



about Johnson. "The whole town is ringing with it," she wrote. Writing to another family member in January 1840, Weston asserted that "The colored people are much excited against Nathan & at the ball the waiters refused to serve under him."<sup>3</sup> Charges against Johnson were aired publicly as well as privately. The *New Bedford Mercury* of 29 January 1840 outlined the story, "which has produced considerable sensation in this community," and filled in details surreptitiously provided by "A Friend to Humanity."<sup>4</sup> In response to this outcry, the Young Men's Anti-Slavery Society of New Bedford had formed a special committee in mid-November 1839 to hear the charges against Johnson, not only a member but an elected official of the society. Perhaps the most significant testament to the interest aroused by Johnson's alleged sin against Betsey Gibson was *The Liberator's* front-page coverage of the committee's final report in March 1840.<sup>5</sup>



Betsey Gibson, born and raised a slave, was the mother of two daughters fathered by Scottish-born Patrick Gibson, a wealthy white Georgia planter who readily admitted his paternity. Gibson, who resided in McIntosh County, Georgia, a fertile area where rice, cotton, and sugar cane were cultivated and where slaves outnumbered whites nearly four to one, was also the owner of Creighton Island, off the coast from Darien, Georgia. According to the 1830 federal census, the Gibson household had no white members except for Patrick Gibson and another white man, probably the overseer of Gibson's 107 slaves. Captain Joseph Howland, who assisted Gibson on his plantation between 1818 and 1831, recalled that Gibson, one of the largest slaveholders in McIn-

<sup>3</sup> Deborah Weston to Maria Weston Chapman, 8 November 1839, and Deborah Weston to Mary Weston, 19 January 1840, Boston Public Library Rare Books Collection. Quotation by courtesy of the Trustees of the Boston Public Library.

<sup>4</sup> *New Bedford Mercury*, 29 January 1840.

<sup>5</sup> A handwritten copy of the report, hereafter cited as "Committee Report," is in the Gibson Papers.

tosh County, was a “very kind master.” Apparently Gibson had entertained notions of moving to other countries, including Van Dieman’s Land (now Tasmania), after providing for the freedom and welfare of his slaves.<sup>6</sup>

On 21 June 1834 the aptly-named sloop *Northern Liberty* arrived in New Bedford. On board were six passengers: Patrick Gibson, Betsey Gibson, their daughters Helen and Jane, and two other black children, a boy named Tobey, who soon returned to the South, and a girl named Margaret.<sup>7</sup> Upon arriving in New Bedford, Gibson openly stated his plans to educate his daughters, and following the recommendation of several citizens, he chose Nathan Johnson to take charge of his family.<sup>8</sup>

Johnson was a likely candidate to be nominated for, and to accept, such an arrangement. According to historian Philip Purrington, Johnson was “well respected and did much business with prominent whites” as a caterer, confectioner, and later as owner of a dry-goods store. Born in Virginia in 1795, apparently into slavery, Johnson was the son of “Emily” and an unknown father. While a young man, Johnson somehow made his way to New Bedford, where in October 1819 he married Mary Page, the free-born daughter of Isaac and Ann Mingo of Fall River, Massachusetts. Mary, or “Polly,” Johnson, ten years her husband’s senior, took an active role in her husband’s business activities, and together they prospered.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Biographical information on Patrick Gibson can be found in the Committee Report and miscellaneous testimonies in the Gibson Papers; New Bedford *Mercury*, 29 January 1840; “Cemetery Records for McIntosh County,” *Georgia Genealogical Magazine* 11 (January 1964): 637; Fifth Census of the United States, 1830, McIntosh County, Georgia. For information on Darien, Georgia, and environs, see Spencer B. King, Jr., *Darien, The Death and Rebirth of a Southern Town* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1981), chap. 1, and Rev. George A. White, *Historical Collections of Georgia* (New York: Pudney & Russell, Publishers, 1855), p. 546.

<sup>7</sup> Information from Committee Report, Gibson Papers; reference to “Tobey,” who is not mentioned in the Committee Report, from Patrick Gibson to Nathan Johnson, 7 August 1834, Gibson Papers.

<sup>8</sup> Committee Report and handwritten notes of testimonies, Gibson Papers.

<sup>9</sup> “City’s first black lawyer rose from slavery,” New Bedford *Standard-Times*, 20 February 1980; *Vital Records of New Bedford, Massachusetts, to the year 1850*, vol. 2, Marriages (Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 1932); Death Records of New Bedford, microfilm, New Bedford Free Public Library. New Bedford City Directories between 1836 and 1840 list Nathan Johnson as a “Trader” or

Frederick Douglass later cited Johnson as proof that New Bedford had offered the “nearest approach to freedom and equality that [Douglass] had ever seen.” He continued his praise of Johnson:

He lived in a nicer house, dined at a more ample board, was the owner of more books, the reader of more newspapers, was more conversant with the moral, social, and political condition of the country and the world, than nine-tenths of the slaveholders in all Talbot County.<sup>10</sup>

