

Introduction

In 2003, Ruth Simmons, the president of Brown and the first African American to lead an Ivy League university, commissioned a report on the institution's early connections to slavery. The report, released in 2006, confirmed long-standing rumors: slavery had played an essential role in establishing Rhode Island's first college. Enslaved people were among the multiracial workforce that constructed the first buildings, which were built with wood donated by a local slave-trading firm. Furthermore, slaveholders and slave traders dominated the Board of Fellows and Trustees. These "recent revelations" contrasted with the story that Brown had told about itself for at least the last half century—that it was a bastion of tolerance, founded by abolitionists.¹

Brown, not surprisingly, is far from alone. In the past two decades, all of the Ivy League schools, as well as a wide range of other universities and colleges, are figuring out how to reckon with a history that, for many generations, has been either willfully disguised or unconsciously ignored. Indeed, administrators, alumni, and current students, not to mention the rest of the country, often know little about the relationship between their institution of higher education and the institution of slavery.² Brown University's reliance on slave labor and use of donations from slaveholders and slave traders were typical for the region, not the exception but the norm. Throughout the North slavery permeated nearly every business

of early America—from trading to banking, from insurance to shipbuilding, from rum distilling to agricultural production, from textiles to tool making. After Brown's report, the investigations spread. Magazines and journals published special issues devoted to slavery in New England; conferences and public forums were held to discuss the legacy of slavery in the region. Descendants of Rhode Island's most dominant slave-trading family, the DeWolfs, released a film and wrote a book about their ancestors' involvement in the American trade in African slaves and its legacy to them.³ The dawn of the twenty-first century brought a surge of public interest in the history of slavery in the United States, especially outside the American South: slavery, it turned out, was everywhere.

We now know that the institution of slavery was central to the social and economic development of the northern colonies and states.⁴ Historians have long noted that the "key dynamic force" in New England's economic success was slave-related commerce.⁵ Furthermore, we know that slavery and capitalism, far from being separate and incompatible systems, were utterly interdependent. Indeed, the interchangeability and coexistence of slave and free labor allowed capitalism to exploit the most efficient workers: enslaved cultivators undergirded the growth of the American economy. In sum, slave labor was central to the modern capitalist rise of the United States as an industrial and financial power in the Western world.⁶

In this book I use economic history to investigate how the business of slavery shaped the establishment and growth of lifelong inheritable bondage in the North and how it affected the process of emancipation and black freedom. I define the business of slavery as all economic activity that was directly related to the maintenance of slaveholding in the Americas, specifically the buying and selling of people, food, and goods. The business of slavery, as distinct from the institution of slavery, allowed New England to become an economic powerhouse without ever producing a staple or cash crop—sugar, rice, or cotton.⁷ Our understanding of slavery has grown tremendously in the last several decades, but it has been dominated by a few particular visions of enslaved people, particularly the horrors of the Atlantic slave trade and people toiling under the threat of the lash in the hot sun. I would like to continue efforts to expand

our comprehension of this peculiar institution. To do so, I focus on the business of slavery and its effect on the lived experience of enslaved people and their “free” descendants. I want to use the seemingly clear realm of economics to explore the often ambiguous experiences of the enslaved: how did the business of slavery shaped the experience of slavery in Rhode Island and what it was like to be both black and free in a society that was economically dependent and invested in black bondage.⁸

Rhode Island is the tiniest state in the North, yet had a surprisingly large role in slavery. In the eighteenth century, Rhode Island merchants dominated the American trade in slaves and provided the West Indies with basic necessities; local merchants also held a relatively large number of enslaved people. In the nineteenth century, after they had begun to legally dismantle slavery, Rhode Islanders still managed to make a profit from black bodies through the manufacture of slave clothing. These deep and lasting economic commitments to the business of slavery shaped the state and black life. The history of New England merchants, tradesmen, businessmen, and abolitionists has been well documented, but the lives and experiences of enslaved and free black people in the region have received comparatively little attention.⁹

Enslaved people lived and labored in Rhode Island from the birth of the colony, in 1636, until slavery was abolished in 1842. These bound people did not labor to build plantations, nor did they toil to produce cash crops like their counterparts in the American South, the West Indies, and South America. Nor were their labors critical to building colonial infrastructure and feeding the locals, like those of their northern counterparts throughout New York and New Jersey. Instead, they labored in the business of slavery. They assisted their enslavers in distilleries that manufactured rum and shops that manufactured barrels, and the barrels of rum were then packed onto slave ships and used to purchase slaves along the West African coast. Enslaved Rhode Islanders also cared for the livestock and cultivated the crops that eventually fed enslaved people in the West Indies. Their work, in other words, reflected the business of their enslavers. Ironically, in the post-Revolutionary period, the free descendants of enslaved Rhode Islanders were almost completely excluded from the business of slavery because they were

restricted from working in the new manifestation of the northern industrialization: the factory. Consequently most free black Rhode Islanders worked as domestics, day laborers, and sailors.

