaniel Wheatley in exchange for her promise to return to Boston: one promise for another. Wheatley’s

Figure 2 Phillis Wheatley Letter to Col. David Wooster. 8 Oct. 1773. (Reprinted with permission from MHS Online.)

Sir

Having an opportunity by a servant of Mr. Badcock's who lives near you, I am glad to hear you and your Family are well, I take the freedom to transmit to you, a short sketch of my voyage and return from London where I went for the recovery of my health as advised by my Physician, I was received in England with such kind Complaissance, and so many marks of esteem and real Friendship as astonishes me on the reflection, for I was no more than 6 weeks there— Was introduced to Lord Dartmouth and had near half an hour's conversation with his Lordship, with whom was Alderman Kirkman,— Then to Lord Lincoln, who visited me at my own Lodgings with the famous Dr. Solander, who accompanied Mr. Banks in his late expedition round the World. Then to Lady Cavendish, and Lady Carteret Webb.— Mr. Palmer a Poet, an accomplished Lady.— Dr. Tho. Gibbons, Rhetoric Professor, To Israel Mauduit Esq. Benjamin Franklin Esq. T. R. S. Grenville Sharp Esq. who attended me to the Tower & showed the Lions, Panthers, Tigers, &c. the Horse Armory, great Armory, the Crown, Scepter, Diadems, the Tent for christening the Royal Family, Saw Westminster Abbey, British Museum, Coxes Museum, Saddlers wells, Greenwich Hospital, Park and Chapel, The royal Observatory at Greenwich, &c. &c. too many things & Places to trouble you with in a Letter.— The Earl of

word was his bond” although it appears evident that Phillis “had the stronger hand. ... The choice of freedom, the terms, and the place were hers to make” (137). The selection below reflects only a portion of the letter in its entirety, but gets at the heart of endeavoring to secure her promise from Nathaniel Wheatley: “The Instrument is drawn, so as to secure me and my property from the hands of the Exectutrs [executors], adminstrators, &c. of my master, & secure whatsoever should be given me as my Own. A Copy is sent to Isra. Mauduit Esq. F.R.S. [Fellow of the Royal Society]” (qtd. in Carretta *Genius in Bondage* 137). Although it is likely that Phillis

wrote this letter as a kind of insurance policy for her freedom should Nathaniel fall back on his promise, it also became a bleak foreshadowing for what was to come. Wheatley's freedom would come at a high cost, wherein her life became devalued and she, like "Equiano recognized that '[h]itherto I had thought only slavery dreadful; but the state of a free negro appeared to me now equally so at least, and in some respects even worse, for they live in constant alarm for their liberty, which is but nominal'" (136). As Carretta notes, "[s]he knew the truth that [Olaudah] Equiano had learned a decade earlier about how vulnerable any free person of African descent remained in a society where slavery was legal" (137).

Subsequent letters document the most rewarding and trying year of her life, detailing the fame and respect she received in England and the obstacles she faced upon returning to America, where legal enslavement made Black life seem as second-class citizenship and in many cases, criminal. Although Wheatley remained free, her life changed drastically. Where she once enjoyed the support and companionship of the Wheatley children, Mary and Nathaniel, and the guidance and protection from Susannah and John Wheatley, she now found quiet abandonment.

Mary left her family home when she married John Lathrop in 1771 and Nathaniel remained in London, where he also married in 1773. Phillis set sail from London to Boston on July 21, 1773, and returned to an increasingly sickly and weak Susanna, who relied upon Phillis for her comfort and care until her death on March 3, 1774. Again, the vastly different home and society she returned to in Boston was the beginning of what would lead to a difficult and disappointing future, one in which her written elegies, poems, and protests would, for the most part, fall on deaf ears. Several letters of note, however, chronicle Wheatley's life and preserve her narrative and her fight against injustice for the future.

Figure 3 Letter from John Andrews to William Barrell regarding Wheatley. (Reprinted with permission from Massachusetts Historical Society.)

Dear Will

17th Feb 1774

I think this will make you indebted to me for a few Letters, my last was by post-drawn of 4/7. Instantly accompanying a volume of Phillis's poems; this will be handed you by Mr. Thos. Galt who returns some days earlier than we expected; from a little acquaintance I have had to him, I think him a very deserving young fellow, if am much prejudiced in his favor; this evening being of last, he spends in town shall Galt to him at my office house.

The week before last, we were favored to Miss (Christina) coming after an absence of 4 or 5. M. three of which nothing has been said at the time together to Mr. and a young fellow of good prospects of a fair character, abt. 23 years of age, to whom he was of first time, published yesterday, he comes a member to our general court, for Mr. Wells, & as the fellow has been only abt. 10 days in town, he is most have been settled in that town, believe of some relation will be as judicious, as they intend to be more of wife very soon.

Thus much from you affectionately

John Andrews

Wm Barrell

In January 1774, forces were already beginning to work against her. Following the successful publication of her first book of poetry, Wheatley intended to secure publication for a second volume of poems, which would also include many of the official correspondences she maintained. In a letter from one subscriber John Andrews, a Boston attorney, to his brother-in-law, a Philadelphia merchant, William Barrell, the positive sentiment of Wheatley's ability in writing begins to shift. In part, the letter reads:

Dear Will

After so long a time, have at last
got Phillis's poems in print, which will be dld
you by Capt Dunn, in a brig Ben has the care of,
there dont seem to be near all her productions, She's
an artful jade, I believe, & intends to have ye benefit
of another volume with a tendr of Ruth's love I am
Yrs &c.

Jno Andrews

Mr Wm. Barrell –

(MHS Collections Online)

Wheatley's second collection would never be published.

On March 11, 1774, the *Connecticut Gazette* published a letter Wheatley wrote to Reverend Samson Occum, one of the first Native Americans to convert to Christianity in the United States. In this letter, Wheatley clearly begins what will continue on as a career of protest against slavery when she writes:

“... I have this Day received your obliging kind Epistle, and am greatly satisfied with your Reasons respecting the Negroes, and think highly reasonable what you offer in Vindication of their natural Rights: Those that invade them cannot be insensible that the divine Light is chasing away the thick Darkness which broods over the Land of Africa; and the Chaos which has reign'd so long, is converting into beautiful Order, and [r]eveals more and more clearly, the glorious

Dispensation of civil and religious Liberty, which are so inseparably united....”

(qtd. in Carretta *Genius in Bondage*, Wheatley to “Occum” 160)

While the text of this letter remains, the physical letter is now either lost or destroyed. Given that this is one of Wheatley’s most political and outspoken pieces, the loss of the physical artifact is devastating. With that, we lose what her handwriting looks like, as well as the material upon which she inscribes her words as weapons against the institution of slavery and the genocide of the “heathen Indian.” As a female slave in the eighteenth century, Wheatley’s writing remains one of the few records left behind by slaves, giving her a voice through the ages. Wheatley was given opportunities most slaves never had because of the environment into which she was sold.

During Wheatley’s life, her poetry was well received, although most criticism and approval of her work came from white elites in New England and England proper. It was in England that she was first published; not only as the first publication by a Black person, but more specifically, a Black *woman*. Despite the literary praise for her intelligence and her work, one famous writer sought to dismiss her work and reiterate the narrative of Black inferiority—Thomas Jefferson. In 1773, the year of Wheatley’s publication was also a year of increasing hostility between Great Britain and America’s colonies. As Kendi explains, “they [creators of the new republic—Jefferson being one] had the most to gain in independence and the most to lose under British colonialism. Politically, he and other slaveholding Americans could not help but fear all those British abolitionists opposing American slavery, toasting Phillis Wheatley, and freeing the Virginian runaways” (*Stamped* 100).

In 1781, Thomas Jefferson, then Governor of Virginia, was commissioned by the French diplomat François Marbois to respond to a list of twenty-three questions pertaining to Virginia. Even as the Revolutionary War raged on, Jefferson penned his response and sent it within the

year to Marbois. Because Jefferson did not intend to publish his response to Marbois, he was very open about his concerns regarding enslaved people in Virginia and the US, in general. He writes: “Incorporating the blacks into the state” was entirely out of the question as, “[d]eep rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained . . . and many other circumstances will divide us . . . [and] will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race” (qtd. in Kendi *Stamped* 108). In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson makes numerous arguments for and against slavery. In the end he concludes that separation is ideal. Ultimately, it was decided that the avenue for separation would be colonization through the “re-exportation” of Blacks in America back to Africa. Thus, the colonization of Blacks began with the founding of the American Colonization Society in 1816, the last year of Madison’s presidency, which was financially and politically supported by James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, Henry Clay, and Daniel Webster. In 1822, Liberia became the first official U.S. colony for Blacks on the African Continent.

In addition to advocating for colonization in *Notes*, Jefferson also makes an emphatic argument against the mixing of races, meticulously outlining the differences between whites (Europeans and Americans) and Blacks of African descent. Of particular importance to the subject of this chapter is the racist idea that “he [Jefferson] could ‘never . . . find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration . . . [however] Religion has indeed produced a Phyllis Wheatley; but it could not produce a poet’” (qtd. in Kendi 109). Because of Jefferson’s political and economic clout, he “emerged as the preeminent American authority on Black intellectual inferiority. [A] [s]tatus [that] would persist over the next fifty years” (109).

In 1784 Jefferson became the Minister to France. Perhaps most importantly he carried with him his ideas and responses about Virginia and what would become The United States of

America. In 1785 Jefferson had two hundred copies of *Notes on the State of Virginia* printed anonymously in France, and sent to some of the most leading minds at the time. By 1787 *Notes on the State of Virginia* was published in London and under the author name of Thomas Jefferson. Of interest, as it pertains to Wheatley, *Notes* made reference to her. Through the misspelling of her first and last name and condescending and disrespectful tone of his reference to her, he reinforced white superiority, while maintaining his core beliefs about the vast majority of the enslaved:

They [blacks] astonish you with strokes of the most sublime oratory; such as prove their reason and sentiment strong, their imagination glowing and elevated. But never yet could I find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration; never see even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture. In music they are more generally gifted than the whites with accurate ears for tune and time, and they have been found capable of imagining a small catch. Whether they will be equal to the composition of a more extensive run of melody, or of complicated harmony, is yet to be proved. Misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry. -- Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry. Love is the peculiar; oestrus of the poet. Their love is ardent, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination. Religion indeed has produced a Phyllis Whatley [*sic*]; but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism. The heroes of the Dunciad are to her, as Hercules to the author of that poem. (554)

After numerous revisions over the next two years, *Notes on the State of Virginia* was published in London. Dr. Kendi points to the book's significance when he argues that, "[t]hereafter, *Notes on the State of Virginia* would become the most consumed American nonfiction book until well into the mid-nineteenth century leading to a consuming idea that Wheatley was indeed an inferior writer as well as human" (*Stamped* 112).

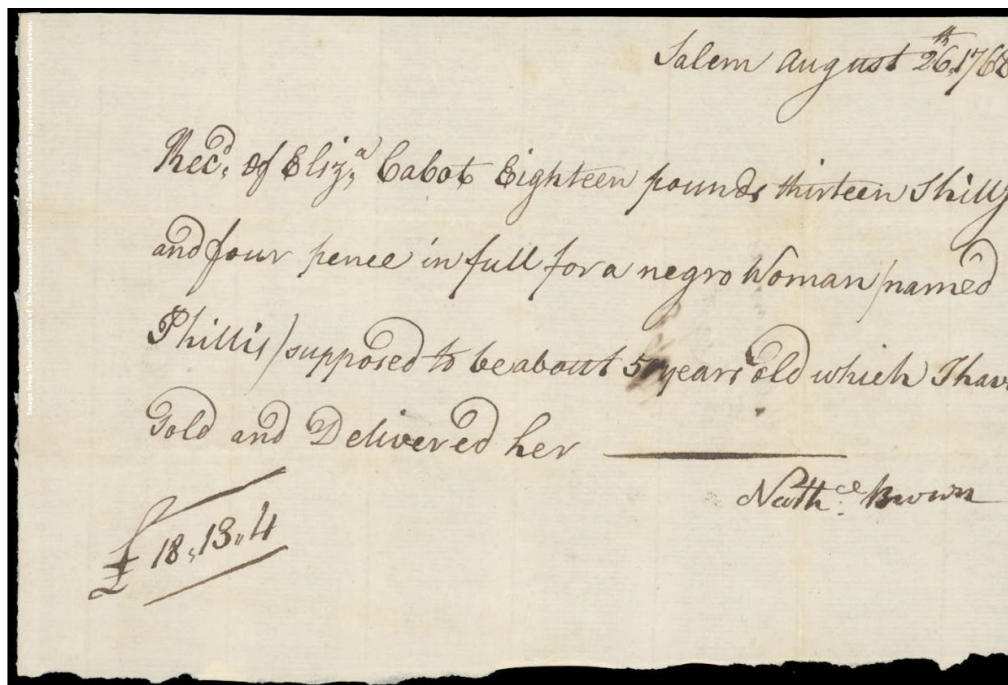
Phillis Wheatley died in 1784, one year prior to the first publication of *Notes*. Although Wheatley never read Jefferson's book, she did know that he was not an ally in the fight for freedom. Her poetry and letters would have to withstand the defamation and vitriol that the majority of white Americans shared with Jefferson. Although criticism of Wheatley waned for a time, when her work began to be studied, explored, and criticized again in the twentieth century, she was in the fight again. Over time Wheatley's writing has been hotly contested in terms of meaning and content. During the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s Wheatley's poem "On Being Brought from Africa to America" was highly scrutinized because of its content. It reads:

"Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there's a God, that there's a *Saviour* too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
"Their colour is a diabolic die."
Remember, *Cheiftains*, *Negros*, black as *Cain*,
May be refin'd. and join th' angelic train. (Shields, *Collected Works* 18)

Gates notes how "Phillis Wheatley, who had once been cast as a paragon of Negro achievement, was now given a new role: race traitor" (82). For decades, Wheatley's legacy had come from a single poem, "On Being Brought from Africa to America" which suggests that it was divine intervention that stole her from her homeland and brought her across the ocean, to the auction

block, and into the arms of the Wheatley family. Gates also contends that Wheatley's work was met with more hostility and scrutiny than the hour-long defense Wheatley made for herself to eighteen of New England's elites. There is no question that Phillis was, to some degree, "lucky" because of sheer geography. She was first seen on an auction block in Massachusetts by a Puritan family who treated her more like family than a domestic servant, and who viewed the practice of slavery as patently wrong. Wheatley came to the US fully equipped to become one of America's great poets by virtue of being an equal, physically and mentally, to any other human being. She easily digested and applied what she learned, with the support of the Wheatley family.

Figure 4 Phillis Wheatley Bill of Sale. (With permission from Massachusetts Historical Society.)

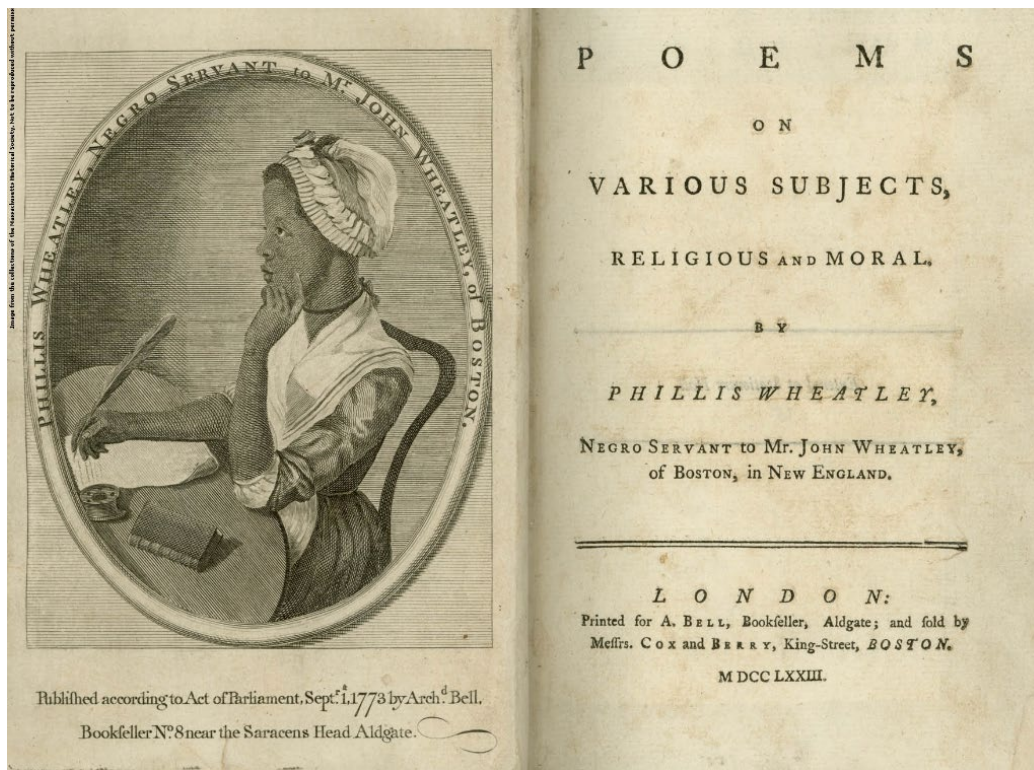


Because her education included the classical studies of history, geography, mathematics, Greek, Latin, and English, Wheatley possessed a vocabulary and knowledge that far surpassed many whites of the time. There is no question that the literary qualities of poetry, beyond contextualizing her work, are beautiful, descriptive, affective, and brilliant expressions.

However, this view of Wheatley's poetry did not come until the 1970s when Gates began his education at Yale. Gates' study of African American history and the life and poetry of Phillis Wheatley led to numerous literary theories and analyses. David Harlan, a critic of Gates and his study of Wheatley, explores the various movements of African American Literature in his book *The Degradation of American History* and his chapter on "The Renewal of American Historical Writing" which states:

In the seventeenth century it was the ability to write (and to a lesser extent the ability to read) that separated the African from the African American, the slave from the freedmen, species of property to human beings. Thus when Phillis Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects* . . . appeared in 1773 it was immediately taken up by British and American abolitionists as proof positive that Africans possessed the mental capacity of English men, that they were indeed human beings. Though *Poems on Various Subjects* was reviewed by dozens of prominent figures, literary and political, on both sides of the Atlantic, not one of those reviewers discussed the book as poetry, so taken were they by it as evidence of the intellectual potential and essential humanity of African people. (164)

Figure 5. Front matter for Wheatley's collected works (1802 ed.) Public domain.



From the inception of Wheatley's poetry through the 1960s in America, it was almost always the color of her skin and not the literary quality of her writing that scholars explored. Gates was among the first to recognize Wheatley's literary efforts. Harlan notes that Gates and his contemporaries began to suggest that "[i]f 'black' had any meaning at all, they reasoned, that meaning must lie in the *formal* and *literary* qualities of African American texts—with the texts themselves rather than what they were 'about'" (163).

After decades of research, scores of books and articles on Wheatley and her work as poetic and political, Gates reminds readers "of our task, as readers: to learn to read Wheatley anew, unblinkered by the anxieties of her time and ours. That's the only way to let Phillis Wheatley take the stand. The challenge isn't to read white, or read black; it is to read. If Wheatley stood for anything, it was the creed that culture was, could be, the equal possession of

all humanity” (*Trials of Phillis Wheatley* 90). Gates calls the reader to action when he states, “we have been slow to learn. But, the learning has begun. Almost two and a half centuries after a schooner brought this African child to our shores, we can finally say: Welcome home, Phillis; welcome home” (90). Gates opened a path leading to an understanding and methodology for reading Black literature, and scholars have written a considerable amount on Wheatley’s poetry since then. However, very few have examined the correspondence she carried on with some of the leading minds and founders of what would become the United States of America. The journey continues with the “creed . . . [of] humanity” and the necessity of evaluating the meaning in her words; in letters to powerful men and women in the US and in The United Kingdom, she uses her writing ability to protest the enslavement of Africans in both places.

Although the scope of her poetry and letters reflect many similar themes, there is a candor and a shift in voice and focus that clearly sets her letters apart from her poetry. After less than four months of freedom, she closes her letter to Reverend Samson Occom with “the biting scorn of the hypocritical absurdity of slave-holding Christian ministers . . . [which becomes] Phillis Wheatley’s strongest indictment of American Slavery in print” (Robinson 332). It reads:

[I]n every human breast, God has implanted a Principle, which we call Love of Freedom; it is impatient of oppression and pants for Deliverance[.] . . . God grant Deliverance in his own Way and Time, and get him honour upon all those whose Avarice impels them to countenance and help forward the Calamities of their fellow Creatures. This I desire not for their Hurt, but to convince them of the strange Absurdity of their Conduct whose Words and Actions are diametrically opposite. How well the Cry for Liberty, and the reverse Disposition for the

exercise of oppressive power over others agree I humbly think it does not require the penetration of a Philosopher to determine. (qtd. in Robinson 332)

This text clearly articulates the hypocrisy of slavery in a nation of “freemen.” A similar letter authored by someone like John Adams, or even his wife Abigail, took courage, but surely a newly emancipated Black *woman* understood the danger of such writing. Her life with the Wheatleys protected Phillis from backlash for her criticism, at least while they lived. The safety her white Puritan family once provided did not help Phillis going forward, despite her freedom. After the death of Susanna and John Wheatley, Phillis became a stranger in her own community, which had once praised the work of a “barbarian” turned into a cultured woman. A letter upon Susanna’s death notes her good fortune, as she writes:

Let us imagine the Loss of a Parent, Sister, or Brother the tenderness of all these were united in her. I was a poor little outcast & a stranger when she took me in, not only into her house, but I presently became a sharer in her most tender affections. I was treated by her more like her child than her servant, no opportunity was left unimprov’d of giving me the best advice, but in terms how tender! How engaging! This I hope to ever keep in remembrance.

(qtd. in Robinson 333)

In addition to the writing and the content of each of these letters, it is also important to evaluate the intended recipient. Occum, born in 1723 on Mohegan land, was a Native American who became a Christian preacher. He too, would have been an “exception” to his race as Phillis was to hers, and beyond that, singular to each race. He was also a close acquaintance of Susanna Wheatley, with whom he corresponded regularly.

Figure 6. Phillis Wheatley Letter from Samson Ocom.

(Dartmouth University, Rauner Special Collections Library,
<https://sites.dartmouth.edu/library/2013/10/15/ocom-to-wheatley/>)

Rev^d Sir
you will see what
Mr. Pruell has wrote to you, - I extremely
want one of your Negroes and a yoke
of oxen, - my Business is Crowding, and I
want to dispatcch it as fast as I can, - pray
let me have a yoke of oxen, if you cant
 spare a Negroe. I came home but the
night before last, - I shall keep Jacob a few
Days, to help me, In utmost hast from
your Remembrance
Servant
Phelley Dec^r 4: 1764 S. Ocom
To the Rev^d Eliphalet Wheelock

Among Wheatley's collected letters are eight found in existence today written to Miss Obour Tanner of New Port, Rhode Island. Although Tanner was also an enslaved African woman, like Wheatley, she was also purchased by a wealthy evangelical family who taught her to read and write. In the letters between Phillis Wheatley and Obour Tanner, Wheatley's voice comes through as one of complete assimilation into white culture and education, a criticism that would follow Wheatley for centuries. This was no doubt because Wheatley was not part of a larger community in which African Americans lived, in contrast to Tanner, whose writings reflect a woman who was able to assimilate into Christian culture while maintaining her African identity. African American poet June Jordan expresses Wheatley's assimilation as follows:

What did she read? What did she memorize? What did the Wheatleys give to this African child? Of course, it was white, all of it: white," Jordan contended. "It was written, all of it, by white men taking their pleasure, their walks, their pipes, their pens and their paper, rather seriously, while somebody else cleaned the house, washed the clothes, cooked the food, watched the children: probably not slaves, but possibly a servant, or, commonly, a wife.

It was written . . . while somebody else did the other things that have to be done. And that was the literature absorbed by the slave, Phillis Wheatley. That was the writing, the thoughts, the nostalgia, the lust, the conceits, the ambitions, the mannerisms, the games, the illusions, the discoveries, the filth and the flowers that filled up the mind of the African child. (qtd in Asim n.pag.)

In 2005 one of Wheatley's letters was put up for auction by Swann Auction Galleries. This particular letter is of great import as it is one of the few in which Wheatley speaks openly

against the hypocrisy of the newly formed colonies. The letter specifically addresses Wheatley's personal opinion about the impending Revolutionary War and is dated February 14, 1776:

“Even I a mere spectator am in anxious suspense concerning the fortune of this unnatural civil Contest” (qtd. in Asim). Because of the unique content of this letter, it sold for \$253,000 in 2005. Clearly the nature of protest continues to speak to readers today as events of the past are found and articulated through the writings of people like Phillis Wheatley.

Carretta's biography recognizes the conflict freed slaves like Wheatley felt, who “during the 1760s and 1770s, [were] understandably ambivalent about which side to identify with in the growing conflict between Britain and its North American Colonies . . . who demanded liberty for themselves while they enslaved others” (126). However, at the time and following her emancipation, Wheatley had little power to do anything but continue to write about the injustices of slavery to whomever she could and to many who had a great deal of power in the direction that the not-yet-independent nation would follow. It is important to note the content of the letter but also the intentional capitalization of words that serve semantic purposes. Wheatley specifically noted that she did not seek revenge on those who embraced the cruel practice of owning another human being as property, but only hoped they would see their own fault in what would become a deeply rooted necessity in building the economy of a newly formed nation. By taking out the words that seem less significant, in her letter to Occum, the reader is left with a statement that echoes through time:

God ... Principle ... Love of Freedom ... Deliverance ... God ... Deliverance ...
Way ... Time ... Avarice ... Calamities ... Creatures ... Hurt ... Absurdity ...
Conduct ... Words and Actions ... Cry for Liberty ... Disposition ...
Philosopher. (qtd. in Robinson 332)

Phillis Wheatley was a product of eighteenth-century writing practice and the use of literary devices in the writing of both poetry and letters. When one considers the message of the letter Wheatley is intentionally conveying, many of her letters speak even louder to the protest against social injustice. In *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* David Crystal writes of the emerging orthography in the sixteenth century and beyond:

[John] Hart recommended his readers to use a capital letter at the beginning of every sentence, proper name, and important common noun. By the 17th century, the practice had extended to titles (*Sir, Lady*), forms of address (*Father, Mistris*), and personified nouns (*Nature*). Emphasized words and phrases would also attract a capital. By the beginning of the 18th century . . . it was not long before some writers began using a capital for any noun that they felt to be important. (67)

Because Wheatley's letters, for the most part, were published posthumously, only the intended reader was privy to the message being conveyed. It is also important to note that Wheatley wrote letters to people she had met through the patronage of the Wheatley family. Because of these connections, she is bold enough after her emancipation to write to the people who had the most power and opportunity to change the legal practice of enslaving Africans.

Wheatley died just three years prior to the First Constitutional Convention, where many of the individuals she corresponded with became the drafters of the US Constitution, which legalized slavery and included the Three-Fifths Compromise, a clause that might have destroyed Wheatley's optimism and led to a more rapid decline in her physical health. Wheatley found favor and respect from a young general from Virginia, who would become the first President of the United States: George Washington. Wheatley wrote a poem for the general, which was accompanied by the following letter:

Providence 26 October 1775

Sir [George Washington],

I have taken the freedom to address your Excellency in the enclosed poem, and entreat your acceptance, though I am not insensible of its inaccuracies. Your being appointed by the Grand Continental Congress to the Generalissimo of the armies of North America, together with the fame of your virtues, excite sensations not easy to suppress. Your generosity, therefore, I presume, will pardon the attempt. Wishing your Excellency all possible success in the great cause you are so generously engaged in. I am,

Your Excellency's most obedient humble servant,

Phillis Wheatley

(qtd. in *Norton Anthology African American Literature* 149)

Wheatley's ability to address Washington is formal and succinct. The text indicates that Wheatley was well aware of the commendations she has favored Washington with in her letter as well as the self-awareness of her own humility. The letter dated 26 October 1775 to Washington includes the most lavish language of humility and honor in writing a letter to him accompanied by a poem about him.

Wheatley closes her letter with the farewell phrase commonly used among writers at the time—"Your Excellency's most obedient and humble servant." In the many letters between Alexander Hamilton, then Washington's personal secretary, and Aaron Burr, less than a decade away from the Vice Presidency in the Election of 1800, also often included a variation of the same farewell phrase—"I have the honor to be your obedient servant, A. Ham." Wheatley's use of salutations, formality or informality of writing, including farewell phrases, varied depending

on the letter's intended recipient. The phrases, words, imagery, and glory Wheatley bestowed on Washington was akin to the royalty of a New America.

Wheatley did have something to prove to the General. Biographies on George Washington, too many to number, testify to the racism that denied his own slaves freedom until his death. As a general in the Revolutionary War, Washington wanted nothing to do with Black soldiers in his militia. Only when defeat seemed imminent and the size of the army began to wane exceedingly did Washington acquiesce to Black soldiers fighting in the Revolutionary War. Wheatley's letter to Washington was dated 26 October 1775, the same date King George, ironically enough, declared to Parliament that the colonies had officially rebelled. Washington was in Cambridge developing his strategy to reclaim Boston from the British troops. He received the letter months later, read it, and put it aside until February 1776 when he forwarded the contents, including Wheatley's poem dedicated to and written about Washington, to Colonel Joseph Reed, his former secretary. Reed passed the poem along to the editors of the *Virginia Gazette* where it was printed on the twentieth of March, 1776. Although Washington noted his receiving and reading of her letter and poem during the month of December 1775, he did not respond to her until the last day of February, eighteen days after he had forwarded the contents of the letter for publication. Washington's response to Wheatley is telling, as according to Carretta, "He addressed her only by her first name, refusing, as was his custom to acknowledge black surnames" (156). Washington's letter in part, reads as follows:

Phillis, Your favor of the 26th of October did not reach my hands, 'til the middle of December. Time enough, you will say, to have given an answer ere this. Granted. But a variety of important occurrences. Continually interposing to distract the mind and withdraw the attention, I hope will apologize for the delay,

and plead my excuse for my seeming but not real neglect. I thank you most sincerely for your polite notice of me . . . and however undeserving I may be of such encomium and panegyrick, the style and manner exhibit a striking proof of your poetical Talents; . . . I would have published the Poem, had I not been apprehensive . . . [of incurring] the imputation of Vanity . . .

If you should ever come to Cambridge, or near Head Quarters, I shall be happy to see a person so favored by the Muses, and to whom Nature has been so liberal and beneficent in her dispensations. I am, with great Respect, your obedient humble servant. (qtd. in Carretta *Genius in Bondage* 156)

Although Washington's invitation would never formally come to fruition, they may have met by chance as Washington's troops paraded through Providence. A two-day stay may have provided an opportunity to meet, however, no documentation exists as proof. Both of these letters written by arguably the best writer and best leader in the Americas, can be read several ways; each gives rise to new meaning yet remains speculative. Critics of Wheatley's poem to Washington have countered her praise and unity in the Revolution and freedom of a new Republic with her loyalty to the British Crown. Undoubtedly, Wheatley was more fully embraced in England, as her arrival automatically granted emancipation, as well as audiences with important government and literary figures, and most importantly, offered her the opportunity to publish her first book. While Susanna Wheatley's illness curtailed her stay in England, Phillis willingly returned to a nation engaged in a war of open rebellion. The infant nation's independence relied on its citizens' emancipation to progress in liberty and freedom, yet remained steeped in the revolting practice of owning people as property, granting only rights as they "deserved."

Figure 7 Portraiture of His Excellency George Washington.

(Norman, John, 1748?-1817 - Engraver. *The True Portraiture of His Excellency George Washington Esqr. in the Roman Dress, as Ordered by Congress for the Monument to Be Erected in Philadelphia, to Perpetuate to Posterity the Man Who Commanded the American Forces Through the Late Glorious....* 1783. Copperplate Engravings. Free Library of Philadelphia: Philadelphia, PA. <https://libwww.freelibrary.org/digital/item/47373>)



Despite speculation about why Wheatley would willingly return to a land where she was no longer free, it seems clear that her love of Susanna, and the Wheatley family as a whole, outweighed her own desire for freedom. Based on the poem for George Washington, written after she was emancipated in 1773, following the death of Susanna and John Wheatley, she was hedging her bets:

His Excellency General Washington

Celestial choir! enthron'd in realms of light,
Columbia's scenes of glorious toils I write.
While freedom's cause her anxious breast alarms,
She flashes dreadful in refulgent arms.
See mother earth her offspring's fate bemoan,
And nations gaze at scenes before unknown!
See the bright beams of heaven's revolving light
Involved in sorrows and the veil of night!
The Goddess comes, she moves divinely fair,
Olive and laurel binds Her golden hair:
Wherever shines this native of the skies,
Unnumber'd charms and recent graces rise.
Muse! Bow propitious while my pen relates
How pour her armies through a thousand gates,
As when Eolus heaven's fair face deforms,
Enwrapp'd in tempest and a night of storms;
Astonish'd ocean feels the wild uproar,
The refluent surges beat the sounding shore;
Or think as leaves in Autumn's golden reign,
Such, and so many, moves the warrior's train.
In bright array they seek the work of war,
Where high unfurl'd the ensign waves in air.
Shall I to Washington their praise recite?

Enough thou know'st them in the fields of fight.

Thee, first in peace and honors—we demand

The grace and glory of thy martial band.

Fam'd for thy valour, for thy virtues more,

Hear every tongue thy guardian aid implore!

One century scarce perform'd its destined round,

When Gallic powers Columbia's fury found;

And so may you, whoever dares disgrace

The land of freedom's heaven-defended race!

Fix'd are the eyes of nations on the scales,

For in their hopes Columbia's arm prevails.

Anon Britannia droops the pensive head,

While round increase the rising hills of dead.

Ah! Cruel blindness to Columbia's state!

Lament thy thirst of boundless power too late.

Proceed, great chief, with virtue on thy side,

Thy ev'ry action let the Goddess guide.

A crown, a mansion, and a throne that shine,

With gold unfading, WASHINGTON! Be thine.

(qtd. in *Norton Anthology African American Literature* 149-50)

Phillis no longer had the financial support of the Wheatley family. All those who might have, just two years earlier, entertained her presence and praised her genius, were dead and gone as well. However, being newly emancipated, Wheatley began to write more openly, in particular, letters steeped in political rhetoric and viewed as very much in line with the rebellious leaders of the United States of America. In a letter to Samson Occom, part of which was published in 1774, and was “Phillis Wheatley’s most direct condemnation of slavery and the hypocrisy of self-styled freedom fighters, readers would have seen Wheatley as a powerful voice in the chorus of

calls for rebellious Americans to be consistent in their demands for personal and political freedom” (Carretta *Genius in Bondage* 159).

As much as Wheatley was revered and continuously recognized as a genius, with freedom came discrimination, poverty, and enslavement yet again when she married a free black man, John Peters in 1778. For the next six years, Wheatley’s poems would be republished and a new volume of poems was advertised for publication, but Wheatley’s person and voice would be essentially swallowed up in the identity, and now property, of John Peters.

