FLEE NORTH

A FORGOTTEN HERO AND THE FIGHT FOR FREEDOM IN SLAVERY'S BORDERLAND

SCOTT SHANE

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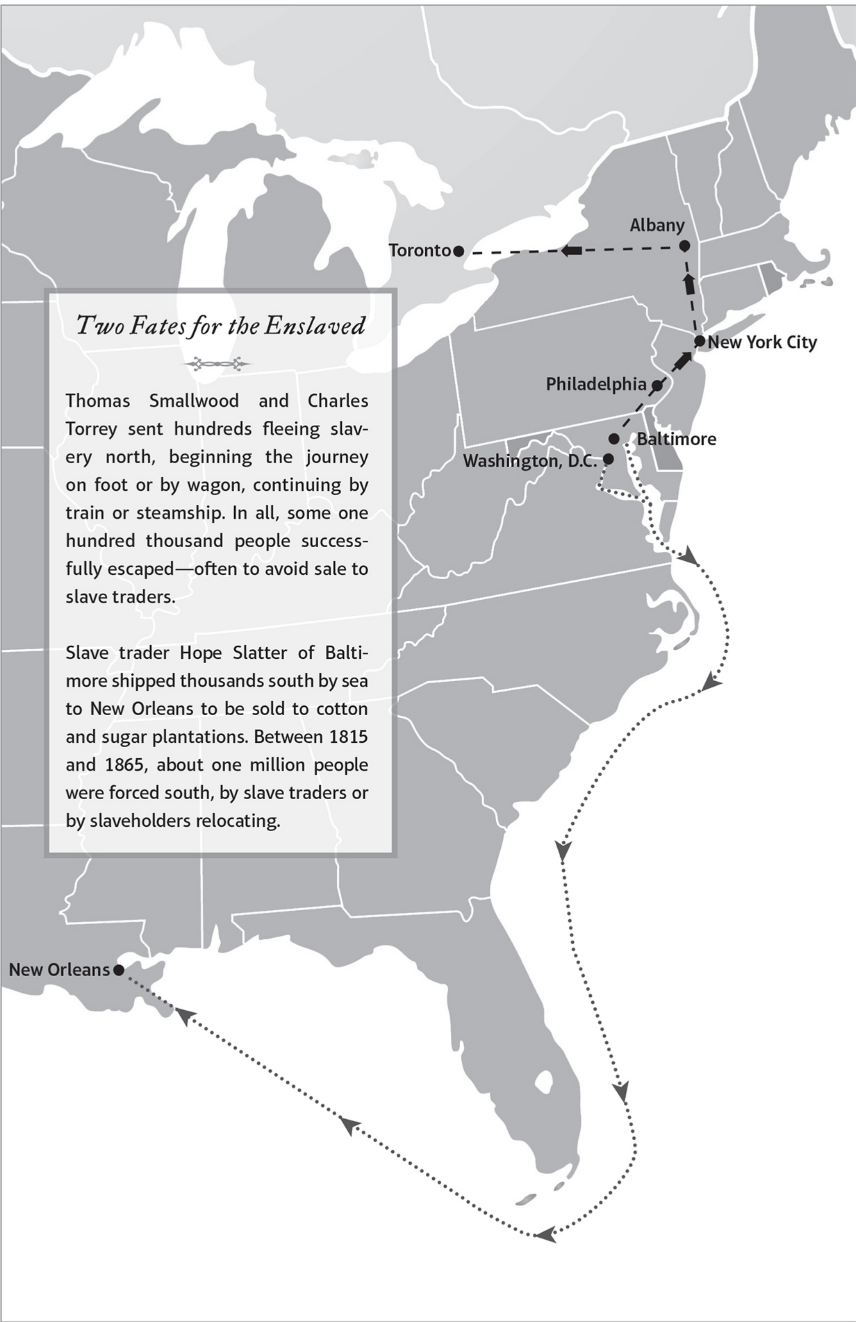
For Francie, my whole-souled partner in all things



Toronto
Albany
New York City
Philadelphia
Baltimore
Washington, D.C.
New Orleans
Two Fates for the Enslaved
Thomas Smallwood and Charles Torrey sent hundreds fleeing slavery north, beginning the journey on foot or by wagon, continuing by train or steamship. In all, some one hundred thousand people successfully escaped—often to avoid sale to slave traders.
Slave trader Hope Slatter of Baltimore shipped thousands south by sea to New Orleans to be sold to cotton and sugar plantations. Between 1815 and 1865, about one million people were forced south, by slave traders or by slaveholders relocating.

Prologue

There were a hundred details for Thomas Smallwood to worry about as he organized yet another mass escape from slavery in the nation's capital. But when he wrote about this particular episode years later, he paused to savor one especially satisfying memory: a half dozen pampered Washington slaveholders awakening to discover that something had gone drastically wrong. Prosperous people accustomed to thinking of themselves as masters and mistresses found themselves, quite literally, at a loss:

> Morning arrived, and with it a terrible uproar. One had no one to get breakfast: Ann had absconded taking with her all her children; another had no one to black the boots, to set the table, and to wait breakfast—Bill had taken French leave, and gone about his business; and a third, had no one to drive the coach to church; others were also in as bad a fix.

