{essays in history}

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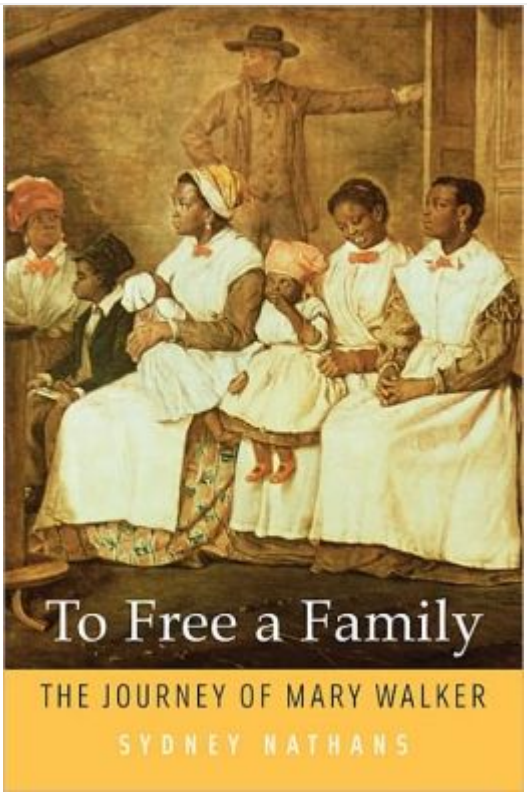
To Free a Family: The Journey of Mary Walker



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Reviewed Work(s)

To Free a Family: The Journey of Mary Walker. By Sydney Nathans. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012). Pp. 330. Hardcover,

$29.95.

With *To Free a Family: The Journey of Mary Walker*, historian Sydney Nathans provides an illuminating narrative of how a light-skinned, blue-eyed North Carolina slave escaped her wealthy master "to learn whom to trust and how to survive" in the abolitionist North (3). As a domestic slave, Mary Walker was "a cultivated person" but also her owner's "pet" (24). During the 1840s, she traveled to Philadelphia with her master, Duncan Cameron, and his daughters, one of whom sought medical treatment in the city. In August 1848, the master's pet slipped away to hide among Philadelphia's network of abolitionists and Underground Railroad conductors. Nathans speculates that Mary escaped because she feared being sent to Alabama, without her family, to Cameron's son and to the imminent sexual exploitation by a "young and reckless master" (30). On the heels of the Northern-supported Fugitive Slave Act, Mary fled to Boston where a former Presbyterian minister Peter Lesley and his wife Susan employed her as a domestic servant in-hiding. The book is compelling because, although a fugitive, Mary made repeated attempts to contact her former owners in hopes of securing her family's release to join her in the North.

Nathans first learned of Mary Walker in Herbert Gutman's *The Black Family* and credits Gutman and Alex Haley's *Roots* for challenging the belief that slavery destroyed black families. He assigns Mary Walker to a group of better-known women who also escaped but persevered to recover their still enslaved families (Harriet Tubman, Harriet Jacobs and Sojourner Truth endeavored to re-unite with their families in the North). For Nathans, Mary's story is "more wrenching, more protracted, and probably more representative" to the enslaved woman's experience than these better-known heroines (3).

Nathans emphasizes that the significance of his study of Mary Walker's experience is that it is emblematic of "the secret strivings of thousands who sought to free family members still living behind the Cotton Curtain" (4). He relies upon extensive family papers of those whites who knew Mary, while also revealing that only three of Mary's letters have been found. As a result, Mary must largely be understood today through how whites saw her. The available sources reflect the story of "white

runaway slave" who suffered depression from being separated from her children and from the exploitation that her enslavement had entailed (199). Nathans contends that Mary's story is representative of thousands of slaves. However, it can only be representative of domestic slaves, and even fewer of those who traveled north with their masters, who had the opportunity to witness and then to grasp for freedom.

To tell Mary's story, Nathans must also describe the enslaved South. With a subtle comparison, Nathans depicts a prosperous North engaged in a service economy, free from the slave driver's whip, to that of the South with wretched tobacco fields and with an enslaved labor force compelled to work by violence. Moreover, young domestic slave women could be "taught and formed" to become complicit concubines (93). Mary likely succumbed to this exploitation before her escape.