Carretta notes that, “[a]lthough she [Phillis] had much to gain in terms of security by marrying, she surely knew that marriage would mean losing the independence she had enjoyed during the five previous years” (175). In his biographical study, Carretta cites the following law, which “effectively erased the legal identity she had gained in 1773”:

By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection, and cover, she performs everything; and is therefore called in our law-French a *feme covert*. (174)

It is known, however, through evidence of her own writing, that Wheatley and Peters lived together before they were married. A letter dated May 28, 1778 to her friend, Obour Tanner, begins with the simple salutation of “Dear Obour.” In the body of this letter, Wheatley asks Tanner to “do me a great favour . . . [by writing to her] by every opportunity. Direct your letters *under cover* to Mr. John Peters in Queen Street. I have but half an hour’s notice; and must apologize for this hasty scrawl” (185). The letter abruptly ends with the simple closing of “I am most affectionately, My dear Obour, your sincere friend[.] Phillis Wheatley” (*Collected Works*

185). Nearly another year passed before Obour Tanner heard from Wheatley, now Phillis Peters. The content of this letter exposes the overt system of patriarchy held over women, even celebrated geniuses. In a letter dated May 10, 1779 Wheatley writes:

Dear Obour,--By this opportunity I have the pleasure to inform you that I am well and hope you are so; tho' I have been silent, I have not been unmindful of you, but a variety of hindrances was the cause of my not writing to you. But in time to come I hope our correspondence will revive in better times—pray write me soon, for I long to hear from you—you many depend on constant replies—I wish you much happiness, and am,

Dr. Obour, your friend & sister

Phillis Peters

(Collected Works 186-87)

Although history records only a few letters, republished poems, and excerpts from what Wheatley hoped would be her second volume of published poetry, she remained “silent” for the next five years. Only the records of her husband John Peters, who was part and parcel of a litigious community in the state of Massachusetts, give any indication about Wheatley’s well-being. Peters was sometimes the victor in court and sometimes the convicted, having spent many weeks or months in jail; his absence did grant Phillis some freedom to regain her voice, thus guaranteeing that her name and reputation would never “vanish” from American literature and politics (Carretta 178). During those times Peters was jailed was when Wheatley reasserted her independence to an extent, and advocated freely and fiercely for the publication of her second volume of poems.

Whatever fight Wheatley had left, it died with her on the fifth of December 1884 after five years of marriage. Wheatley died alone and in squalor, coming full circle from her kidnapping and voyage through the Middle Passage, to being sold on an auction block. Though young by today's standards, Wheatley's thirty-one years of life, though very different from other enslaved people, were fraught with tragedy, discrimination, and isolation. Alongside each of those words should be determination, courage, hard work, kindness, loyalty, love, and ingenuity unmatched by many others. Her last years were spent "in relative obscurity, but like many authors before and since, she was restored to celebrity by death" (190). Peters was likely in jail when Phillis passed, and as such was anxious to secure the manuscript of her second poetry volume for publication and for his profit. Just two months after her death, his advertisement in the *Independent Chronicle and Universal Advertiser* read: "'The person who borrowed a volume of manuscript poems && [sic] of Phillis Peters, formerly Phillis Wheatley, deceased, would very much oblige her husband, John Peters, by returning it immediately, as the whole of her works are intended to be published'" (qtd. in Carretta 190). Peters never did obtain the manuscript.

Phillis Wheatley is, no doubt, one of the most courageous poets and activists of all historical ages. Wheatley recognized the power of the word; as such, she used words with such power that her narrative remains active even in the twenty-first century. Gates has called her "the Mother of African American Literature" (qtd. in Carretta *Genius in Bondage* 201). Wheatley's works "continued to be used by black as well as white antebellum American Abolitionists as evidence for the humanity, equality, and literary talents of people of African descent" (201). Without her poetry and letters, Wheatley's voice of protest would have been lost to history; the literary canon would face a narrative that might have remained unchallenged if not for voices like hers.

Chapter Three

“‘The Truth Shall Make You Free’”: Early to Mid-19th Century

Black Letters and Literature as the True Voice of America”

In addition to recording narratives of former slaves, the content of personal letters and correspondence—although rare—also speaks to the injustice of the institution of slavery. The corpus of letters examined throughout this dissertation mostly comes from women who used letters to send and receive information about family members from whom they had been separated. Finding letters written by enslaved women is almost like finding a needle in a haystack; they often don’t exist, or have significant damage, or may lie in the obscurity of some small collection. As such, the following letter is from one Vilet Lester to Patsey Patterson dated August 29, 1857. The rarity of such letters attests to the vital role of amanuenses to write for those who lacked the ability; they took down narratives, wrote advertisements to find the missing, and even forged emancipation documents. The same amanuenses would help move Harriet Tubman and many others, most of whom were illiterate, from slavery into liberation.

Slave letters are very rare documents. Among the vast plantation records held at the Duke University Special Collections Library, this letter from Vilet Lester is one of less than a dozen. In this particular case, Vilet's letter stands alone, with virtually no other documents such as slave lists, work records, or owner's letters to offer any additional information. Because Vilet’s former owners, the Pattersons, were related to the Allred family, the connection explains why Vilet's letter to Patsey Patterson is in the Allred Papers. However, the Allred collection is very small and consequently does not shed any further light on Vilet Lester's life. We have to glean what little we know about her from the letter itself, which verifies that Vilet was once owned by the Patterson family and lived in Randolph County, North Carolina.

Figure 8 Letter from Vilet Lester to Patsey Patterson, p.1. The Joseph Allred Papers, Special Collections Library, Duke University. (2,3)
<https://library.duke.edu/specialcollections/scriptorium/lester/lester.html>

Georgia Bullock Co August 23th 1837

My Loving Miss Patsey I have long bin wishing to imbrace this pleasant and pleasant opportunity of unfolding my Plans and feelings Since I was constrained to leave my Long loved home and friends which I cannot never give my self the Least chance of returning to I am well and enjoying good health and have every Since I Left Randolph where I Left Randolph I went to Rockingham and Staid there five weeks and then I Left there and went to Richmond Virginia to be sold and I staid there three days and was bought by a man by the name of Groover and brought to Georgia and he kept me about nine months and he being a trader sold me to a man by the name of Pimes and he sold me to a man by the name of Lester and he has owned me four years and says that he will keep me til death separates us without some of my old north Caroliner friends wants to buy me again my Dear Mother I cannot tell my feelings nor how bad I wish to see you and old Pop and Miss Rachel and Mother I do not now which I want to see the worst Miss Rachel or Mother I have though that I wanted to see Mother but never before did I no what it was to want to see a parent and couldnot I wish you to give my love to old Pop Miss Rachel and Mother and give my manifold love to Mother Brothers and Sister and please to tell them to Right to me so I may here

Figure 9 Letter from Vilet Lester to Patsey Patterson, p.2.

from them if I cannot see them and also I wish
 you to right to me and Right me all the more I do
 want to now whether old Bops is Still Living or
 now and all the rest of them and I want to now
 whether Baitum is married or no I wish to now what has
 Ever become of my Precious little girl I left her in
 goldsborough with Mr Walker and I have not heard
 from her since and Walker said that he was going
 to carry her to Rockingham and gave her to his
 sister and I want to no whether he did or no as
 I do wish to see her very much and Bops says
 he wishes to now whether he will sell her or now
 and the least that can buy her and that he wishes
 a answer as soon as he can get one as I wish him to
 buy her and my Bops being a man of Reason and
 feeling wishes to grant my troubled breast that
 much gratification and wishes to now whether he
 will sell her or now So I must come to a close
 by Expressing my self yours long loved and well
 wishingilly mate as a servant until death with Sister
 of Georgia
 Wm Mops Patsey Patterson
 of North Carolina
 My Bops Name is James W Lester and if you should
 think a nuff of me to right me which I do beg the
 favor of you as a servant direct your letter to Millray
 Bullock County Georgia Please to right me So
 Fare fare you well in love

Figure 10. Woodcut of Harriet Tubman. Carla Bauer (6).



Figure 11 Harriet Tubman US Postage Stamp 32¢. #2975k 1995, Civil War. Issue Date: June 29, 1995; Printed By: Stamp Venturers; Printing Method: Photogravure; Color: Multicolored. (7)



In October 2019, *The Smithsonian Magazine* published an article titled, “The True Story Behind the Harriet Tubman Movie.” As author Meilan Solly states, “Though she looms large in the public imagination, Harriet Tubman has rarely received the attention afforded to similarly iconic Americans” (n.p.). That same year, a film about the extraordinary life of Harriet Tubman, *Harriet*, premiered. Although speculation lingers about the film’s veracity, some cinematic moments give insight into one tool Tubman lacked—the ability to read and write.

The film depicts Tubman's arrival at the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery in Philadelphia, after traveling alone over ninety miles to meet abolitionist and "father of the Underground Railroad," William Still. For the first time in Tubman's life, she enters a world in which people who look like her are free and unafraid. There is a jolt of realization that she is finally safe and that she owns her own person and body, something that in her life she has never known. As Tubman begins finding out who she is in a seemingly new world she begins to tell Mr. Still the story of her life. Though illiterate and uneducated, Tubman shares her story of survival in a world where she once was worth no more than chattel. Ironically, Tubman would come to be known as "Moses" for helping more than seventy people to escape slavery in the South and later leading a Civil War Army regiment that freed over 750 people. Her worth grew exponentially as her actions to liberate others were perceived as theft by slaveholders.

Because of Tubman's illiteracy, Mr. Still transcribes her history, serving as an amanuensis to document her physical and mental abuse as well as her harrowing escape from Virginia to Pennsylvania. Using a scribe, or writing an "As Told To," became known as a biography through the use of an amanuensis, in contrast to autobiographies. The use of amanuenses brought to the forefront a question of whether the accounts of former slaves who remained illiterate were accurate representations of the life of the narrator.

Tubman later described that the weight "broke [her] skull" and would have killed her had it not been for her thick hair which "stood out like a bushel basket." Bleeding and unconscious, Tubman was returned to her house without medical care. She had a scar and a clear deformity on her forehead, consistent with a depressed skull fracture. After this event, she was reported to suffer from "sleeping fits" which may have represented seizures. During these seizures, no

one would be able to wake her until the episode was over. As described in some supporting literature, the seizures would put her into a trancelike state, but she remained aware of her surroundings during these episodes, suggesting that she may have suffered from absence seizures. Harriet believed she was able to speak with God during these episodes. She developed a deep religious faith that, like her seizures, stayed with her for the rest of her life. (7-8)

Tubman's claim of divine intervention parallels the Old Testament account of Moses, who also claimed to be guided by the hand of God, yet Still offers traumatic brain injury as an alternative explanation rather than simply recording her words as spoken.

After helping over 800 enslaved men and women find freedom, Still destroyed many of his written records—including letters and documentation of the formerly enslaved—because of the danger posed by the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. However, at the urging of Still's children, he published *The Underground Railroad* with the surviving records in 1872. Before emancipation narratives came to bear on the abusive nature of master to slave, the text was heralded as one of the most accurate accounts of the history of the Underground Railroad.

Although William Still recorded part of Harriet Tubman's biography, her biography in full was told to and recorded by Sarah Bradford and published in 1869, titled *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*. This book brought the story of Harriet Tubman into the public discourse. However, the biographical sketches provided in that first publication were disjointed and somewhat contradictory. In 1886, Bradford published a second biography titled *Harriet Tubman: The Moses of Her People*. This book was written for the express purpose of raising money to build a hospital where people of color and people with special needs could come for treatment. Bradford's 1886 telling of Harriet Tubman received enthusiasm and praise as a more definitive

biography of Tubman, who even still looms large as a mythical figure who overcame overwhelming odds to free herself and others. In the instance of both William Still and Sarah Bradford and countless others, the amanuensis served a fundamental role in recording the stories of Black Americans unable to document their own lives due to laws deliberately designed to keep the enslaved illiterate.

The “as told to” narratives allowed generations of Americans to learn of a past that was not written by those who lived and survived under the whip while in captivity. In Southampton, Virginia, local attorney Thomas R. Gray served as the amanuensis for the infamous case of (now much-revered) Nat Turner, the leader of the Late Insurrection. The title page for “The Confessions of Nat Turner” reads: “As fully and voluntarily made to Thomas R. Gray, In the prison where he was confined, and acknowledged by him to be such when read before the Court of Southampton” (Gray 1). Had Turner written his own story, a different narrative would exist to bring understanding and clarity to a system so oppressive, that rebellion was the only option. The truest version of the life of the enslaved comes through firsthand accounts and, in many cases, letters written by the enslaved themselves. This is certainly the case for Harriet Jacobs.

Harriet Jacobs’s writing career began after she taught herself how to read and write in secret, enabling her to leave a lasting legacy documenting her life as well as the lives of her grandmother and grandfather, mother, father, and her own children. Because of the time in which her narrative is situated her circumstances differ dramatically from that of Phillis Wheatley. Jacobs grew into a young woman shackled by the weight of slavery, sexual assault, and enslavers who were violent, indecent, overbearing, and envious, which was fertile ground for the creation of a much more hostile environment than that of Phillis Wheatley. Like Wheatley, however, Jacobs was intent on telling the truth about slavery from her perspective. Her desire and intent,

however, were marked with danger unknown to Wheatley. In the introduction to *Harriet Jacobs: A Life* Janet Fagan Yellin writes about Jacobs:

[H]er story is compelling. She is the only woman I know of who was held in slavery, who was a fugitive both in the South and in the North, an antislavery activist who wrote and published her life story and then, during the Civil War, went back south to work with the black refugees behind the Union lines and report what she saw in the northern press. We know of the heroic Harriet Tubman and her work during the war as a Union spy. And we know of the heroic Sojourner Truth and of her relief efforts. But because of slavery's anti-literacy laws, neither Tubman nor Truth could write her own story, and instead produced only "as-told-to" narratives. Astonishingly, Jacobs managed both to author her own book and to get it published before Emancipation. (Introduction xv)

Jacobs remains a remarkable figure in the history of women writers and social justice fighters. Her determination and self-will were made manifest by the fruits of her labor. Her work did indeed change the narrative of slavery to make it more comprehensive, as one that examined the lived experiences and voices of enslaved women.

After Jacobs's escape from enslavement in Edenton, North Carolina, her good friend, mentor, and publisher, Amy Post, encouraged her to begin to write down the story of her life. Jacobs was "determined to help the abolitionist cause . . . took the advice of her friend . . . and began writing her life story as a *weapon* against slavery" (Yellin "Family Papers" xxxi). Even in enslavement, familial bonds were sometimes afforded to the enslaved, though never legally. This often led to further grief and agony as families were torn apart regularly, both for economic

Figure 12. Harriet Jacobs Letter to Amy Kirby Post, The Harriet Jacobs Family Papers, Volumes One and Two

P. 5x 787
Amy Kirby Post
185-2
 Dear friend I send you those few lines to let
 you know that we are getting along Dear little
 Willie made us a visit last Sunday he seemed
 much pleased and was a very good boy he loved
 Joanna and Jacob more than any one else things
 seem to go on smoothly at home and I feel
 so happy daily expecting to see my Sam I
 have not heard from my Brother since he
 left went to hear Mr. Louis Lecture last night
 and I can assure you that he did not forget
 to hold up the name of Isaac and Annmy Post as
 the Coloured Man & Womans friend as much
 as I love you I am glad that your name is not
 too sacred to be held up by a coloured man I
 suppose you know that Louis is out of prison
 and his accuser in for the same hold I hope

Figure 13. Drawing of Amy Kirby Post. "Amy Kirby Post," House Divided: The Civil War Research Engine at Dickinson College (24). <http://hd.housedivided.dickinson.edu/node/22504>



purposes and also to disallow allegiance anywhere other than to their master. The traditional familial model was broken down bit-by-bit, then piece-by-piece, until the practice of separating families became the norm under slavery. Because they were owned as chattel property, no slave was allowed the right to even begin to believe they, too, could establish families, homes, self-sufficiency, and become educated.

Harriet Ann Jacobs was born in 1813 to Delilah Horniblow and Elijah Knox, who were married, despite being enslaved on neighboring plantations. Jacobs also had a brother, John S. who purchased his own freedom in New York City. He also wrote an account of his life in enslavement titled *A True Tale of Slavery*, published in 1861, the same year *Incidents* was published. By 1819, Jacobs's mother Delilah died in Edenton and was buried in Providence Cemetery. Elijah later remarried, and his marriage produced a step-brother to Harriet and John, Elijah Knox, Jr. Their father tried multiple times to purchase his freedom and the freedom of his children. At every juncture, he was denied and sent back to the plantation owned by James Coffield, the husband of Elijah's mistress, Lavinia Matilda Knox. Yellin writes that the separation from his current wife, who was pregnant with their child, eventually led to his death. Harriet's brother, John S. noted that during the separation from his family, Elijah, who had "an intensely acute feeling of the wrongs of slavery, sank into a mental dejection, which, combined with bodily illness, occasioned his death" ("Family Papers" lxxiv). It is likely that Elijah died in 1824 and was buried next to Delilah. By age 11, Jacobs had lost both her mother and father, and even though she had an uncle, brothers, and her grandmother Molly, Jacobs was left to her own devices to protect herself, as well as to plan and execute her escape to freedom.

Jacobs understood that the way to obtain freedom was to continue to hone her reading and writing skills. By writing Jacobs placed herself in danger, due to the illegality in many states

for slaves to learn how to read and write. Harsh punishments were meted out to slaves for small infractions, bigger infractions, or no infraction at all. The patriarchal order in the US determined that men could use their property in any way they saw fit. Upon the death of Jacobs' first mistress, Margaret Horniblow, she was willed to Mary Norcom, Horniblow's three-year-old niece. Because of Mary's young age, Jacobs, aged 12, was essentially given to Mary's father and his wife, Dr. James and Maria Norcom.

Jacobs became very aware of the threat of sexual violence Dr. Norcom intended to enact while still barely a teenager. From 1825 until her escape in 1842, Jacobs was subject to sexual assault and jealous rage from Norcom, often acted out in violence by his wife. When Dr. Norcom found out that Jacobs, 15, had fallen in love with a free black carpenter, he was enraged, and continually reminded Jacobs that she belonged to him and would do his bidding. Jacobs did all she could to avoid the violence threatened by Dr. and Mrs. Norcom and miraculously, remained safe from harm. In order to protect herself physically she began a "friendship" with a white lawyer and future NC congressman, Samuel Treadwell Sawyer, which produced a child. When Jacobs was found pregnant with a second child, she tried to persuade Dr. Norcom to sell her and her children to Sawyer, to which he refused and necessitated her life as a runaway slave.

Countless numbers of enslaved women were raped, impregnated and forced to bring more children into a life of being owned as chattel property, and at risk of physical, emotional, and sexual violence as well. Numerous stories speak to the unutterable terror inflicted on millions of enslaved people. Frederick Douglass wrote about the first time he became aware of what the institution of slavery allowed. As he recounts:

I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart-rending shrieks of an own aunt of mine, whom he used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her

naked back till she was literally covered with blood. No words, no tears, no prayers, from his gory victim, seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose. The louder she screamed the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest. He would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush; and not until overcome by fatigue would he cease to swing the blood-clotted cowskin.” (*Narrative of the Life* 28)

Jacobs’s breaking from tradition was dangerous and met with much opposition, but her legacy continues because of the courage rooted deeply within her and her abiding belief that she too, was created equal.

Her life became “a writing life” and although the existence of her earliest writings in Miss Horniblow’s “account book” are not physically available, her later writings, beginning in 1849, were preserved and made available through *The Jacobs Family Papers*, a two-volume collection which houses genealogical records, letters, and legal documents. This collection enabled the remarkable character and actions of Harriet Ann Jacobs to propel the idea of abolition forward into reality. Jacobs’s desire to call attention to the social degradation and injustice of slavery became more important than even her life.

Her earliest known writing was a letter to her publisher and long-time friend, Amy Kirby Post in 1849. Because of the evidence offered in Jacobs’s narrative, there is no question that her writing life began as a child while she attended to Miss Margaret Horniblow. Due to the lack of letters from her childhood, Mary E. Lyons, author of *Letters from a Slave Girl: The Story of Harriet Jacobs*, recreates in her book what Jacobs might have been writing about in her formative years. Lyons’ book, although fiction, turns Jacobs’s narrative into an epistolary novel which offers a new perspective, albeit speculative, from which one can infer alongside Lyons

what Jacobs's life and the practice of slavery narrated from the perspective of the enslaved girl, who was not yet a woman. Lyons comments that "like the letters herein, young Harriet Ann Jacobs's real writing was probably quite personal. In a world that did not recognize her humanity or her emotions, such writing may have provided the only *safe* way to express her deepest feelings" (160-61 emphasis added). As this chapter progresses to letters Jacobs would write in adulthood, there is a marked difference in the style, voice, writing methods, which depended on whether she was writing to a friend, a statesman, or a newspaper. The missing part of Jacobs's life, which might have forever remained silent, is given voice through Lyons's work.

In it, the first letter describes the passing of Miss Margaret Horniblow, to whom Jacobs served as a housemaid, caretaker, and academic project. Lyons's work takes the reader to one of the most important moments in Jacobs's life. While on her deathbed, Horniblow asks for Jacobs and gifts her an "account book" in which Jacobs teaches herself to write. The book becomes a place where she can communicate without fear of reprisal by physical punishment or sexual abuse. Jacobs writes, "Mama, I am not so lonesome if I can talk to you in my book" (2). This fictional account of Jacobs's letters offers a very different, yet complementary, perspective into the voice Jacobs might have had as a child; it took nineteen years after her escape North for Jacobs to begin writing her own narrative.

Mary E. Lyons's fictional epistolary novel *Letters from a Slave Girl* allows for the "[r]eimagining [of] Harriet's life in letter form [which] celebrates her determination to become educated even while in bondage" (159). Her later letters are more formal exchanges between herself, her publisher, close acquaintances, and family. More importantly, they offer little in terms of her childhood, beyond what she has written in her published narrative, leaving a space for an epistolary novel addressing her childhood to take shape. It would seem that any reader of

this fictionalized body of letters could see the horrors of slavery and that letters can serve as a form of protest against slavery in the past, and against discrimination and prejudice in the present. It is imperative that readers question why so many writers continually write about the past, while living in the present.

During the time in which Jacobs lived and wrote, “writing paper was handmade, expensive, and hoarded like money. It was common practice to fill every available inch of old account books ... [s]ometimes the book was turned sideways and the spaces between the lines were filled in with words” (Lyons 160). Because postage cost was determined by weight, cross writing became a common practice in order to communicate economically. Although Miss Horniblow taught Jacobs to read, she did not teach her how to write. Harriet had to develop her writing skills on her own. No doubt, what Miss Horniblow assigned Jacobs to read likely helped her become acquainted with good writing, and likely became an indispensable model for Jacobs. Even more miraculous is the fact that Miss Horniblow provided writing tools for the young girl, which was sometimes an old used account book, or scraps of paper, but nonetheless *paper*, as well as the time to use the paper for the beginning of what would become a career of protesting the institution of slavery, and a voice that continues to echo through history.

Lyons also speculates that the young Jacobs likely would have written in a southern dialect, which reflected the time and place of her youth and of her uneducated, likely illiterate fellow slaves residing and working on the Horniblow plantation. Because there is no evidence of her early writing, this cannot be confirmed, however, letters she wrote as an adult and the narrative she published of her life, beginning at earliest recollection, confirms what Lyons asserts. Lyons’s method for the reconstruction of Jacobs’s life was to take known information and re-animate it with “social occasions, meals eaten, [and] words spoken . . . [T]he major events

in *Letters from a Slave Girl* are true. Every person and place mentioned in the letters really existed” (161). In Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, the author notes that she has taken certain liberties to fill in some of the gaps that exist in the memory of her life story.

As Jacobs grew in age and determination, her efforts in securing her freedom and the freedom of her children led to flirting with ideas of equality and freedom, and with the dangers of escaping from constant sexual assault, as well as physical and emotional abuse. As the fire inside her grew, so did the import of her writing and her ability, through writing to appeal to people who could help change the egregious practice of slavery, and would listen—educated Northern white women. In her “Notes to the Reader,” Lyons states, “...[M]uch of Harriet’s actual writing during her years in Edenton, North Carolina, was of a private nature. We know that she had to conceal her literacy from her master. ‘One day,’ she recalled in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ‘he caught me teaching myself to write.’ . . . Since writing was forbidden . . . [Jacobs wrote letters and responded to letters] in secret” (160). Even though the letters are admittedly fictional, they are a solid representation of what her writing may have contained as a young girl. The first letter Lyons re-creates for young Harriet (12) is dated July 2, 1825, six years after her mother’s death. Lyons writes:

Dear Mama,

I write this letter to tell you Miss Margaret Horniblow dying. You know she is always been sickly, even where you were alive. This morning Docter Norcom come. He brung his black bag, and soon as he take out the lancet and bleeding cup I know the Missus bad off. I never did see a person get well after the Docter finish his bleeding cure.

Little while ago, Missus ask for me. A-laying up in that big old four-poster bed, she look like a pale white heron bird. Her eyes all glassy-like. Alone with her, I was afraid. Then Miss Margaret slip this old account Book into my hand. Harriet, she whisper, you read the Bible and practice your letters. Most Slave children dont get any learning she say, now dont waste it. Then she turn her head away. The Docter, he come back and scat me out the door.

My like Book is fill with numbers and lists. If I turn it over and upside down, I can write on the back side of each page. The blue leather all faded. Feel soft, like John's bottom when he was just a little baby thing. ...

Your daughter,

Harriet Ann (2)

This letter foreshadows the enormous role literacy would play in her life and in the life of her family. The content of this letter is not typically what one might expect to read from a 12-year-old girl. She is acutely aware that her freedom depends on words on paper—Margaret Horniblow's Will and Final Testament, which was read over the space of several days.

Because of her literacy, Harriet was the sole reader of any and all documents that pertained to her family and their lives. To many of the enslaved, reading became both a blessing and a curse. Jacobs's literacy and courage to put pen to paper has enabled a single narrative to emerge. Her writing preserved her legacy, one that will continue to influence and teach generations of people to explain the legacy of white supremacy, disproportionate violence, outright racism, and domestic terrorism perpetrated largely on people of color.

Harriet Jacobs's voice remains silent until nearly a decade after she escapes North. Many things were written about her, such as reward posters posted as early as 1835, and documents

regarding Jacobs and her escape to freedom. Jacobs's authorial voice is silent until 1861 when she published her own narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Before publishing her most famous work, Jacobs sent parts of the narrative as letters to *The New York Daily Tribune* in order to begin to address the realities of slave life for a woman.

A decidedly feminine perspective of sexual abuse offered a new narrative voice—one marked by the degrading whispers of her master's physical abuse and rape, and the complexities of bringing children into a world where they were despised while yet in the womb. Because these topics were not in line with the "manners and morals" of women during the nineteenth century, Jacobs was very uneasy about putting her narrative out in the public sphere; however, many leading abolitionists supported Jacobs's view and believed her narrative could help shift or reinforce the anti-slavery cause. In addition, Jacobs was concerned about the safety of anyone who would help publish her narrative, as well as how the public would perceive Jacobs herself.

Jacobs's efforts to secure a publisher were marked with patronizing support or indifference that disheartened and prolonged the publication of her narrative. While employed by the Willis family, Jacobs became the sole caregiver to Mrs. Willis, nursing her back to health after the delivery of a premature baby, who died shortly after birth. Because of time restrictions due to illness and loyalty to those who employed her, months had lapsed in which Jacobs was unable to edit her narrative. During this time, however, Jacobs was able to commit Maria Child to secure the publication of the narrative; Child also offered her services as editor for *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. As Jacobs's editor, Child made editorial decisions without the author's consent. Yellin describes the quick shift of ownership of the narrative, to the degree that

[Child] in addition to editing the text . . . supplied an Introduction and assumed the role of Jacobs's agent. In late September, she wrote that she had signed a

contract and instructed Thayer and Eldrige to take the copyright out in her name—commenting (apparently in reference to the decision to publish the book pseudonymously), ‘Under the circumstances *your* name could not be used, you know’—and she enclosed a document for Jacobs to sign establishing the book as her property, in the event of Child’s death. (141)

Jacobs was well aware of the danger her writing put her in, however, she did so knowing she would suffer repercussions sooner or later, but continued to put words on paper nonetheless.

Because of this fear, she began by writing letters, ostensibly testing the waters, while protesting the grievous system of not only being owned as property but having her body used in whatever way her master chose; physical violence, rape, and emotional abuse were part and parcel of the nightmarish life of a female slave. In many cases, rape would lead to pregnancy, which did much to incur the wrath of the mistress of the house, not to mention the emotional and physical toll that bringing a child into the bonds of slavery would take. Although this was not a new cultural phenomenon, it was an issue that was not openly discussed and in most cases would have been denied. Because Jacobs found the courage to begin writing letters, she publicized this injustice and inspired hope for solutions.

The blatant disregard for a woman’s life, even one owned as property, was used in a way that will forever be difficult for a man to understand. The practice of physical, sexual, and emotional violence inflicted upon women has no demographic boundaries. Harriet Jacobs had the courage to share her own experience of sexual violence, and the predations of a master who was furious with her when he discovered she was his only by law. He didn’t own her spirit, and in the end, did not own her children, who had been fathered by Samuel Treadwell Sawyer, a white man of social standing. Though Sawyer expressed his intention to purchase freedom for

Jacobs and their children, her master, Dr. Norcom, emphatically dissuaded him. This turn of events led Jacobs to escape to a place where Norcom might never find her, despite his efforts in posting notices and distributing reward posters. On July 4, 1835 in Norfolk, Virginia, the following was advertised:

\$100 REWARD WILL be given for the apprehension and delivery of my Servant Girl HARRIET. She is a light mulatto, 21 years of age, about 5 feet 4 inches high, of a thick and corpulent habit, having on her head a thick covering of black hair that curls naturally, but which can be easily combed straight. She speaks easily and fluently, and has an agreeable carriage and address. Being a good seamstress, she has been accustomed to dress well, has a variety of very fine clothes, made in the prevailing fashion, and will probably appear, if abroad, tricked out in gay and fashionable finery. As this girl absconded from the plantation of my son without any known cause or provocation, it is probable she designs to transport herself to the North. The above reward, with all reasonable charges, will be given for apprehending her, or securing her in any prison or jail within the U. States. All persons are hereby forewarned against harboring or entertaining her, or being in any way instrumental in her escape, under the most rigorous penalties of the law. JAMES NORCOM. Edenton, N.C. June 30 (Advertisement, *American Beacon*, Norfolk, Virginia, July 4, 1835)

She escaped by traveling no farther than the house of her grandmother, who had been charged with caring for Jacobs's children, and who herself had been granted emancipation, land, and property from her former master. Jacobs went where she knew Dr. Norcom would not and could not find her; she hid herself in the attic of her Grandmother's home, which had been left to her

by Ms. Horniblow, who also promised Jacobs emancipation upon her death, but instead left her to become the property of Norcom.

Whether or not she intended to remain hidden for the seven years she was concealed, is not entirely known. What is certain was that the risk of being captured and subjected to Norcom's advances and sexual abuse was a strong enough deterrent that she chose to remain in an attic space nine feet long and seven feet wide for seven years. The ceiling height was three feet. Harriet Jacobs' criminal act of writing was fraught with danger and highlighted the separation she endured from her children who were no further than twenty feet away for those long years. She writes about her living conditions, which were confining and comfortless, but offered some access to her children:

The garrett was only nine feet long and seven wide . . . offer[ing] no admission for either light or air . . . The air was stifling; the darkness total . . . The rats and mice ran over my bed; but I was weary, and I slept such sleep as the wretched may, when a tempest has passed over them. Morning came. I knew it only by the noises I heard . . . I suffered for air even more than light. But I was not comfortless. I heard the voices of my children. There was joy and there was sadness in the sound. It made my tears flow. How I longed to speak to them! I was eager to look to their faces; but there was no hole, no crack, through which I could peep . . . Yet I would have chosen this, rather than my lot as a slave, though white people considered it an easy one . . . Through my peeping-hole I could watch the children, and when they were near enough, I could hear their talk. (42-43)

Jacobs suffered both physically and emotionally as she fended off rats and other vermin from crawling all over her, but worse than that were the sounds and sights of her children who for seven years didn't know where their mother was. Fortunately, the children's biological father, a young, unmarried white lawyer, had purchased their freedom and given them to her grandmother and uncle; however, Sawyer could never get Norcom to sell her to him. So in 1835, Jacobs escaped, and suffered tremendously through all conditions of weather, hidden in her Grandmother's attic. She came down from hiding in the dark of night to exercise, although those times were few and far between; she simply couldn't risk being discovered. From this unique point of view, Jacobs had the time to develop and hone her writing skills through the practice of reading. Often Jacobs was given objects of contraband—newspapers and magazines—and began in earnest to develop her reading and writing skills.

Within a decade and a half Harriet Jacobs published her account of her life in bondage under the pseudonym of Linda Brent. However, before the 1860 publication of her narrative, there were letters; letters to newspaper editors, letters to allies in the north, and letters to friends and family. The “female” version of *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* does something that Douglass only briefly touched on and perhaps did not fully experience: the sexual abuse suffered by female slaves.

Although much had been written on the topic of female enslavement, Jacobs's narrative was the first of its kind. Jacobs was the first woman to write and publish a slave narrative in the United States. Hers was controversial at the time of publication because she spoke truth to power about the sexual harassment and abuses she suffered while enslaved. Henry Louis Gates Jr., in his biographical sketch of Jacobs, in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* states, “She called herself ‘Linda Brent’ and masked the important places and persons in her

story in the manner of a novelist . . . [G]iven the harrowing and sensational story she had to tell, the one-time fugitive slave felt she had little alternative but to shield herself from a readership whose understanding and empathy she could not take for granted” (221). In her own words, Harriet Jacobs writes:

But I now entered on my fifteenth year—a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl. My master began to whisper foul words in my ear. Young as I was, I could not remain ignorant of their import [meaning]. I tried to treat them with indifference or contempt. . . He tried his utmost to corrupt the pure principles my grandmother had instilled. He peopled my young mind with unclean images, such as only a vile monster could think of. I turned from him with disgust and hatred. But he was my master. I was compelled to live under the same roof with him—where I saw a man forty years my senior daily violating the most sacred commandments of nature. He told me I was his property, that I must be subject to his will in all things. My soul revolted against the mean tyranny. But where could I turn for protection? No matter whether the slave girl be as black as ebony or as fair as her mistress. In either case, there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or even from death; all these are inflicted by fiends who bear the shape of men. The mistress, who ought to protect the helpless victim, has no other feelings towards her but those of jealousy and rage. The degradation, the wrongs, the vices, that grow out of slavery, are more than I can describe. They are greater than you would willingly believe. (231)

In this passage Jacobs asks where she might seek protection because she lived in a world without any promise of safety, help, or hope. Even now, many women are frightened to write down their

stories of abuse or speak about them for fear of retaliation from men in power, just as Harriet Jacobs was when she wrote herself as Linda Brent.

Gates writes of the importance of Jacob's narrative to the canon of nineteenth century literature: "*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is the only nineteenth-century slave narrative, whose genesis can be traced, through a series of letters from Jacobs to various friends and advisors" (222). Jean Fagan Yellin, one of the foremost Harriet Jacobs scholars, discovered an extensive collection of correspondence between Jacobs and her editor and friend, Amy Post. In a 1987 edition, Yellin published the letters in two volumes, among other correspondences. Because of the inherent danger in writing letters as enslaved or even freed slaves, there are but a few collections of these letters. Many of Frederick Douglass's letters are available in a multi-volume record of his extraordinary writing life. Harriet Jacobs's two-volume collection of letters is another. The narrative of the enslaved may never be complete, however, when letters of both enslaved men and women are made available for study as part of the literary canon, hope remains for a sizeable complementary narrative to the national narrative as it still continues to evolve and grow.

The first published piece of Jacobs's writing is a letter to Post in 1849, between May 7 and May 21. Post encouraged her writing and helped Jacobs make the acquaintance of Lydia Maria Child, who published *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Linda Brent. The preface to this letter, by Yellin, Jacobs' most eminent biographer and editor of *The Harriet Jacobs Family Papers, Volumes One and Two*, notes: "The . . . letter to Amy Post is the first writing by Harriet Jacobs that has been found. Here she displays her delight in figurative language and also reveals her lack of knowledge of standard conventions of punctuation and capitalization" (158). As the years passed, Jacobs became more political in her letter writing.

Figure 14-15 Letter from a Fugitive Slave, *New York Semi-Weekly Tribune*. Item # 594794. 24 June 1853 (27, 28, 29). <https://www.rarenewspapers.com/view/594794?imagelist=1>

LETTER FROM A FUGITIVE SLAVE.

Slaves Sold under Peculiar Circumstances.

[We publish the subjoined communication exactly as written by the author, with the exception of corrections in punctuation and spelling, and the omission of one or two passages.—Ed.]

To the Editor of The N. Y. Tribune.