At the urging of Smallwood, a Black shoemaker who had bought his own freedom and was now engineering escapes from bondage on an unprecedented scale, some fifteen enslaved people had slipped away from their slaveholders' houses on a sweltering August night in 1842—taking what Smallwood called "French leave," a sardonically elegant term for skipping work. One of the fleeing families had to overcome a poignant obstacle: a daughter, only five years old, had been assigned the job of staying up all night, every night, in her enslavers' bedroom, beside the baby's cradle. Should the infant stir she was required to instantly rock the cradle "to prevent it from disturbing their slumbers."

The cradle rocker's enslaved mother managed to spirit her daughter from the bedroom without waking the baby or its parents, "as if by special providence of the Lord," Smallwood wrote. All fifteen people managed to gather as planned that

night, but their liberators had run into trouble procuring the getaway wagon and the horses to pull it. So the uneasy fugitives had to hide for an extra day with Smallwood's help, scattered around the city in the homes or sheds of trusted friends, keeping an eye out for their angry enslavers and the bounty-hunting police who prowled for runaways.

On the second night, Smallwood handed off this latest band of freedom seekers to his white partner, Charles Torrey, a devout young New Englander —"that most excellent and whole-souled Abolitionist," in Smallwood's words— and the group took off, with Torrey driving the wagon. A tense overnight journey brought them to a safe house in Baltimore, where the fugitives again had to be on the lookout for police constables and slave catchers looking for runaways. Another day's travel would bring them to the Susquehanna River and the Pennsylvania line, with its promise of liberty.

As the suddenly bereft slaveholders realized what had happened, there was pandemonium. The wagonload of enslaved people had a value on the auction block of some $200,000 in today's dollars. They had vanished simultaneously from households all over Washington—a heist on the scale of a major bank robbery, if the bank held human deposits. The slaveholders organized a pursuit, assuming the fugitives had departed the first night, but were puzzled to find no trace of them on the roads and rough trails north of Baltimore. The next day the baffled search party turned back—and headed south on the very road that Torrey's delayed wagon was now taking north. The fugitives' escape seemed doomed.

But they got a remarkable break—in this case, no metaphor. An axle snapped on the overloaded wagon, and Torrey, a bookish Yale graduate not entirely accustomed to such driving, steered it off the highway into the thick woods of northeastern Maryland to try to make repairs. There, from the shelter of trees, the fugitives watched their pursuers pass south on the way back to Washington.

A week later, from the Hudson River town of Troy, New York, Torrey wrote to Smallwood, mocking the enslavers' bloodless language about their "property," a standing joke between the two men.

"I have arrived at Troy safe, with the chattels," he wrote, "and am now shipping them on board of a canal boat for Canada."

Did Smallwood, taking satisfaction in their clandestine success, choose to keep quiet about it? Far from it. He celebrated the runaways and mocked their oppressors in the column he wrote for an abolitionist newspaper in Albany, where Torrey was shortly to take over as editor. Smallwood's lengthy dispatch ran under

a headline lampooning the proverbial claims of slaveholders about the supposed contentment of their enslaved workforce.

"More Fleeing from Happiness," it read.

In the distinctive satirical writing style he was developing, Smallwood addressed by name the enslavers who had just suffered such a painful loss—and also named those who had fled to freedom in the north, most of them to Canada. To the aggrieved slaveholders, he offered his mock sympathy, "paying my respects to the large number who have recently been afflicted by the loss of their beloved servants!" And he went on to bare the slaveholders' secrets—secrets those they had held in bondage knew only too well. He exposed one who had been raping, or attempting to rape, a young woman who had fled. Another he denounced for his brutal whippings of those he enslaved. Of two others, who were known to be smarting from their losses, he reported with pleasure that they had been overheard vowing never to buy another slave. He addressed several of them sternly, including a doctor, William H. Gunnell—the man who had required the little enslaved girl to rock his infant's cradle:

> On reflection, don't you think it was cruel, Dr. Gunnell, to make that little child, only five years old, lie on your chamber floor, and keep awake to tend your own *white* baby, while you and your wife slept?

But if the slaveholders saw intimate details of their lives revealed, they did not learn who had the audacity to expose them. Smallwood signed his dispatch to the Albany paper with his usual pseudonym, borrowed from a favorite writer, Charles Dickens. Samivel, or Samuel, Weller was a comic character in Dickens's bestselling *Pickwick Papers,* and Smallwood posed as Weller's son, Sam Weller Jr. And to make sure his stinging missives hit their mark, he asked his editors to mail a copy of the appropriate issue of the newspaper, the *Tocsin of Liberty*, to the slaveholders he had identified. Finding themselves taunted and humiliated in print, they could only wonder just which of their neighbors this Sam Weller might be.