Before and after the War for American Independence, white northerners, in one way or another, invested in the business of slavery. However, nowhere was this commerce more important or apparent than in Rhode Island. During the colonial period, the West Indian and Atlantic slave trades were the lifeblood of the colony's economy. Merchants in the two biggest cities, Newport and Providence, transported local agricultural products, especially livestock and cheese, to sugar plantations in the West Indies in exchange for molasses; the same merchants then brought that molasses back to Rhode Island and sold it to local distillers, who used it to make rum, the colony's number one export. Rhode Islanders also trafficked more than 60 percent of all the North American trade in African slaves.¹⁰ And by 1750 Rhode Islanders held the highest proportion of slaves in New England: 10 percent of the total population was enslaved, double the northern average. In contrast, enslaved people made up just 2 percent of population in Pennsylvania, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts and 3 percent of the population in Connecticut.¹¹ In other words, Rhode Islanders proportionately held five times more slaves than other New Englanders.

Local merchants were the last New Englanders to stop slave trading before the outbreak of war in 1776 and the first to begin slave trading after the peace in 1783. Although Rhode Islanders were among the first to pass, in 1784, a gradual emancipation law ending hereditary slavery, they were among the last northerners to abolish the institution altogether, in 1842.¹² In the antebellum era, Rhode Islanders remained heavily invested in the business of slavery through the textile industry, especially the manufacture of "negro cloth," a coarse cotton-wool material made especially to minimize the cost of clothing enslaved people. Seventy-nine percent of all textile mills in Rhode Island manufactured "negro cloth."¹³ These economic commitments to the business of slavery dictated the texture and rhythms of slave life, stalled the emancipation process, and circumscribed black freedom.

While the business of slavery is an important frame for this book, my primary concern is how enslaved and free blacks

responded to the restrictions imposed by a socioeconomic system that depended on oppressing people of African descent.¹⁴ There have been a few attempts to write the history of black people in Rhode Island. Those written before the major historical critiques of slavery and emancipation are apologist histories of slavery and lack critical analysis of the institution. The next installments of African American history in Rhode Island were intensely local, focusing on the black experience in Providence, Newport, and the Narragansett Country during or after the American Revolution.¹⁵ The experiences of black Rhode Islanders have also been significant parts of the study of slavery and the process of emancipation in the North.¹⁶ While black Rhode Islanders' experiences form parts of these histories, no single monograph explores the history of black people in Rhode Island from slavery to freedom. This study complicates understandings of the origins of northern slavery and explores how slavery continued to have an enormous influence on the economics, culture, and politics of the North even after it was eliminated by northern states in the post-Revolutionary period.

Though the number of enslaved and free black people in the region never approached the sheer volume of slaves in the South, slavery played a central role in the North and particularly in Rhode Island. The development and maintenance of the institution of slavery in North America required a proslavery consensus among northerners and southerners alike, particularly as their economies grew more complex, more profitable, and more interdependent. The racial ideology of white supremacy and black inferiority was not confined to the southern colonies and states; whites, North and South, created a national ideology that hinged upon their own superiority.¹⁷ I draw on manuscript collections, public records, government documents, business correspondence, and organizational records to reveal the histories of black Rhode Islanders. The result is a detailed account of how white Rhode Islanders' ideological commitments to and financial investments in the business of slavery shaped the institution itself as well as the protracted process of emancipation and the limitations placed on black freedom. Furthermore, placing the experience of black people at the center of my analysis highlights how enslaved and free black people pushed

back against their bondage and the restrictions placed on their freedoms.

Though we do not often talk about it, especially those of us living in the North, slaveholding was common throughout the northern colonies. African slaves first entered northern colonies in the 1620s, concentrated in the Dutch encampment that would become New York City.¹⁸ By 1700, 40 percent of New York City residents held slaves. In Pennsylvania one in three residents was a slave of African descent.¹⁹ However, most northern enslavers held just one or two slaves. Consequently, most enslaved people in the North lived in isolation from one another and without the built-in institution of the large farm or plantation had to find alternate means of creating community. Enslaved northerners were jacks of all trades; they labored as carpenters, shipwrights, sailmakers, printers, tailors, shoemakers, coopers, blacksmiths, bakers, weavers, goldsmiths, farmhands, cooks, maids, and caretakers.²⁰

Throughout much of the colonial North, the status of enslaved people was ambiguous; in fact, during the seventeenth century, many enslaved people were held as indentured servants.²¹ However, by the turn of the eighteenth century most northern colonies had followed the lead of Massachusetts and established slave codes.²² In the North, the laws of slavery assigned the enslaved a status that simultaneously reduced them to chattel and made demands of them as legal persons—whichever suited their enslavers.²³ This arbitrary treatment of slaves, as chattel in some instances and legal persons in other instances, made northern slavery particularly bewildering and appalling. The limited legal acknowledgment of personhood seemed technically mild but was in practice draconian. For example, enslaved northerners had a right to life and a day in court; however, they were bought, sold, willed, and inventoried. By the early eighteenth century, every northern colony had special laws, procedures, and punishments for people of Native American and African descent. Some restrictions included curfews and provisions against travel and purchasing liquor, holding livestock, and gathering in groups of four or more. Slave codes attempted to prevent running away, theft, drunkenness, damage to public property, assaulting or defaming a white person, disturbing the peace, rioting, and insurrection.²⁴