SIR: Having carefully read your paper for some months I became very much interested in some of the articles and comments written on Mrs. Tyler's Reply to the Ladies of England. Being a slave myself, I could not have felt otherwise. Would that I could write an article worthy of notice in your columns. As I never enjoyed the advantages of an education, therefore I could not study the arts of reading and writing, yet poor as it may be, I had rather give it from my own hand, than have it said that I employed others to do it for me. The truth can never be told so well through the second and third person as from yourself. But I am straying from the question. In that Reply to the Ladies of England, Mrs. Tyler said that slaves were never sold only under very peculiar circumstances. As Mrs. Tyler and her friend Bbains were so far used up, that he could not explain what those peculiar circumstances were, let one whose peculiar sufferings justifies her in explaining it for Mrs. Tyler.

I was born a slave, reared in the Southern hot-bed until I was the mother of two children, sold at the early age of two and four years old. I have been hunted through all of the Northern States, but no, I will not tell you of my own suffering—no, it would harrow up my soul, and defeat the object that I wish to pursue. Enough—the dregs of that bitter cup have been my bounty for many years.

And as this is the first time that I ever took my pen in hand to make such an attempt, you will not say that it is fiction, for had I the inclination I have neither the brain or talent to write it. But to this very peculiar circumstance under which slaves are sold.

My mother was held as property by a maiden lady; when she married, my younger sister was in her fourteenth year, whom they took into the family. She was as gentle as she was beautiful. Innocent and guileless child, the light of our desolate hearth! But oh, my heart bleeds to tell you of the misery and degradation she was forced to suffer in slavery. The monster who owned her had no humanity in his soul. The most sincere affection that his

Figure 16-17 Letter from a Fugitive Slave, *New York Semi-Weekly Tribune*.

heart was capable of, could not make him faithful to his beautiful and wealthy bride the short time of three months, but every stratagem was used to seduce my sister. Mortified and tormented beyond endurance, this child came and threw herself on her mother's bosom, the only place where she could seek refuge from her persecutor; and yet she could not protect her child that she bore into the world. On that bosom with *bitter tears* she told her troubles, and entreated her mother to save her. And oh, Christian mothers! you that have daughters of your own, can you think of your sable sisters without offering a prayer to that God who created all in their behalf! My poor mother, naturally high-spirited, smarting under what she considered as the wrongs and outrages which her child had to bear, sought her master, entreating him to spare her child. Nothing could exceed his rage at this what he called impertinence. My mother was dragged to jail, there remained twenty-five days, with negro traders to come in as they liked to examine her, as she was offered for sale. My

sister was told that she must yield, or never expect to see her mother again. There were three younger children; on no other condition could she be restored to them, without the sacrifice of one. That child gave herself up to her master's bidding, to save one that was dearer to her than life itself. And can you, Christian, find it in your heart to despise her? Ah, no! not even Mrs. Tyler; for though we believe that the vanity of a name would lead her to bestow her hand where her heart could never go with it, yet, with all her faults and follies, she is nothing more than a *woman*. For if her domestic hearth is surrounded with slaves, ere long before this she has opened her eyes to the evils of slavery, and that the mistress as well as the slave must submit to the indignities and vices imposed on them by their lords of body and soul. But to one of those peculiar circumstances.

At fifteen, my sister held to her bosom an innocent offspring of her guilt and misery. In this way she dragged a miserable existence of two years, between the fires of her

Figure 18-19 Letter from a Fugitive Slave, *New York Semi-Weekly Tribune*.

mistress's jealousy and her master's brutal passion. At seventeen, she gave birth to another helpless infant, heir to all the evils of slavery. Thus life and its sufferings were meted out to her until her twenty-first year. Sorrow and suffering had made its ravages upon her—she was less the object to be desired by the fiend who had crushed her to the earth; and as her children grew, they bore too strong a resemblance to him who desired to give them no other inheritance save Chains and Handcuffs, and in the dead hour of the night, when this young, deserted mother lay with her little ones clinging around her, little dreaming of the dark and inhuman plot that would be carried into execution before another dawn, and when the sun rose on God's beautiful earth, that broken-hearted mother was far on her way to the capitol of Virginia. That day should have refused her light to so disgraceful and inhuman an act in your boasted country of Liberty. Yet, reader, it is true, those two helpless children were the sons of one of your sainted Members in Congress; that agonized mother, his victim and slave. And where she now is God only knows, who has kept a record on high of all that she has suffered on earth.

And, you would exclaim, Could not the master have been more merciful to his children? God is merciful to all of his children, but it is seldom that a slaveholder has any mercy for his slave child. And you will believe it when I tell you that mother and her children were sold to make room for another sister, who was now the age of that mother when she entered the family. And this selling appeased the mistress's wrath, and satisfied her desire for revenge, and made the path more smooth for her young rival at first. For there is a strong rivalry between a handsome mulatto girl and a jealous and faded mistress, and her liege lord sadly neglects those little attentions for a while that once made her happy. For the master will either neglect his wife or double his attentions, to save him from being suspected by his wife. Would you not think that Southern Women had cause to despise that Slavery which forces them to bear so much deception practiced by their husbands? Yet all this is true, for a slaveholder seldom takes a white mistress, for she is an expensive commodity, not one which he would like to have her, but more apt to be

Figure 20 Letter from a Fugitive Slave, *New York Semi-Weekly Tribune*.

submissive as he would like to have her, but more apt to be tyrannical; and when his passion seeks another object, he must leave her in quiet possession of all the gewgaws that she has sold herself for. But not so with his poor *slave victim*, that he has robbed of everything that can make life desirable; she must be torn from the little that is left to bind her to life, and sold by her *seducer* and *master*, caring not where, so that it puts him in possession of enough to purchase another victim. And such are the peculiar circumstances of American Slavery—of all the evils in God's sight the most to be abhorred.

Perhaps while I am writing this you too, dear Emily, may be on your way to the Mississippi River, for those peculiar circumstances occur every day in the midst of my poor oppressed fellow-creatures in bondage. And oh ye Christians, while your arms are extended to receive the oppressed of all nations, while you exert every power of your soul to assist them to raise funds, put weapons in their hands, tell them to return to their own country to slay every foe until they break the accursed yoke from off their necks, not buying and selling; this they never do under any circumstances. But while Americans do all this, they forget the millions of slaves they have at home, bought and sold under very peculiar circumstances.

And because one friend of the slave has dared to tell of their wrongs you would annihilate her. But in Uncle Tom's Cabin she has not told the half. Would that I had one spark from her store house of genius and talent I would tell you of my own sufferings—I would tell you of wrongs that Hungary has never endured, nor England ever dreamed of in this free country where all nations fly for liberty, equal rights and protection under your stripes and stars. It should be stripes and scars, for they go along with Mrs. Tyler's peculiar circumstances, of which I have told you only one.

A FUGITIVE SLAVE.

Her audience also changed and with that change, Jacobs again found herself in a position where the importance of the message outweighed the risk. The first letter Jacobs published anonymously was in response to a letter written by a Mrs. Tyler, a white woman who published a letter about Southern domestics in which she claimed they were treated better than many free indentured servants and were more often fed well and clothed sufficiently. Tyler also asserted

that slave families were maintained and rarely separated. Jacobs was so upset by reading this letter that she wrote a response that night. Jacobs's letter was published in *The New York Daily Tribune*, June 21, 1853, reading in part: "I was born a slave, reared in the Southern hot-bed until I was the mother of two children, sold at the early age of two and four years old. I have been hunted through all of the Northern States . . . the dregs of that bitter cup have been my bounty for many years. And as this is the first time that I ever took my pen in hand to make such an attempt" ("Documenting the South"). Her letter was republished in the *New York Standard*, and emboldened Jacobs to continue to write letters for publication, each of which protested the practice of slavery and put her very life in danger.

Her first published letter was signed, "A Fugitive Slave." In the letters that followed, Jacobs wrote about the injustices that blacks continually faced— lynchings, attempts at the re-colonization of Black Americans, and slavery. These letters and the death of her grandmother led her to begin writing her own story. Yellin writes:

Following her rebuff by Harriet Beecher Stowe, Jacobs, in New York City . . . in June 1853, read a newspaper article that moved her to enter the international debate on American slavery. Written by former First Lady Julia Tyler, "The Women of England vs. the Women of America" was a defense of chattel slavery composed in response to the Duchess of Sutherland's "Stafford House Address," which had appealed to southern white women to help end slavery. Tyler's letter, published first in the *Richmond Enquirer*, republished in both southern and northern papers, and widely circulated, caused a furor. It presents a series of stock apologies for slavery— . . . that southern households included happy domestics who were given access to Christian teachings and were better off than many Englishmen June 21, 1853. (*Harriet Jacobs: A Life* 122)

Writing in response, Jacobs produced what would become her first published work. Announcing that her life as a slave qualifies her to enter the public debate, she presents a gendered argument, asserting that southern white women, like Julia Tyler, were aware of “the evils of slavery,” and she directly counters Tyler’s claim that the separation of slave families was “rare” and occurred only under “peculiar circumstances.” In this letter, Jacobs—telling the story of a slave mother whose mistress marries a lascivious master, of the separation of that slave family, of the sexual slavery of the daughters and their sale (and the sale of their babies), and of their mistress’s jealousy—touches on the themes of the sexual abuse of slave women that she would explore throughout *Incidents*. Here, as in *Incidents*, she writes pseudonymously and uses contrasting voices to tell her story. Here also, as in *Incidents*, she asserts that her work is not fiction. But unlike in *Incidents*, here Jacobs’s claim that she is describing her own family—that the slave mother was her mother and that the debauched girls were her sisters—is not historically true. Jacobs followed up this anonymous public testimony with two more letters to the editor, using them as exercises to polish her writing skills. One of these letters, in which she discusses colonization, has not been found (*Harriet Jacobs Family Papers* 196-97).

Figure 21 Photograph of Harriet Jacobs (1894), Public domain.



In most cases, the enslaved were kept from acquiring literacy and were considered dangerous and unfit to remain in bondage if they could read and write. Harriet Jacobs wrote while in hiding after accusations of theft—the theft of her own body, which she did not own. Her letters also served the purpose of fighting against the injustice of slavery while remaining in hiding, separated from her children and from the earth. Thus, letter writing remained an especially dangerous practice for female slaves, which directly contrasts with the situation of eighteenth century white women for “whom letter writing was perceived as a safe and appropriate activity” (Barton and Hall 88).

In Dorothy Sterling’s book *We Are Your Sisters*, a transcribed letter addresses this very situation. Sterling relates the narrative of a Black women who writes about how freely white women could write and yearned to be able to do so herself: “‘Of dat be great comfort, Missis. You can write to your friends all ‘bout ebery ting, and hab dem write to you. Our people can’t do so. Wheder dey be ‘live or dead, we can’t neber know—only sometimes he hears dey be dead’” (qtd. in Sterling 44). Sterling emphasizes the importance of adding the once silenced voice of enslaved women, as well as all other women under a patriarchal society. She argues that combining the letters of all women allows opportunity to “corroborate and complement one another and to round out the whole picture” (Introduction xiii). The preservation of these letters is a testimony to the importance and availability to this medium of writing.

Among Sterling’s collected missives is Harriet Newby’s letter, separated from her husband and children, who writes on August 16, 1859 the following:

Dear Husband, You letter came duly to hand and it gave me much pleasure to here from you, and especely to here you are better of your rheumatism. I want you to buy me as soon as possible, for if you do not get me some body else will.

Dear Husband you [know] not the trouble I see; the last two years has been like a trouble dream. It is said Master is in want of money. If so, I know not what time he may sell me, and then all my bright hopes of the futer are blasted, for there has been one bright hope to cheer me in all my troubles, that is to be with you. If I thought I should never see you this earth would have no charms for me. Do all you can for me, witch I have no doubt you will. The children are all well. The baby cannot walk yet. It can step around everything by holding on. I must bring my letter to a Close as I have no newes to write. You mus write soon and say when you think you can come. Your affectionate wife, Harriet Newby. (45-46)

Sterling adds a note just after the letter concludes: “Two months after the above letter was written, Dangerfield Newby returned to Virginia with John Brown and his men. He was killed in the attack on Harpers Ferry. After Harriet Newby’s letters were found on his body, she was sold to the Deep South” (46). Sterling’s book has numerous transcripts of letters written in much the same manner as Harriet Newby. Reading the letters from this collection allows for the unvoiced to be voiced again. In all of its forms the letter is perhaps the last testament to their lives.

Additional letters in the Sterling anthology contain pleas for rescue, even if it meant enslavement for another woman. Elizabeth Ramsey wrote to her daughter from Wharton, Texas, on March 8, 1859. Her letter, in part, reads: “...I want you to writ to me on recept of this letter, whether you hav ever received the letters and presents or not. I said in my letter to you that Col. Horton would let you have me for 1000 dol. or a woman that could fill my place. I think you could get one cheaper where you are than to pay him money. I am anxios to hav you make this trade” (50). More than a year later Elizabeth Ramsey wrote again to her daughter, in a letter dated April 21, 1860, this time from Matagorda, Texas, the following:

Dear Daughter: I received your kind & affectionate letter, & was glad to hear that you was well, & getting along very well. I was sorry to learn that you were disappointed in raising the amount of money required to purchase me. In a conversation with my master he says he is willing to take a woman in exchange for me, of my age, and capacity or he will under the circumstances take nine hundred dollars in cash for me. He also says that money cannot buy John. He is training John to take charge of one of his Plantations & will not part with him untel death parts them. I should be very happy to see you My Dear Daughter as well as my Grandchildren. I hope there will be a way provided for us to meet on earth once more before we die. Cant you come and see us. Your Brother John is well and desires to be very kindly remembered to you. Farewell My Dear Daughter. May God protect you from All evil, is the prayer of your affectionate Mother. Elizabeth Ramsey. (50-51)

Sterling notes that “with the help of abolitionists in Ohio and elsewhere, Louisa Picquet was able to raise \$900 for her mother’s freedom. In October 1860 Elizabeth Ramsey at last met her grandchildren” (51). Following the two letters from Ramsey is a correspondence that began in slavery but found its way to the present.

The article titled “From Out of Slavery’s Past, a Family Hears a Matriarch Speak,” written initially in 2008, updated in 2019, details the reconstruction of the legacy of Lucy Skipwith through the lens of letters. The Lucy Skipwith letters to her master, John Hartwell Lockes is the most extensive collection of its kind, which unbeknownst to Skipwith’s progenitors, were collected and published in a book titled, *Dear Master: Letters of a Slave Family*, first published in 1974 and reprinted in 2004 as an illustrated edition. Editor Randall

Miller found that through the use of letters, slavery did not and could not destroy the Black family. He writes, "It endangered families. Slaves like Lucy found ways to keep connections alive, in a world where they had limited control" (qtd. in Smith "From Out of Slavery's Past"). In the preface to *Dear Master*, Randall Miller writes, "This book relates the story of an American slave family, the Skipwiths, a family separated by time, place, and circumstance . . . [T]he family survived for a common folk tradition and a deep commitment to family unity bound the Skipwiths together. Ironically, the slave owner who separated them also joined them" (11). Lucy knew and "employed her power of the letter and the Word" to maintain what was left of her family, her daughter Maria (187). Like Lucy Skipwith, the main priority for many of the formerly enslaved mothers was to find their children. As the *Memoir of a Freedman's Bureau* observes:

For nothing were the Negroes more eager than for transportation. They had a passion, not so much for wandering as forgetting together. Every mother's son among them seemed to be in search of his mother; every mother in search of her children. In their eyes the work of emancipation was incomplete until the families which had been dispersed by slavery were reunited. (Deforest 36)

This power of letter writing in the role of reuniting Black families is considered more deeply in the following chapter. The purpose of this dissertation is not to undermine the ideas presented in varied anthologies but to focus primarily on how the letters were used to protest the system of slavery itself. Most Black men and women who chose to document their oppression and lived experience through letters, did so at considerable risk. Although much was written during the Civil War, Black women's voices in the South, with the exception of Harriet Jacobs, Yellin argues, are almost silent:

Moving beyond the established patterns of Black male-authored fiction. Harriet Jacobs told a story new to American letters. Another memorable moment occurred when Fred Stern, a dear friend and colleague, commented that despite its great interest, *Incidents* is, after all, not *Moby-Dick*. I have kept this in mind, but upon reflection, have concluded that he was wrong. *Incidents* is, like *Moby-Dick*, a work of American genius, and Harriet Jacobs's life is, in Emerson's sense, a representative life. (*Harriet Jacobs a Life* xxi)

The role that literature played in the mid to late nineteenth century US is incomprehensible. Narratives, poems, songs, and essays that spoke almost exclusively to the inhumanity of the multi-faceted practice of slavery came from a diverse group of writers. The very practice that built the United States of America through the gains of American capitalism became the single most important issue that by 1861 would threaten to tear the country apart. What built it, threatened to destroy it. Fortunately, along with emancipation came an opportunity for former slaves to use their name, story, and platform to continue to speak out against the bitter discrimination, racism, and sexism that would pervade the United States as a whole. No longer just a "North and South" problem, it would be an irrevocable indictment on the hypocrisy of a new "free" nation, one that spoke of the rights of mankind, but one who took little action to ensure those rights. In many cases, the quality of life and quest for freedom and equality were met with fierce hostility and opposition. New voices would emerge to protest a new and darker period than even former slaves could imagine.

In *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* David Blight writes: "There were millions of individual stories unfolding at the end of this transforming war that gave real-life meaning to all the metaphors of death and rebirth. In all the material and human wreckage,

in shattered families and psyches, new life was to take form” (19). However, as one might expect, “[c]ountless private memories began to collide, inexorably, with the politics of collective memory” (19).

Chapter Four:

The Dying Light from the Embers of Reconstruction: 1865-1877 and 1878-1899

This chapter continues the same premise as previous chapters, focusing on the power of the personal letter as a tool for public protest, and extends this examination beyond the Civil War's end. Letters of protest from "un-voiced" individuals provide insight into one of the ugliest historical periods in American life and literature; these letters allow the oppressed to become voiced once again. A new group of US citizens produced the letters under examination when they found themselves trapped in a new system of oppression and wholesale domestic terrorism, despite official promises of equality and opportunity. Most of these authors are Black women, many of whom lacked a formal education and remained barely literate; therein lies one of the most difficult obstacles for many of the authors in this chapter. Although Black participation in politics, land ownership, the arts, and economic prosperity increased dramatically during the years of Reconstruction, it would not last long.

The abolition of slavery in 1865 occurred with the ratification of the 13th Amendment, followed by the adoption of the 14th Amendment, granting all persons naturalized in the United States, citizenship, including all the rights and privileges of being a citizen of the United States. The 15th Amendment soon followed, which granted all men, and only men, the right to participate in the democratic practice of voting and running for public office themselves. Accordingly, women found themselves in a system still mired by the injustice of a patriarchal society in which they could neither vote nor hold public office.

During the eleven years between the end of the Civil War and the end of federally supervised "reconstruction" efforts in the South, Black Americans faced new forms of oppression; in contemporary society, these practices would be considered acts of domestic

terrorism, but at that time they were not, unless one was Black. Henry Louis Gates Jr. writes of Reconstruction as a “period filled with such great hope and expectations for the freedwomen and freedmen, but one that was far too short to ensure a successful transition from slavery to freedom, from bondage to free labor, for the almost four million black human beings who found themselves in perpetual slavery on the eve of the Civil War” (*Stony* xx). The world Black Americans faced upon gaining their freedom would soon become a place where “dogged . . . determination of the ‘Redeemed South’ to obliterate any trace of the marvelous gains made by the freedpeople [would be suppressed.] . . . Moreover, the painfully long period following Reconstruction saw the explosion of white supremacist ideology across a baffling array of media” (xxi). However, the significant contribution of Black writers during Reconstruction was robust, and included the voices of Black women, as well as those who were respected in the academy along with those living in terror in rural parts of the South.

Following the abolition of slavery, reuniting families who were separated through that peculiar institution became the first priority for many of the formerly enslaved. Many used a system that had allowed communication to continue, even in enslavement—the newspaper. People searching for missing family members took out full-page ads in desperate attempts to find them.

The 13th Amendment states that slavery shall be abolished, except in the case of a crime in which a defendant has been duly convicted. Because of this, Black American women began to use the only means they had at their disposal—the letter—to protest the continued oppression and separation of Black families and the disproportionate punishment assigned in convictions. Letter writing became one of the most powerful means of fighting back against the injustices that permeated their lives following the abolition of slavery. From the passage of the 13th

Amendment to the end of WWII, acts of racial suppression and terrorism worsened to a degree that often exceeded the oppression of slavery.

Figure 22 Clara Bashop Newspaper Advertisement.

<p style="text-align: center;">HUNTING HER CHILD.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">A Former Slave Still in Search of Her Lost Daughter.</p> <p>NEW YORK, Oct. 1.—For thirty-three years Mrs. Clara Bashop of Morristown, N. J., has been searching for her lost daughter, and she is searching still. Tears have often flowed over the woes of Uncle Tom, but her story is sadder and more pathetic than the one Mrs. Stowe so feelingly told. Mrs. Bashop is tall and slender, and her sad face shows the refinement which the colored women in the aristocratic old families of the South so often possessed. At the Colbath House, in Morristown, she is in charge of one of the most important departments. Mrs. Bashop belonged to Dick Christian, a wealthy country gentleman who lived near Charles City Court-house, Va. Mr. Christian became involved in debt and his slaves were placed on the block. Among them were Mrs. Bashop and her 12-year-old daughter Patience. "She was a bright little girl," said Mrs. Bashop yesterday, "and when we were taken into the market-place to be sold I prayed that wherever we might go we would go together." But her wish was not to be fulfilled. She was sold first and Ben Davis, a professional negro trader, bought her. The little girl was sold to a stranger. Mrs. Bashop fell on her knees before Davis and implored him to buy her daughter from the stranger. Though hardened by the constant sight of such scenes, Davis' heart was touched by the agony of the mother. He went to the stranger and offered to buy the little girl but the latter refused to sell her and went away a few hours later with his purchase. Mrs. Bashop has never seen her daughter since but her own history since then shows how faithful is a mother's</p>	<p>heart even though it beats in the humble bosom of a slave. Mrs. Bashop was carried to Charlestown, S. C., and sold again. That was in 1859, and already the rumblings of the coming war were heard. Slaves changed masters rapidly then, and Mrs. Bashop was sold from one to another, passing into Alabama and Mississippi, being owned at Carrollton in the latter State when emancipation came. But during all her involuntary wanderings she had no thought but of her lost daughter, Patience. She begged each master to write back to Charles City Court-house, Va., and endeavor to discover something of her. Some complied, others did not, but no news ever came of the missing girl. When she was free Mrs. Bashop began the search on her own account. For a long time she could not get away from Mississippi. She could earn but little money; not enough to take her back to Virginia, where her daughter had been sold, but she wrote letters and friends wrote others for her. At last she saved money enough to reach Virginia, but the visit increased only her sorrow. Her former master was dead and the war had swept away old landmarks and old recollections. No one knew anything of her daughter, she could not learn the name of the man who bought her, but the mother's heart was faithful still. She sewed and she cooked and she did housework. She denied herself to save money for her search. She traveled through Virginia and she went into Kentucky. She visited South Carolina and the far South, and everywhere she hunted for her daughter. She put advertisements in the papers; she paid the colored preachers to state the case in their churches before their congregations, in order that one person might tell the story to another and thus spread it through the country, but still no news came of the lost girl. Though weary and old, why not? Did you ever see a mouth that resembled an oyster more than hers?"</p>
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Figure 23 Clara Bashop searching for her daughter.

might have come to the North after the war and she renewed her search in New York. She found a home here and for many months she hunted through the great city. She repeated her advertisements in the newspapers and she asked the colored preachers here as she had in the South to help her and still no news came of the lost girl. Though twenty years had now gone the mother was as faithful to her child's memory as ever and searched for her as eagerly and as patiently as she did when first she was free. Finally she settled at Morristown and has for many years been employed at the Colbath House. There she intends to remain, but she is still searching for the lost girl.

"Mrs. Clara Bashop seeking information about her daughter Patience," editorial, *St Louis Post Dispatch* (St Louis, MO), 2 Oct. 1892. *Last Seen: Finding Family After Slavery*, accessed March 24, 2021, <http://www.informationwanted.org/items/show/3140>

Figure 24 Newspaper Clipping Abraham Blackburn finds his mother.

“Reunited At Last. A Newburg Colored Man's Long Search for His Mother – Both Sold 1862. Abraham Blackburn finds his mother after writing 236 letters of inquiry,” *Chicago Tribune*, Chicago, IL, 8 Dec. 1886. *Last Seen: Finding Family After Slavery*, accessed 24 March 2021, <https://informationwanted.org/items/show/2835>.

REUNITED AT LAST.

A Newburg Colored Man's Long Search for His Mother—Both Sold in 1862.

An incident has just come to light in this city which is a strong reminder of old slavery days in the South, and which illustrates several phases of human character. Mr. Abraham Blackburn, a colored man 35 years old, had been in the employ of the late Rev. John Forsyth, D. D., since March, 1878. He has always been sober, industrious, and reliable. Added to this Abraham is intelligent and courteous.

In August, 1862, Abraham, his mother, three sisters, and three brothers were sold in Richmond, Va., to Andrew Blackburn, a large slaveholder. They were by him carried to New Market, Jefferson County, Tenn. Abraham Blackburn, was then a mere boy. At New Market the children were all separated from their mother, she being sold again. From New Market Blackburn, the purchaser, took the children to Henderson County, North Carolina, where they were one by one separated from each other, Abraham reaching the North some years ago. The mother was never seen or heard from by any of her children until last night.

From the time Abraham reached the estate of manhood he has felt a keen interest in the welfare of his mother, and has long wanted to find out where she was and to see her. Of late years he has adopted various plans which he thought would lead to the restoration of his mother to him. For the last four years and six months this dutiful son has been following up every clue that he had an idea would lead to the learning of his mother's whereabouts. He failed repeatedly, until yesterday.

When he received a letter from his aged mother's own hand. It now transpires that the mother has resided in Knoxville, Tenn., ever since the close of the War of the Rebellion. During the long search 236 letters have been written with the hope of finding this young man's mother. That there will be rejoicing when the reunited mother and son meet goes without saying. The mother is alone in the South, except for a sister Eliza, who resides at Richmond, Va. Abraham has written a letter to his mother expressing the wish that she come here and spend the winter, and then she can go back South, if she so desires, in the spring. There appears to be no doubt that the mother will avail herself of the invitation extended by her dutiful son, and that she will reach Newburg at an early date. Of the children who were sold with Abraham Blackburn, at Richmond, in 1862, the latter has track still of the following: William, who is (younger) at Syracuse, N. Y.; Mary (older) in South Carolina; Clara, in Rutherford County, South Carolina.

It is the purpose of Abraham Blackburn to remain at the home of the widow of Dr. Forsyth during the coming winter, where he will be an able assistant, as he always was, to the Rev. Dr. Forsyth, who valued his services very highly. In conversation with Abraham, it transpires that Dr. Forsyth did good work during the last few years in assisting the former in his search for his mother. And the young man speaks in high praise of his late employer for the benevolent and kindly interest he took in assisting him in this direction. Above all, Abraham returns his grateful thanks to God for reuniting him with the mother whom he loves so well.—*Newburg (N. Y.) Journal*.

The task of repairing much of the Southern land, institutions, and wealth was without hope, unless the labor force that had given Southerners power and prosperity prior to the Civil War was somehow maintained. Duplicating a system of forced labor with little to no compensation seemed to be the most effective way to heal the land's wounds and allow "The South to Rise Again" through economic means and the restoration of power that comes with monetary advancement. The realization of such a monumental task required methods to justify forced labor, suppression of citizenship—through lack of documentation, including birth certificates and social security numbers, which were nearly impossible to secure—and suppressing certain civic and political rights guaranteed to all men. Fear of retaliation from Black men and women, once owned as property and treated with the same indifference as one would a piece of furniture, drove a system in which economic interests again took precedence over human life. In order for the governing class of white people to suppress a population that exceeded their own, various modes of fearmongering became essential to maintaining the Southern way of life.

Black southerners, who were protected under federal laws, quickly found that state laws had already been adapted to control Black life and would change again to repair a war-torn land. The criminalization of Black people in America began centuries before equality would be granted and guaranteed under the Constitution. As a way around the federal government, states re-instituted obscure and antiquated laws indiscriminately embraced to support the Southern way of life. The laws and enforcement of those laws differed from state to state, and even from county to county; many white Southerners adopted these laws back into the current system of legal suppression and control. From vagrancy laws that permitted the arrest of any person who could not produce documentation of employment, to laws against walking along train tracks

during certain hours of the day, in and around certain geographic areas, criminalization of Black life became a very real, tangible, and horribly unjust system of racial terrorism.

Figure 25 Report Pratt Mines Entry for Ezekiel Archer [sic]. *Report of the Inspectors for Pratt Mines*, p.82.

82

BIENNIAL REPORT OF THE INSPECTORS

Tabular Statement Showing the number of Convicts employed

Number.	Names.	When Received.	Crime.	Sentence.	Age.
1	Adams, Cooper.....	February 1...1879	Assault to Murder.....	5 yrs.	28
2	Archer, Ezekiel.....	December 18..1879	Burglary & Grand larceny	10	23
3	Bradfield, Mose.....	November 28..1878	Assault to Murder.....	5	18
4	Banks, Grenville.....	November 26..1878	Grand Larceny.....	4	15
5	Brasfield, Jerry.....	November 8..1878	Murder 2d degree.....	4	47
6	Beverly, Jack.....	May 14.....1881	Burglary.....	5	25
7	Binion, Silas.....	August 23....1882	Murder 2d degree.....	17	19
8	Boyd, Nellie.....	October 23....1878	Murder 2d degree..	20	16

Black men and children were subject to false arrests, rigged trials, and paid juries. Illegal imprisonment and sentencing led to over eight decades of racial terror for Blacks living in the South, even in some of the most cosmopolitan cities, like Birmingham, Alabama. Most trials led to sentences that far outweighed the crime. When convicted, both white and Black men (the majority being Black) were often sentenced to years of hard labor to work off the fines each was compelled to pay. The abolition of slavery in the US laid bare the fact that the majority of Black people did not own land, and had little to no formal education. Lacking any means with which to challenge the courts, tens of thousands of Black men throughout the South were sold to corporations emerging from the embers of the Civil War. This newly incorporated system of “convict leasing” inflicted new horrors daily, recounted in the letters of Ezekial Archey, a prisoner in Alabama’s Pratt Mines. His is a firsthand account of the injustice and depravity Black Americans suffered for half a century in the “New South.” Blackmon states of Archey:

Ezekiel Archey was a young African American man, born in slavery, who then experienced emancipation in his childhood, but then was sucked back into the system by the 1880s. And we don't really know a lot about the context of his letters, but he began writing letters to the prison inspector of Alabama. It's one of the very few primary source voices from that period of time from a witness actually inside these coal mines and inside these conditions. And his letters are extraordinarily despairing and poignant. (qtd. in Wurzer *MPR News*)

Figure 26 Letter from Ezekiel Archey and Ambrose Haskins p.1

Part Mines May 26/84
Col. D. Dawson.
Dear Sir y^r friend
Yours looking to get your
kind attention in
this case. We have bin
treated very cruel. lately by
the Board. and we wish
to find out if that you
have done to cause such
treatment. Sunday Col. Love
Came to mine. He left af-
ter 1. and left the
Prison with sub. speaking
to us. We have bin treated
the like. once before. but
looked over it. thinking
the night- caused you to be.
In haste. We all know.

Figure 27 Letter from Ezekiel Archey and Ambrose Haskins p.2

come a long way, and we
mistake not the Rules Reader
The Conversation of visitors
shall be in presence of God
This we accept on the ground
as. We have no secrets, &
our family coming is the next
favor to liberty. & they are
the only comfort we have
left. This Jack has made known
to me, & the reply was
the white man's conduct.
he speaks as though we are
not got - since I must, to
know that we should not
be held for what they
have done, or will do.
Could we appreciate good
treatment - & our notions
stand good, to show the
same. & will, we be made
to suffer for another's
crime. if so, we rather

Figure 28 Letter from Ezekiel Archey and Ambrose Haskins p.3

Wash. to know the ground
 on which you intend us
 To act. We appreciate good
 Treatment & we know when
 we get such, could consider
 For instance, if you were
 by law or violence ^{or} taken
 from your family, & see
 I mean come & go with day
 speaking one word to them
 Sir it is heart-breaking
 to our families and to us.
 Such treatment makes
 any man look away
 different way. We all
 wanted to serve our time
 But - The times is getting
 very hard, day with out
 Feasting. In food, cloth,
 in constraints of discharging
 our day by duties. & we are
 whipped for dirt - Road - & out - &
 if they run a half day we are whip
 if we fail to get our task & Co.

Figure 29 Letter from Ezekiel Archey and Ambrose Haskins p.4

402 That the Colored Men
have not the chances of the
white men. and we at
the same time know that
we are the greatest in
number. We are the men
who do the work. we pay
for kind treatments and
fines to get it. please work.
At the white men and see
how many are cutting 5 or 6
ton coal per day. They are
few. They are the men that
cause the present trouble &
every State officer tries to
hold us accountable for these
actions. by denying us the
privileges of allowing our families
to come to see us. if our
families come. More or
less they are dogged away.
by having too many visitors all

Figure 30 Letter from Ezekiel Archey and Ambrose Haskins p.5, 6

Could I have a new friend. we
 are going to be the day after. I
 shall have a very May to look
 what the time you are. let it be
 good to have a very thing to
 do at the month. We have a
 living room. filled as it is with
 flowers. We have a table and chairs. Simply
 because we tried to make, as the time
 the company was by looking a look &
 a very high - with standing, we have
 really got - I mean to get - per, day
 took. We only call your attention to
 the fact. There there is a third
 Bee. a man will try to get a letter
 one & then. I know who he is.

Truly, the humble servant
of State
J. M. Jones
George Washington

“Letter from Convict Laborers at Pratt Mines in Jefferson County, Alabama, to Reginald Dawson, President of the Alabama Board of Inspectors of Convicts.” Alabama Board of Inspectors of Convicts, 26 Jan. 1884. Alabama Department of Archives and History, <https://digital.archives.alabama.gov/digital/collection/voices/id/5417><https://digital.archives.alabama.gov/digital/collection/voices/id/5417>

Figure 31 Orders of Alabama Prison Board Discharge of Ezekiel Archie [sic],
<https://digital.archives.alabama.gov/digital/collection/voices/id/5418/rec/3>

Date, Jan'y 28th 1887

To Commodore McGurdy

For Discharge of

NAMES.	DATE OF DISCHARGE.
Ezekiel Archie	Feb'y 6.87 (Indict'pend'g)
John Fannin	Feb'y 18.87

Life for many Black families began with the hope of a future governed by equality and the opportunity to work toward a new life built on the principles and ideas found in the Declaration of Independence: the right of every human to life, liberty, and freedom. These universal rights and truths were a non-reality to tens of thousands of Black Americans for nearly eighty years, perhaps even longer. The promise of a new life faded into obscurity as one by one, Black men—husbands, fathers, brothers, friends—were arrested and charged with obscure and petty crimes, which for many meant they would never realize the American Dream and their families would never prosper and become members of American life as families and individuals. Even more cruel was the realization that, for many family members left behind, they had no legal recourse and could find no help from local law enforcement or the prison system to remedy the situation.

Many families caught in this vicious cycle of oppression did the only thing they could to protest this injustice, by bringing attention to the practice of convict leasing as a full-blown underground system of re-enslavement for poor and non-white populations in the US. Most sought solutions by writing letters to specific authorities Black women trusted to help reunite them with family members who had been snatched from their homes and communities. Many thought the most effective strategy was to write the only person they thought could, or would, help: the President of the United States of America, from the time of President Ulysses S. Grant (1869) through President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's administration (1945). Black women wrote letters to subvert the Jim Crow South because participation was open to people of every color and creed, and it was relatively safe, as white authorities viewed it with indifference. With the increasingly common practice of convict leasing, the ability to write letters became an imperative.