It was the latest triumph in a rocky and risky business. Smallwood and Torrey had begun to describe their spiriting away of people from bondage with a new term, one Smallwood was the first to use in print: "under ground rail-road." Smallwood used it initially to ridicule the slaveholders' wide-eyed bafflement that the people they enslaved, whom they often derided as incapable of planning anything or even looking after themselves, somehow managed to disappear

overnight without a trace. He fashioned this mythical transport system into a trope of Black empowerment and a lash for the enslavers and their hired hands, the slave-catching police. The name caught on.

The goal of the two swashbuckling abolitionists was not just to help people by the score escape from slavery and start a new life in the north. They hoped their tactics might add up to a strategy: that by stealing the human assets of the enslavers, they might destroy the slaveholders' faith in the profitability of treating people as property. Disillusioned by their losses, Smallwood and Torrey imagined, enslavers would conclude that actually paying people for their labor might be a safer and cheaper bet. And then, they imagined, the malevolent institution on which the American economy had been built just might begin to crumble.

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A daring activist and searing writer, self-taught and selflessly motivated, Thomas Smallwood was a striking figure in the American antislavery movement who has largely been lost to history, either mentioned in passing as a Black sidekick to Torrey or overlooked altogether. He deserves much more.

Having acquired his own freedom, Smallwood risked it again and again for the sake of others still in bondage. With Torrey, he forged an escape network that became a model for radical action up to the Civil War, operating a decade before the far-better-known Harriet Tubman. A man of wonderful wit, Smallwood not only gave the underground railroad its name (picking up the phrase from a casual remark by a frustrated slave-catching constable). He also left a short, fascinating memoir. And in his pseudonymous newspaper dispatches, he crafted unique, real-time accounts of escapes from slavery that add up to a satirical masterpiece, Dickensian in style and rich in detail. In his blunt, shrewd, often sardonic analysis of American racism as the enduring plague that underlay slavery, he was far ahead of his time.

But the man who called himself, with a wink, the "general agent of all the branches of the National Underground Railroad, Steam Packet, Canal and Foot-it Company" would fade into oblivion. His bold white partner, Torrey, would get a much-deserved monument and two biographies. Smallwood, whose achievements were by many measures greater, would receive no such attention. Until recently, his remarkable newspaper columns lay moldering and forgotten in a Boston Public Library warehouse.

The unusual partnership of the older Black man and the younger white man commands attention, too. They forged an enterprise that was breathtakingly audacious. They worked courageously together to liberate people in Washington, Baltimore, and beyond, helping them to flee north. When the two men could they tried to do it wholesale—not in ones or twos, but whole families and carriage loads at a time. They did not passively wait until enslaved people decided on their own to run—they actively encouraged them to flee. In shifting their efforts from theoretical debates about the fate of the enslaved to practical action, and in their merciless ridicule of the enslavers whose human property was vanishing, they hoped to erode the very institution of slavery. For a time, their operation was a blazing success.

Yet despite the pose of ostentatious celebration and carefree glee that Smallwood cultivated in his newspaper columns, he and Torrey knew they were engaged in a deadly serious enterprise, one that was making dangerous enemies. Organizing escapes was hazardous enough for a white man like Torrey, as events would prove. But even nominally free African Americans in the 1840s in the mid-Atlantic lived in a separate reality, under the tyranny of white leaders who reserved full freedom for their own kind. Smallwood, who had freed himself but still walked the legal tightrope reserved for free Black Americans, knew he was working against a relentless clock. Soon enough, the blows Smallwood and Torrey struck for liberty would rebound against both men, with dire consequences.

Their adversaries included not only the slaveholders Smallwood portrayed as hapless and degraded and the police officers paid to do the enslavers' bidding but also, perhaps most perilously, the slave traders who operated from Washington's mall and Baltimore's harbor. These human traffickers were directly competing with them for Black bodies—every person who successfully fled north was one more who could not be sold south. Even as Smallwood and Torrey were discreetly collecting enslaved people to lead to freedom, Hope H. Slatter, the region's leading slave trader and this book's third major character, had agents combing the towns and countryside, buying and carting away in shackles those the slaveholders deemed excess labor or a source of easy cash.

On October 21, 1842, the day before Smallwood sent his latest rollicking satire to Albany's *Tocsin of Liberty,* Slatter, whose "Cash for Negroes!" advertisements ran daily in *The Baltimore Sun* and other newspapers, signed the paperwork for his latest shipment south: seventy-seven men, women, and children, ages one to forty, who had been locked in Slatter's private slave jail near

Baltimore's waterfront until he had accumulated a cost-efficient shipload. They were forced aboard the ship *Burlington* and departed on a cold, wet, fetid journey to New Orleans, to be sold to the highest bidder and dispatched to the cotton and sugar plantations of the Deep South, where the lives of the enslaved were often cut short by a labor regime of appalling brutality. Many had been torn from their wives, husbands, mothers, fathers, children; most were leaving behind, almost certainly forever, everyone and everything they had ever known.