Most citizens of New Bedford, black and white, more than likely would have agreed with Douglass’s assessment of Nathan Johnson’s refinement and success. During the late 1830s, after he became the caretaker for Betsey Gibson and her daughters, Johnson actively participated in civic discussions of major issues of the day. He signed a call in 1836 for New England’s “people of color” to hold a temperance convention in Providence, Rhode Island. In November 1837, his fellow black citizens chose Johnson as one of three representatives responsible for questioning candidates for public office about their views on slavery and the slave trade. Perhaps the greatest symbol of Johnson’s prominence was his position as “Counsellor” in the Young Men’s Anti-Slavery Society, which had only two black leaders in 1839.<sup>11</sup>

After selecting Nathan Johnson to oversee his children, Patrick Gibson left New Bedford, but he remained concerned about his family’s well-being, as is evident in the seventeen extant letters he wrote to Johnson. In the first, sent in August 1834, Gibson inquired about the girls’ education: “I hope Helen[,] Jane[,] & Margaret are get[t]ing along & improving fast in their learning.” Gibson also kept Betsey and her children well informed about and would convey the

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“confectionary” with his business located next to the Johnson house at 21 Seventh Street. See Henry H. Crapo’s *New Bedford Directory* for years 1836 and 1838 (printed by J. C. Parmenter) and 1839 (printed by Benjamin Lindsey).

<sup>10</sup> Douglass, *Life and Times*, pp. 207–9.

<sup>11</sup> *The Liberator*, 14 May 1836 and 17 November 1837; Crapo, *New Bedford Directory*, 1839, p. 33.

love of their enslaved relatives who remained in Georgia. Upon returning to Creighton Island in November 1834, Gibson was pleased to relate that “I found all here well, Grandma Cloey is anxious to hear from Betsey & the children[;] be sure to write very soon[.] [T]ell Helen she ought by this time be able to write to her Grandma. I hope they are learning to read fast.” In addition, Johnson was often instructed to take whatever measures were necessary to assure that Gibson’s family not “want for any thing that is necessary for their comfort.”<sup>12</sup>

Complaining of a recent spate of cold weather in Georgia, in February 1835 Gibson reminded Johnson that “if any of [the Gibsons] are sick[,] apply to the best Doctor for medical aid if you find it necessary,” and again in the fall of 1835, he implored Johnson not to “let them want for anything to their comfort through the winter.” The children apparently profited from their education in New Bedford, for Gibson later requested that Johnson “tell Helen I was much pleas[e]d at receiving a letter from her.” He added his hope that “Jane & Margaret will soon be able to teach me also.” Patrick Gibson visited his family in New Bedford when possible, as he did in the summer of 1836 after vacationing with other Southern planters in Newport, Rhode Island. When he returned to Georgia, Gibson notified Johnson that he had sent a bundle of goods to Betsey and the children, including thirty yards of “French Calico” and twenty-six yards of flannel, directing that Sunday dresses be tailored for all, including Mrs. Johnson.<sup>13</sup>

Following this trip home, however, Gibson became seriously ill. He had recovered slightly by the first day of 1837 and wished Johnson and his family a “happy New Year.” In the same letter, Gibson told of his plans to send a barrel of

<sup>12</sup> Patrick Gibson to Nathan Johnson, 7 August 1834, 17 November 1834, and 15 June 1835, Gibson Papers.

<sup>13</sup> Gibson to Johnson, 21 February and 7 November 1835, 2 June, 23 July, and 7 November 1836, Gibson Papers. Many wealthy Southern planters vacationed in Newport, Rhode Island, particularly in the 1830s; see Henry E. Turner, “Newport, 1800–1850,” reprinted from the Newport *Daily News*, 24 and 25 March 1897 (Newport: Newport Historical Society, n.d.), p. 8.

rice, plus corn, grits, and flour “so that the children could have some homney [hominy].” He hastened to add that “I want them to want for nothing that will make them comfortable, & . . . to attend to their schooling & needle work.” On 2 February 1837, Patrick Gibson wrote his last letter to Nathan Johnson. In it he notified Johnson that he had sent an order for \$236 via his agent in New York and that the grits were on their way. Requesting a receipt for these precious goods, Gibson added, “I could not live without my homney.” Again, Gibson sent his “best regard to Betsey & the children,” and he closed by stating that he had been very “unwell myself lately from the bad effects of my bad health at the North last year.”<sup>14</sup>

Patrick Gibson died on 12 March 1837 of “water in the chest,” stated his nephew William Gibson in a letter to Johnson. He also noted that Edmund Molyneux, Jr., would “manage the affairs” of the late Gibson, although a Mr. Cugler and Jonathan Thomas were to serve as executors of the will. William Gibson followed his news with a request that Johnson “Tell Betsey and the children that all send their love to them & hope soon to see them all.” One month later, and then again in late June, Gibson wrote to express his surprise that Molyneux had not yet contacted Johnson. “I am sorry to think Mr. Molyneux had not wrote you,” Gibson apologized. “[A]ll that I can say is that Betsey & the children is under the charge of Mr. M. & I suppose that every thing will go on as before the death of my Uncle.” Like his kindly uncle, Gibson added his hope that Johnson would continue to educate the children, asking that the children send letters “so that I may see how they improve.”<sup>15</sup>



A sharper contrast could not be found than that between the Gibsons' warm letters and those sent by Edmund Moly-

<sup>14</sup> Gibson to Johnson, 1 January and 2 February 1837, Gibson Papers.