In his essay "Reconstruction," Michael Harriot emphasizes how the violence against Blacks was severe enough to earn the description of domestic terrorism: "While many historians describe Reconstruction as a period of 'racial unrest' marked by lynchings and 'race riots,' it was undoubtedly a war. The network of terror cells that sprang up during Reconstruction was no different from the . . . ragtag Confederate squads" (*Four Hundred Souls* 235). To ensure loyalty out of fear to those who were once oppressed and liberated, and now found themselves in bondage yet again, "rampant murder and intimidation . . . successfully suppressed" their limited access to voting and electing officials who would represent the free African American (236).

During Reconstruction and the decades that followed, the population of Black Americans was greater than that of whites in the South. After eleven years of federally mandated and supervised "Reconstruction," more Black Americans than ever before were engaged in civic

offices, and held positions as teachers, sharecroppers, and bank operators. Blacks were involved in a broad spectrum of professional organizations that promoted the upward trend of Black involvement in the North and the South. Once federal troops withdrew, however, any hope of economic, physical, or emotional freedom withdrew as well. A period of “domestic terrorism” began in the United States, not only in the South, but also in the North, East, and West. The federal government did little to ensure that the rights guaranteed by law to Black Americans remained or were otherwise upheld. The rights of Black citizens began to disappear as quickly as they had come. The forty acres of land given to all former slaves was taken back; even voting rights were severely curtailed as state and federal judges and legislators “dismantled black rights in a number of overlapping ways” (Gates *Stony the Road* 31).

Figure 32 Photograph of Members of Colored Women Voters (1898). Public domain.



One of the many Black writers who found the courage to expose the increasing repression of southern Black citizens was Edmonia Goodelle Highgate. Highgate's essay in the *Christian Recorder* November 3, 1866, illustrates her powerful determination to call all Black men and women to action when she writes: "A real man or woman makes circumstances and controls them. They be deterred from doing what duty calls them to! Never! They control their destiny and observe every weaker mind within the square of the distance . . . Up! work, make something out of yourself . . . Try! The race needs living, working demonstrations—the world does" (qtd. in Gates *Nineteenth-Century African American Woman Writers* 183). Eric Gardner's study, *Black Print Unbound: The Christian Recorder, African American Literature, and Periodical Culture*, focuses specifically on *The Christian Recorder* and serves as an invaluable resource pertaining to the role the publication played in calling for justice. The *Recorder* focused on "broadening the boundaries surrounding African Americans and . . . brought readers along to explore and 'visit' those places far from them, and proposed that print could hold together an increasingly diverse and diffuse community" (qtd. in Gardner 186). Many of Highgate's letters published in the *Recorder* do the same, but from a slightly different lens, as she "spoke as much or more to the immense geography of Black intellect and feeling, landscapes white power had tried to fence off. . . . Highgate's *Recorder* texts embodied post-war Black geographic and physical mobility[,] . . . mobility that offered to select Black women through teaching the newly freed through the upper and lower South" (186). Highgate was one such woman who became a teacher and thereby increased her own geographic and physical mobility.

Figure 33 The Christian Recorder Office Building. August 10, 1861. Public Domain



As a young teacher in Norfolk, Highgate grappled with teaching “so many of my people who have spent most of manhood’s and womanhood’s freshness in slavery [which brought] peculiar crushing emotions which, at first, check even my utterance” (qtd. in Gardner 187). Highgate’s upbringing differed vastly from many of her students. Education and political activism enveloped her life as “she began to see herself as not just a teacher but also a speaker and perhaps a writer” (186). Highgate joined the important work toward equity for all men and women and was one of two women invited to speak at the National Convention of Colored Men in October 1864. Her mantras emphasized the idea of work as a path to freedom: “Salvation Only in Work” and to “trust in God and press on” (187).

At the forefront of her writing for the *Recorder* was her desire to “record” in letters what she saw as important matters in the Black community, focusing specifically on “deeper commentary and personal reflection . . . that morphs into political commentary . . . and the newly freed people” in cities all across the United States (188-89). Highgate’s “recording” or letters speak to her ability to explore social issues through a multi-genre approach. Gardner writes “that she experimented with integrating various forms of the personal, diverse conceptions of audience . . . and questions of race and art—all in exploration her own place in the nation and the world, which was complexly marked by her gender, race, class, and regional background. All of this work was deeply shaped by Highgate’s engagement with American Transcendentalism” (qtd. in Garder 189) and her interest in the work of Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Margaret Fuller, among many others.

The meaning behind the word “transcendental” inspired her to take part in engaging “for freedom’s cause . . . [finding how] the unseen forces that press upon us from every side, and urge us to make what is termed ‘transcendental.’ . . . Being loyal to one’s self, is loyalty to the cause of liberty, to the country, and to the Union, whose arch of keystone is Justice” (189-90). It is a powerful idea, but only an idea. Highgate’s enthusiasm for an America in which she was not just invited, but welcomed, did not materialize, and in many ways, remains unfulfilled. The battle march toward equality and equitable opportunity was only just beginning, but Highgate’s actions remain indelibly stamped upon America’s national narrative. This small step forward managed to gain traction with federally mandated Reconstruction, during which Black writers and professionals flourished.

In 1853 Julia Griffiths, British abolitionist, member of the Rochester Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society, and colleague of Frederick Douglass, edited a collection titled *Autographs for*

Freedom. It includes two pieces, a story and a poem, authored by Annie Parker. Beyond her authorship, history offers no further details on Parker. The poem, “Story Telling,” depicts a white mother telling her daughter a bedtime story about a “Southern maiden, with a skin of sable hue” who returns to an empty hut one evening to discover her child has been sold. Upon finishing her tale, the white woman looks at her own five-year-old daughter, and says she could “guess the anguish of that lone slave-woman’s heart.” This anthology immortalizes Parker as a published author; no details of Parker’s life remain other than her contributions to this important work published by the Rochester Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society, under the editorship of Griffiths.

Figure 34 Print of *Autographs for Freedom*, Title page

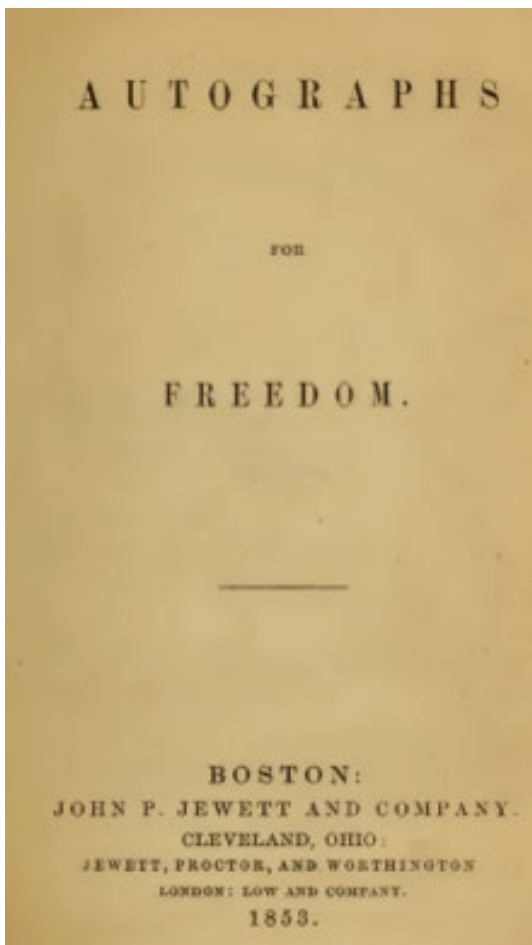


Figure 35 Print of *Autographs for Freedom* (front matter)



Figure 36 Poem by Annie Parker

STORY TELLING.

BY ANNIE PARKER.

THE winter wind blew cold, and the snow was falling fast,
But within the cheerful parlour none listened to the blast;
The fire was blazing brightly, and soft lamps their radiance shed
On rare and costly pictures, and many a fair young head.

The father in the easy chair, to his youngest nestling dove,
Whispered a wondrous fairy tale, such as all children love;
Brothers and sisters gathered round, and the eye might clearly
trace
A happiness too deep for words, on the mother's lovely face.

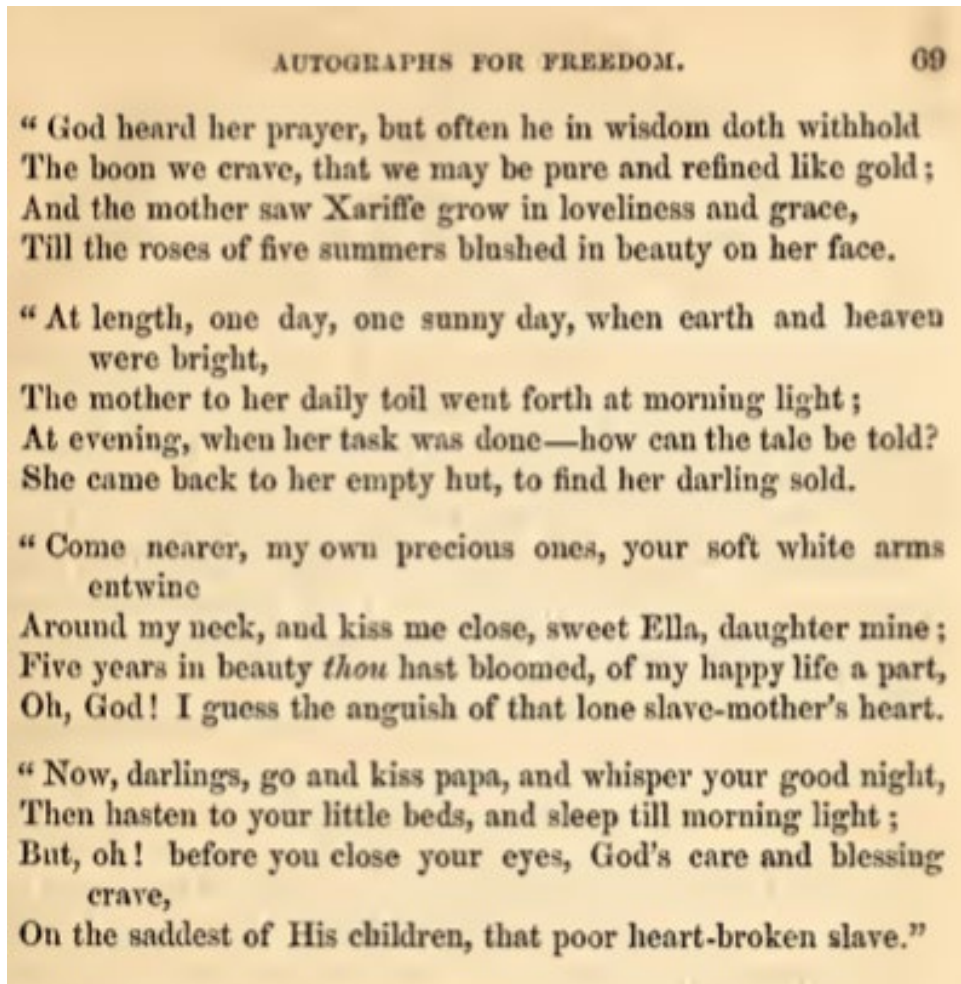
And when the fairy tale was done, the blue-eyed Ella said,
"Mama, please tell a story, too, before we go to bed,
And let it be a funny one, such as I like to hear,
'Red Riding Hood,' or 'The Three Bears,' or 'Chicken Little-
dear.'"

A smile beamed on the mother's face, as the little prattler spoke,
And kissing her soft, rosy cheek, she thus the silence broke,
"I will tell you my own darling's, a story that is true,
Of a little Southern maiden, with a skin of sable hue.

"Xariffe, her mother called her, a child of beauty rare,
With soft gazelle-like eyes, and curls of dark and shining hair,
A fairy form of perfect grace, and such artless winning ways
That none who saw her, e'er could fail her loveliness to praise.

"She sported mid the orange-groves in gleeful, careless play,
And her mother, as she gazed on her, in agony would pray,
'My Father, God! be merciful! my cherished darling save
From the curse whose sum of bitterness is to be a female slave.'"

Figure 37 Poem by Annie Parker



As a Christian preacher, Julia A. J. Foote felt the sting of injustice in her life and profession, something she worked on reconciling, as the very teachings she shared had everything to do with humanity, taking care of the poor, and sacrificing whatever was necessary to fulfill her commitment to God. As a Black woman, she was harassed and eventually excommunicated from her church because she refused to give up preaching the gospel to others in her faith. In her autobiography she writes, "It was only the grievance of a woman, and there was no justice meted out to women in those days. Even ministers of Christ did not feel that

women had any rights which they were bound to respect” (qtd. in *Nineteenth-Century African American Woman Writers* 196).

Just as Foote felt the divine mission to share the gospel of Christ with her fellow brothers and sisters, women like Fannie Barrier Williams advocated for what she coined “The Intellectual Progress of the Colored Women of the United States.” In a speech she delivered to the World’s Congress of Representative Women at the Columbian Exposition on May 18, 1893 in Chicago, Illinois, Williams addressed what might be one of the most important observations about Black life, post-Civil War:

The American people have always been impatient of ignorance and poverty. They believe with Emerson that “America is another word for opportunity,” and for that reason success is a virtue and poverty and ignorance are inexcusable. This may account for the fact that our women have excited no general sympathy in the struggle to emancipate themselves from the demoralization of slavery. This new life of freedom, with its far-reaching responsibilities, had to be learned by these children of darkness mostly without a guide, a teacher, or a friend. In the mean vocabulary of slavery there was no definition of any of the virtues of life. The meaning of such precious terms as marriage, wife, family, and home could not be learned in a school-house . . . Yet it must ever be counted as one of the most wonderful things in human history how promptly and eagerly these suddenly liberated women tried to lay hold upon all that there is in human excellence . . . The longing to be something better than they were when freedom found them has been the most notable characteristic in the development of these women. This

constant striving for equality has given an upward direction to all the activities of colored women. (*Nineteenth-Century African American Woman Writers* 395)

In this speech, Williams dares to speak the truth about the life of the “colored” American, something that was not done very often. Not every African American was offered the opportunity of education and the liberation of the mind. To this point in the national narrative, not many Black Americans had family they could describe as intact. The effects of the four-hundred-year-old practice of separating families did not simply disappear. Black families who had been enslaved or otherwise oppressed began searching for family members who had been taken from them and who, God willing, might still be alive. Marriage between slaves was rarely recognized as legal, let alone sacred. Those who owned the enslaved, broke marriage bonds between enslaved men and women, separated children and mothers, and distorted ideas of what it means to be a family beyond the point of horror. Williams powerfully addresses slavery’s effect and emancipation’s failures. Hers was a call to action:

If the love of humanity more than the love of races and sex shall pulsate throughout all the grand results that shall issue to the world from this parliament of women, women of African descent in the United States will for the first time begin to feel the sweet release from the blighting thrall of prejudice. The colored women, as well as all women, will realize that the inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is a maxim that will become more blessed in its significance when the hand of woman shall take it from its sepulture in books and make it the gospel of every-day life and the unerring guide in the relations of all men, women, and children.

(*Nineteenth-Century African American Woman Writers* 405)

As an elite Black writer and orator, Williams advocated for the tools that would free even the newly emancipated: literacy and the recognition of the power of the pen were non-negotiable.

Williams is anthologized next to dozens of African American women whose words and ideas changed the world.

Figure 38 Newspaper Article about Victoria Earle Matthews

The Woman's Era.

VOL. 1. NO. 2. BOSTON, MASS., TUESDAY, MAY 1, 1894. PRICE 10 CENTS

THE WOMAN'S ERA.

The Woman's Era, the organ of the Woman's Era Club, and devoted to the interests of the women's Clubs, Leagues and Societies throughout the country.
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"THE WOMAN'S ERA,"
185-187 CAMBRIDGE STREET.



MRS. WM. E. MATTHEWS
(VICTORIA EARLE.)

We read daily of the progress women are making for the elevation of their sex and we are proud to note noble examples among us, who follow in their train, laboring

earnestly yet modestly for their sex and the upbuilding of the race. Surely we cannot know too much of their genius and merits, for the inspiration of our girls.

Among our prominent progressive women is Mrs. William E. Matthews, known in the literary world as "Victoria Earle."

Mrs. Matthews, so desirous of doing what she can for her race, with a few others saw the practical need of banding together well-thinking women with the hope that they might in their generation pave the way for the success of the futurity of the race, and organized The Woman's Loyal Union. We are favored to exist in the seed planting time.

Mrs. Matthews has been the president of the Woman's Loyal Union since its organization.

Its members have found her loyal, unswerving embracing every opportunity for the accomplishment of the aims of the Union.

Realizing the wrongs perpetrated upon our race in the South, the injury occasioned by opinions that have been freely expressed in several leading magazines and newspapers, as to the retrogression of the race morally, Mrs. Matthews has been exceedingly anxious to ascertain the truth of such statements.

With this idea in view she wrote a set of questions, submitted them to the executive board of the Union with the hope of their approval, and expressed the desire to have said questions sent to the ministers, school teachers and other representative men and women throughout the country for the purpose of eliciting from them the true statistics of our people morally.

The idea is bright, progressive. We, co-workers, appreciate her efforts, her executive ability, and shall ever give her our hearty support.

"Her great fondness for research and her splendid memory make her quite an authority on literature, art, history and philosophy. Her historical researches have led her to the determination to write a series of text books, historical primers for the youth of the race, which will trace the history of the African and show that he and his descendants have been prominently identified with every phase of this country's history including the landing of Columbus.

She has also a number of stories and a play which is yet unpublished.

When all these shall have been given to the public, race literature will be enriched and the name of Victoria Earle become a household word."

S. ELIZABETH FRAZIER,
141 West 17th street,
New York City.

This month our title page has a cut and sketch of Mrs. W. E. Matthews, (Victoria Earle) president of the Women's Loyal Union of New York and Brooklyn. As well know as is Mrs. Matthews, her face and history are comparatively new to people of this section who will be delighted with this opportunity to make a closer acquaintance with this distinguished lady.

Our readers who need to have any tailoring work done are urged to patronize Miss Butler, 84 Mason st. Boston.

See Ad.

Victoria Earle Matthews is one of the most important Black literary women in the twentieth century. At the First Congress of Colored Women of the United States at Boston, Massachusetts, July 30th, 1895, Matthews delivered “The Value of Race Literature” in front of African American women from over forty-two different Black organizations. She wrote: “A Race Literature ... [i]s a necessity to dissipate the odium conjured by the term ‘colored’ persons” (*Nineteenth-Century African American Woman Writers* 507).

In her article “Victoria Earle Matthews: Making Literature during the Woman’s Era,” Kerstin Rudolph states:

[H]er work as both a fiction writer and literary theorist is a starting point to examine the role black women writers played in shaping the larger aesthetic debates surrounding the literary representation of minorities. In the white- and male- dominated print market of the late nineteenth century, discussions about aesthetic value in literature often focused on genre. These arguments frequently presented themselves as ideological battles that lauded realism as progressive while deeming sentimentalism old- fashioned, and they turned deeply gendered and racialized after the Civil War. Matthews saw the need for a literature that was new and fresh and had thus far not been as fully developed as she hoped: “What is bright, hopeful and encouraging is in reality the source of an original school of race literature, of racial psychology, of potent possibilities, an amalgam needed for this great American race of the future.” (104)

For instance, Rudolph continues: “Among late- nineteenth-century African American women writers, Victoria Earle Matthews inhabits a curious role. As a late nineteenth-century black

woman who successfully combined literary, oratory, and performative skills to shape her political agenda, she epitomizes what Elizabeth McHenry calls a ‘literary activist’” (190).

Figure 39 Photograph of Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin



At the same convention, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin acknowledged the current situation of Black women in the South. She states: “All over America there is to be found a large and growing class of earnest, intelligent, progressive colored women, women who, if not leading full useful lives, are only waiting for the opportunity to do so, many of them warped and cramped for lack of opportunity, not only to do more but to be more” (170). Ruffin invited all women, Black and white alike, to come together in this cause of establishing a better America, one where

children are offered equal education, both in the North and in the South. She makes it clear that the purpose of the Convention is to advocate for all women and to refrain from divisiveness among any of the women of The United States. She writes:

[O]ur women's movement ... is led and directed by women for the good of women and men, for the benefit of all humanity. ... [W]e are not drawing the color line; ... [W]e are not alienating or withdrawing, we are only coming to the front ... cordially inviting and welcoming any others to join us. ... The questions that are to come before us of too much import to be weakened by any triviality or personalities. If any differences arise, let them be quickly settled, with the feeling that we are all workers to the same end, to elevate and dignify colored American womanhood" (171-72).

Figure 40 Photograph of Charlotte Forten Grimke. (Courtesy of Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University)



Another prominent writer, Charlotte Forten Grimke, saw the paradox of a land freed from slavery, yet one that continues to re-enforce the ideas of white supremacy. In her poem “The Gathering of the Grand Army,” published in 1890, she writes:

Through all the city’s streets there poured a flood,
A flood of human souls, eager, intent;
One thought, one purpose stirred the people’s blood,
And through their veins its quickening current sent.
... And when at last our country’s savior came, --
In proud procession down the crowded street,
Still brighter burned the patriotic flame,
And loud acclaims leaped forth their steps to greet.
... Shall it be said the land they fought to save,
Ungrateful now, proves faithless to her trust?
Shall it be said the sons of sire so brave
Now trail her sacred banner in the dust?
Ah, no! again shall rise the people’s voice
As once it rose in accents clear and high—
“Oh, outraged brother, lift your head, rejoice!
Justice shall reign,--Insult and Wrong shall die!”
So shall this day the joyous promise be
Of golden days for our fair land in store;
When Freedom’s flag shall float above the free,
And Love and Peace prevail from shore to shore.

(Nineteenth-Century African American Woman Writers 165-67)

Just six years later, the Supreme Court decision of *Plessy v. Ferguson* replaced equal opportunity, equal protection, equal rights, and equal citizenship with the notion of “separate but equal.” The outcome of this case would only perpetuate the problem of discrimination, lawless vigilantism, and criminal offenses treated with little or no punishment.

Figure 41 Photograph of Brick Church near Frogmore, SC.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1864/05/life-on-the-sea-islands/308758/> Penn, Irvine Garland. *The Afro-American press and its editors*. Willey & Company, 1891. Public Domain.



As every right gained by the formerly enslaved began to disappear, science ramped up in an effort to prove, scientifically, that the Negro had not the capacity, mentally, emotionally, or psychologically, to rise above the station nature assigned him, and that station was at the bottom. Politics also played a significant role in the determination of voting laws, party lines and membership, and the use of propaganda and art. As journalist and activist, Ida B. Wells writes, so did, “the lynch law” (qtd. in Gates *Nineteenth-Century African American Woman Writers* 572). Wells documented injustice, in particular lynching in America. Katherine Davis Chapman

Tillman took Wells's experiences and turned them into poetry, which is often described as the highest form of communication. In his biographical sketch, Gates writes, "Tillman was known as a literary prodigy: she published poems, short fiction, and journalism . . . her work highlights historical figures, singling them out from within important American moments . . . These extraordinary individuals . . . lived violently, apart from, and often at odds with the history of their own nation" (*Nineteenth-Century African American Woman Writers* 322). One of the "extraordinary individuals" Tillman's poetry highlights is Ida B. Wells. Her 1894 poem, "Lines to Ida B. Wells" reads:

Thank God, there are hearts in England That feel for the Negro's distress,
And gladly give of their substance
To seek for his wrongs a redress!
Speed on the day when the lynchers No more shall exist in our land,
When even the poorest Negro Protected by justice shall stand
When no more the cries of terror
Shall break on the midnight air, While poor and defenseless Negroes
Surrender their lives in despair.
When the spirit of our inspired Lincoln, Wendell Phillips and Sumner brave
Shall enkindle a spirit of justice
And our race from oppression save.
When loyal hearts of the Southland
With those of the North, tried and true, Shall give to the struggling Negro
That which is by nature his due.
And the cloud that threatens our land Shall pale beneath Liberty's sun,
And in a prosperous future
Be atoned the wrongs to us done.
Go on, thou brave woman leader,
Spread our wrongs from shore to shore, Until clothed with his rights is the Negro,
And lynchings are heard of no more.

And centuries hence the children
Sprung up from the Hamitic race On history's unwritten pages
Thy daring deeds shall trace.
And the Afro-American mother Who of Negro history tells
Shall speak in words of grateful praise Of the noble Ida B. Wells! (qtd in Gates
Nineteenth-Century African American Woman Writers 323)

The language Tillman uses to describe Wells does excellent service in representing Wells and her work. "We have been charged with mental inferiority; now if we can prove that with cultivated hearts and brains, we can accomplish the same that is accomplished by our fairer sisters of the Caucasian race, why then, have we refuted the falsehood . . . We owe it to God and to the Negro race, to be as perfect specimens of Christian womanhood as we are capable of being . . . All men are created free and equal and women ditto" (Tillman 86 and 89).

Figure 42 Drawing of Katherine D. Chapman Tillman



In 1893, after speaking in Great Britain, Wells returned to a scathing editorial printed in the *Washington Post*. The author criticizes her for “misrepresenting [her] native country from a mercenary motive.” To such accusations, Wells replies: “This invitation came unsolicited and unexpected. They [British people] could not understand why such lawlessness prevailed in the ‘land of the free and the home of the brave’” (qtd. in Gates *Nineteenth-Century African American Woman Writers* 573). As a journalist, her job was dedicated to writing the facts, and the fact of the matter was that “[o]ver fifty negroes have been lynched in this country since January 1, 1893, two of whom were burned at the stake with all the barbarity of savages” (576).

Figure 43 Photograph of Ida B. Wells, ca. 1893. Public Domain.



For much of the next century, lynching was adopted as a way to intimidate and terrorize Black men and women, and any other group of people, who fought to achieve the American Dream of equality and freedom. It was rarely prosecuted. The fading embers continued to fuel a movement in search of equality, civic participation, and safety under protection of law and the movement against it. The generations following the close of the nineteenth century had their own battles to fight. In numerous cases, the system of convict leasing “must have exceeded any vision of hell a boy born in the countryside of Alabama—even a child of slaves—could have ever imagined” (*Slavery By Another Name* Blackmon 2).

The victims of peonage and convict leasing, in many cases, have been erased from the record of humanity, rendered “utterly mute, the fact of their existence as fragile as a scent in the wind” (9). There may exist a census record or a letter that preserves and testifies of a life, but by and large, there are no poems, no short stories, no speeches or essays that allow the memory of the dead to continue on century after century. Some of their letters are explored in coming chapters set against the published works of their contemporaries who seem to live a world away.

Chapter 5: “The Unending Dawn of Black Lives in 20th Century America”

The papers are full of the reports of peonage in Alabama. A new and more dastardly slavery there has arisen to replace the old. For the sake of re-enslaving the Negro, the Constitution has been trampled under feet, the rights of man have been laughed out of court, and the justice of God has been made a jest and we celebrate. Like a dark cloud, pregnant with terror and destruction, disenfranchisement has spread its wings over our brethren of the South. Like the same dark cloud, industrial prejudice glooms above us in the North. We may not work save when the new-come foreigner refuses to, and then they, high-prized above our sacrificial lives, may shoot us down with impunity. And yet we celebrate.

With citizenship discredited and scored, with violated homes and long unheeded prayers, with bleeding hands uplifted, still sore and smarting from long beating at the door of opportunity, we raise our voices and sing, “My Country, ‘Tis of Thee”; we shout and sing while from the four points of the compass comes our brothers’ unavailing cry, and so we celebrate.

But there are some who sit silent within their close rooms and hears as from afar the din or job come muffled to their ears on some later day their children and their children’s sons shall hear a nation’s cry for succor in her need. Aye, there be some who on this festal day kneel in their private closets with hands upraised and bleeding hearts cry out to God, if there still lives a God, “How long, O God, How long?”
(qtd. in Norton Anthology of African American Writers 916).

—Paul Lawrence Dunbar “The Fourth of July and Race Outrages”

The letters of focus in this chapter examine the narrative of poor, uneducated, Black women in the rural South, who determined that their most powerful tool of resistance against the injustices in their own lives and those of loved ones was through letter writing. Their narrative directly contradicts the dominant national discourse of rebuilding and healing the nation during Reconstruction. The enormity of this body of letters—most of which have been filed away in the vast, echoing chambers of the National Archives in College Park, Maryland—attests to the existence of a long-forgotten narrative that must be re-voiced. The letters come from hundreds of people whose lives were affected by the practice of convict leasing, each narrator meting out

their own judgment through the stylistics of each letter. Of those letters written by white people, most come from white men who felt that that an injustice had been done, and must be reconciled or overcome. The language with which these men write shows confidence and demands action from those in the position to change the system. These injustices were so deeply entrenched into Southern life that perhaps these men did not understand that the events they witnessed and reported would take a monumental investigation; those investigating this horrifying new form of enslavement would require courage to demand justice, and determination to fight and right these wrongs. As part of this study I will also include letters written by women who were, themselves, taken prisoner in this system of convict leasing. These letters mainly consist of appeals for clemency written from inside the system. They also represent acts of defiance and protest as letters were smuggled out to alert others of the horrific conditions they endured, including, but not limited to, physical and mental abuse, rape, and coercion.

The individual lives of those who were caught and kept in the practice of convict leasing mattered little to the bosses who ran the farms, coal mines, and turpentine swamps—when one convict died, they simply drew from an endless source of replacements to continue the break-neck pace of rebuilding the South. Built into the psyche of a vast number of leaders for the new industrial South was the notion that it was their right to continue to systemically dictate and even control the life of the southern Black—this flawed ideology affected poor southern whites all the way up the social hierarchy to heads of law enforcement, local and national, as well as the titans of the industrial nation in whose pockets the money burst from the seams. The economy of the South would continue its oppression of all races, gender, and ages, but most specifically of Black men who had no recourse to escape a system many historians claim was worse than slavery.

Because of this systemic and age-old practice of enslavement, the letters written by Black men and women situate the story differently, lending a dramatic sense of exigency. Ultimately, each letter in the collection tells the same story through varied lenses, and using different voices. However, the voices that speak the loudest from the dusty stack of letters are those of mothers, wives, aunts, grandmothers, sisters, and friends. These letters reveal a different message, one marked by urgency, and appeal to what President Abraham Lincoln referred to as the “better angels of our nature.” Those who fought to diminish this new system of slavery included Black men and women who held positions of power, such as Thurgood Marshall, James Weldon Johnson, the leadership of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). All of them acted as freedom fighters, to a certain degree, but in very different ways.

The most poignant letters are those written by barely literate Black women in the rural south, post-emancipation, whose voices remain largely silenced, even today. All the letters written by Black women were conceived and produced at the peril of their own lives. These letters, heretofore unstudied and unexamined, add to the literary genre of protest letters. They served very specific purposes: to call attention to, protest against, and plead for help for re-enslaved Black men in the rural South caught in a system of “neo-slavery,” a term coined by Douglas A. Blackmon. In his book, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the End of the Civil War to World War II*, Blackmon explores the injustice for tens of thousands of Black men who were taken into a new form of servitude, leaving behind a life of promise and also family, in particular their mothers, wives, and daughters.

The most important parts of Blackmon’s study, as it pertains to my work, are the various letters written by Black women included throughout the text; the letters are also tangible pleas for help

filled with uncertainty and fear. Blackmon defines convict leasing in the following terms: “It was a form of bondage distinctly different from that of the antebellum South . . . [b]ut it was nonetheless slavery—a system in which armies of free men, guilty of no crimes and entitled by law to freedom, were compelled to labor without compensation, were repeatedly bought and sold, and were forced to do the bidding of white masters through . . . extraordinary physical coercion” (4). Among the countless injustices of the convict-lease system, Mary Terrell Church highlights the separation of family, once so prevalent in the antebellum South, as an egregious act that was destroying the families of Black southerners yet again. She writes, “Very recently, incredible as it may appear to many, colored men have been captured by white men, torn from their homes and forced to work on plantations or in camps of various kinds, just as truly as their fathers before them were snatched violently by the slave catchers from their native African shores” (*Nineteenth-Century African American Woman Writers* 449). Among Black families, this system proved to dash hope and awaken to them a reality of injustice and inequity that would narrate the Black American experience moving forward.

The letters written on behalf of those seized by the convict leasing system also served as a means of acquiring help from the highest levels of government, and many were written directly to the President of the United States. The women writing these letters not only add to the narrative of protest, but also give themselves a voice that should not be lost to history. My own investigation of texts deposited at the National Archives augments Blackmon’s study, bringing additional letters written by Black women to light, and adding an important and virtually unexplored voice in the study of letters as protest. Because letter writing can be considered a form of defiance and was in many cases illegal, at least in the era of slavery, there may be only one letter written by women like Carrie Kinsey or Viola Cosley. Cited in this chapter, their

letters give accounts of their own experiences, but they are also similar to numerous other letters from women connected by similar backgrounds and similar complaints. By striking out against a system that, in most cases, forbade black women from writing, the brave women featured in this dissertation gave voice to the civil rights movement and provided a lasting legacy, not to be erased by any person or by the space of time and history.

Although women like Ida B. Wells (1862-1931), Mary Church Terrell (1864-1954), and Mary McLeod Bethune (1875-1955) became the voice for Black women during the period of Reconstruction and Jim Crow-Era horrors, they were all educated and wrote from the North. This does not diminish the importance of their narratives; however, they wrote, spoke, and fought against a system of violence from places where their lives could be protected, to a certain extent, and where their voices could be heard. This chapter is framed around the women who lived in the rural south, but lacked the same education and opportunities as Wells, Terrell, and Bethune.

The dawn of a new century brought with it number of mitigating factors that perpetuated the limitations on the progression of Black Americans. It is important to consider how ill-equipped the formerly enslaved were following emancipation; most lacked the ability to read and write, few had a formal education, even fewer owned land or property, and all lived in a cultural atmosphere that viewed their lives with indifference, if not hatred. Many were separated from mothers, fathers, siblings, spouses, and children, and thus had few relations on which to depend. Because the education of slaves was, in most cases, illegal and punishable by death, many could not read, write, or decipher executed contracts. Generational illiteracy, poverty, discrimination, and a system of oppression mocked progression, and made it difficult, and sometimes impossible, to progress toward a life that allowed for civic participation. The need for “capital” among southern whites bore out in the reclamation of farms and other businesses owned and

operated by the formerly enslaved. Those who knew the land better than any other, knew when to plant, when to harvest, and it was those hands that produced the product that allowed America to become one of the richest and most powerful countries in the world.

Life continued to be difficult for former slaves, as so many had been born into a lineage of slavery, making it a great deal more complicated to try to capitalize on the principles of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Pursuing this promise led to the intimidation of thousands of Black Americans, resulting in mob-rule intimidation, threats to curtail civic engagement, and at least 5,000 barbarous lynchings. Innocent men, women, and children, mostly Black, saw ruthless treatment of the living and the dead. Without recourse, Black Americans were subjected to terrorism, both psychological and physical, to ensure they “remained in their place.” The freedom of emancipation was accompanied by a long period of injustice based on antiquated laws and loopholes that allowed for a new system of oppression and fear—neo-slavery.

Attempts to colonize, segregate, and maintain the ignorance of African Americans failed, in large part. White supremacy could not enforce the above, but supporters of such racist values employed violent tactics to control and even re-enslave Blacks. This practice of “neo/new” slavery took hold from the beginning of the twentieth century and lasted through half of the century that came to define early modern America. This new kind of enslavement followed on the heels of more injustice through convict leasing, sharecropping, and unequal banking practices. Lenders denied Black loan applicants the ability to support their own farming practices, even though many were not only born on farms, but also knew the best practices to successfully raise cotton, tobacco, and other agrarian byproducts. Housing discrimination kept Black Americans out of residential areas that were mostly inhabited by educated, wealthy, white citizens. The accumulation of such unequal practices over so many years created a civil and legal

system that maintained control and thus power over Black US citizens. Due to the instability of the rule of law and the economic upheaval in the South, freedom remained a word, just an idea that could potentially end discrimination and oppression of Black Americans, but didn't.