Slatter saw the likes of Smallwood and Torrey as lethal enemies to his business, and they returned the favor. He was regularly featured in the pages of the Albany paper as the iconic human trafficker, a diabolical character wringing profits from human tragedy. But business was steady, and Slatter had rationalizations at the ready. His story would end far more happily than those of his adversaries.

Together, the stories of Smallwood and Torrey, on the one hand, and Slatter, on the other, capture the contrasting possible fates that awaited the men, women, and children held as property in slavery's mid-Atlantic borderland—slave states that were tantalizingly close to free states. They could try to flee north, with great difficulty and at huge risk to their lives and safety. Or they could take their chances and stay put, enduring whatever physical or sexual abuse their enslaver might perpetrate, and risk being sold south at his whim. It was a terrible, terrifying predicament, and the two desperate possibilities fed on one another, as Smallwood knew well.

"I frequently had lots of slaves concealed about in Washington," he wrote, "who had fled to me for safety when they got wind that their masters were about to sell them to the slave traders."

But there was an excruciating irony: if the enslaved were caught trying to escape to avoid the hazard of being sold south, their punishment would often be exactly that. Their owner, no longer trusting that his property was secure, would drop the would-be runaway at Slatter's jail to await the next ship to New Orleans. This intertwining of the domestic slave trade and the underground railroad would continue to the Civil War. It is a stirring, agonizing chapter in the story of a foundational American crime, one whose consequences continue to haunt us every single day.

Thomas Smallwood's signature in 1842, twelve years after he purchased his freedom and as he began organizing mass escapes from slavery, was a mark of his self-education and self-creation. No image exists of Smallwood, who would soon become a writer of extraordinary insight and style. [*Smallwood v. Coale*, National Archives]

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The Most Inhuman System That Ever Blackened the Pages of History

A memory that would stay with Thomas Smallwood all his long life mixed pride with wry wonderment. As a young boy he was taught to read by the couple who enslaved him, a skill that distinguished him not just from other enslaved children but from most Black adults as well. In their rural community of Bladensburg, just east of the District of Columbia boundary, he became a sort of neighborhood spectacle, asked repeatedly to perform for the friends and neighbors of his owner.

> They were amazed at the fact that a black or colored person could learn the Alphabet, yea, learn to spell in two syllables. I appeared to be a walking curiosity in the village where I then lived, and when passing about the village I would be called into houses, and the neighbors collected around to hear me say the Alphabet and to spell baker and cider, to their great surprise, (which were the first two words in the two syllables of Webster's Spelling Book.)

It is an affecting scene—the cute Black prodigy wowing his white and Black neighbors with his mastery of the leading primer of the day. The passage presages Smallwood's dual identity in adulthood, as a Black man but one whose literacy, wide learning, and political consciousness would set him apart, first in slavery and later in freedom. He would develop the power to operate behind enemy lines in a slave society, studying the enslavers and their allies while rarely attracting notice.

Yet years later, as he wrote his memoir, Smallwood did not linger for long on the sentimental appeal of his childhood skill at spelling. Characteristically, he

went straight to the larger context and its bitter significance in politics and power. He knew his boyish feats were seen as extraordinary only because he was Black and enslaved:

> This may afford the reader a glimpse into the abyss of intellectual darkness into which the African race in America has been so long purposely confined, to serve the avarice and ends of their tyrannical oppressors.

This poignant childhood memory and Smallwood's brutally clear-eyed adult understanding of it capture a critical fact about Smallwood's early life. He was born into slavery, but unlike the vast majority of people in bondage, he benefited from unusual enslavers who helped him educate himself and obtain his freedom. His "slave narrative," as his memoir has sometimes been labeled by the few scholars to take notice of it, is no catalog of the horrors he suffered. Instead, he devotes only a few paragraphs to the thirty years he spent in slavery, lingering mainly on his luck in the owners he got by virtue of a will and a wedding.

Smallwood was born on February 22, 1801, in Prince George's County, a Maryland jurisdiction of tobacco plantations and small farms bordered to the west by Washington, D.C. When he sat down decades later to write his memoir, he said not a word about his parents, a curious omission that may have signaled lingering personal pain. It is quite possible that Smallwood, like so many enslaved children, was separated permanently from his parents in very early childhood, either because they were dispatched to different farms by the dictates of an estate settlement or because his parents were sold to a slave trader who shipped them to the Deep South. Archival records shed no light, but Smallwood would later write fiercely of the domestic slave trade: "Who can calculate the amount of suffering occasioned by the sudden snapping of conjugal and parental ties, among those poor creatures, by an unrighteous law?"