Mary's owner, Duncan Cameron, should not be assumed to have been a typical slaveholder. He owned plantations in three states and held over one-thousand slaves. Moreover, Nathans points out that it is indeed remarkable that we know Mary's exact birth date and that she was educated with white children. That Mary and her children were mulatto helps to explain these things about them. Nathans cites one observer of the Cameron household who wrote that it was "full of proud half-breeds, neither properly enslaved nor fully freed" (73). Following Mary's escape, her son Frank left too. The master's son, Paul Cameron, referred to the Walker family as "ungrateful pets" and suggested that Frank had a good chance of remaining a fugitive because he was "so nearly white that with ninety five men in a hundred he will pass for a white man" (98-99).

Nathans's book offers a significant contribution to the historiography of Northern abolitionism. The book also debunks any notion of altruism associated with it. Early in 1853, Mary learned that her former master Duncan Cameron had died. To that end, Mary and the Lesleys enlisted the aid of New England's foremost abolitionist attorney, Ellis Gray Loring, to contact the Cameron sisters in hopes of negotiating the purchase of Mary's family. Mary's justified obsession to reunite with her family in Massachusetts conveys the agony that she must have felt when Loring and his wife rejected her plea on the principle that, even as abolitionists, they would not enrich a slave owner to win the freedom of the enslaved. The Lorings tried to persuade Mary to regard her family in North Carolina as dead. The following year a life-threatening illness,

combined with Mary's convalescence into 1855, resulted in Susan Lesley's mother's refusal to care for Mary in return, which suggests a context of Northerners' abolitionism as potentially a superficial demonstration that otherwise lifted Northern whites above heathen, slave-driving Southerners.

By September 1856, Mary was prepared to quit the Lesley household, which elicited Peter Lesley's scorn. Consequently, Lesley rejected notions of friendship "especially between different orders, races, and classes of humankind" (141-2). When faced with Mary's possible departure, Susan offered Mary a salary increase to $1.50 per week, which, as Nathans notes, represented the average wage for a domestic servant.

Nathans presents a striking contrast between Northern white and black reactions to the Emancipation Proclamation, writing that Northern blacks, particularly those in Boston, received the decision as a prelude to eradicating the continent of tyrants and initiating "a national era of fair play for the black man" (190). He observes that white abolitionist New Englanders, however, mobilized to keep "the freed slaves at work in the South" instead of "coming north as pauper emigrants" (194). To illustrate the point, Nathans writes that Mary went to work for the Ware family in 1862. Charles Ware joined his fellow Northern missionaries among the Sea Islands that year, studying the *Cotton Manual* and noting the "offensively servile" nature of the "nigs" whom he found to have been "rather more agreeable on the whole … much preferred to the Irish" (196). Mary joined the Wares on the Sea Islands for six months in 1864, not as a missionary among the emancipated slaves but as her employer's housekeeper. Nathans finds that Mary neither related to the region's freed people nor judged the Wares' mission favorably.

Following the Civil War, Nathans cites antislavery writer and Lyman friend Lydia Maria Child who "visualized the creation of new identities and even national reconciliation through racial intermarriage so that "People of color would move toward white skin, embrace white civilization, and thereby assimilate and ascend" (p. 233). When Sherman took Raleigh, North Carolina in early 1865, General O.O. Howard, who would direct the Freedmen's Bureau, found Mary's children, Agnes and Bryant, at the Cameron mansion and told them that their mother was waiting for them in Massachusetts. They reunited months later. Bryant

fulfilled Child's assertion by marrying an Irish immigrant in 1866, despite his mother's objection.

Mary Walker lived neither a white nor black existence in the antebellum United States. Freedom seemed to taunt her through the actions of a paternalist slave owner and then through the benevolence of her abolitionist protectors. Both as a slave and as a fugitive, Mary accommodated those around her. Yet, she persevered and re-gained her family. In June 1870, another employer bought a home in Cambridge for Mary Walker, 54 Brattle Street, and deeded it to her. She died two years later.

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