Efforts to disenfranchise Black Americans became increasingly obvious, hostile, and violent, ensuring the maintenance of White Supremacy as both a philosophy and a systemic tool used to discriminate and oppress Black people, the results of which are still felt today. Little effort was made by the government to document or protect the lives of the emancipated after their value as property diminished. Birth certificates and social security numbers were not issued until well into the twentieth century, making documentation nearly impossible. The American legal system allowed the segregation of races in housing, employment, and most telling, in education. Those who believed in their supremacy, even though outnumbered, controlled the flow, distribution, and content of information, making it possible to use the tools of oppression to maintain control and silence the opposition. This was certainly the case in 1901, when two white residents of Elmore County, Alabama, took justice into their own hands and lynched Robert White, a 27-year-old Negro, who was accused of "assault with the intention to kill" over a dispute about chickens and property. Following the lynching, three men were arrested and convicted, all white—George Howard, Martin Fuller, and John Strength (qtd. in Lyman *Montgomery Advertiser*). The three men, Fuller, Howard, and Strength, were sentenced and sent to a convict labor camp. A thorough investigation was made, prosecuted, and adjudicated. Each of the men was found guilty and sentenced to life in prison. Within a year, following the numerous letters written by Howard's, Fuller's, and Strength's wives, each was pardoned by Alabama State Governor Jelks and released:

More letters arrived in Jelks' office in early 1902. In February, Strength's wife and Fuller's mother wrote to Jelks on the same day. Strength's wife wrote that she was "wors(er) (sic) than an orphanage" trying to raise two small children . . . "Now, will you please think of my condition, and of my innocence (sic) husband and let him come home to me," she wrote . . . Fuller's mother said Jelks would be "reward(ed) from one who moves all things" if her son received a pardon . . . "I know I will rejoice to here (sic) that you have pardened (sic) him," she wrote . . . In May, Lizzie Howard — George's wife — asked Jelks to pardon her husband . . . Like members of the other families, she stressed her difficulties at home but also said "if you will only accept the money for the expenses of the State for his part I will give it freely" . . . "Governor you can not sympathize much in this trouble I know with me but I do hope and prey (sic) that you will grant him a parden (sic) in the near future I am here in the agony of trouble of home affairs & his trouble too," she wrote . . . "I have reached the conclusion that it will subserve the ends of justice if a parole is granted to the three, George Howard, John Strength and Martin Fuller," Denson wrote . . . On June 9, 1902, Jelks pardoned Howard, Strength and Fuller . . . Lynching continued throughout Alabama and in Elmore County. (Brian Lyman, *Montgomery Advertiser*)

This case dramatizes the inequity between white citizens, who often committed the most egregious crimes against Black citizens, but who were often charged for only very minor infractions, most of which were technically not against the law. African-American men were often charged with using obscene language, gambling, stealing, disturbing the peace, walking along a railway line, and vagrancy—the offense of not being able to provide documentation of

employment. These men were often brought in front of a “family” owned judicial system, and in many cases, the trials were never documented. The men responsible for lynching Robert White were released well before the time they should have served as restitution to a family who would never get their brother back. Based on the records for Howard, Fuller, and Strength, it was the letters of their wives that made the difference between life imprisonment and freedom.

Figure 44 <https://insurancenewsnet.com/oarticle/the-lynching-of-robin-white-and-the-confession-of-george-howard> “The Woods in Elmore County, Ala., near where Robin White was lynched in 1901. Mickey Welsh, *The Montgomery Advertiser*.
<https://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/2018/04/24/murder-robin-white-george-howard-eji-montgomery-lynching-memorial-legacy-museum-peace-montgomery/499623002/>



Ultimately, the words written carefully by each wife, which painted a picture of destitution and desperation, were enough to soften the heart of Alabama’s Governor, William Henry Denson (a confederate Civil War veteran), to the point of pardon. Sadly, even the most emotionally charged and desperate pleas from Black women—some wives, sisters, and even mothers—were not enough to free their male counterparts from the horrors of re-enslavement through convict leasing. The separation of families continued, disproportionately for Black families, well into the foreseeable, and for some unforeseeable, future.

Figure 45 US Census Entry for Robin White, Jr. and Osillis White

<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33HT-XCS9-B3M?i=9&cc=1325221&personUrl=%2Fark%3A%2F61903%2F1%3A1%3AM98F-443>

T-886

TWELFTH CENSUS OF THE UNITED STATES.

B

State Alabama County Cherokee Supervisor's District No. 2 Sheet No. 5
 Enumeration District No. 56

Township or other division of county North Part of Tallapoosa West (3) Name of Institution, _____
 Name of incorporated city, town, or village, within the above-named division, _____ Ward of city, _____

Enumerated by me on the 8 day of June, 1900, H. B. Millon Enumerator.

LOCATOR	NAME	RELATION	PERSONAL DESCRIPTION			BIRTH			CITIZENSHIP			OCCUPATION, TRADE, OR PROFESSION			EDUCATION			REMARKS
			Sex	Age	Color	Place of Birth	Year of Immigration	Place of Birth	Year of Immigration	Place of Birth	Year of Immigration	Place of Birth	Year of Immigration	Place of Birth	Year of Immigration			
64-66	Roll, William E.	Head	M	24	W	1876	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876
	Roll, William E.	Wife	F	24	W	1876	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	
	Roll, William E.	Child	M	10	W	1886	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1886	1886	1886	1886	1886	1886	1886	1886	
	Roll, William E.	Child	F	8	W	1888	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1888	1888	1888	1888	1888	1888	1888	1888	
	Roll, William E.	Child	M	6	W	1890	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	
	Roll, William E.	Child	F	4	W	1892	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1892	1892	1892	1892	1892	1892	1892	1892	
65-66	Roll, William E.	Head	M	24	W	1876	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	
	Roll, William E.	Wife	F	24	W	1876	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	
	Roll, William E.	Child	M	10	W	1886	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1886	1886	1886	1886	1886	1886	1886	1886	
	Roll, William E.	Child	F	8	W	1888	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1888	1888	1888	1888	1888	1888	1888	1888	
	Roll, William E.	Child	M	6	W	1890	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	
	Roll, William E.	Child	F	4	W	1892	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1892	1892	1892	1892	1892	1892	1892	1892	
66-67	Roll, William E.	Head	M	24	W	1876	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	
	Roll, William E.	Wife	F	24	W	1876	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	
	Roll, William E.	Child	M	10	W	1886	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1886	1886	1886	1886	1886	1886	1886	1886	
	Roll, William E.	Child	F	8	W	1888	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1888	1888	1888	1888	1888	1888	1888	1888	
	Roll, William E.	Child	M	6	W	1890	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	
	Roll, William E.	Child	F	4	W	1892	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1892	1892	1892	1892	1892	1892	1892	1892	
67-68	Roll, William E.	Head	M	24	W	1876	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	
	Roll, William E.	Wife	F	24	W	1876	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	
	Roll, William E.	Child	M	10	W	1886	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1886	1886	1886	1886	1886	1886	1886	1886	
	Roll, William E.	Child	F	8	W	1888	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1888	1888	1888	1888	1888	1888	1888	1888	
	Roll, William E.	Child	M	6	W	1890	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	
	Roll, William E.	Child	F	4	W	1892	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1892	1892	1892	1892	1892	1892	1892	1892	
68-69	Roll, William E.	Head	M	24	W	1876	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	
	Roll, William E.	Wife	F	24	W	1876	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	
	Roll, William E.	Child	M	10	W	1886	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1886	1886	1886	1886	1886	1886	1886	1886	
	Roll, William E.	Child	F	8	W	1888	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1888	1888	1888	1888	1888	1888	1888	1888	
	Roll, William E.	Child	M	6	W	1890	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	
	Roll, William E.	Child	F	4	W	1892	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1892	1892	1892	1892	1892	1892	1892	1892	
69-70	Roll, William E.	Head	M	24	W	1876	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	
	Roll, William E.	Wife	F	24	W	1876	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	
	Roll, William E.	Child	M	10	W	1886	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1886	1886	1886	1886	1886	1886	1886	1886	
	Roll, William E.	Child	F	8	W	1888	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1888	1888	1888	1888	1888	1888	1888	1888	
	Roll, William E.	Child	M	6	W	1890	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	
	Roll, William E.	Child	F	4	W	1892	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1892	1892	1892	1892	1892	1892	1892	1892	
70-71	Roll, William E.	Head	M	24	W	1876	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	
	Roll, William E.	Wife	F	24	W	1876	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	
	Roll, William E.	Child	M	10	W	1886	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1886	1886	1886	1886	1886	1886	1886	1886	
	Roll, William E.	Child	F	8	W	1888	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1888	1888	1888	1888	1888	1888	1888	1888	
	Roll, William E.	Child	M	6	W	1890	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	
	Roll, William E.	Child	F	4	W	1892	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1892	1892	1892	1892	1892	1892	1892	1892	
71-72	Roll, William E.	Head	M	24	W	1876	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	
	Roll, William E.	Wife	F	24	W	1876	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	
	Roll, William E.	Child	M	10	W	1886	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1886	1886	1886	1886	1886	1886	1886	1886	
	Roll, William E.	Child	F	8	W	1888	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1888	1888	1888	1888	1888	1888	1888	1888	
	Roll, William E.	Child	M	6	W	1890	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	
	Roll, William E.	Child	F	4	W	1892	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1892	1892	1892	1892	1892	1892	1892	1892	
72-73	Roll, William E.	Head	M	24	W	1876	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	
	Roll, William E.	Wife	F	24	W	1876	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	
	Roll, William E.	Child	M	10	W	1886	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1886	1886	1886	1886	1886	1886	1886	1886	
	Roll, William E.	Child	F	8	W	1888	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1888	1888	1888	1888	1888	1888	1888	1888	
	Roll, William E.	Child	M	6	W	1890	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	
	Roll, William E.	Child	F	4	W	1892	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1892	1892	1892	1892	1892	1892	1892	1892	
73-74	Roll, William E.	Head	M	24	W	1876	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	
	Roll, William E.	Wife	F	24	W	1876	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	
	Roll, William E.	Child	M	10	W	1886	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1886	1886	1886	1886	1886	1886	1886	1886	
	Roll, William E.	Child	F	8	W	1888	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1888	1888	1888	1888	1888	1888	1888	1888	
	Roll, William E.	Child	M	6	W	1890	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	
	Roll, William E.	Child	F	4	W	1892	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1892	1892	1892	1892	1892	1892	1892	1892	
74-75	Roll, William E.	Head	M	24	W	1876	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	
	Roll, William E.	Wife	F	24	W	1876	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	1876	
	Roll, William E.	Child	M	10	W	1886	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1886	1886	1886	1886	1886	1886	1886	1886	
	Roll, William E.	Child	F	8	W	1888	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1888	1888	1888	1888	1888	1888	1888	1888	
	Roll, William E.	Child	M	6	W	1890	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	
	Roll, William E.	Child	F	4	W	1892	Alabama	Florida	Florida	1892	1892	1892	1892	1892	1892	1892	1892	

Figure 46 a Newspaper Clipping Detailing the Pardon of White Lynchers. *The Weekly Advertiser*
13 June 1903. <https://www.newspapers.com/clip/19140222/the-weekly-advertiser/>

THREE ELMORE LYNCHERS ARE PARDONED BY THE GOVERNOR

Strength, Fuller and Howard Given Freedom.

PARDON ISSUED SUNDAY

Howard Had Life Sentence; Others 10 Years Each.

From Convict Camp at Dolive Howard
Arrived in Montgomery
Yesterday—Met by Willis
Brewer and Luke.
Williams.

Governor Jelks has issued unconditional pardons to George Howard, John Strength and Martin Fuller, white convicts of Elmore County, who had been leased by the State to the Hand Lumber Company at Dolive.

These men were convicted of having participated in the lynching of Robin White, a negro, in July, 1901. Howard was sentenced to life imprisonment and Strength and Fuller were serving sentences of ten years each.

Since the conviction of Howard, Strength and Fuller, nothing has been left undone by their friends to secure a pardon or parole for them at the hands of the overnorr. Lawyers have made eloquent pleas in their behalf before the

thorough investigation of the lynching with the result that Howard, Strength, Fuller and Thomas, with several others, were arrested. A special term of the Circuit Court of Elmore County was ordered to make quick disposition of the cases.

To the complete surprise of everybody, George Howard, who had hitherto borne an excellent reputation as a law-abiding citizen, went on the witness stand and confessed to the part he played in the lynching of White, and giving the names of his associates. A still greater surprise came when the jury, after being out but a few minutes, returned a verdict of guilty and sentencing Howard to the penitentiary for the rest of his life. The trial, conviction and sentence of Strength, Thomas and Fuller to ten years each followed.

Howard, Strength and Fuller were leased to the Hand Lumber Company at Dolive, and have been working there since sentenced. Thomas chose to appeal his case to the Supreme Court and, pending its decision, he has been in jail at Wetumpka. Recently the Supreme Court affirmed the decision of the lower court, and Thomas was transferred to the penitentiary at Wetumpka. In a few days he will be sent to Dolive, the place just quitted by his associates.

Judge Denson's Letter.

The letter of Judge N. D. Denson, who presided over the trial of Howard, Strength and Fuller, recommending that they be granted paroles, is as follows:

Lafayette, Ala., June 7, 1902.

Governor W. D. Jelks, Montgomery, Ala.:

Dear Sir—The case of John Thomas vs. The State, appealed from Elmore Circuit Court, I note in *The Advertiser*, has been affirmed and therefore can no longer be occasion of any embarrassment in the consideration of the question as to whether or not Howard, Strength and Fuller, better known as the Elmore lynch-ers, should be paroled or pardoned. You are already familiar with the cases of the above named parties in every particular. There is a stenographic report of the evidence that was elicited in the trial of the Thomas case on file in your office and my bench notes of the evidence made on the trial of Strength and Fuller you have on file.

Figure 46 b Newspaper Clipping Detailing the Pardon of White Lynchers.



Public arrests and lynchings of Black Americans reinforced the belief of Black criminality and white supremacy. This idea was perpetuated by several well-known studies. One in particular done by Cesar Lombroso, for which he was coined the “Father of Criminology.” He argued that “criminals are born, not bred, and that people of color are by nature criminals” (qtd. in *How to Be an Antiracist* 194). Crowds, sometimes numbering in the thousands, came to witness the spectacle and even document it through photographs-turned-postcards. In her book *Caste*, Isabel Wilkerson writes, “[L]ynchings were part carnival, part torture-chamber, and attracted thousands of onlookers who collectively became accomplices to public sadism.

Photographers were tipped off in advance and installed portable printing presses at the lynching sites to sell to lynchers and onlookers like photographers at a prom” (93). The local and sometimes national newspapers documented many of the atrocities perpetrated against innocent men, women, and children, and did so with headlines that condemned the victims and praised the oppressors. Photographs and art in other media, combined with essays, articles, and books were consumed by vast numbers of Americans, and further perpetuated the beliefs that equated Blackness with criminal behavior.

Not more than five years into the twentieth century, a book published by Thomas Dixon, *The Clansman*, took the notion of Black people from docile and humble to dangerous and depraved. As many Americans looked forward to a new life and renaissance of “art and culture,” a number of Black women continued to protest, using their pens as weapons for truth against injustice, as in Mary Church Terrell’s essay on the brutality of convict leasing and the prison system. *The Clansman*, however, perpetuates the myth of the danger and violent nature of Black men, who in Dixon’s estimation were, by their very nature, beast-like predators capable of sexual assault and the rape of “virtuous and innocent white women.” The reality of the nature and condition of Black Americans were almost the exact opposite of what Dixon’s novel propagandized. One of the biggest concerns in Black life was involvement in government, education, and perpetually escaping from the grasp of the law—laws which returned the newly emancipated to new forms of slavery—sharecropping, debt peonage, and convict leasing.

Although this dissertation focuses mostly on the women left behind to build a life for their families in a country where everything seemed to be against them, there were also poor men and women of every race who were themselves trapped by the system of convict leasing. Decades ago, Mary Ellen Curtin investigated and wrote fairly extensively about women’s

prisons and the horrendous conditions of physical and emotional abuse women endured while in custody. Two books have been published more recently on female involuntary-servitude: Talitha LeFlouria's *Chained in Silence*, and Sarah Haley's *No Mercy Here: Gender Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity*. Each work contains letters by female prisoners, writing requests for clemency and also as a subversive act of defiance against the system by which they are bound. These letters stand as artifacts of protest.

Mary Church Terrell, author and first president of the National Association of Colored Women and a member of the NAACP, explored this system in her work "The Convict Lease System and the Chain Gangs" in 1907. As she notes: "In the chain gangs and convict lease camps of the South to-day are thousands of colored people, men, women, and children who are enduring a bondage, in some respects more cruel and more crushing than that from that which their parents were emancipated forty years ago" (*Nineteenth-Century African American Woman Writers* 441). Although this practice of "re-enslaving" mostly Black people was identified and somewhat explored, this aspect of US history is rarely taught, and for many, entirely unknown: "It is surprising how few there are among even intelligent people in this country who seem to have anything but a hazy idea of what the convict lease system means" (443). Terrell explains that "[u]nder this modern *regime* of slavery thousands of colored people, frequently upon trumped-up charges or for offences which in a civilized community would hardly land them in jail, are thrown into dark, damp, disease-breeding cells" (441).

Terrell highlighted a 1903 case in which "a man whose barbarous treatment of convicts leased to him by Tallapoosa and Coosa Counties, Alabama, had been thoroughly exposed, and who had been indicted a number of times in the State courts" was indicted for ninety-nine counts

Figure 47 Photograph Mary Church Terrell



of peonage [forced labor as payment for a debt with no release until paid in full]” (458). The lack of official records meant little could be done to stop the practice, making it obvious “that negroes—friendless, illiterate, and penniless—had no salvation at all” (459). In 2008 Blackmon named this man and his partners—John W. Pace, James Fletcher Turner, and the Cosby brothers, George and William. Blackmon explains how “the misdemeanor convict leasing system solved two critical problems for southern whites. It terrorized the larger black population into compliance with a social order in which they willingly submitted to complete domination by whites, and it significantly funded the operations of government by converting black forced labor into funds for the counties and states” (*Slavery By Another Name* 68-69).

Figure 48 Witness Statement from Pat Hill p.1 (illiterate, signed X) against John W. Pace, et. al.
<https://slate.com/human-interest/2014/08/history-of-peonage-in-the-american-south-pat-hill-s-testimony-in-case-of-john-w-pace.html>)

State of Alabama ()
 Montgomery County. ()

Personally appeared before me *E.H. Dawson, Jr.*
 United States Commissioner, Pat Hill, who being first duly sworn doth
 depose and say as follows:

I live at Roanoke, Alabama. I left Roanoke Ala. about the 1st April 1902. I started to go to Hollands. On my road to Hollands to go to work, - I had been informed by a black fellow that they were paying \$1. a day for labor, and wanted hands. I went to Hollands, and hired out and worked one day. They promised us one dollar a day, and I had been told I would get a dollar a day and our board. We worked a day, and found they did not do that, took so much a day out of our wages for board, \$2.00 a week for board. After working one day I quit. Up to this time I had never signed any contract. After I quit I was on my way to Roanoke on foot and got back as far as Goodwater when we was arrested by Mr. Franklin at Goodwater on the 3rd day of April. Ed Moody, Doc Crenshaw, and Charley Williams ~~4/4/7~~ five altogether, five gone there together, coming away together, and all five arrested together. I was arrested by two men, and was told the ~~men's~~ men's names were Franklin and Smithman. When they carried us back to Hollands the Mayor of the little town tried us and fined us \$5. dollars apiece that he claimed was for board. We had only eaten one meal at the works. After we got to Hollands one of the men that arrested us told us that he would bring us to his brothers and that he would pay the fine and we could work it out with him. We signed no contract at Hollands. We were taken and put on board a train and brought in the direction of Goodwater, passed through Goodwater and on to Daleville where we were taken off the train by these same two men. We were loaded in a wagon at Daleville, and taken to Mr. Pace's where we signed a contract with Mr. Pace to work 7 months each of us. I had been at Mr. Pace's about three weeks when I started to run away. I got four miles from there when I was overtaken by Mr. Anderson Hardy and brought back. I was tried before Justice of the Peace Kennedy, and he convicted me of breaking the contract and gave me six months. I went back to work for Mr. Pace, and worked out the six months Mr. Kennedy had given me. I then worked four months on the

1.

Figure 49 Witness Statement from Pat Hill p.2

original contract, and then borrowed ten dollars from Mr. Mac Carlisle of Neanoke and paid Mr. Pace and was released.

While at Mr. Pace's was locked up at nights. Worked as a convict and locked up every night, and looked upon myself as a convict. I was whipped twice. One of the times my hands were fastened under my knees, I was bent over and whipped on the naked back. He told me to count, and I counted up to 10, and could not count any further. He whipped me about 25 licks. There was no doctor present when I was whipped. The whipping occurred out in the field before the other negroes. This last severe whipping was given me after I was caught and brought back after running away.

Sworn to and subscribed *Pat L Hill*
before me this 12 day of May 1903,
L. H. Dawson Jr,
U. S. Commissioner
Mid. Dist. of Ala,

In one of the most prominent cases of peonage and convict leasing, all of the defendants—Pace, Turner, and the Cosby brothers—were indicted on charges of peonage. Contained in the “Peonage Files” are many documents that also stand as artifacts and lenses into a world that was little known by a vast majority of Americans. Among these artifacts are court records, statements by US Attorneys General, defense counsel, statements from victims, and correspondence between some of the highest officials in the US, including President Theodore Roosevelt’s signature on an approved appeal for clemency in 1903: John W. Pace. Each of Pace’s co-defendants, all prosecuted for re-enslaving Black Americans, was eventually granted clemency. One can imagine how devastating, intimidating, and disheartening it would be for African Americans looking for a change, to take hold of the “American Dream” just to have it disappear as quickly as it came.

Figure 50-51 The Official Pardon of John W. Pace, p.1 and 2. Signed and Executed by the President of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt. http://pbs.bento.storage.s3.amazonaws.com/hostedbento-prod/filer_public/SBAN/Historic%20Documents/John%20W%20Pace%20Pardon%20Warrant.pdf

X.
24

Theodore Roosevelt
President of the United States of America.
To all to whom these presents shall come, Greeting.

Whereas, John W. Pace was indicted in the United States District Court for the Middle District of Alabama for holding persons in peonage in violation of Section 5526 of the Revised Statutes of the United States - illegal cases, and

Whereas, he demurred to the indictments, - The demurrer being overruled by the Trial Court, pleaded guilty, and on June twenty-fourth, 1913, was sentenced to imprisonment for five years, in each case in the United States Penitentiary at Atlanta, Georgia, - sentences to run concurrently, and

Whereas, he sued out a writ of error from the Circuit Court of Appeals, Fifth Judicial Circuit, which Court affirmed the judgment of the trial Court, and

Whereas, it has been made to appear to me that the said John W. Pace is a fit object of executive clemency.

Now, Therefore, be it known, that I, Theodore Roosevelt, President of the United States of America, in consideration of the premises, doers these good and sufficient reasons me thereunto moving, do hereby grant unto the said John W. Pace a full and unconditional pardon.

In testimony whereof I have hereunto signed my name and caused the seal of the Department of Justice to be affixed.

(Seal) Done at the City of Washington this Thirtieth day of March in the year of our Lord one thousand nine hundred and six, and of the Independence of the United States the one hundred and thirtieth.

T. Roosevelt.
By the President:
William H. Moody
Attorney General

Roosevelt's signature on this document communicates that white, wealthy, land-owning Americans would maintain supremacy and power throughout the post-war US. As a result, Black Americans had nowhere and no one in positions of power that could help them achieve justice. Because of this, many of the letters in this collection are addressed to the most powerful person in the United States, who surely had the duty and courage to help them: the sitting President of their time. The practice of neo-slavery would span sixteen presidencies.

The danger Terrell faced upon publishing the findings in her essay "The Convict Lease System and the Chain Gangs," was imminent. By 1907, Terrell would have had access to the names of the men whose case her essay details. She likely left their names out intentionally, due to Pace's Presidential pardon. Nevertheless, through her essay, the narrative of women and men who were confronted with legal re-enslavement were given a voice; an especially individual voice revealed the humanity of each, and that voice would echo through time.

Each of the men, women, or children who had some form of literacy did what they could: they wrote letters. It became clear that local law enforcement would not help, and in fact, actually enforced convict leasing. Those left behind wrote to the only resource they had left, in this case, they addressed their letters to The President of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt. Most of these letters met with indifference, and never reached the office of the President. Other men, like Pace, were handed pardons by the same person many victims were writing to for help. Blackmon chronicles one of the better-known letters, by Carrie Kinsey, in his book.

Kinsey, a woman, wrote a letter to President Roosevelt regarding her brother, James Robinson, who had been taken and never heard from again. Blackmon notes that "like the vast majority of such pleas, her letter was slipped into a small rectangular folder at the Department of Justice and tagged with a reference number, in this case 12007. No further action was ever

recorded” (*Slavery By Another Name* 9). In most cases, people who were captured and placed in involuntary servitude were illiterate or just barely literate. Because of that, “the horror that enveloped them . . . [victims] had virtually no capacity to preserve their memories or document their destruction. The black population of the United States in 1900 was in the main destitute and illiterate” (9). In 1906 a letter arrived at the White House, addressed to President Theodore Roosevelt. The writing was neither elegant nor very legible; however, the message housed in the letter continues to speak even louder today than it did when it reached the White House.

This letter and hundreds, if not thousands, of letters similar to what would become known as the “Carrie Kinsey Letter,” spoke defiance to systemic oppression and terrorism. Written over one hundred years ago, the words of this letter introduce a new narrative in a vast subterranean collection of narratives hidden from the view of the people. This dissertation is written with the hope of bringing to light narratives that have remained unvoiced, but when brought from this place of darkness and secrecy, will help readers understand the power of stories told from the perspective of the voiceless. Two other letters are worth noting: one by a man named Jerry Shannon, and another by a woman named Mentha Morrison. Shannon writes in reference to his mother, who was taken into the convict lease system. Morrison writes for help in getting her husband back. Of all of the letters in this dissertation, the “Mentha Morrison” letter is unique, in that it is featured in a number of articles, and Dennis Childs includes it as part of his larger study.

Using letters, court documents, census records, and intuition, Childs pieces together what is known of Morrison’s life as she attempts to find her husband and get him home. Morrison, like countless others, appealed to President T. Roosevelt. Her letter included a list of what could be done to restore her own family. The inhumanity of separating families, a long tradition beginning with slavery in America in 1619, doesn’t really ever end. Black Americans hope for what

everyone else hopes for, love, inclusion, respect, and the right to be married and have children who will not be torn from their arms and with whom they can establish familial bonds. Morrison believed that the mis-characterization of Black Americans could be changed one story at a time. Hers wasn't the first, but it was certainly a start. It is also one of the few to have gained the attention of scholars. She was fighting against one of the most powerful and wealthy plantation owners in Oglethorpe County, Georgia, James Monroe Smith. In his book, *Black Georgia in the Progressive Era, 1900-1920*, John Dittmer offers the following description of Smith:

Smith ruled with an iron hand. Many laborers were working off debts contracted when he paid court fines, but sometimes Smith bought convicts, such as Jackson Morrison, from other planters. Convicted of selling liquor, Morrison faced a fine of a hundred dollars or a year on the chain gang. A farmer from Comer paid Morrison's fine and worked him two months before "selling" him to Smith, who agreed to free Morrison after seventeen months. Smith persuaded Morrison's wife, Mentha, to work for seven dollars a month, which she could use to reduce her husband's sentence. Mentha Morrison was never paid, nor was her husband's term shortened, and after eighteen months she quit. Smith confiscated her personal possessions. (78-79)

Figure 52 Letter from Mentha Morrison to President T. Roosevelt p.1. 22 Oct. 1903. The Peonage Files. National Archives II, College Park, MD. (21, 22)

C O P Y
R. W.

Laronia, Franklin Co., Ga.
Oct. 22, 1903.

Mr. President,
Dear Sir:

I write you this letter to inform you that my husband (Jackson Morrison, col'd) is being made to serve an unlawfull term at Col. James M. Smith's Camp at Smithsonia, Ga., in Oglethorpe county.

Events of the case:

- (1) He was sentenced at Carnsville, Ga. to the Gang for 12 months from Sept. 27th, 1901, or pay a fine of \$100.00.
- (2) He was bought out by a Mr. Mose Jordan of Corner, Ga. to whom he gave 8 months which made 20 months.
- (3) Mr. Jordan, after working Morrison only two months sold him to Col. James M. Smith, on Nov. 30th, 1901.
- (4) Col. Smith agreed to liberate Morrison on the 30th of May 1903.
- (5) Col. Smith also induced me to work by saying that if I labored on his farm he would pay me for my work, or else he would allow it to be credited to my husband sents. in order to shorten his term, but he did not do either. I worked for 18 months hard labor and he (Col. Smith) did not pay me anything neither did credit any of my time to the of that of my husband.

Figure 53 Letter from Mentha Morrison to President T. Roosevelt p.2

- (6) I went to Col. Smith's Camp on Nov. 30th 1901, and staid there till July 7th 1903, and worked all the time and when I left there he took all of my household possessions.
- (7) My husband, Jackson Morrison's time expired on May 30th 1903, but Smith would not turn him free. He, (Morrison) worked on till July 7th on which day he left the camp.
- (8) On Sept. 11, 1903 he, Morrison, was captured by Smith's sheriff and carried back to the camp and then lodged in Lexington jail in Oglethorpe county.
- (9) Col. Smith inflicts inhuman punishment on the person of his convicts, and whips them unmercifully.
- (10) Mr. President, I appeal to you, as the Executive Head of our Nation to please do something for my husband. Will you please cause an investigation of that Camp to be made in near future, and while doing so it will be found out that there are numbers of persons (both men and women) serving as slaves there for many years months and days after their terms have expired. ~~I have one child 3~~ years old and am in great need of my husband's assistance.

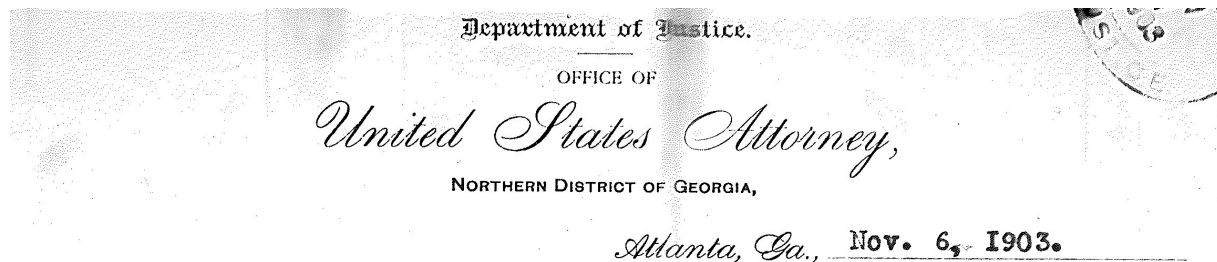
I have the honor to be, Sir,

Your obedient Servant,

Mentha Morrison, Col.

P. S. Col. James M. Smith's Camp is situated in the eighth Congressional District of Georgia, near the city of Athens, Ga.

Figure 54 Letter from US Attorney Edgar A. Angier to AG Philander Knox, 6 Nov. 1903. The Peonage Files. National Archives II, College Park, MD. (23, 24, 25, 26)



The Attorney General,

Washington, D. C.

Sir:-

Your favor--M. D. P.--3098-1902, of the 2nd instant, relative to the complaint of Mentha Morrison, colored, that her husband is held in unlawful servitude by one Col. James M. Smith of Smithsonia, Ga., received. A visit will promptly be made to Mrs. Morrison for the purpose of ascertaining all the facts relative to her complaint, and if the same is well founded, the case will be promptly presented to the Grand Jury and a vigorous prosecution instituted against the guilty party or parties if the evidence disclosed justifies such action.

Very respectfully,

E. A. Angier
U. S. Attorney.

Figure 55 Letter from US Attorney Edgar A. Angier to AG Philander Knox p. 1.

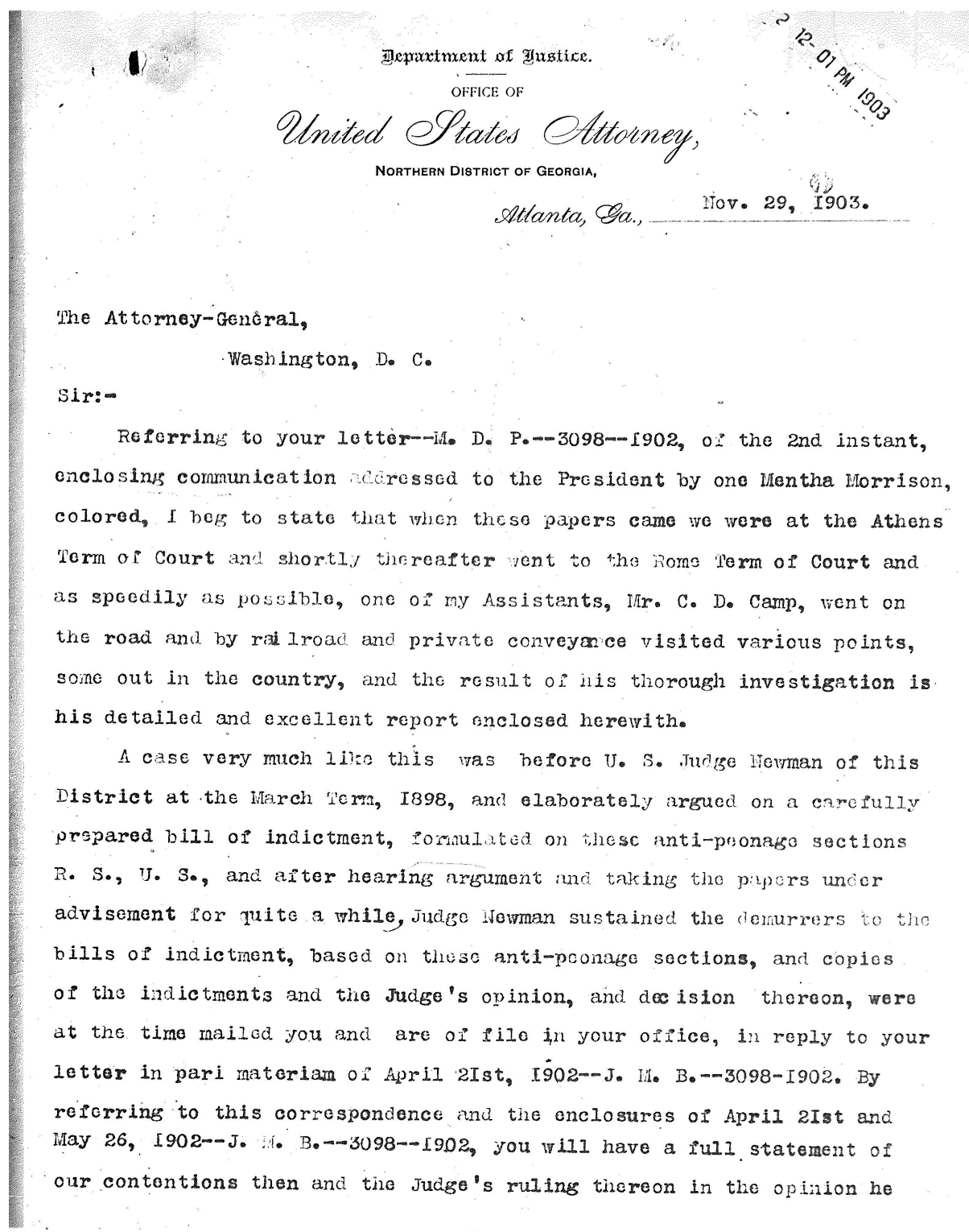


Figure 56 Letter from US Attorney Edgar A. Angier to AG Philander Knox p. 2.

(2)

wrote, a copy of which was enclosed in the letter of March 26, 1902, and this decision of Judge Newman is still the law of this District until reversed. The Fourteenth Amendment is clearly directed against the States, whereas the Thirteenth Amendment operates on States and individuals, and another bill of indictment along this line might be maintained, but Judge Newman's opinion, as you will see, seems against our contentions, and I have no reason to believe he has changed his opinion as declared in his decision you have. A conspiracy bill under Sec. 5508 might be upheld, to-wit, "the right of a citizen not to be held in involuntary servitude," but such a bill would have to include "two or more," and from Mr. Camp's report, herewith enclosed, there does not appear a union or joint or common intent between the persons mentioned therein as oppressing those unfortunate colored men.