What is known is that as small children Thomas and his sister, Catharine, called Kitty, were inherited by a Prince George's County woman, Sarah Ferguson, and her children. In 1808, Sarah Ferguson married a cousin, John Bell Ferguson. It turned out to be a stroke of luck for Thomas, then seven. John Ferguson was a Methodist minister who frowned upon slavery, but by Smallwood's account he was constrained by the terms of his wife's inheritance:

> Myself and Sister had been bequeathed to the Lady whom he married and to her children. Although by the terms of the will he could not dispose of us, at pleasure, yet by paying the amount at which we were valued he could do so by mutual agreement with those interested. That he did (for he was no friend to slavery) by paying $500 for me, but with the amount he paid for my sister I never became acquainted.

For both John and Sarah, it was a second marriage, and both brought children to the match. Because Thomas and Kitty had been bequeathed jointly to Sarah and her children, Ferguson was obligated to buy them from his new wife and stepchildren. Having spent the considerable sum of $500 (a very high price for a child at the time, some $15,000 today), he chose not to immediately grant Thomas his freedom. Instead, Ferguson told young Thomas that he would have to go to work and gradually pay off the $500 debt, not an unusual arrangement at the time.

Unlike many slaveholders, though, Ferguson put legal weight behind his promise of eventual emancipation. He went to the Prince George's County courthouse and filed a document in 1815, when Thomas was fourteen, pledging to free him when he turned thirty. Ferguson may have intended his deed of manumission, witnessed by his neighbor Thomas Bowie, to reassure Smallwood that the promise of freedom was sincere and irrevocable. He might also have wanted the scheduled emancipation placed on the record in case Ferguson should die in the meantime, to preempt any move by Sarah or her children to ignore the arrangement and try to reenslave Thomas Smallwood for life.

"To all whom it may concern," Ferguson wrote in the wordy, official style of such documents, he had "released from slavery liberated manumitted and set free and by these presents do hereby release from slavery manumit and set free my Negro Boy Thomas." The deed incorrectly makes Thomas a year older than he was, saying he was fifteen "and able to work and gain a sufficient livelihood and maintenance."

Given the treatment of most enslaved people at the time, Smallwood appears to have found the arrangement fair. He later spoke fondly of Ferguson. Though he reached the end of his term of enslavement in 1830 with a small debt to Ferguson remaining, Smallwood insisted on carrying out his end of the bargain to the letter: "Hence it left me in debt at the end of my service $60, which I subsequently paid to the last farthing." His gratitude to Ferguson was surely due in part to John and Sarah's decision to teach the enslaved boy to read—a legal but highly unusual step in Maryland. "What little I know of the letter," Smallwood would write,

referring to literacy, “was obtained in the following manner, for I never had a day’s schooling. The gentleman before mentioned, as my master, and his wife, learned me the English alphabet, and to spell in two syllables.”

Smallwood’s earliest years showed him how random events and decisions in the world of white people could determine the fate of the enslaved. Perhaps because of those early lessons, he would later take particular satisfaction when the actions of enslaved people—taken with his own determined help—turned the tables and upset the plans and comfort of their enslavers. But in his case, the lottery of white power happened to break in his favor. The sense that he was the beneficiary of rare good fortune seems to stand behind his later decision to act so boldly on behalf of those still in slavery.

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One feature of the despicable treatment of enslaved African Americans was to leave them out of official records except when their existence was noted in a legal accounting of a slaveholder’s possessions. It’s not quite right to say they were erased from history—in many cases, there was no record that could be erased. They were “chattels,” the chilling word (often used ironically by Torrey and Smallwood) that meant movable property and came to be applied routinely to people in slavery, stripping them of humanity and character. The United States Census collected only the sex and age of enslaved people in a household, not bothering with their names. Other official records were just as sketchy, and newspapers took little note of people in bondage except when they ran away or were accused of a crime. To trace the early life of a man like Smallwood requires looking for places to glimpse his reflection, however distorted or imperfect, in the lives of his owner and employers and in the events that shaped his time and place.

We know, for example, that from early childhood Smallwood lived with the Fergusons in Bladensburg, a modest river town about six miles northeast of the U.S. Capitol. In the early nineteenth century, Bladensburg was a significant port on what was then called the Eastern Branch of the Potomac River—today the Anacostia River. But by the time Smallwood was a teenager it had become clogged with silt and lost business to the wharves downriver in Washington, where he and his owner would eventually move. A momentous event when Thomas was thirteen, old enough to be paying attention, was the Battle of Bladensburg in the War of 1812. British troops overwhelmed a poorly organized American militia in August 1814, swept across the bridge over the Eastern

Branch, and marched to the heart of the capital, where they famously burned the presidential mansion, later called the White House. The Americans' helter-skelter retreat was memorialized in newspaper sarcasm as the "Bladensburg Races."