The American Revolution transformed the institution of slavery in the North and led to its slow and uneven destruction. During the war enslaved people ran away in unprecedented numbers, volunteered for military service in exchange for their freedom, and lobbied their enslavers for freedom. The shortage of fighting men and the subsequent use of slaves as soldiers also contributed to the breakdown of bondage. Following the war the enslaved petitioned and filed suit for their freedom in the new democracy. Sometimes they were successful and sometimes they were not. In the three decades after the war nearly all the northern states began to legally dismantle slaveholding, for both the actions of enslaved people and the rhetoric of the Revolution had called slavery into question as never before. In Massachusetts in the 1780s, a series of slave-initiated court cases showed how slavery was incompatible with the state constitution and its declaration of freedom for all. Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New York, and New Jersey passed gradual emancipation laws between 1780 and 1804, stipulating that children born to slave mothers after a certain date were free but were indentured to their mother's master.²⁵ Some states freed children when they turned twenty-one or as late as twenty-eight. Piecemeal emancipation allowed white northerners to slowly wean themselves off slave labor. Gradual emancipation laws put an expiration date on legally sanctioned white "mastery" and black "slavery." Yet while these shifts in the legal landscape were transformative, as we shall see, sustaining and growing investments in the business of slavery were equally transformative, ensuring that bondage remained a defining, if now geographically distant, aspect of northern life.

Blacks born after the American Revolution came of age in a country that had complex, contradictory, and contested racial ideologies. While northern citizens were dismantling the use of slave labor, their southern counterparts were committing to it more fully. Furthermore, even within the North, new laws did not mean a new consciousness. While most northern states had begun the process of legally ending black slavery, the white citizenry of the North remained explicitly racist.²⁶ Black people were free, but they were far from equal; indeed, even the most liberal of the early nineteenth-century northerners considered the notion of equality

between the races untenable. What is remarkable is that despite this overt racism, the personal wealth, schools, and churches in black communities all grew in the first three decades of the nineteenth century, largely as a result of the establishment of mutual societies.²⁷

Historians have long argued that black freedom was circumscribed in the North.²⁸ Several have asked what it meant to be a “free” black person in a country that protected race-based slavery. I too pose this question and ask what it meant to be a free black person in a society intimately involved in sustaining chattel slavery throughout the Americas. Blacks in Rhode Island lived in a colony, then a state, that depended on the West Indian rum trade, that dominated the North American slave trade, and that made enormous profits from the plantation societies of the South through the manufacture of “negro cloth.” How did these economic realities shape black life?

The experience of enslaved and free blacks in Rhode Island followed the general contours of the larger northern story. Rhode Islanders were engaged in the same economic activities—slave trading and providing West Indian slaveholders with basic necessities—that occupied their neighbors; however, the intensity of their involvement set them apart, making Rhode Island the ideal place to study how the business of slavery shaped the emergence of slavery, the experience of slavery, and the birth of black freedom, however circumscribed, in the North.²⁹ Rhode Island is the best place to study the impact of the business of slavery because it is both representative of and unique in how slavery shaped and enriched the North. Like their northern neighbors, Rhode Islanders bought and sold people and supplies that kept plantations in the Americas thriving; Rhode Islanders, however, were the most deeply invested in the business of slavery. In other words, Rhode Island is both exemplary and exceptional. Moreover, economic investments in the business of slavery continued and actually increased in the state after passage of the gradual emancipation law. Investments in the business of slavery stunted black freedom. Free blacks were shut out of the emerging industrial economy and increasingly found themselves victims of white violence and restrictive laws that denied them full citizenship, most notably those banning

black voting and mandating segregation in schooling. In response to economic, political, and social marginalization, black Rhode Islanders banded together and built institutions to challenge the limitations on their freedom. Thus the experience of free black Rhode Islanders must be understood within this economic reality. To put it bluntly, the lives and the worth of many white Rhode Islanders were predicated on the subordination of black people.

I began researching slavery and emancipation in Rhode Island after Ruth Simmons commissioned the report on Brown University and its connections to the institution of slavery. After reading the report and secondary literature that highlighted Rhode Island's overt investments in slavery, I was surprised to find out that no one had written a history of how those economic ties to the business of slavery had shaped the lives of the enslaved and curtailed the freedom of their descendants. It is my hope that by looking at both the experiences of individuals and the vast realm of economics we can understand how the business of slavery shaped the lives of enslaved and free blacks in the colony and later the state of Rhode Island. I have attempted to reconstruct their lived experience through the documents of the state, the business and personal records of their owners, and the few firsthand accounts left by enslaved and free black Rhode Islanders. The history of Rhode Island must include their stories because they too shaped Rhode Island and the United States of America.