The Hazelton petition addressed to the President and enclosed in your letter of instructions to me of April 21, 1902, was placed in the possession of the Mr. Thomas, Secret Service Agent, you sent here last July and he worked faithfully thereon, but after several weeks' diligent investigation verbally stated that he had developed no substantial case on which a prosecution could be successfully maintained, and that he would report in writing direct to you.

As to the Florida peonage cases mentioned in the letter of May 26, 1902, there has been no decision as yet, so far as I am informed, but I understand counsel for accused took them to the Circuit Court of Appeals on Judge Swayne's refusals to grant movants new trials, and if this information is authentic there will probably be no decision by the Circuit Court of Appeals on the question as to whether these anti-peonage

Figure 57 Letter from US Attorney Edgar A. Angier to AG Philander Knox p. 3.

(3)

statutes, construed together, operate on States or individuals or both. By reference to the bill of indictment sent you in the letter of May 26, 1902, you will see my earnest contention was that those statutes, in favor of human liberty and rights, operate on individuals and States, and I am still of that opinion, and I would like, if directed by you, to present the question again to Judge Newman for a rehearing. In the U. S. vs. Sanges, 48 Fed. Reporter, p. 79, you will observe copied in full an indictment I drew, and wherein Judge Newman and the late Justice Lamar ruled adversely to the position I took in that indictment, and yet later in the Butler-Quarles cases, U. S. Supreme Court Reporter, Law Vol. 158, p. 959, the learned Judge decided in favor of and sustained an indictment like the one I wrote, and which is copied in 48 F. R., p. 79, and I am quite sure this excellent Judge would hear argument on another Bill, if we can get the evidence to justify a True Bill. Judge Newman is an able Judge, and his rulings in the two cases cited indicate his broad, legal mind and generous judgment. The facts stated in Mr. Camp's report hardly justify a prosecution, but we will continue the investigation, and be on the alert to protect all citizens whose rights and liberties under the Constitution are cognizable in the Federal Courts. Awaiting further instructions, I am,

Very Respectfully,

E. A. Angier
U. S. Attorney.

Similar to the narrative of Mentha Morrison is the story of Carrie Kinsey. The Kinsey letter begins with what seems like a good employment opportunity for James Robinson, Kinsey's brother. As the reader goes on, the plot gets more complicated and becomes more real. Kinsey learns that her brother is being held against his will, and her failure to find anyone to help her get him back creates serious conflict. Another point of conflict appears when Kinsey describes how her brother is "in chanes [*sic*] ... an [*sic*] they wont [*sic*] let me have him." In the end, Kinsey is resolved to get help in any way she can, and in her mind that means petitioning the President of the United States.

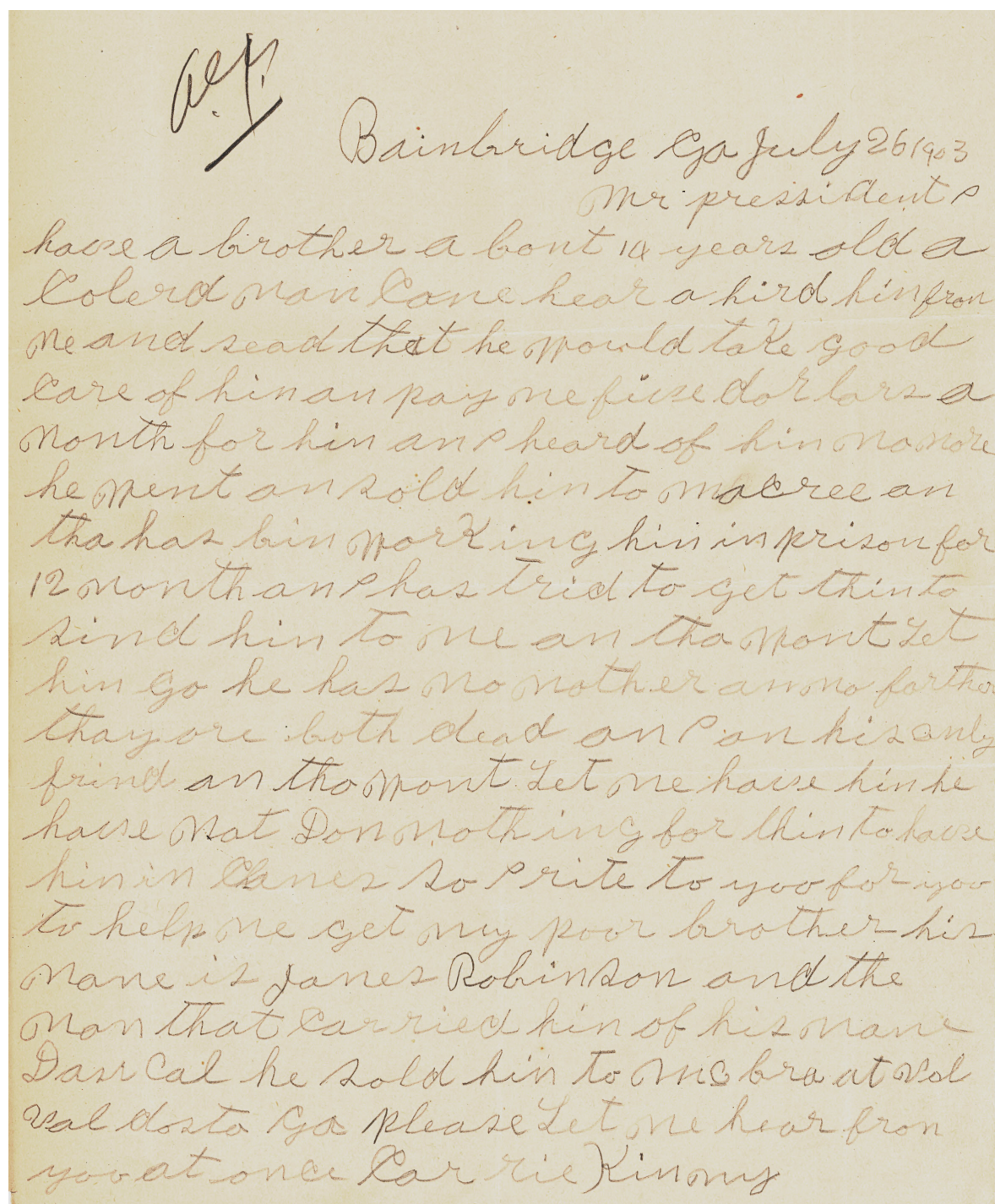
Because this letter survives, the narrative is even more painful when one realizes that there are dozens and dozens of letters just like it written in 1903. The language used in each letter to share their individual and collective pain indicates these women feel betrayed by their communities and their nation, by allowing their voices to remain silenced. For some, the only physical remnant of their lives are letters that sit in green boxes in a vast repository of both related and unrelated material. Everyone has a story to share, and this study highlights how Carrie Kinsey's—and so many others like hers—are stories that need to be heard.

As previously noted, 1903 proved to be productive in terms of prosecuting those responsible for holding men, women, and children against their will. There was evidence that the federal government was, in fact, aware and engaged in the gross re-enslavement of mostly Black men. The same year also proved to be devastating in the rise of unlawful arrests and separated families; the blatant neglect of African Americans in their time of need increased exponentially and would not recede for decades to come.

Figure 58 Carrie Kinsey Letter

The Peonage Files. National Archives II, College Park, MD.

http://pbs.bento.storage.s3.amazonaws.com/hostedbento-prod/filer_public/SBAN/Historic%20Documents/Carrie_Kinsey_Letter.pdf (28). Bainbridge, Georgia, 31 July 1903; Peonage Files, Letter Sent; General Records of the Department of Justice, RG 60, NACP.



W. F.
Bainbridge Ga July 26/1903
Mr. president
have a brother a bout 14 years old a
Colored man came hear a kind kin from
me and read that he would take good
care of him an pay me five dollars a
month for him an heard of him no more
he went an sold him to macee an
tha has bin working him in prison for
12 month an has tried to get him to
send him to me an tha wont let
him go he has no mother an no farther
they are both dead an can his only
friend an tha wont let me have him he
have not don nothing for him to have
him in lanes so write to you for you
to help me get my poor brother his
name is James Robinson and the
man that carried him of his name
Darr Cal he sold him to me bra at Val
Val Vista Ga please let me hear from
you at once Carrie Kinsey

Figure 59 Photograph of Child Convicts in Field, 1903. Courtesy of Detroit Publishing Company (30).



In one of many publications Mary Church Terrell scrutinized the treatment of Black Americans, she recounted how evidence regarding the re-enslavement of hundreds of men in Florida was presented in 1906 to the Department of Justice. The federal agent sent undercover to investigate the matter found “that hundreds of colored men have systematically been deprived of their liberty, while it is impossible to state how many of them lost their lives” (Terrell 446). The practice of convict leasing and involuntary servitude impacted the lives of at least three generations of families, ten generations if the period of enslavement is included.

At the dawn of freedom, when it seemed, for the first time, that Black citizens could control their own destiny and take part in “the American Dream,” citizens in booming industrial cities, like Birmingham, Alabama, and in rural countrysides, found their dreams becoming

nightmares—in which thousands lived for the rest of their lives. As Terrell prophetically proclaimed: “It can be seen that negroes—friendless, illiterate, and penniless—had no salvation at all except when the strong arm of the United States Government took them under its protection” (qtd. in Gates *Nineteenth-Century African American Woman Writers* 459). Like many other members of the “black intelligentsia,” Terrell traveled widely, speaking globally on behalf of suffrage for women, Black and white.

Raised in New York for a time by her mother, Terrell then returned to live with her father, who became a millionaire in Tennessee; such advantages allowed her to speak firmly about the injustice she witnessed and experienced as a Black woman. Her voice alerted the nation to a system that had trapped thousands of men, women, and children in a never-ending cycle of poverty, racism, and injustice; Terrell’s writing exposed the evils of corporate greed. In her book about the actions the NACW, of which Terrell was a member, Sarah Haley writes, “The convict camp is constructed not only as a violent institution from which children should be rescued, but also an institution that estranged black mothers from their children” (125). The voices of those trapped in the cruel system of involuntary servitude survive in letters written by victims and their families, pleading for help that never came. Instead, those letters were slipped quietly away to an archive, which even now is rarely examined.

The following letter was written by Vina Malone in search of any information about her son, who was taken from her and imprisoned on a chain gang:

Figure 60 Letter from Vina Malone to District Attorney, Col. E.A. Angier p.1

The Peonage Files. National Archives II, College Park, MD. (30) Northern District of Georgia, Athens, Georgia, 31 May 1905; Peonage Files, Letter Sent; General Records of the Department of Justice, File 50-162-5 RG 60, NACP.

Athens, Ga., May 31, 1905.

To the District Attorney, Col. E. A. Angier,

Dear Sir:-

I write to you for information & advice concerning my son Ike William who was arrested and sent to chaingang without my knowledge for a dollar he borrowed from a white man by the name of Van Deadwyler. Ike was working for him at his stable and he asked him to lend him a dollar which he did and when his work ran down at the stable he had to discharge him and failing to get work here he hired to a contractor to go to work on railroad above Atlanta and was carried to Atlanta and when got there some hitch caused him not to be able to go to work, and not desiring loafing away from home come back home and as soon as Deadwyler found that he was in Town swore out a warrant, saying he got money under false pretence. Justice Foster committed to jail and had him convicted and he was at the gang before I knew he was tried. I tried to pay the money back, but he refused it. Mr. W. A. Jester, a former citizen of Athens offered him the money too, but he refused it. My son is an extra field hand and Deadwyler wanted him, but he said he would fare better at the chaingang than he would at Deadwyler for when he pays negroes but he beat them worse than they does a convict at the Camps. The boy is a minor--he is 18 years of age. This County is getting worse than Oglethorpe Co. I know it is against the Revised Statutes of the Government for they forbid it. This is a plain case of peonage and invite your undivided attention to the case. We have no way of getting redress

Figure 61 Letter from Vina Malone to District Attorney, Col. E.A. Angier p.2

(2)

only through the Federal Courts. Mr. Jester, a highly esteemed citizen of Athens and a christian gentleman says it is an outrage. Hoping to get the required information from you in short or as soon as convenient. Also thanking you in advance, I am,

Respectfully,

Vina Malone,

#649 Odd St. E,

Athens, Ga.

Care P. T. Bugg,

432 River St.

Vina Malone's story is not unique but adds to the mounting evidence of re-enslavement. Although the vast majority of those caught within the system of convict leasing were Black men, Black women often went with their husbands to help pay off the debt, while many others were imprisoned themselves. Within the last decade, only two books focus specifically on women, mostly nonwhite, who were forced into the prison labor system. Although the number of women taken into involuntary servitude pales in comparison to men, their narratives convey a different version of this brutal system. As in times of enslavement, women were often sexually assaulted, abused, and raped, which brought its own special level of terror.

For nearly four hundred years, from enslavement to reconstruction to Jim Crow era terrorism and the birth of the Civil Rights Movement, predominantly white, southern citizens of

the United States encouraged, practiced, and enforced the breakdown of familial bonds and the separation of Black families. Blackmon's study focuses on the narrative of one family, whose experiences mirrored thousands of others facing similar circumstances. The first family member Blackmon introduces is Green Cottenham:

On March 30, 1908, Green Cottenham was arrested by the sheriff of Shelby County, Alabama, and charged with 'vagrancy' . . . After three days behind bars, twenty-two-old Cottenham was found guilty in a swift appearance before the county judge and immediately sentenced to a thirty-day term of hard labor. Unable to pay the array of fees assessed on every prisoner . . . Cottenham's sentence was extended to nearly a year of hard labor. The next day, Cottenham, the youngest of nine children born to former slaves . . . was sold. Under a standing arrangement between the county and a vast subsidiary of the industrial titan of the North—U.S. Steel Corporation—the sheriff turned the young man over to . . . Tennessee Coal, Iron & Railroad Company . . . What the company's managers did with Cottenham, and thousands of other black men they purchased from sheriffs across Alabama, was entirely up to them.

A few hours later, the company plunged Cottenham in the darkness of a mine called Slope No. 12—one shaft in a vast subterranean labyrinth on the edge of Birmingham known as the Pratt Mines. There, he was chained inside a long wooden barrack at night and required to spend nearly every waking hour digging and loading coal. His required daily "task" was to remove eight tons of coal from the mine. (1-2)

Blackmon goes on to underline what may seem obvious: these men “were slaves in all but name” (2).

The death rate among prisoners sold into the system of convict leasing was exponentially higher than that of former slaves. Disease, exhaustion, inhumane living and working conditions, forced labor, physical and mental punishment, and outright murder characterizes the gross inhumanity of this system. Because records were kept haphazardly, or not at all, the true conviction rate or death toll is unknown. What remains are relics of a system that helped fuel the struggling economy of the South, through the use of Black bodies that “were dead of disease, accidents, or homicide . . . Most of the broken bodies, along with hundreds of others before and after, were dumped into shallow graves scattered among the refuse of the mine. Others were incinerated in nearby ovens used to blast millions of tons of coal” (*Slavery By Another Name* Blackmon 2). Green Cottenham’s circumstance was almost commonplace for Black men in rural and burgeoning industrial areas across the South.

The dreams that created Green’s life are almost certainly the dreams of many Black families who sought the right to determine their own destiny—to own land on which they could build a home, and begin a new generation of Black families—the same kind of family that had been denied them for four centuries. For Mary and Henry Cottenham, Green’s parents, “freedom wasn’t yet three years old when the wedding day came. Henry Cottenham and Mary Bishop had been chattel slaves until the momentous final days of the Civil War, as nameless in the eyes of the law as cows in the field. All their lives, they could no more have obtained a marriage license than purchased a horse, a wagon, or a train ticket to freedom in the North” (13). As Mary and Henry’s last child, Green really strikes a chord. Did Mary do what countless other mothers did? Did she write letters? Did she go to local law enforcement for help? There are likely no answers

to those questions. In a personal interview with Blackmon, I posed the same questions. His response was both unsurprising and devastating:

There's no record to suggest anything about family efforts one way or another—though the absence of any record suggests nothing formal happened. He also lived such a brief time, with a sentence short enough to imagine he would be back relatively soon. Most very poor black families would have seen nothing that they could attempt, in terms of getting him out alive. Also no indication about anyone seeking his remains, but also there are almost no records of that for anyone in Alabama during that time. However, I visited the cemeteries where most of his family members in that era were buried, and never found him. Memory of him also vanished from the family's oral history. So all of that contributed to my confidence that he wasn't taken back by his family. The fact that he died showing signs of syphilis would also make his body one that everyone would want to see buried as quickly as possible and not disturbed again. (Personal Interview)

Thousands of others looked to the future in much the same way Henry and Mary Cottenham did. Like the Cottenham family, thousands would lose a father, husband, brother, uncle, cousin, mother, sister, aunt and every other iteration of “family” to the brutal system, outlined by Terrell, of convict leasing and involuntary servitude.

For the first half of the twentieth century, Black families would live in terror and without any assurance of the justice each citizen of the United States was entitled to. In 1907, Terrell voices the reality that, “[t]here is no lack of law by which to punish the guilty, but they are permitted to perpetrate fearful atrocities upon the unfortunate and helpless. Because there are thousands of just and humane people in this country who know little or nothing about the

methods pursued in the chain gangs, the convict lease system and the contract labor system, which are all children of one wicked and hideous mother, peonage” (qtd. in Gates *Nineteenth-Century African American Woman Writers* 461-62). One would think Terrell’s essay helped to shine a light on this new system of enslavement. However, in my examination of close to a dozen academic and historic sources, I saw no mention of Terrell, and further research has produced little in terms of how her exposé was received. The essay was published in a journal titled *Nineteenth Century*. What little information exists beyond the essay itself, is found in Sarah Haley’s book, *No Mercy Here*, and an article in the *American Literary History* titled “Toward a History of Access: The Case of Mary Church Terrell.” Elizabeth McHenry writes that Terrell often met with fierce opposition to the publication of her works she considered most important. As McHenry writes, “she [Terrell] lamented that the articles in which she most firmly believed . . . ‘The Convict Lease System in the United States’ . . . [were] ‘rejected by every magazine in this country’” because her content dealt with what she referred to as the “Race Problem” (381). Even with all the attention Terrell’s writing brought to the national discourse of racial injustice, it was not enough, and the systemic oppression continued for decades to come.

As the twentieth century moved forward, so did the separation of families, as evidenced by the letter below from Mrs. Thomas Daley to one Mr. Russell, in reference to her husband who was taken. As is the case with most of these letters, the fate of Thomas Daley and his family remain unknown. Like most of these letters, the narrative has no end. What happened to Thomas Daley remains unknown, along with the fate of his wife and three children, who never appeared in a census.

Figure 62 Letter from Mrs. Daley to Mr. Russell, 17 Dec 1907, p.1. The Peonage Files. National Archives II, College Park, MD (39, 40, 41)

Dear Sir

Pluda Feb 9, 1908

12-26 PM 1908

File

128792

74682

I write you these few lines asking you if you have ever herd, any thing of my husband, Mr Thomas Daley, i sent his picture down, to M. Carlinia, i thought i would of herd something about him, by this time, if you have herd anything about him, for god sake let me know, i am near crazy, i have herd that my husband has gone to Florida, to do a government job, in cedar keys, would you for god sake, let

Figure 63 Letter from Mrs. Daley to Mr. Russell, 17 Dec 1907, p.2

me know, who i could
write to, so i could
find out, if he is in
ceder keys, florida, if
i only knew, who
the Contractors
were, that was doing
the government work,
then i could find out
if my husband was
living, Mr Hoyt will
you try and find
out, the contractors
names, that is doing
the railroad work
in cedar keys Florida
i know it aint
nice to trouble you
so much, if i had
money i could find

Figure 64 Letter from Mrs. Daley to M Russell, 17 Dec 1907, p.3

out my self, but i
am a poor women,
trying to work hard
every day, for my three
little, 6 children, Mr
Hoyt, four months
ago, a man was killed
in Bordentown N. Jersey
& he was killed on
the railroad, and i
am all ways thinking
it was him, if i cant
here any thing about
him in florida,
i will have the man
lifted up againe,
and see if he is my
husband, i hope to
god it aint him,
Mr Hoyt, if you

Figure 65 Letter from Mrs. Daley to Mr. Russell, 17 Dec 1907, p.4

can find out the
Contractors names,
for me, it will save
me a lot of trouble,
and god will bless
you your troubles for
looking after the poor
Mr Hoyt - please let me
know as soon as possible
if you can grant me
this favor, god bless
you, from a broken
hearted mother
Mrs Thomas Daley
1913 N Philip st
Chila
Pa

In the case of Emma Polite and her son, Daniel, referenced in the letter below, there is no conclusion. The only information available for either Emma or Daniel is found in the 1910 US Census. Born in 1860, Emma was married to Thomas Polite, born 1850, and they had Daniel in 1887. The records list no death date nor cause of death for any of the family members. The 1900 Census for South Carolina, Beaufort County, lists the names of eleven children. The digitization of the Census has made some progress in connecting the Polite family line, but not until 2019, when Daniel was linked to Thomas and Emma, though his race was not added until 2020. My research did not lead me to Daniel's other siblings.

Figure 66 Letter to AG of the US from Mrs. Emma Polite p.1

Frogmore S.C. Aug. 8 1907
AUG 12 3-11 PM 1907

To The Attorney Gen. of the U.S.
Washington D.C.

Dear sir I appeal to you,
and ask if you please, to
intervene for me concerning
my boy, whose name is Daniel
Polite, Daniel Polite. Colored:
who was persuaded, & taken
of to Inglis Florida; whom I
believe is there, & is held in
bondage. Will you be kind enough
to order the commission of the
interior to make an investigation
of the case at once & re-
port the findings? I am a poor
woman & need the help of my
country to bring in out for me.
The Barker's Chemical Co. can I be
give some information.

Fill.
74682

[illegible]

For many families devastated by this new kind of enslavement, there was little they could do, and little anyone else was willing to do to help reunite their families. High rates of illiteracy may have restricted biographical details to a census entry; while this preserves their names, little else exists to offer insight about who they really were. Fortunately, many of the letters written in desperation were preserved by chance in the National Archives. These letters give at least a partial narrative of who they were.

In 1905, following the aggressive investigations and convictions of the most violent labor camp bosses and owners, out of thirty indictments, twenty-five were withdrawn. Attorney General A.E. Angier found that black men and women in “peonage” or “involuntary servitude” were intimidated by local law enforcement as well as the owners of the lucrative labor camps wherein most defendants had been confined. In one case white farmers told witnesses they would “use all means to put in the chain gang every colored man, woman, and child who has complained to the Federal Courts, threatening to return to peonage those who could not be jailed, and to kill those who could not be reduced to servitude” thus the number of complaints diminished exponentially (Dittmer 79-80). Dittmer explains that “while an average number of indictments was fifteen or twenty, during the spring term the grand jury indicted a hundred and fifty blacks, a number ‘unprecedented in the annals of the county.’ The judge speculated, ‘It may be the object of the projectors of this movement to run all expected witnesses in peonage cases off where United States Officers can’t find them’ or if those black defendants were found, characterize them as criminal and dangerous (80). Because the prosecution of peonage by the federal court rarely happened, Black men, women, and children continued to suffer under this unjust, criminal, and immoral practice of re-enslavement. Very few saw a way out.

In his study, Dittmer explains that federal court judge Emory Speer challenged the legality of convict labor, peonage, and involuntary servitude, and argued that if the practice continued, Blacks would be relegated to serfdom. Judge Speer asked the following:

What hope can the respectable Negro have—what incentive to better effort or better life—if he, his wife, his daughter, or his sons, may in a moment be snatched from his humble home and sold into peonage? Let us for a moment put ourselves in his place, and imagine our furious indignation or hopeless despair if our loved ones or ourselves could be subjected to such a condition of involuntary servitude. Nor if conditions like those described in the indictment shall continue, will the Negro remain the sole victim of peonage. (Dittmer 80)

In 1906, prosecutions of peonage, convict leasing, and involuntary servitude reached its peak. Dittmer notes that “as early as 1906 President Theodore Roosevelt believed the government had ‘pretty well broken up’ the practice. Fewer cases were tried during the next decade, but the practice had not diminished, and prosecutions increased following World War I” (80-81). In the three decades to come, peonage, disguised as convict leasing not only existed but also increased so much that “the Attorney General [Harry M. Daugherty] reported peonage existed ‘to a shocking extent’ in Georgia” and the Southern United States.” (qtd. in Schmidt “Principle and Race” 716).

The attention of the world was not on “convicts” many of whom likely committed no crime and who were convicted on spurious charges, and forced to labor to repay or repair the wrongs they committed. To a certain degree, owners of coalmines, turpentine farms, lumber camps, railroads, sugar plantations, and sharecroppers were demanding reparations from blacks, for whom The Civil War was fought. Southerners demanded reparations in the repair of the

land, the industry, and a once thriving economy now devastated due to war. Many of the bosses of these convict leasing labor cites, really believed that they were owed and that in order to see a successful return to a thriving economy, they would have those, in whose name it was taken, repair what was lost. Dunbar-Nelson's poem "To the Negro Farmers of the United States" reads:

God washes clean the souls and hearts of you,
His favored ones, whose backs bend o'er the soil,
Which grudging gives to them requite for toil
In sober graces and in vision true.
God places in your hands the pow'r to do
A service sweet. Your gift supreme to foil
The bare-fanged wolves of hunger in the moil
Of Life's activities. Yet all too few
Your glorious band, clean sprung from Nature's heart;
The hope of hungry thousands, in whose breast
Dwells fear that you should fail. God placed no dart
Of war within your hands, but pow'r to start
Tears, praise, love, joy, enwoven in a crest
To crown you glorious, brave ones of the soil. (qtd. in Gates *Nineteenth-Century African American Woman Writers* 375-76)

Hope for a better future, the determination to prove equality between races, and faith in a system that could indeed be just, guided the movement into the Harlem Renaissance and the continuation of letters pleading for justice and for an end to the separation of families.

Chapter Six: The Quiet Before the Storm

As Black citizens constructed lives as Black families, the opportunity of equality moved farther and farther away, most especially in the South; and as the nation turned its eye to the European theater, convict leasing continued to grow, as did the prosperity of many of the most advanced cities in the South. Those most affected by convict leasing and literal re-enslavement turned to letter writing to protest this inhumane penal system and to plead for help. Many victims and victims' family members turned to the most powerful individuals in America for help.

By 1910, African Americans began to see their rights diminish substantially. Whatever had been gained and maintained during the late nineteenth century had been repealed and replaced with laws that led to the disenfranchisement of African Americans through voter suppression and laws that disallowed the advancement of Black Americans and women. As noted in the previous chapter, Black Codes and Jim Crow segregation and terrorism seeped into almost every aspect of Black life. In 1888, while on a lecture tour, Frederick Douglass delivered a speech about his observation of the post-war South. David Blight writes, “the *Boston Morning Journal*, considered the speech a ‘staggering blow to the pleasing fiction of a new regenerated South’” (*Frederick Douglass* 682). Whatever form of fiction once existed was revealed as false. In the same year that Douglass lectured in the South, there were an estimated 137 lynchings across America.

The passage of the 14th Amendment gave all naturalized Americans citizenship, and perhaps more importantly provided “protection under the law.” The meaning of that phrase might be more obvious now, but during the twentieth century each state could determine what “equal protection under the law” actually meant. Ida B. Wells, Black female writer, journalist, and the leader of the Anti-Lynch Crusade, was well known for her editorials, essays, and poems,

most of which spoke out against the injustice Black Americans faced, even with governmental protection under the Constitution. Because of the “audacity” of Wells to speak and write truth, her printing office was burned down while she was away lecturing, with the promise from white supremacists that if she ever came back to the South, she would be hunted down and lynched herself.

Wells sought out Douglass, who advised her to take her cause against lynching to Europe, something that Douglass also had done in his early days of freedom. Wells did so, continually writing and speaking of the terrorist regime of white supremacists who murdered with impunity and mostly got away with their crimes. When she returned to the United States, she joined Douglass at the 1893 Columbian Exposition and they co-authored *The Reason Why the Colored American is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition*. Wells contributed three chapters; one chapter spoke to the conditions and effects upon Black southerners who continued to be terrorized by the practice of lynching; another chapter addressed the practice of debt servitude, more widely known as peonage, which had been technically illegal since the 1867 congressional vote to outlaw the practice of debt slavery. The final piece Wells contributed railed against the disenfranchisement of Black Americans, most particularly in the South. She cited case after case of state-sanctioned lynchings, including the hanging of a thirteen-year-old girl in South Carolina for the “crime” of poisoning a baby in her care. Wells also described similar horrific conditions in Alabama, a state that had allowed the hanging of a ten-year-old Black boy. Ethan Michaeli describes Wells’s writing as a mirror of unrelenting reality when he notes:

She traced the origin of lynching as a tool of frontier justice and documented its increasing use in the South to deny blacks their political rights, including vivid firsthand descriptions of gruesome mob hangings, shootings, burnings, and

tortures of men as well as women, a catalog of brutality that continued unabated even as the World's Fair was underway. (14)

In 1912, Wells published an article titled "Our Country's Lynching Record," wherein she writes, "The lynching mania, so far as it affects Negroes, began in the South immediately after the Emancipation Proclamation fifty years ago. It manifested itself through what was known as the Klu [*sic*] Klux Klan, armed bodies of masked men, who ... killed Negroes who tried to exercise the political rights conferred on them by the United States" (*Light of Truth* 450). Wells then proceeds with a chart laying out how many "Negroes" were killed each year from 1885-1912—equating roughly to 3,470 terror lynchings carried out in the United States. Wells states, "With the South in control of its political machinery, the new excuse was made that lynchings were necessary to protect the honor of white womanhood" (450-51). Wells fought, mostly by writing to expose the horrendous crimes perpetrated against people of color, both inside and outside prison.

The inhumanity with which people of color were treated was reprehensible. Wells articulated it this way in her essay "The Ordeal of the 'Solitary,'" "The papers say he [Joe Campbell] has been confined in solitary fifty hours, hands chained straight out before him and then brought into the inquest, sweated and tortured to make him confess a crime that he may not have committed. Is this justice? Is it humanity? Would we stand to see a dog treated in such a fashion without protest? I know we would not. Then why will not the justice-loving, law abiding citizens put a stop to this barbarism?" (455). Wells would continue to write hundreds of articles and exposés on America's inhumane treatment of Black citizens.

In 1918, after seeking justice for her husband who had been lynched, Mary Turner was found hanging from Folsom Bridge in Brooks County, Georgia. Reports about her death include the following graphic details:

As stated by an unnamed reporter for the *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, on a Sunday afternoon “the people in their indignant mood took exceptions to her remarks, as well as her attitude, and without waiting for nightfall, took her to the river where she was hanged.” As the eight-months-pregnant woman’s lifeless body dangled upside-down in the air, a spectator “took out a carving knife and cut open her stomach. Her baby fell from her womb and cried. Upon hearing the baby cry, a man from the crowd raised his heel and crushed the baby’s head.” In a final act of postmortem torture, “the mob started to burn her and after her clothes were burned off they riddled her with bullets.” (qtd. in Leflouria 30)

On March 16, 2021, author Rachel Marie-Crane Williams released a book, titled *Elegy for Mary Turner: An Illustrated Account of a Lynching*. Included along with original artwork are newspaper clippings and memorandums exchanged between the leaders of the NAACP. Turner’s death accompanied those of ten Black men, all lynched in May of 1918.

At a time when the rest of the world was engaged in World War I and focused on ending it, Americans across the South tortured and murdered their fellow Black citizens. America fought a war on two fronts; battles in Europe struggled for the assurance of a free world, and the other front battled violent racism inside its own borders. Within the (almost) *most* free country on Earth, people fought to end Black subjugation and death at the hands of their fellow citizens, even though the laws governing a free America kept Blacks and whites segregated. In order to

articulate what seemed to be a contradiction between serving a country that had repeatedly denied Black citizens enfranchisement, writing flourished.

Entrance into the War, and by extension into the military, offered Black soldiers hope for achieving equality through service to the United States of America. The idea of equality resonated in the lives of those who volunteered to serve their country, even though, rightly noted, this country did not serve them. However, for scores of African American men, “the combination of literacy and an army uniform galvanized a self-image of a free manhood” (Hager 167). In his declaration of war speech on April 2, 1917, Woodrow Wilson proclaimed, “The world must be made safe for democracy” (“Address of President Wilson to Joint Session of Congress”). Chad Williams, in his article for *Time Magazine*, writes the following: “Black people immediately recognized the hypocrisy of Wilson’s words. On the eve of American entry into the war, democracy was a distant reality for African Americans. Disfranchisement, segregation, debt peonage and racial violence rendered most black people citizens in name only” (“African America Veterans”). Just two years earlier, in 1915, President Wilson hosted the premiere of *The Birth of a Nation*; D.W. Griffiths based his film on *The Clansman*, a novel by Thomas Dixon, Jr., a former Johns Hopkins classmate of Wilson’s.

The screening of this film was significant as it was only the second film that had been screened at the White House. Wilson was supportive of Dixon’s work, and is known to have said that *The Clansman* was “history written with lightning” (qtd. in Ross). Wilson also became an important supporter of the film, which inevitably led to the Klan’s rise in popularity again in the twentieth century. Wilson’s endorsement of the film forced a serious reflection of what America meant, would mean, and perhaps might mean one day.

The question of race equity pervaded this second decade as lynchings grew in scope and frequency. As voting rights for African Americans began to fade from existence, so did the hope of a new life in the vein of the “American Dream.” Based largely on American Capitalism, this “Dream” would become nearly impossible for Black Americans to attain, even as America herself was being built on the backs of millions of enslaved men, women, and children. Set against the experiment of all-inclusive democracy in this relatively new nation, the world would soon be at war, shifting the attention of the US government from advancing the state of the nation from a segregated, unequal, inequitable, lawless, and terrorizing institution, to a nation based on “freedom and liberty for all.”

On January 17, 1910 a letter from Mary Barker was sent to U.S. Attorney General Wickersham: “Mary Barker was one of the early leaders of the biracial movement in Atlanta. She belonged to the Atlanta Urban League, Fulton-DeKalb Committee on Interracial Cooperation, and the Georgia Committee of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation. She served on the board of Phillis Wheatley Branch of the Atlanta Y.W.C.A.” (Inventory of the Mary Cornelia Barker papers, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University).

Similar to the way Barker’s letters revealed a corrupt system, Ethel Rust spoke out as loudly as she could for the illegal holding of her husband, John, and his brother. The “Ethel and John Rust” letters are interesting because their plight was not only highlighted by the letters, but also by the press. Their story appeared in several newspapers from West Virginia to Chicago, Illinois. Ethel and John Rust were white, according to U.S. Census information, where they are listed with a W—White. The letters below and the accompanying information reported by investigators and journalists narrate the story from the beginning, but not to its ending. The only information available after John and his brother go missing is John’s death date and location—

November 6, 1916, Kansas City, Missouri. Even though the details of the Rusts' lives are few, they are more than most of the Black families written of in this dissertation have.

The world's attention was not on "convicts," as many likely committed no crime, yet were convicted on spurious charges and forced to labor to repay or repair their alleged wrongs. To a certain degree, owners of coal mines, turpentine farms, lumber camps, railroads, sugar plantations, and sharecroppers were demanding reparations from Blacks, for whom The Civil War was fought. Southerners demanded the repair of the land and its industries, as well as the once-thriving economy, all devastated by war. Many bosses of these convict leasing labor cites truly believed that they were owed; they held former slaves responsible for their losses, as the war eliminated their primary source of free labor. In order return to a thriving economy, the former slaveholders believed that former slaves must make the necessary repairs to recoup all the lost resources.

Hope for a better future, the determination to establish racial equality, and faith in a system that could indeed be just, fueled the continuation of letters pleading for justice and for an end to the continued separation of families. Annie Castleberry sent letters first to The Department of Justice and then directly to President Calvin Coolidge's wife, First Lady of the United States. The first of the letters was written November 13, 1923. The next was written a year later on November 28, 1924. One can assume Castleberry wrote the second letter after it became apparent the Department of Justice would take no action to help her.