One striking element of the invasion surely reached young Thomas Smallwood by word of mouth: fighting with the British force under Major General Robert Ross in Bladensburg and Washington were units of the Corps of Colonial Marines, composed of Black troops recruited from among thousands of enslaved Americans who had responded to a British promise of freedom for those who joined their fight. Men who looked like him were dressed in splendid uniforms, armed with muskets and swords—and marching to victory. In addition to those who had joined the Colonial Marines, hundreds of African Americans who had fled slavery in the Chesapeake region tagged along with British forces to avoid reenslavement.

"A great number of negroes, delighted at the unhoped-for freedom our expedition had placed within their reach, followed the army," one British officer recalled, declaring that some of the enslaved who joined the invaders "possessed infinitely more sense and judgment than their late owners gave them credit for." Some of the Black men who fought for the British, like others who had joined the British side in the American Revolution, were subsequently given land grants in the British colonial territory of Canada, homesteading there years in advance of the thousands who would flee American slavery and settle there in the ensuing decades.

Three weeks after the rout at Bladensburg, a Washington lawyer named Francis Scott Key, watching from a ship off Baltimore as the British bombarded Fort McHenry, penned the poem that would become the national anthem. Few Americans know that its rarely sung third stanza appears to denigrate those who fled enslavement by crossing over to the British side: "No refuge could save the hireling and slave / From the terror of flight or the gloom of the grave." But the villains of Key's rhyme may have been heroes to an impressionable young Black man. Such were some of the complex contradictions of freedom and bondage, loyalty to country or to principle, that might have reached the young Smallwood, who would himself, much later, acclaim and enjoy liberty on Canadian soil.

The fact that hundreds of his neighbors were willing to abandon their homes to fight or flee with an enemy army must have left an impression. By his teenage years, Smallwood would have had a visceral understanding of the cruelty, violence, and bedrock unfairness of slavery—if not always from his own experience, then from the experience of those around him. Just a year after the

Battle of Bladensburg came a horrifying episode that would become an oft-cited example of slavery's particular atrocities. An enslaved woman from Bladensburg named Anna Williams, twenty-four, was sold to a slave trader and locked with her two children in a room above a tavern on F Street in Washington. They had been forcibly taken away from her husband, whom their owner happened not to want to sell at the time. Frantic with despair, Williams threw herself out the window and landed in the street below, breaking her back and both arms.

When an antislavery activist heard the terrible story and visited her, Williams told him she had come to regret leaping—not because of her injuries, but because the slave trader had sold both of her children. "I was so confused and 'istracted, that I didn't know hardly what I was about," Williams said, "but I didn't want to go, and I jumped out of the window;—but I am sorry now that I did it;—they have carried my children off with 'em to Carolina." She did not know, and would likely never find out, where exactly they had been taken. Both events, the woman's leap and her children's forced removal, were the talk of Bladensburg and surely reached fourteen-year-old Smallwood.

The activist who recorded Williams's story, Jesse Torrey (no relation to Charles Torrey), learned that such wrenching episodes, and worse, were anything but rare in the daily life of a slave society. In the months before his visit, a woman sold in Bladensburg cut the throat of her child, and then her own throat, in the wagon taking them to a trader in Washington. Another woman, sold in nearby Georgetown, had cut her own throat as she was carted off to a slave trader in Alexandria, Virginia. It was just a tiny sampling of the horrors of slavery that rarely made the newspapers but were a daily conversation in the community of the enslaved.

What was the impact on young Thomas Smallwood of such horrific stories, some of them involving his neighbors? He surely had heard adults whisper about whipping, torture, rape, kidnapping, suicide, and the rest of the brutal baggage of the slave system. Some of the atrocities he had undoubtedly witnessed with his own eyes. Some terrible things had happened to people he had known all his life. The experiences would shape his growing understanding of the society in which he had been born and drive his grappling with what he might do about it.

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By the time Smallwood was in his early twenties, John Ferguson and his family had moved a few miles from Bladensburg to settle in southeast Washington.

Ferguson would become a respected figure in town, sometimes serving as a clergyman but mainly earning a living working at a lumberyard on the wharves along the Eastern Branch. He seems to have been a public-spirited man, inclined to charity. Licensed by the city as a "wood corder," he was qualified to fairly certify an honest cord of wood. He was the chaplain at the city's penitentiary, served on the board of health, and helped oversee the Guardians of the Poor.

In a second stroke of good fortune, Smallwood would credit a Scottish immigrant in the same southeast neighborhood with having an influence on his life nearly as great as Ferguson's. He spent several years, he later recounted, working as a household servant for John McLeod, who had become one of Washington's leading educators:

> But for my advancement from two syllables to the little I now possess I owe a deep debt of gratitude to a family of that people who are proverbial for their love of learning and imparting it to others, viz. Mr. John McLeod a Scotch gentleman in whose excellent family I lived several years as servant. He had a large family of sons and daughters, these young gentlemen and ladies not only took great pleasure in learning me, but all the other servants about the house, who would take their teaching, for they were all colored, and hired help notwithstanding. He employed many servants about his house, he hired all; for be it said to his credit and humanity, he would own no slaves, although living in a slaveholding country.

In his later writing, despite the pose of modesty ("the little I now possess"), Smallwood would flaunt his impressive learning, quoting classical philosophers and contemporary British and American poets. His advance from mere literacy to deep learning and wide reading came at McLeod's house. McLeod, who had started his first school in Washington in 1808 with just four students and the motto "Order is Heaven's first law," would go on over nearly four decades to found and operate a series of institutions: the Eastern Academy, the Central Academy, the Female Central Academy, the Columbian Academy. He occasionally feuded with rival schoolmasters and at times struggled to collect the tuition parents owed him, but he appears to have been widely admired. He served as president of the Washington Relief Society, which sought to help the poor, and, as Smallwood noted, he opposed slavery—he loaned his schoolhouse on F Street for meetings of Washington's Abolition Society. One featured speaker was Francis Scott Key,

whose record on slavery as an attorney was checkered but who had represented a number of Black people in freedom suits challenging their enslaved status.

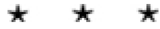
From McLeod's school advertisements, and others' comments about him, it is easy to form an impression of Smallwood's boss and mentor: a stern, old-fashioned pedagogue with affection for his students and a very dry wit who took full advantage of his location in the capital. At some school gatherings, the Marine Band, based at the Navy Yard nearby, performed for the parents and students. In June 1838, none other than the vice president of the United States, Richard M. Johnson, stopped by graduation ceremonies to hand out medals to top pupils. McLeod required students to start class at dawn and once denounced vacations in a deadpan newspaper notice that would find an echo in Smallwood's future satirical prose:

> Columbian Academy—The subscriber informs the public that no vacation will be given in this establishment this year. He has not given vacations for many years past. When he formerly gave a few days in August, he found that the practice did much harm and no good. For many days before the vacation it was impossible to make the children study—the girls tormenting their parents for dresses to visit their relations; the boys planning how they should spend their time in swimming, robbing the neighboring orchards, &c.

Once, placing a "situation wanted" notice on behalf of a veteran teacher looking for a job as a principal or private tutor, McLeod began the item:

> A Gentleman, a graduate of a respectable University, who I will not say pretends to teach, but who actually can teach, the English and French languages grammatically, the Latin and Greek languages well, Geometry and Algebra.

During some years, McLeod took in boarders in his own home, where he also conducted classes. There is no evidence that McLeod allowed Smallwood to attend them, but there is every indication that the educator and his adult children pitched in to help the young man with his self-education. The qualities of Smallwood's adult character—his devotion to broad learning, his impatience with laziness, his delight in an ironic style of writing, even his penchant for feuds and ferocious sense of right and wrong—surely had some roots in McLeod's household.



Inevitably, as a curious young man whose personal situation had put him on a long road from slavery to freedom, Smallwood began to take an interest in the politics boiling around the institution of slavery. In his twenties he became a supporter of a movement that was drawing significant backing from prominent white men and some educated Black people. It was called "colonization," and it would introduce him to the complications of racial politics and become his first intellectual battleground.

For Black supporters like Smallwood, the underlying notion was simple: only by cutting ties with the racist United States and starting anew in another country could African Americans escape not just the scourge of slavery but the deep-seated prejudice that constrained the lives of free Black people. It's easy to imagine Smallwood, an ambitious young man with a steadily more sophisticated view of the world, getting caught up in the promise of such an adventure. For decades there had been scattered examples of enslaved or free people leaving behind America for a fresh beginning in Haiti or British Guiana in South America or Sierra Leone in West Africa or somewhere else where, they hoped, Black people would not be a despised underclass. As Smallwood came to adulthood, powerful white men had created the American Colonization Society (ACS) to push for the organized, wholesale emigration of African Americans, especially to the new colony of Liberia that the society founded in West Africa.

Even as he experienced relative kindness from the Fergusons and the McLeods, Smallwood knew well the horrors of slavery, and he was surely beginning to grasp the indignities faced by free African Americans. It was no wonder that he took an active interest in colonization, which attracted some white people who were critical of slavery. Like many other Black Americans, he was drawn to the notion that he might do better, or at least avoid the terrors and humiliation of slavery, somewhere outside the United States. And at least at first, he thought the colonization movement might simultaneously work for the eventual eradication of slavery inside the United States.

> If my memory be not at fault, I was from the year 1822 or 23, up to about 1830, an advocate of African Colonization, because I thought the object of that Society was the entire abolition of slavery in the United States; and which I thought would lead to its final extinction every

> where else. Thus placing my race, together with all others, in an elevated position.

Through his attendance at colonization meetings, Smallwood met other educated and politically engaged Black people and made some close friends. James E. Brown was training as a pharmacist with the support of the American Colonization Society and would start an apothecary business in Liberia. Samuel Ford McGill came from a leading family of Black colonizationists and had grown up partly in Liberia. He would return to the United States and become the first Black medical school graduate in America, completing his training at Dartmouth College in 1839. For the self-educated Smallwood, their friendship must have been a flattering form of approval.