In 1909, The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was formed to help advance the cause of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," as it pertained to Black citizenship in the United States. The organization became a place where the story of the Black Americans trapped in involuntary servitude, convict leasing, and peonage

could be heard, a place where the disenfranchised and oppressed could find relief. Many of their letters, testimony, and court records can be found in the NAACP archives collection in the Library of Congress. Even with the help of the NAACP, many desperate mothers, aunts, sisters, and wives continued sending their pleas directly to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the First Lady.

In the three decades to come, peonage not only existed but also increased its labor force in so much that “the Attorney General reported peonage existed ‘to a shocking extent’ in Georgia. The NAACP investigated so many violations that the Atlanta branch revived the Underground Railroad to facilitate escape from rural areas” (Dittmer 81). James Weldon Johnson, in addition to dozens of other officers of the NAACP fought vigorously against this system of injustice where hundreds of letters came from poor Black citizens of the South to Johnson pleading for help to recover family members that had been taken from them again and again. It is at this point that many Southern Blacks, largely uneducated, some illiterate and desperate for help, wrote to various government officials and to the governing body of the NAACP to help them achieve justice.

On December 12, 1941 “. . . in response to the outbreak of World War II and amid fears that racial inequalities would be used as anti–United States propaganda, Attorney General Francis Biddle issued Circular No. 3591 to all federal prosecutors, instructing them to actively investigate and try more peonage cases” (Wagner, *Slavery by Another Name* “History Background”). Decades before Circular No. 3591, convict leasing had been a thriving enterprise for some, but a hellish nightmare for countless others. Even though the Federal Department of Justice had conducted investigations concerning peonage and convict leasing as early as 1903, there were other issues that perhaps seemed more pressing than the complete and total

emancipation of Black Americans in the South. Following the end of World War I, Black veterans faced increased domestic terrorism as a result of their service and asserting their Civil Rights after putting their lives on the line for “their country.” Between the end of World War I and the beginning of America’s entry into WWII, letters continued to arrive en masse at the White House, addressed to whomever was President at the time. These complaints were almost exactly the same as they had been for the past eight decades, from just after the emancipation of over four million formerly enslaved people in 1863. And like those letters from the decades before, they likely never landed on the President’s desk, but were filed away in an obscure envelope, with hundreds of others just like it. Those documents are part of “The Peonage Files” in the National Archives in College Park, Maryland.

The collection of “The Peonage Files” manifests letter after letter written to the highest levels of government, pleading for justice, and without the help of an organization like the NAACP—most letters are addressed to a “Mr. President” or to the Department of Justice, and a few are even addressed to the wife of the President of the United States who was serving when these letters were penned. There is no doubt that writers such as James Weldon Johnson, W.E.B. Du Bois, Ida B. Wells, Mary Church Terrell, Alice Ruth Moore Dunbar Nelson, and Paul Lawrence Dunbar, to name just a few, were inspired in their writings, whether it was through fiction, non-fiction, narrative, essay, poetry, and music, to address the issues concerning social injustice for their black counterparts in the deep south, who had not the education, opportunity, or safety of being a northerner or a member of the “black intelligentsia” Du Bois wrote of. The rest of this chapter allows the letters themselves—some hand-written, others typed—to narrate this incongruent side of life by those crippled by the persistent denial of their rights and wholesale dismissal of their requests for justice.

Figure 69 Letter US AG from Mary C. Barker, 23 Jan. 1910.

"To Honorable George Wickersham, US Atty. Gen., from Mary C. Barker. The Peonage Files. National Archives II, College Park, MD (62, 63, 64). Atlanta, Georgia, January 17, 1910; Peonage Files, Letter Sent; General Records of the Department of Justice, File 50-185-5 RG 60, NACP.

68 East Avenue
Atlanta, Georgia,
Jan 23, 1910.
DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE
RECEIVED
JAN 23 1910
FILED
DIVISION

Attorney-General Wickersham,
Washington, D. C.

Dear Sir:- Last week I sent you
a clipping from an Atlanta paper
concerning a charge of peonage
against a company constructing
a dam near Jackson, Georgia. To-
day's paper contained a denial from
a member of the firm, which I am
enclosing herewith. The other clip-
ping was cut from the "Henry
County Weekly" published at Mc-
Donough, Georgia when a shooting
affair occurred there last sum-
mer. Every week come stories
of cruel treatment and deaths at
that construction camp at Jackson.
Of course there are only hearsay. I
have no proof what ever as to the
truth or falsehood of them, but I
think it time the matter should
be investigated.

Respectfully yours
(Miss) Mary C. Barker.

Figure 70 "Death Certificate of John William Rust." Missouri State Board of Health, Bureau of Vital Statistics, Certificate of Death, 6 November 1916. (65)

N. B.—Every item of information should be carefully supplied. AGE should be stated EXACTLY. PHYSICIANS should state CAUSE OF DEATH in plain terms, so that it may be properly classified. Exact statement of OCCUPATION is very important.

1 PLACE OF DEATH			MISSOURI STATE BOARD OF HEALTH BUREAU OF VITAL STATISTICS CERTIFICATE OF DEATH	
County	<i>Jackson</i>	Registration District No.	<i>899</i>	File No.
Township	<i>Rau</i>	Primary Registration District No.	<i>1002</i>	Registered No.
Village	<i>Kansas City, Mo.</i>	(No. of General Hospital)		
City	<i>General Hospital</i>	Ward		If death occurred in a hospital or institution, give its NAME instead of street and number.
2 FULL NAME <i>John William Rust</i>				
PERSONAL AND STATISTICAL PARTICULARS			MEDICAL CERTIFICATE OF DEATH	
3 SEX <i>Male</i>	4 COLOR OR RACE <i>White</i>	5 SINGLE MARRIED WIDOWED OR DIVORCED (Write the word) <i>Married</i>	10 DATE OF DEATH <i>Nov 6 - 1916</i> (Month) (Day) (Year)	
6 DATE OF BIRTH <i>August 11, 1883</i> (Month) (Day) (Year)			17 I HEREBY CERTIFY, that I attended deceased from <i>Oct 25, 1916 to Nov 6, 1916</i> that I last saw him alive on <i>Nov 6, 1916</i> and that death occurred, on the date stated above, at <i>12:25 a.m.</i>	
7 AGE <i>33 yrs. 2 mos. 26 ds.</i> If LESS than 1 day, hrs. or min.?			The CAUSE OF DEATH* was as follows: <i>Acute Endocarditis, malignant</i> <i>1st</i> <i>2nd</i>	
8 OCCUPATION (a) Trade, profession, or particular kind of work <i>Tailmaker</i> (b) General nature of industry business or establishment in which employed (or employer)			(Duration) yrs. mos. ds.	
9 BIRTHPLACE (City or town, State or foreign country) <i>Ohio</i>			CONTRIBUTORY <i>Chronic Interstitial nephritis</i> (Secondary) (Duration) yrs. mos. ds.	
PARENTS	10 NAME OF FATHER <i>William Rust</i>		(Signed) <i>P. T. Bohon of Red Bank, Mo.</i> M. D.	
	11 BIRTHPLACE OF FATHER (City or town, State or foreign country) <i>Ohio</i>		<i>Nov 6, 1916</i> (Address) <i>General Hospital</i>	
	12 MAIDEN NAME OF MOTHER <i>Melinda Poling</i>		*State the Disease Causing Death, or, in death from Violent Causes, state (1) Means of Injury; and (2) whether Accidental, Suicidal or Homicidal.	
	13 BIRTHPLACE OF MOTHER (City or town, State or foreign country) <i>Ohio</i>		18 LENGTH OF RESIDENCE (For Hospitals, Institutions, Transients, or Recent Residents) At place of death yrs. mos. ds. In the State yrs. mos. ds. Where was disease contracted if not at place of death? Former or usual residence <i>1898 Wyandotte</i>	
14 THE ABOVE IS TRUE TO THE BEST OF MY KNOWLEDGE (Informant) <i>Archie Rust, Clerk</i> (Address) <i>Genl. Hosp</i>				
15 NOV - 1916 Filed <i>Nov 7, 1916</i> Registrar <i>Thos. J. Miller</i>			19 PLACE OF BURIAL OR REMOVAL <i>Forrest</i> 20 UNDERTAKER <i>Mrs C. L. Forrest</i> ADDRESS <i>918 Brooklyn</i>	

Figure 71 Photograph of RR Station, Glen Alum, West Virginia “Station, Railroad, Glen Alum, West Virginia.” Norfolk Southern. Courtesy photo. *Daily Mail WV*, https://www.wvgazettemail.com/dailymailwv/daily_mail_features/railroads-built-west-virginia-and-still-play-a-vital-role-daily-mail-wv/article_85b12f25-a3b8-5ed2-9463-62fdf8368e28.html (63)



Figure 72 Letter from John Rust to Ethel Rust

Glen Alum, April 10, 1911

Dear Ethel:

Go ahead to Ironton and try & stay there till we come. We can't get away because they have got a guard over us & we have to work our transportation out. He loweered the bill to \$35. just as soon as we pay that we can go he said. Write to us and let s know how you get along. You don't know how bad I feel. We either have to pay this bill or go to jail & that will mean about 2 months imprisonment. Write right away as I will be waiting for an answer.

From your loving husband
John

Figure 73 Ethel Rust Sworn Statement p.1 "Ethel Rust Sworn Statement." The Peonage Files. National Archives II, College Park, MD. (63, 64, 65, 66, 67). *The Peonage Files of the U.S. Department of Justice, 1901-1945*. Department of Justice, Record Group 60, National Archives, College Park, MD.

Department of Justice.
Office of the United States Attorney,
Southern District of West Virginia.

Huntington, April 15, 1901.

The Attorney General,
Department of Justice,
Washington, D. C.

Sir:-

I hand you herewith copy of an affidavit made by Ethel Rust, which is self explanatory. On the strength of this affidavit Commissioner Douglass issued a warrant for the arrest of E. C. Lambert, Superintendent of the Glen Alum Fuel Company, referred to in the affidavit, charging him with holding John Rust and Charles Rust in peonage.

The marshal went to Glen Alum to execute the warrant and summon the two Rusts as witnesses in the case, but when he arrived there he was unable to find John Rust or Charles Rust. The warrant issued by the Commissioner has been dismissed.

I am very much of the opinion that the Glen Alum Fuel Company hearing of the charge against it, sent the Rusts away, in order to prevent their testifying before the commissioner. From the statement made by the woman in the affidavit and the statement made by her husband in the letter, which is attached to the affidavit, it seems that these two men were detained in violation of law. They are originally from Cincinnati, Ohio, and information as to their whereabouts

156618 -1
DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE
APR 18 1901
MAIL & FILE ROOM
RECEIVED

Figure 74 Ethel Rust Sworn Statement p.2

Department of Justice.
Office of the United States Attorney,
Southern District of West Virginia.

Huntington, _____, 190

The Attorney General #2.

can be gotten at Mambrus Cigar Store, 609 Walnut Street,
Cincinnati, Ohio.

If, after examining these papers it is desired
by the Department that the same be investigated, I would
be glad to be advised of it.

Yours respectfully,

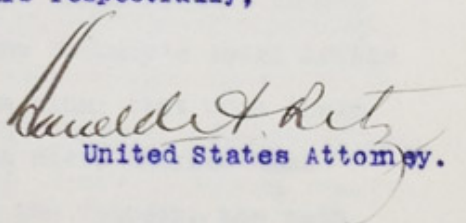

United States Attorney.

Figure 75 Ethel Rust Sworn Statement p. 3

State of West Virginia,
County of Cabell, to-wit:
Ethel Rust being first duly sworn says that she is the wife of John Rust, that about the 31st day of March, 1910, she together with her husband, her husband's brother and his three children and David Poling, left Cincinnati, Ohio, to come to Glen Alum, West Virginia, where the said John Rust, Charles Rust and David Poling were to work for the Glen Alum Fuel Company; that they had secured employment with this company through an advertisement inserted in the Cincinnati Post, by the said Company; that before leaving Cincinnati they went to the Company's local office and secured transportation to Glen Alum; that upon their arrival at Glen Alum the said John Rust, Charles Rust and David Poling went to work for the Company, the said Poling worked one day, and the said John and Charles Rust worked one week after which they discovered that conditions were unsatisfactory and determined to quit and on Monday morning the 10th day of April the whole party determined to leave Glen Alum. The said John Rust and Charles Rust had gone ahead of affiant and the said David Poling and the children and after proceeding for a short time affiant was overtaken by one E. C. Lambert, Supt of said Company and one Herbert Butcher, claiming to be a constable, and W. A. Fink, employed as book-keeper by said Company, and said Lambert enquired where the said John and Charles Rust were and affiant did not answer and said Lambert thereupon remarked to the men with him "come on, we will catch them." In a few minutes affiant met said Lambert returning with the said John and Charles Rust

Figure 76 Ethel Rust Sworn Statement p. 4

and the said Charles Rust told affiant and said David Poling to go on to Williamson and do the best they could, that they, John and Charles Rust had to return to work out the transportation money, that affiant went on to Williamson, West Va., with said David Poling and the three children and at said place secured a letter from her husband, John Rust, which is attached hereto, that from there she came to the City of Huntington, West Va., that she has not seen or heard of said John and Charles Rust since the receipt of said letter. Before leaving Glen Alum affiant had the station agent of the Norfolk and Western Railway Co. telephone to the store of the Glen Alum Fuel Co and said station agent enquired of some one at said store or office what they intended to do with the two men they had taken back, meaning the said John and Charles Rust, and that said station agent informed affiant that the reply was, ^{were} that the two men ~~wilixke~~ confined in a room and that they were going to be made work out their transportation.

Ethel Rust.

Taken, sworn to and subscribed before me this 15th day of April, A. D., 1911. My commission expires February 2, 1916.

J. P. Douglass, N. P.
Notary Public, Cabell
County, West Virginia.

SEAL

This party can be located by enquiring at the cigar store of Mambrus Cigar Store, 609 Walnut Street, Cincinnati, Ohio.

Figure 77 Letter from Annie Castleberry to Department of Justice p.1 "Annie Castleberry Letters." The Peonage Files. National Archives II, College Park, MD. *The Peonage Files of the U.S. Department of Justice, 1901-1945*. Department of Justice, Record Group 60, National Archives, College Park, MD.

50 24
 Ocala Fla - 50-1630-1
 Nov. - 18 - 1923
 11-19-23
 NOV 14 1923
 DEC 1 1923
 CRIM - JUSTICE
 The Department of Justice
 Washington D.C.
 Dear Sirs I am writing to
 inform the Department of a
 Gross Injustice that was
 done my Husband and my
 self I was held in Peonage
 Against my will and my
 husband was put in
 Prison because he would
 pay a false Debt the man
 paid a small sum of
 money for my Husband


Figure 78 Letter from Annie Castleberry to Department of Justice p.2

without my husband
Consent and then wanted
him to pay Two Dollars
for one he wrote him
through the mail that
he paid one amount and
when my husband found
out about it he only paid
half of what he said and
he had paid that without
the Consent of my Husband
and when we was
making Frank's notes he
dressed his Pistol on my
husband and carried him
and put him in jail
and he was beat up

Figure 79 Letter from Annie Castleberry to Department of Justice p.3

3
After being put in jail
and then they put
fictious charges against
him and put him on
Turner County Gang. It
was all done because he
quit working Turpentine
for this man. I has witn-
esses to these charges and
I hope the department
will make charges against
the man his name
is J. B. F. Shingler of
Ashburn Ga. he also
done my Husband brother
the same way trying
to compell them to work

Figure 80 Letter from Annie Castleberry to Department of Justice p.4



Work for him please
don't publish this letter
because he is a rich
man and I fear for my
life please act at once
Respectfully
Annie Castleberry
Wife of
Jerry Castleberry

Figure 81 US Census, 1900, Lilla Castlebury and Jerry Castlebury. "US Census, 1900," database with images, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:M3JH-688>: accessed 28 April 2020), Lilla Castlebury in household of Jerry Castlebury, Militia District 887, Sixth Byron town, Houston, Georgia, US; citing enumeration district (ED) 15, sheet 11B, family 222, NARA microfilm

T-224.
TWELFTH CENSUS OF THE UNITED STATES.

B

State Georgia County Houston Killed in War No 887 Supervisor's District No. 3 Sheet No. 11
 Enumeration District No. 15

Township or other division of county _____ Name of Institution, X _____
 Name of incorporated city, town, or village, within the above-named division, Byron _____ Ward of city, X _____
 Enumerated by me on the 12 day of June, 1900. G. E. Buttsman Enumerator.

IN CITIZEN	NAME	RELATION	PERSONAL DESCRIPTION		NATIVITY			CITIZENSHIP	OCCUPATION, TRADE, OR PROFESSION		EDUCATION			PROPERTY OF HOME
			SEX	AGE	Place of birth of father	Place of birth of mother	Place of birth of person		Occupation	Years of school	Years of college	Years of high school		
51	Robert V. V. V.	Head	M	14	1886	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
52	Julia	Wife	F	14	1886	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
53	William	Son	M	11	1889	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
54	Elizabeth	Daughter	F	8	1892	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
55	Natie	Daughter	F	7	1893	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
56	Leslie	Son	M	5	1895	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
57	Jordan	Son	M	4	1896	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
58	Jessie	Daughter	F	3	1897	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
59	Charles	Son	M	2	1898	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
60	Mac	Son	M	1	1899	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
61	Emma	Daughter	F	1	1900	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
62	Vic	Son	M	1	1900	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
63	Marie	Daughter	F	1	1900	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
64	Natie	Daughter	F	1	1900	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
65	Barnes	Son	M	1	1900	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
66	Bellis	Daughter	F	1	1900	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
67	Jefferson	Son	M	1	1900	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
68	Julia	Daughter	F	1	1900	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
69	William	Son	M	1	1900	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
70	Frank	Son	M	1	1900	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
71	Martha	Daughter	F	1	1900	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
72	David	Son	M	1	1900	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
73	John	Son	M	1	1900	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
74	John	Son	M	1	1900	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
75	John	Son	M	1	1900	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
76	John	Son	M	1	1900	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
77	John	Son	M	1	1900	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
78	John	Son	M	1	1900	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
79	John	Son	M	1	1900	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
80	John	Son	M	1	1900	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
81	John	Son	M	1	1900	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
82	John	Son	M	1	1900	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
83	John	Son	M	1	1900	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
84	John	Son	M	1	1900	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
85	John	Son	M	1	1900	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
86	John	Son	M	1	1900	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
87	John	Son	M	1	1900	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
88	John	Son	M	1	1900	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
89	John	Son	M	1	1900	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
90	John	Son	M	1	1900	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
91	John	Son	M	1	1900	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
92	John	Son	M	1	1900	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
93	John	Son	M	1	1900	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
94	John	Son	M	1	1900	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
95	John	Son	M	1	1900	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
96	John	Son	M	1	1900	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
97	John	Son	M	1	1900	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
98	John	Son	M	1	1900	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
99	John	Son	M	1	1900	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						
100	John	Son	M	1	1900	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia						

Figure 82 Letter from Annie Castleberry to Department of Justice, 28 Nov. 1924 p.1

50 -
 Tipton Ga - R - A
 11 - 28 - 24
 JAN 6 - 1925
 Mrs. Calvin Coolidge
 50-630-2
 50-630-2
 C.B. Mistress of the White House
 DONOVAN-FISHER
 Secy to the President
 Washington D.C.
 I want you to please read this
 and in the cause of justice I
 ask you to please help me I
 want you to please talk to
 our beloved President who is
 your husband and ask him
 to see that the Department of
 Justice shall act on my behalf
 Mrs. Coolidge my husband was
 bought by a Mr. Clinton Shingler
 of Ashburn Va who runs
 a Turpentine Farm the
 price paid being \$44.00

Figure 83 Letter from Annie Castleberry to Department of Justice, 28 Nov. 1924 p.2

And he wanted my
Husband to work out \$85.00
which was double the amount
he paid for him my Husband
refused to work for him and
after he cut his wages and my
Husband found out he was
charging him double what he had
paid for him and we decided to
make wherein my Husband was
arrested and thrown in jail I
and the others was allowed to
proceed on with the wagons
but a Deputy Sheriff overtaken
us and searched our wagons and
taken a revolver that my
Husband had bought me for
my protection in our home he
taken it without warrant of any
kind my husband had been

Figure 84 Letter from Annie Castleberry to Department of Justice, 28 Nov. 1924 p.3

In Jail about an hour but
that same Deputy beat my Husband
up In Jail and made him go
before the City Judge and plead
Guilty & Carrying a Pistol and was
sentenced to 14 months and a sentence
& 8 months because he would not
work for Mr. Shingler he was
allowed no witnesses + no Counsel
I wrote to the Department of Justice
but I cant get them to take up the
matter Mr. Shingler Influence is
so heavy they dont want to give
him trouble about a Negro man
he has been on Chain Gang
now for 15 months and he is
52 yrs old and has always been
a hard worker and a good
husband I am motherless and
Fatherless and has no Brothers

Figure 85 Letter from Annie Castleberry to Department of Justice, 28 Nov. 1924 p.4

4

no one to help me but him I have
to go through the rain and cold
we has been married 20 yrs and
I know the Federal laws does
not allow no man to force another
man to work for him I am sending
for a Clipping from an Atlanta
news paper which will show you
how some are treated in these city
courts by Mexican operators
I am trusting that these men
shall get their justice for the way
they has done my Husband
Respect

C. O. Ross Annie Castiberry
Wife
of Jerry Castiberry

Figure 86 Letter from Mary Haggard to Department of Justice p. 1. "Mary Haggard Letters." The Peonage Files. National Archives II, College Park, MD. *The Peonage Files of the U.S. Department of Justice, 1901-1945*. Department of Justice, Record Group 60, National Archives, College Park, MD.

50-54-0
MAY 14 1927
50-54-0-2
1
DEPT. OF JUSTICE
MAY 11 1927 A.M.
MAIL ROOM
RECORDED
LUHRING-FISHER
Powellsville, N.C.
May 9, 1927.
Dear Sirs:
Is there any law
for a white man to take a
child from its mother,
and work him hard on
the farm for 9 years? And
his mother getting no pay
for his work at all. He is
lunatic foolish. He isn't
real bright. So this white

Figure 87 Letter from Mary Haggard to Department of Justice p. 2

2
man W.H. Hughson took
him to Winsor, and swore that
he didn't have any one to care
for him. He has a mother
and 8 sisters and brothers,
No father, for he is dead.
His mother, Mary E.
Haggard has no one to care
for her he is my main help.
I don't get anything for
his work, at all. I wish
to make him loose from
slavery bring him home,
and get pay for all his
work, he has done. Please
get the matter straight
at once. [over]

Figure 88 Letter from Mary Haggard to Department of Justice p. 3

3
Yours truly,
Mary E.
Haggard,
Powellsville,
N.C.
Rt. 1, Box 23

P.S. Every time he comes
to see any of his people he is
whipped to death nearly. He can
do good work on a farm but
he can't count read or write.

Figure 89 Letter from O.R. Luhring to Mary Haggard

ORL

50-54-0-2

MAY 14 1927

HAF-smh

May 12th., 1927.

Mrs. Mary E. Haggard,
Powellville, Box 23,
N. C.

Madam:

Replying to your letter of the 9th instant, in which you complain that your nine-year old son is being held by one W. H. Hughesone, and that you desire that steps be taken to secure his return to you, I beg to advise you that from the facts stated it does not appear that complaint is one for the attention of the Federal Government. Under the Federal statute which deals with peonage, the holding of a person must be in consideration of the payment of a debt, and it does not appear from your letter that such is the case.

Respectfully,
For the Attorney General

(signed) O. R. Luhring
O. R. LUHRING,
Assistant Attorney General

Figure 90 Letter from Lois Campbell to President and First Lady F.D. Roosevelt p.1.

"Lois Campbell Letters." The Peonage Files. National Archives II, College Park, MD.

The Peonage Files of the U.S. Department of Justice, 1901-1945. Department of Justice, Record Group 60, National Archives, College Park, MD.

Justice
West Plains, Mo
Sept. 1935
Respectfully referred
for acknowledgment
and consideration
Lois McKenry Howe
Recy. to the President
1935
SEP 16 1935
RECEIVED
Dear President
Mr. & Mrs. Roosevelt
The father of our country
Am pleading to you in behalf
of my husband self and children
I am a negro woman
and my family and self have
been held in bondage on
the farm of W. W. Seibert
of West Plains Mo. we have
been with him a number of
years he partly raised my
husband we have three little
girls ages ten, eight and five
I am 32 years old and my
husband 38 we have been treated
worse than slaves my husband
has worked for him and
we have tried to work for him
to work at his home my 10 year old

RECORD
DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE
SEP 18 1935 A.M.
DIVISION OF RECORDS
KEENAN FISHER

Figure 91 Letter from Lois Campbell to President and First Lady F.D. Roosevelt p. 2

2
Mama's you ever heard his Sister
would come over in my house
and say and do terrible things to us
telt him awful false tales on
us to make him abuse us I stopped
working for them and got me
work some other place they became
worse than ever for we only recieved
four dollars for his farm work
and I got nothing his Sister is a woman
of mean type she would do me any
tricks and make my husband
help her we have no home only a
small lot my mother left me where
she died I am almost alone only my
family she decided get into my
farm like wheat and made my
husband cover her tracks and what
she wastest he has to do what she
said or else recieve an abusing
Mr W. W. got close in behind and
my husband had to take the blame
on his self Mr. W. W. pretended to

Figure 92 Letter from Lois Campbell to President and First Lady F.D. Roosevelt p. 3

(3)

daughter and I and received no
pay when we wanted pay so
I was cursed and abused to the
most terrible name a human or
beast could be call even threatened
our neighbors are white they
became tired of the way we are
being treated and so did we last
winter my husbands feet froze and
burst he was not even allowed to
go to the doctor he had to wrap his feet
in paper and rag and keep on
work not even allowed to the fire only
at meal time out at four in the
morning and never got in at
night until 9³⁰ and ten o'clock at
night and then was cursed and
abused for they made him do wha
ever they wanted him to do wheter
it was right or wrong W. W. Ham
would come before out do morning
and night and sit in his chair and
call all off us the most horrible

Figure 93 Letter from Lois Campbell to President and First Lady F.D. Roosevelt p. 4

(4)
I have him paroled to him he only
put up his money - I know he paid
a little money and does most any
thing he wants to he makes most
Monday rule most everything
here got all of the land but they
I don't know we only want to be
honest and not to be treated like
slaves Mr. W. W. Lambert he is
worse than ever he has a sick calf
and it was about to die he gave it to us
we took care of it. Made a cow he said
we put it on his pasture he sold our cow
before we knew it and repayed us the
money he slipped up behind my
husband last Saturday he was
milking and hit him from behind
in the back he cut an awful place
in his head he had to go to the doctor
and turned around and had my
husband locked in jail simply be-
cause he refused to work for him
any more and came out in the

Figure 94 Letter from Lois Campbell to President and First Lady F.D. Roosevelt p. 5

(3)
in the front of my house
called my children and my
self all kinds of mean names
and threatened to shoot us
the white lady who lives across
in front made him shut up
he refused to pay me my husband's
wages and for the time I worked
at his house and for the money
he received for our cow all I get
is abuses for heaven sake please
in heaven I ask he as my plea he
is trying to send my husband to
the penitentiary because he wants
to not what he has paid and he is going
to pay it has it did for heaven
in the name of our dear god in
heaven hear me and help me
I know you are a man of justice
for what you have already did for
the nation our dear god in heaven
help me don't let them take all

Figure 95 Letter from Lois Campbell to President and First Lady F.D. Roosevelt p. 6

for my help from me because we
are only trying to put up just
two small rooms on our lot
not even finishing it just so we
can live in it my children are
to keep in school pages are so
small that I just simply cant
make it with out help some way
oh dear lord hear me hear
my plea for I have no home or
nothing you are just both you
and your wife have a heart I have
read so many passage in the paper of
you because we are colored so many
of them for says we are only old
niggers do us any way with out
leave enough to live better we
arent nothing please god help us
you are a man of brain and justice
may god help us and bless you I am
praying day and night oh father
our country hear my plea

Figure 96 Letter from Lois Campbell to President and First Lady F.D. Roosevelt p. 7

7
my Name is Lois Campbell
pleading for self and family
general delivery
west plains, missouri
cant get hardly any help from
campers he cause I dont have any
money only living on my prayer
W. W. Campbell even refused
us enough money for food -
please hear my plea oh dear
god in heaven I am asking
plea
Lois Campbell
West Plains mo.
general delivery

Figure 97 Letter from Lois Campbell to President and First Lady F.D. Roosevelt p. 8

8
Am sending names I saw
you can communicate with
and they will tell you the same
Ed Threikild
Olga Denny
Elinor Fox
Howard Bales
Bunk Crider
Mr Threikild is the head man
he and ~~Mr~~ Denny the wife
you just what I have written
please let heavens name
help me.

Figure 98 Letter from J. Keenan to Lois Campbell

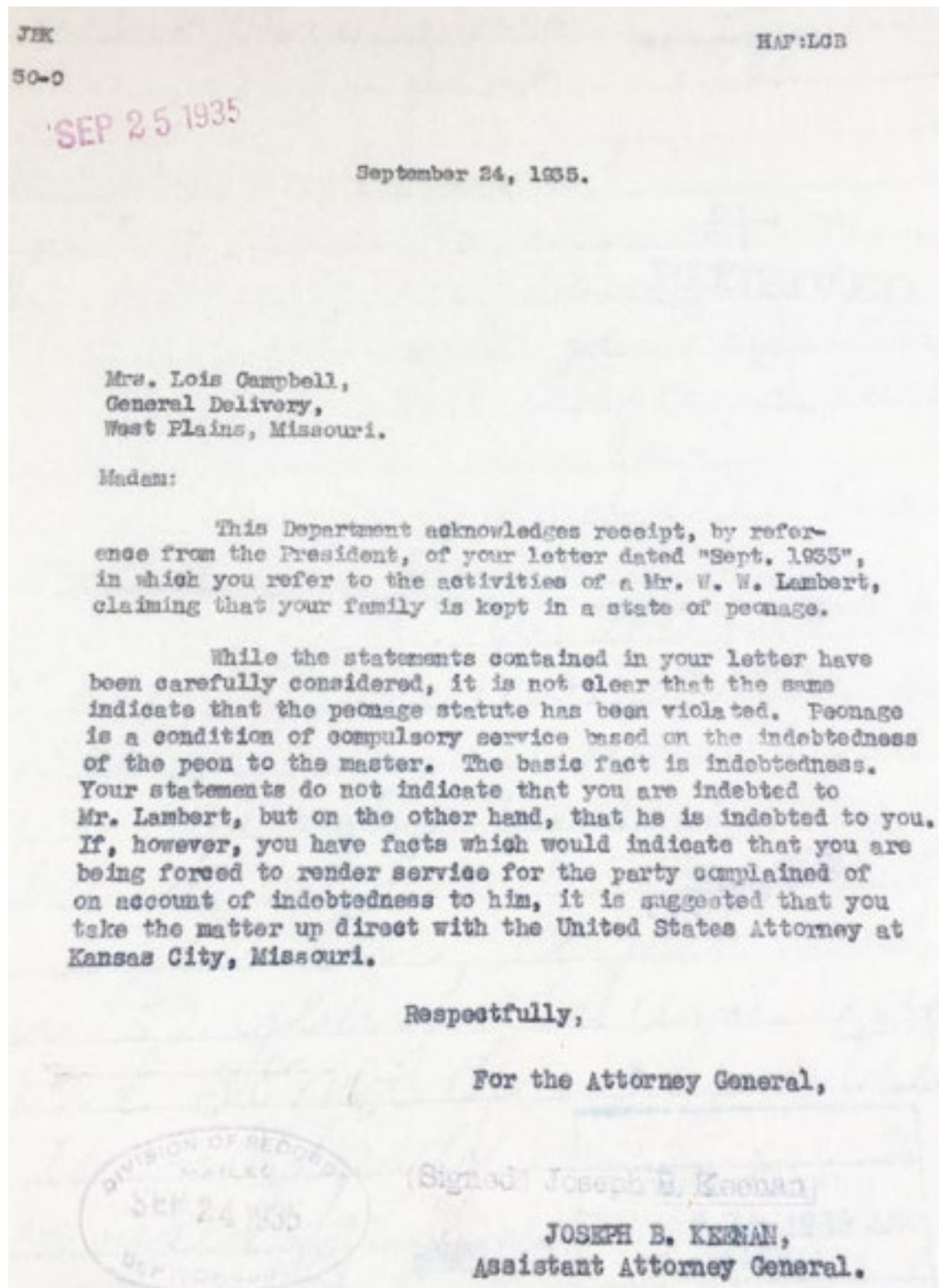


Figure 99 Letter from Ada Gilmore to President F.D. Roosevelt p. 1

"Ada Gilmore Letters." The Peonage Files. National Archives II, College Park, MD.

The Peonage Files of the U.S. Department of Justice, 1901-1945. Department of Justice, Record Group 60, National Archives, College Park, MD.

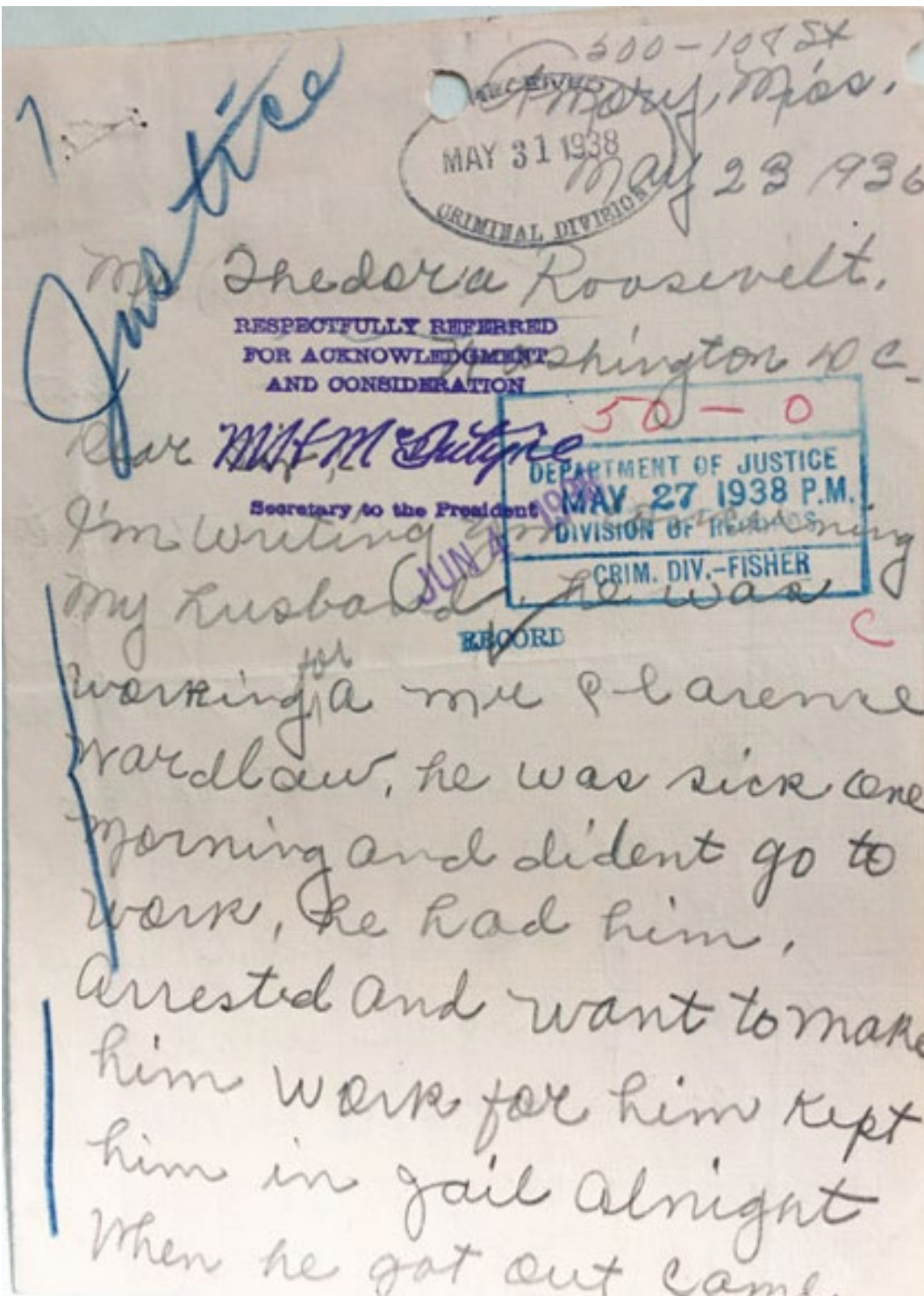


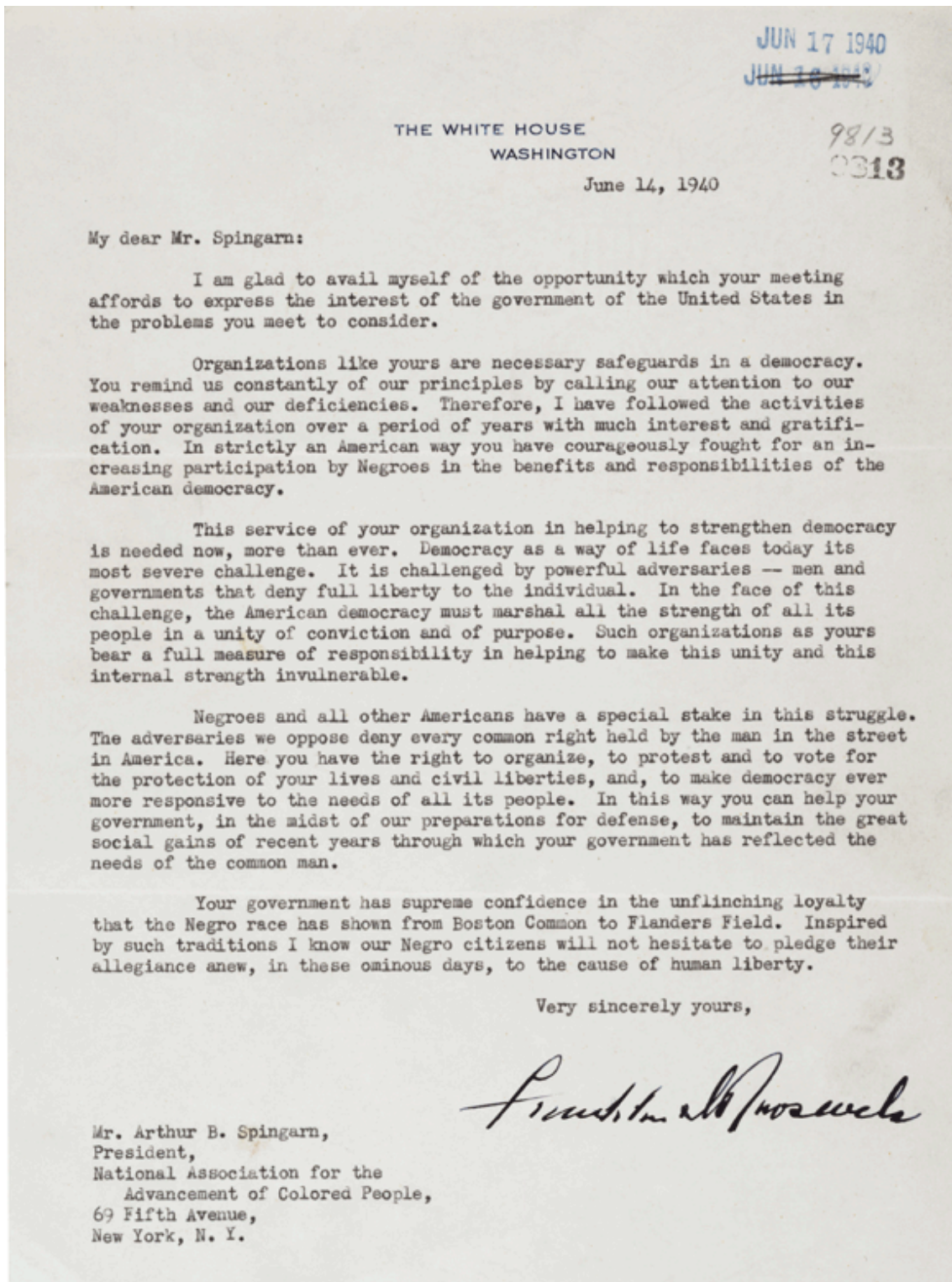
Figure 100 Letter from Ada Gilmore to President F.D. Roosevelt p. 2

Back and got him again
The law is forcing him to
work and my mother is
laying at the point of death
and every day or two they
are over here Mr president
we are poor colored people
over here I dont think we should
be run over and treated
like they do us Beating and
knocking us around like
Slavery. I Sure wish you
would investigate this matter
and help us if you please
Come in without a warrant

Figure 101 Letter from Ada Gilmore to President F.D. Roosevelt p. 3

Or Anything God in Heaven know we
dont out in any thing please keep us and
do some thing for us if they knew we were
writing you they would come over here
and Beat us to death so please do something
for us the law have nearly thrown my
mother in a stroke so please help us
some kind of way because we cant help
our selves & know if they knew I was
writing this we would be killed so please
in a soon from a poor colored
woman *Ada Gilmore*

Figure 102 Letter from Franklin D. Roosevelt to Arthur B. Spingarn
Franklin D. Roosevelt to Arthur B. Spingarn, June 14, 1940 (Gilder Lehrman Collection)



Chapter Seven

Social Justice: The Gross Misunderstandings of Meaning

The final chapter of this dissertation examines how social justice pedagogy can create an avenue in which letters add to the importance of the literary tradition of epistolary writing. I examine the principles and ideas that leading scholars of Social Justice Pedagogy argue should be included in writing and literature courses. Gaining a strong foundation of what social justice pedagogy is allows teaching to take place in which students may become aware of how their own words, narratives, letters, and discourse can contribute to the solution to the injustice throughout our own communities, states, nation, and world. This chapter identifies how using the social justice pedagogical approach can add insights and create more meaning in writing and literature.

The literature contributing to this chapter has significantly changed the way I teach and the responsibility that comes with the act of education. Among those whose work continues to inform my pedagogical practice is Paulo Freire and his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. This work is a call to action to teach toward the liberation of the historically oppressed. Freire argues that in order for liberation to occur, teachers must stop using the “banking method” (71) and instead recognize the wealth of knowledge students come into the classroom with. The classroom is a potential place where all voices are heard and validated and in which a reciprocal relationship is organically created. Freire’s work has influenced leading minds, many of whom I have relied on for my own research, and it continues to have a profound influence on contemporary pedagogical practice.

Sheldon Berman’s essay, “Educating for Social Responsibility,” addresses how education can be tied with “social responsibility.” He advocates for educators to actively teach toward that end. He writes: “For me, social responsibility has meant assisting students to make a personal

investment in the well-being of others and of the planet—doesn't just happen. It takes intention, attention, and time. It may even take redesigning schools and classrooms to embrace a culture that values and creates empowerment, cooperation, compassion, and respect”

(“DigitalCommons@UNO 75). By engaging students in their own education, teachers are empowering those students to take an active interest in their lives beyond the classroom.

Through his approach, the same kind of reciprocal relationship occurs and allow students to be empowered instead of taking the route of believing there is nothing they can do to change the world. Action allows students to become agents of change themselves.

This concept of acting as an agent is clearly mapped out in Marilyn Cooper’s “Rhetorical Agency as Emergent and Enacted.” Cooper argues that “agency” is imperative for students to create meanings and associations with what they write and how that is applicable beyond the classroom. She writes: “Conceiving of agency in this way enables writers to recognize their rhetorical acts, whether conscious or nonconscious, as acts that make them who they are, that affect others, and that can contribute to the common good” (420). In order to enact this type of learning outcome it is incumbent on the educator to become familiar with resources that address what that might look like in a classroom.

“Understanding Education for Social Justice” focuses specifically on practices that enable educators to incorporate themes of social justice pedagogy effectively. The authors, Kathy Hytten and Silvia Bettez, draw from an extensive list of primary sources and secondary sources. One of the primary concerns of this study is the commonality of incorporating social justice into the classroom, but not having a focus that is concentrated on a specific theme, thereby not utilizing what can occur when social justice pedagogy is successfully implemented. In the introduction, Hytten and Bettez write: “The phrase social justice is used in schools mission

statements, job announcements, and educational reform proposals, though sometimes widely disparate ones. ... Despite all the talk about social justice ... it is often unclear in any practical terms what we mean when we invoke a vision of social justice” (7-8). Their work gives insight into the importance of defining what part of justice will thematically tie into curriculum. Their exploration of what is already available in terms of literature on this topic is expansive and is open to educators in all fields of study. This work alerted me to focusing on a specific aspect of social justice in my own curriculum and course creation.

In my courses, I focus on social justice as it pertains to the discussion and investigation of race and ethnicity, through literacy and writing practices. There is a wealth of resources that have become available to educators who seek to do this. I focus on the democratic act of writing and the power that comes through this act. I draw on historical texts in which narrative plays an integral role. Works chosen include *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Slavery By Another Name*, and *Night*, by Elie Wiesel. Fortunately, work like *The New York Times* “1619 Project” by Nikole Hannah-Jones ties what we know about the past to the present and future. The Pulitzer Prize winning commentary is accessible through the Pulitzer Center and is tied to curriculum and teaching resources. Other contributing writers include Ta-Nehisi Coates’ fiction and non-fiction and visual aides; Ibram X. Kendi’s work on the historical connection from before the founding of America and the link to white supremacy. which is vitally important to an understanding of how deep prejudice, discrimination, and overt racism has been culturally engrained into collective memory. His work on antiracism and the invitation for everyone to investigate his or her own beliefs, misunderstandings, and at times “racist” mindsets is tremendously powerful and stands as an invitation to collectively learn and then act. Dr. Clint Smith III, poet, author, and contributor to *The Atlantic*, has written extensively in support of

classrooms being a dedicated space for the work of equity and justice to continue forward. His insights on the power of narrative, literacy, and discussion are many and can be fluidly incorporated into curriculum and classroom practices.

Finally, I use work that has been produced in an effort to push back against the practices of Social Justice Pedagogy, mainly among groups and institutions that are rooted in ensuring students retain the single, white supremacist narrative of America. There is legislation currently being discussed in regard to banning texts like “The 1619 Project” and any other text that speaks to issues concerning inclusion and diversity, which many supporters of a “patriotic education” predict will make “students hate America,” will “brainwash” students who cannot think for themselves, and will force “leftist ideology” onto the future generations of students. Sitting in juxtaposition to “The 1619 Project” is the “The 1776 Project and Commission,” the brainchild of former President Trump and a cabinet of his most trusted supporters. This effort to silence an emerging narrative of truth was signed as an Executive Order in November of 2020. This Order has since been repealed by the Biden Administration but still is embraced and gaining traction, and continues to impede efforts at a more inclusive and diverse education for American students. Contemporary work produced by African American scholars is pushing the opportunity to teach from a Social Justice Pedagogy framework through prescient and powerful words, ideas, publications, and curriculum. Many other works have informed my research and conclusions about the power of addressing aspects of social justice in an English curriculum, many of which have been addressed in the varied chapters of this dissertation. The call for action, in terms of pedagogy, follows below.

Ta-Nehisi Coates opens his book *Between the World and Me* with an epigraph by Richard Wright. It reads: “And one morning while in the woods I stumbled suddenly / upon the thing, /

Stumbled upon it in a grassy clearing guarded by scaly oaks / and elms / And the sooty details of the scene rose, thrusting themselves / between the world and me. ... (Preface). Social Justice Pedagogy is an area of study where perhaps this—a separation “between the world and me”—occurs most, and not just for people of color, but for the now “othered”—white male. 2020 has proven to be a complicated time heightened by a global pandemic and a concentration on an emerging narrative of racism in the history of the United States.

Life is a reoccurring conflict and because of that, approaching a classroom as *the one* instructor who is there to change students’ worlds and enlighten them on the societal problems of systemic racism and white privilege is also not the answer, but perhaps a beginning. In fact, proponents and leaders of Social Justice Pedagogy advocate for the equal right of everyone to “full and equal participation of all groups in a society” (Bell, qtd. in Hytten and Bettez 8). Scholars who have a specialty in Social Justice Pedagogy recognize the need to incorporate definitions of certain terms that carry both negative and positive connotations; these words include: social justice, discrimination, democracy, conservative, and liberal, just to name a few. By defining these terms at the outset of class, students who consider themselves “othered” understand that Social Justice Pedagogy is not about attacking “white middle class men.” Rather, it is to open up a conversation conducted in a dialectical pattern, where students are required to look at all sides of an issue before determining what their “truth” and what the “truth” of others is. Social Justice Pedagogy, if effective, must come with an accompanying definition that is sound but also malleable enough that students in a class can contribute and agree upon a definition of social justice. Once the definition has been agreed upon by each student and the instructor, instruction and discussion can move forward and be meaningful rather than exclusionary.

Hyttén and Bettez note that for years scholars have identified that the problem with social justice is the “difficulty we have making sense of social justice” and what that term really means (9). Social justice seems like a buy-in in most classrooms and in most places where equal opportunity is valued. However, “[w]hen an idea can refer to almost anything, it loses its critical purchase” (8). When scholars have tried, as a group, to define social justice, it has led to unclear definitions of words that are offshoots of social justice: “[I]n terms of the actual work of implementing social justice, their beliefs ranged on a continuum from changing individual assumptions and perspectives to engaging in collective action” (10). Sheldon Berman in his essay “Leading for Social Responsibility,” uses the following example: “The lesson that stands out the most is the importance of a leader grasping this larger purpose, articulating it for all staff, and maintaining a focus on it through even the toughest of organizational issues” (qtd. in “Leadership for Social Justice” 185). Teachers have to model to students what being a leader of social justice and democracy entails. Teachers should have a sincere desire to teach a student about an issue they haven’t thought about or perhaps haven’t been willing to analyze from a different perspective. Conversely, teachers must be willing and open to learning new perspectives from students through their willingness to view issues from varied perspectives. A social justice classroom is not a dictatorship but an open forum where ideas can freely be shared and acknowledged in a safe space.

Bryan Stevenson articulated one of the biggest obstacles in the classroom and likewise society when he stated:

... In this country we don’t talk about slavery, we don’t talk about the native genocide, we don’t talk about lynching, we don’t talk about segregation. You start talking about race and people get nervous. You start talking about racial

justice and people are looking for exits. ... People get very, very uncomfortable when you start talking about how we begin to deconstruct this legacy of bias and segregation. ... Most people in this country know nothing about what happened to African Americans in the first half of the 20th century, when 6 million fled the American South as refugees and exiles. Most of us know nothing about the brutality of the domestic slave trade and the way thousands of African American families were torn apart, where women were brutalized and raped, where men were reduced to objects, where children were sold away from their parents. ... I think we have to articulate the wrong that was done. ... We have to feel some of the shame that we should feel about this history of inequality. I want us to stop tolerating bigotry and bias in ... the school place. I want something fundamental to happen. (*NowThis*

<https://www.facebook.com/NowThisNews/videos/686803581986681/>)

It can be a Herculean task to get to the point where this kind of discussion can take place in a productive manner. Teaching from this pedagogical platform is becoming increasingly difficult. In President Trump's "1776 Project and Commission," we read:

Against this history, in recent years, a series of polemics grounded in poor scholarship has vilified our Founders and our founding. Despite the virtues and accomplishments of this Nation, many students are now taught in school to hate their own country, and to believe that the men and women who built it were not heroes, but rather villains. This radicalized view of American history lacks perspective, obscures virtues, twists motives, ignores or distorts facts, and magnifies flaws, resulting in the truth being concealed and history disfigured.

Failing to identify, challenge, and correct this distorted perspective could fray and ultimately erase the bonds that knit our country and culture together. (Executive Order 13958 2 Nov. 2020)

Although the “project” was disbanded within the first few days of the Biden administration, the attack on education continues. In the April 5, 2021 issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, the featured article is titled “‘Anti-American,’ Pushing ‘Marxism,’ And More: Do You Recognize Your College Here? A Free-Market Group Escalates Its War Against Higher Ed, One Robocall at a Time.” Emma Pettit writes:

The attacks have only escalated further. In December 2020, the foundation came out with a 36-page report on “social justice ideology” at Boise State. Co-authored by Yenor, the Boise State paper contends that academics and administrators across the country are “no longer merely pushing progressive politics.” Worse, they now aim to transform colleges into institutions “dedicated to political activism and ideological indoctrination.” Occasionally punctuating its points with quotes from writers and philosophers on the nature of good and evil, the report recommends nine reforms, including that departments in gender studies, sociology, global studies, social work, and history be eliminated. (Research has shown that faculty members have little influence on students’ political attitudes, and that the thesis of “liberal indoctrination” is overblown.) “Social-justice culture” at the institution has grown “beyond its infancy and is headed toward adolescence,” it says. ... In March, the organization urged citizens through Fix Idaho Colleges to contact specific House members and tell them to make “real cuts.” Tell Rep. Megan Blanksma, a Republican, that “you’re sick and tired of

universities churning out left-wing activists and social justice warriors,” instructs a recent message.

Similar calls and reports are published for the University of Idaho. A professor of English and Environmental Studies at Boise State, Chris Norden, who was on the receiving end of one of the “robo-calls,” wrote a letter to the editor, noting that, “Idaho Freedom Foundation has gone a bridge too far in its McCarthyite robo-call attacks on Idaho educators, claiming college students are being ‘trained to attack law enforcement and the Second Amendment,’ and to ‘hate America and American values’” (*Moscow-Pullman Daily News*). Education, specifically higher education, is being challenged and attacked, in an effort to intimidate professors and instructors who are teaching from the lens of Social Justice.

In order to stimulate classroom discussion and get students excited about writing, it has to “matter” to them. The goal is to encourage students to think critically about literature, about local, national, and global issues, and to teach them about how good writing and careful reading affects these issues. As essential as the “why” of the course is the “how,” and specifically, how can the classroom be a place where students feel safe to engage in critical conversations that a college classroom can and should facilitate. Ideally, students would then be willing and able to make those connections to what they read and write applicable to their lives. The freedom to be able to think and process ideas is one of the most important aspects in any classroom.

Teaching critical is essential. Students should be encouraged, as Mr. Keating does in *Dead Poets Society*, “to learn to think for themselves again.” One should invite and encourage students to consider other perspectives and ideas that are outside of their everyday thought. The classroom could then facilitate students to be able to step outside of their prescribed thoughts and view a text through a lens that allows them to consider other perspectives. Most everyone brings

their own personal set of beliefs to every text they read. Because of that, sometimes students are not willing to open up to a new way of thinking. In order for this to occur in a safe and open classroom, teachers can use the philosophy of Social Justice Pedagogy as a daily practice.

Christopher Merritt, in an essay titled “Social Justice: What Is It? Why Teach It?” states:

“Teachers cannot escape the politics of education because they ‘mediate the relationship between outside authorities, formal knowledge and individual students in the classroom.’ In this role, teachers can either offer an uncritical, ‘neutral’ education that supports the status quo or choose to empower students to question dominant ideas, possibly leading to social change. When this occurs, ‘education [becomes] the practice of freedom.’ If schools are seen as potential sites for the cultivation and reproduction of democratic values, one can argue that teachers have a pivotal role in the ongoing struggle for social justice” (93). Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, in October of 2009, stated: “I believe that education is the civil rights issue of our generation. And if you care about promoting opportunity and reducing inequality, the classroom is the place to start. Great teaching is about so much more than education; it is a daily fight for social justice.” I find it an exciting time to be in the profession of education, especially as it pertains to issues surrounding social justice. I don’t know that there is a more accessible area to incorporate this than in the study of writing.

In my role as a teacher of reading and writing I find that the most satisfying aspect of my profession is observing my students as they gain an understanding of the power of words.

Marilyn Cooper, in her article “Rhetorical Agency as Emergent and Enacted,” describes this kind of thinker, whether it be a teacher, student, or member of a thinking society, as an “agent” (2).

She doesn’t stop there, however, when she defines agency in the following terms:

We have for a long time understood an agent as one who through conscious intention or free will causes changes in the world. But I suggest that neither conscious intention nor free will ... is involved in acting or bringing about change. ... I argue that agency is an emergent property of embodied individuals. Agents do reflect on their actions consciously. ... Agency instead is based in individuals' lived knowledge that their actions are their own. (2)

The end result would naturally occur as students become “agents of change” in the world. It is my hope that this will occur through throughout their education and through what they learn and read in my class and through the Social Justice pedagogical approach.

More often than not, students do not come into university classrooms with knowledge of the complex history surrounding the need for the rise of Social Justice Pedagogy. In 2018, I attended a lecture by Dr. Ibram Kendi, author of *Stamped from the Beginning*. During the lecture Dr. Kendi addressed the rise of white supremacy in the United States of America, beginning with Cotton Mather in the mid-1600s, moving forward to visit the time occupying slavery, and ending with insight into how injustice continued well into the 20th century with the writings of Madison Grant, and where that puts us today. Kendi states:

One hundred years ago a wealthy New Yorker by the name of Madison Grant published a best-selling book called *The Passing of the Great Race*, and this book was translated into several languages, including German, and it became the bible of somebody by the name of Adolf Hitler, and *this Passing of the Great Race* author made the case that the “great race,” of course an Anglo-Saxon white race, was basically under attack by everyone else. By immigrants from Eastern Europe

and Southern Europe, by non-white immigrants, [and] by civil rights activists.

(qtd. in Italie)

By addressing the scholarship and widely held beliefs by a national collective, Kendi fluidly situated The United States of America in its present state, but only through taking the audience through events of the past which have led to present notions about discrimination and equality. Afterward, during the question and answer, a student asked Dr. Kendi what he could do in the fight for equity and justice. Kendi's answer was simple: "Learn your own history and encourage others to do the same." Because the history of the United States is a complicated one, often the only historical background knowledge students come with are overviews and simplifications of a complex history, a history that has turned into one monotone collective story. For the white male student who feels attacked or who feels "othered" in a social justice classroom from the offset, there is work to do.

In 2019 Dr. Kendi published his best-selling book, *How to Be an Antiracist*. Within a year a hands-on journal became available with the call for anyone and everyone to begin to document their own progression, success, failure, and resilience in the journey to become antiracist: *Be Antiracist: A Journal for Awareness, Reflection, and Action*. In the introduction, Kendi writes that "the heartbeat of antiracism is confession. It is self-reflection. It is realizing there is no such thing as *not racist*, no such thing as race neutrality." Kendi argues that a person is *either* "racist or antiracist," there is no middle ground. Kendi also explains that in the quest to be an antiracist every individual must *choose* where they stand in ever shifting situations and places. He writes, "No one *becomes* a racist or antiracist. These are not fixed categories. We can be racist one moment and antiracist the next. What we say about the races, what we do about inequity determines what-not who-we are in each moment" (Introduction). The hope of

Kendi is that by addressing injustice and inequity from each individual's own perspective, that productive, compassionate, difficult conversations can occur with "colleagues, friends, and loved ones." The prompts that are found at the top of each journal entry page are ones that can allow student and instructor reflection and encourage students to reflect, instead of react, to the perspectives and experiences of those who have had different ones. Kendi is not alone in his work to actively engage readers.

There are myriads of sources geared toward sound pedagogical practices that can be incorporated into the classroom. Referenced above was the "1776 Project," created in direct opposition to *The New York Times* "1619 Project" by Nikole Hannah Jones, who was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for "Commentary" for "The 1619 Project" in 2020. In the "1776 Commission Report" opposition to resources that fill in the gaps of an incomplete national and cultural narrative are numerous. In part, the report reads:

By turning to bitterness and judgment, distorted histories of those like Howard Zinn or the journalists behind the "1619 Project" have prevented their students from learning to think inductively with a rich repository of cultural, historical, and literary referents. Such works do not respect their students' independence as young thinkers trying to grapple with social complexity while forming their empirical judgments about it. They disdain today's students, just as they doubt the humanity, goodness, or benevolence in America's greatest historical figures. They see only weaknesses and failures, teaching students truth is an illusion, that hypocrisy is everywhere, and that power is all that matters. ("1776 Commission Final Report" 36)

The “1619 Project” is one in which the present is firmly rooted in the past. In order to add to, not erase, the dominant narrative of the United States, Jones employs the talents of leading African American scholars, journalists, scientists, healthcare professionals, and literary writers. “The Literary Timeline” featured in the project, combines prose, poetry, fiction, and the essay as a vehicle to address injustice from enslavement, to emancipation, to Jim Crow Black codes, to the Civil Rights Movement, to where “America” now sits—a nation embroiled in disproportionate inequity and opportunity for many Black Americans. The entire project is available via the Pulitzer Center, offering curriculum for all levels of educational programs at no cost. The “1619 Project” is also offered in podcast form. The podcasts include introductions, interviews between Jones and outside contributors, archival sound bites, and short pieces from the literary timeline, read by the authors of the creative work. Dr. Clint Smith III, author of the opening and closing poems in the literary timeline of “1619,” in response to the creation of the “1776 Project” writes: “Teaching the actual history of slavery does not necessitate skewing, omitting, or lying about what happened in this country; it takes only an exploration of the primary source documents to give one a sense of what it was and the legacy that it has left” (“Telling the Truth About Slavery”).

Engaging in Social Justice Pedagogy in the classroom calls for the practice of investigation into topics that are not political issues, but are human issues. As Freire writes, “No one can be authentically human while he prevents others from being so” (85). Through the exploration of social justice, teachers and student can engage in discussion that is driven by empathy and understanding instead of polarization and defensiveness. The emphasis Freire puts on the idea of shared humanity is essential in a classroom driven by social justice. Another incredible source is “Learning for Justice” which is a program that comes from the Southern

Poverty Law Center. There are articles, teaching support materials, and videos that specifically address how the classroom, at any level, can be a place where social issues can be explored and minds opened.

A literature class based on Social Justice Pedagogy must become one that addresses history through the use of literature as an interdisciplinary course. Literature allows a single narrative in the once monotone collective, and one in which history is no longer an overview, but is one that is about someone and their life struggles through systemic discrimination. By using literature that addresses issues concerning social justice, students soften and may actually admit that they have gained new insights into a topic they hadn't thought about before. They might even accept that perhaps they don't actually know everything. This doesn't mean that because a class focuses on social justice that the instructor is some "hippie/liberal," a term I was once labeled, but instead is a person who genuinely cares for the state of the world and the perpetuation of equity and justice for every person, not just in the United States, but throughout the world. It should be made clear that that equity and justice is also intended for the white male student.

The conversation surrounding social justice is not just about race. Social justice is an umbrella term, and underneath there are multitudinous terms that factor into the examination of social justice. Perhaps this student is coming from a place where his life has changed due to shifts in the economy, the outsourcing jobs to other parts of the world, and importing products internationally, rather than domestically. He might find himself in a place that has nothing to do with race or sexism but has something to do with classism. Paulo Freire in the year before his death said that, "although one cannot reduce everything to class, class remains an important factor in our understanding of multiple forms of oppression" ("Pedagogy of the Oppressed" 14).

In the Introduction to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Donaldo Macedo states, “what is important is to approach the analysis of oppression through a convergent theoretical framework where the object of oppression is cut across by such factors as race, class, gender, culture, language, and ethnicity” (15). A social justice classroom has to be a place where each of the aforementioned “objects of oppression” are addressed and validated. However, what the student decides to do with the information remains his choice. Allowing, even encouraging, agency is necessary to offer to each student, whether they agree or not with what the teacher is proposing. However, as the teacher you must become a “responsible rhetorical agent” in order to successfully teach a class incorporating Social Justice Pedagogy (Cooper 420). Marilyn Cooper writes, “Individual agency is necessary for the possibility of rhetoric, and especially for deliberative rhetoric[.] ... Responsible rhetorical agency entails being open to and responsive to the meanings of concrete others, and thus seeing persuasion as an invitation to listeners” (420).

As a teacher I have thought long and hard about those ideas and have tried to take the advice from scholars in this area, however, on November 9, 2016, I was tested, and quite frankly I failed. I woke up devastated from the outcome of the 2016 Presidential Race, upset that Utah’s vote went to support Donald Trump, meaning a lot of my neighbors and friends voted for someone who, I believe, is not a fighter for social justice, but one who would despotically rule. I was also devastated that this country was in a place where Hillary Clinton’s alleged email scandal would outweigh sexual assault allegations, and so forth. The morning of November 10, I taught an English 1010 class and prepared to have a discussion around why and how this election became so divisive in homes and communities. My class at the time was somewhat diverse and I felt that I knew each student well enough to be able to have an open and meaningful dialogue. It

became apparent very quickly that this was not the class to have this discussion in, that is, for at least one student—Cache.

Cache was a student who sat in the back of the classroom, often with a smirk on his face when we discussed the inequities between people of color and white people. He would often be willing to participate in meaningful dialogue respectfully but somewhat sarcastically. As I began to address the outcome of the election with the class, I am sure that I was very negative about the group of people who voted for who I see as a misogynistic, racist, elitist, despicable human being, who had been elected The President of the United States. As the class discussion carried on, mostly led by me, I could see the interest fade from his eyes and anger rising up. I knew I had gone too far. The discussion I was leading was not what a social justice scholar would advise. I had momentarily become what I hated, and the look in his eyes alerted me to this.

Class ended and I asked Cache to stay after to meet with me. I apologized for leading a one sided discussion and admitted that I did recognize my fault in silencing others due to my position as the teacher of the class. That was not my aim; I let my personal ideologies surface and I apologized for being so angry and hateful about this situation. Even though my feelings carried on throughout the leadership of former President Trump, as an instructor it is certainly not my job to “speak louder and longer” than anyone else in order shut down other perspectives which differ from my own. This is what propagandists and dictators do, but is not what I should ever do as a teacher who frames each class around social justice. I apologized to Cache and vowed to never again become what I hate. Cache was very kind and accepted my apology. From there on out, he always participated in class and continued to take other classes from me. He wrote in his final essay the following:

There were things in this class that I didn't know. There were points of view that I had never looked at before. There were ideas that never crossed my mind. I think Professor Vause was spot on when she said "you learn the most when you're put in uncomfortable situations." I will say it was not always easy to sit idly by and say nothing. Yet, it was very good for me to understand that it was okay for someone to have opposing views from mine. It helped me to understand, more than I already did, the power of others' words. I learned that others have amazing insights on things I didn't know about. Others have experiences that have led them to believe the things they do. It was an eye opener to hear others experiences, and points of views. I now can see the importance of listening to others' words and to learn how to do and read things that will change your life; how to look for the honest truth; how to find information to lead you to the truth.

I wanted, as Ayers remarks, to "assume a deep capacity in students, an intelligence (sometimes obscure, sometimes buried) as well, obstacles to understand and overcome, deficiencies to repair, injustices to correct. With this as a base, the teacher [I could] create an environment for learning that [would have] multiple pathways to success" (Ayers xxv). I was surprised to read Cache's response but was gratified by how each of us had evolved throughout the course of this class.

In an English 2510 class, Masterpieces in Literature, I taught books again that center on social justice. In this class there was one student who was always willing to comment, however, each of his comments were directed at the idea that social justice was a concept that had gone too far. Below is an excerpt from his journal:

I'm not all that much of an activist on these things. I get the point of it, but I happen to believe that the concept of social justice is mostly obsolete in the United

States today. ... There certainly was a time and place for social justice in America, but it would appear that the pendulum has swung too far in the wrong direction, at least in my opinion. ... When I say I enjoyed the class, I absolutely mean it. But it wasn't necessarily because of the books we read. Actually, the thing I enjoyed the most was your teaching style. It was a personal, open dialogue that encouraged disagreement and freedom of thought rather than suppressing it. I never felt uncomfortable to speak my mind. I've really had some bad experiences with "Nazi" professors who literally punish disagreement of thought, and was more than relieved to discover that this class was the polar opposite of that. Thank you. Based on the classes agreed definition of liberal which reads: "open to new behavior or opinions and willing to discard traditional values. Or (of education) concerned mainly with broadening a person's general knowledge and experience, rather than with technical or professional training," and you're a true liberal -- I really mean that with utmost respect.

When I read this journal I was surprised but very pleased that he saw our classroom as a place where all thoughts and ideas were welcome as long as respect for each student and me was maintained.

Freire states, "that in order for this struggle [social justice and equity] to have meaning, the oppressed must not, in seeking to regain their humanity (which is a way to create it), become in turn oppressors of the oppressor, but rather the restorer of the humanity of both (*Oppressed* 44). It is therefore, the job of the social justice teacher to be cognizant of the direction they themselves are taking. We cannot become what we are fighting against. As Michelle Obama put

it, “When they go low, we go high.” It is never the job of the instructor trained in the pedagogy of Social Justice to create a divisive classroom, but one that is inclusionary of all.

I have learned through the study of leading scholars of Social Justice Pedagogy that classrooms and curriculum have the ability to change lives, including my own. I have learned to be more objective about issues currently facing us at WSU, ISU, in our community, nation, and world and that to be able to have productive discussions in class I have to remember that there is a lot I do not know, because as Kendi claims, “Culture is not genetic. It is taught, accepted, and perpetuated” (Kendi). When this idea is understood, discussions that might change the narrative we have always heard, become possible, even exciting and life altering for both the instructor and the student.

Moving forward in my career as an educator, my goal is to take what I have learned from my advanced studies and my experiences as an educator. I have come to several conclusions, which I believe can contribute to improvement

1. Addressing the affective nature of using stories and metaphor to address how we (student, teachers, and community members) are all connected.
2. Acknowledging that students have a story that is developing but yet to be written and one that can change according to their goals
3. Understanding that my classes can prepare and equip my students to become authors of what they want their stories to be and to do so successfully.
4. That there is a world unfolding before us and creating narratives all around us.
5. That those narratives are shaped by human relationships, experience with social justice, understanding of the world beyond the United States, access to diversity, and life experience.

In addition, the physical environment of our own lives will also shape these narratives. What I want to see happen at WSU and in my classes in particular, is to challenge the narrative of inferiority and the

ideas and narratives that support this idea. Equity and access have to be foundational areas in which narratives can be constructed.

Once a community begins to push through the narrative of consumerism and production, where money is the main concern, and begins to realize that humanity matters far more than money, students can begin to see the relevance of their own narratives. Through the formation of those narratives and recording the narratives of others, students can begin to question assumptions that devalue the stories of our lives. There are things we can do and do now to engage with our community. We can be part of a change that can shape the future of what Ogden and WSU can look like. As a teacher of writing and literature, I have concluded that narratives can shift our preconceived notions about people, places, and events. For the past several years, I have been studying Social Justice Pedagogy as part of my PhD studies and have incorporated this approach into all of my classes.

In a talk addressed to students of the Ogden School District at Ogden High School in November of 2016, Anthony Doerr said:

Without stories, we become trapped in the prison of the familiar; all we would know is the normal (me) and the stereotype (the other). In fundamentalism, the collective is everything, 'we' is defined against 'they': the collective defines itself by lumping other people into collective oppositions. Systemic hatred--whether it's perpetuated by slave owners, Nazis, the Taliban, Boko Haram, or the extremists we are currently calling ISIS--depends on objectifying people into groups, dismantling its adherents' abilities to understand and share the feelings of others, and minimizing the complexity of the individual. But in novels, stories and poems, we 'celebrate' the individual. Novels, I believe, are uniquely qualified to

offer compassion, empathy, and attentiveness; in a good novel, openness is inherent. The lesson of every single one of my favorite novels is this: the truth is more complicated than I thought. Reading and writing stories is not, despite appearances, about spending lots of time with oneself. It's about learning to be able to look 'beyond' the self, beyond the ego, to enter lives and other worlds. It's about honing one's empathy so that a story might bridge the gap between the personal and the communal.

This is something that as a community we need to be aware of and be guided by.

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