But by the late 1820s, even as his friends Brown and McGill remained deeply committed to emigration as the best option for a dignified life for Black Americans, Smallwood began to develop deep misgivings. When individual Black people had decided on their own to strike out for a new land, that was one thing. But it gradually became clear to Smallwood that the American Colonization Society was funded by white people, including many slaveholders, who feared the emergence of a growing class of free Black people in the United States. White leaders saw the colonization movement as an ideal solution to both the problem of slavery and the threat of a growing free Black population: enslaved people could be emancipated on the condition they sail for Liberia. America's race problem would be solved—because there would be no Black people, or at least no free Black people, left in the United States.

A pamphlet published by the American Colonization Society in 1830, just as Smallwood gained his freedom and broke with the movement, was worded tactfully, but its import was clear. Eleven states, it said, had directed their congressional representatives to devise "measures for removing such free persons of color, as are desirous of emigrating to Africa." The movement, the pamphlet said, "has shown how manumissions may be effected without injury to any class of Society"—clearly implying that freeing Black people would somehow "injure" the interests of whites. The following year, white backing for Black emigration got a huge boost when the slave rebellion led by Nat Turner in Virginia left more than fifty white people dead. Many slaveholders decided Black people needed to be either chained in slavery and watched carefully—or put on the first boat out of the country. Colonization amounted to a long-term strategy of ethnic cleansing. As a Black man just trying out life outside slavery, Smallwood began to understand that the encouragement to emigrate was an insult to him and those like him.

Smallwood's friend Brown worked as a pharmacist and doctor in Liberia, returning periodically to give lectures encouraging Black Americans to move to the colony. Such a life might reasonably be viewed as enterprising and public-spirited. But Smallwood ended their friendship. He had come to believe that Brown had sold out to white colonizationists and that he himself had been temporarily fooled by the American Colonization Society:

> I was grievously deceived. The object and policy of that Society proved to be, under the mask of philanthropy, the draining of the free colored population from among the slave population by inducing them to emigrate to Africa; for the doctrine of its leaders was that the free population contaminated the slave population with a spirit of freedom, which made them uneasy in their bonds, and made it very difficult for their oppressors to hold them. But said they, if we can get rid of the free negro population we can put a stop to any further emancipations, and thus have perpetual slavery without danger.

Smallwood understood how the system worked, he later wrote, because the ACS leaders had tried to use the promise of riches to lure him, too, into what he called their "African colonization trap":

> My humble self happened to be among the number to whom inducements were held out. And for the sake of my influence in that direction, I could have become a merchant in the Liberia trade, backed with the aid and influence of that Society. But I preferred to live in indigent circumstances, and enjoy my morsel with a good conscience, rather than be possessed with wealth and a burning conscience, with a recollection that I had come into possession of these through treachery to my afflicted race.

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Smallwood seems to have come of age politically in the battle against colonization, and many of his friends and neighbors experienced the same change of heart. He very likely attended a public meeting of African Americans in Washington in April 1831 that took a strong stance for staying and fighting for rights in the United States:

> Resolved, that this meeting view with distrust the efforts made by the Colonization Society to cause the free people of color of these United States to emigrate to Liberia, on the coast of Africa, or elsewhere.
>
> Resolved, that it is the declared opinion of the members of this meeting, that the soil which gave them birth is their only true and veritable home.

In Baltimore, home to the largest free Black population in the country, a gathering of opponents took an even tougher stand, declaring with a snarl: "When *we* desire to remove, we will apprise the public in due season."

Smallwood's turnaround on colonization was influenced by a sensational pamphlet published in 1829 that sheds some light on his growing political radicalism. Its author, David Walker, became for Smallwood a hero and role model, though they never met. The uncompromising and vitriolic language of Walker's *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* became the subject of excitement and debate in the Black community and touched off fear and fury among southern whites. Black people in Charleston and New Orleans were jailed for trying to hand out the pamphlet. While Walker touched on many aspects of slavery and racism—famously declaring African Americans "the most degraded, wretched, and abject set of beings that ever lived since the world began"—he reserved special venom for the ACS.

> Do they think to drive us from our country and homes, after having enriched it with our blood and tears, and keep back millions of our dear brethren, sunk in the most barbarous wretchedness, to dig up gold and silver for them and their children?… Tell us now no more about colonization, for America is as much our country, as it is yours.—Treat us like men, and there is no danger but we will all live in peace and happiness together.

Smallwood felt huge admiration for the firebrand Walker, a North Carolina–born Bostonian in the clothing business whose radicalism was widely criticized by abolitionists of both races in 1829 but whose influence would last. Many years later, when Smallwood wrote his own memoir, he would include a short biography of Walker and quote him. Perhaps emboldened by Walker's outspoken example, Smallwood did not hide his changed opinion of colonization. He