<sup>15</sup> William Gibson to Johnson, 24 March, 25 April, and 27 June 1837, Gibson Papers.

neux, Jr.<sup>16</sup> Since 1832, Molyneux had served as British Consul at Savannah, a position he would continue to hold until he died in Paris on 16 November 1864. Active in commerce, he would amass a sizeable fortune by 1860 valued at \$21,000 in real estate and \$80,000 in personal property. In 1840, Molyneux headed a household of seven whites (himself, his wife, three children under ten, and presumably two servants) and four black slaves. According to the Slave Schedules of the 1860 Census, however, he was not a slaveowner, although his American wife owned seven slaves, four males and three females. The British-born Molyneux and Gibson were friends, and while Gibson was alive, Molyneux had managed many of his business affairs.

In spite of that friendship, after Gibson's death five months were to pass before Molyneux wrote his first letter to Johnson. It was terse. Inquiring about Johnson's address so that he could send a "small sum of money," Molyneux stated that he was directed to do so by the "Executors of the late P. Gibson." One week later, Molyneux sent Johnson \$150 but added that it was "probable that Betsey & the children will return to Georgia this fall." He offered no explanation. In subsequent letters written between 23 January and 14 July 1838, Molyneux focused exclusively on payments made to Nathan Johnson, often sent in response to Johnson's appeals for additional funds.<sup>17</sup>

In April 1839 Johnson received, along with a check for \$651.71, notification of Molyneux's arrangements to have Betsey and the children accompany his friend Robert Johnston, then living in Newport, to Jamaica. The circumstances surrounding Molyneux's decision to send Betsey and the girls to Jamaica are unclear, but such a plan would have adhered to Patrick Gibson's earlier desires to settle in another country

<sup>16</sup> For information on Molyneux, see Sixth Census of the United States, 1840, Chatham County, and Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Chatham County, Free and Slave Schedules; PRO, *Foreign Office List*, 1865; Milledge L. Bonham, Jr., *The British Consuls in the Confederacy* (New York: Columbia University, 1911), pp. 139–41, 251–53.

<sup>17</sup> Edmund Molyneux, Jr., to Nathan Johnson, 9 and 15 August 1837, 23 January, 9 June, and 14 July 1838, Gibson Papers.

with some of his emancipated slaves, for slavery had legally ended in Jamaica on 1 August 1834. It is quite possible, too, that Molyneux, as British consul, may have had connections in Jamaica that would have facilitated settlement. To spur Johnson's cooperation, Molyneux added in closing: "I request you will send them to Newport or wherever Mr. Johnston fixes to sail from. Send your account to me after their departure & it shall be settled." The following month, Molyneux directed Johnson to take the Gibsons to New York where they would meet Mr. Johnston and embark for Jamaica.<sup>18</sup> As the citizens of New Bedford later learned, the Gibsons did not meet Johnston because "Betsey would not go." Betsey Gibson remained uncertain about life in Jamaica, and, at that time, she had no expectations, from Molyneux or otherwise, that her enslaved family in Georgia would join her there.<sup>19</sup>

After he learned that his plans had gone awry, Molyneux adamantly refused to make any more payments to Johnson. "[A]s you have thought proper to prevent the People going to Jamaica," Molyneux stated to Johnson in August 1839, "I suppose it is your intention to pay for the[ir] support in New Bedford. I again repeat that I shall pay no more money for them." In a postscript designed to encourage Betsey's cooperation, Molyneux added that "Nancy[']s Relations will soon be comfortably settled in Jamaica" (Nancy was Betsey's sister). One month later, Molyneux again refused to pay for any board beyond the previous 30 June. In closing, he declared that "Betsey must now support herself by her own labour." To avoid any doubt about his meaning, Molyneux chastised Johnson: "[A]ny orders for Betseys going to Jamaica ought to have been obeyed or you should have turned her out of Doors."<sup>20</sup>

New travel plans were formulated. In the early fall of 1839 Molyneux sent a check for \$286 to Johnson and asserted that

<sup>18</sup> Molyneux to Johnson, 19 April and 17 May 1839, Gibson Papers.

<sup>19</sup> Committee Report, Gibson Papers.

<sup>20</sup> Molyneux to Johnson, [August 1839] and 23 September 1839.



he would pay the fares of Betsey and the children to Darien, Georgia. "If they do not go," Molyneux hastened to add, "I will pay no more." Apparently, Nathan Johnson met with Molyneux in New York City later that fall and was assured that Molyneux would be at Darien to meet Betsey and her children and that Betsey's enslaved parents would be sent to Jamaica early in 1840. Molyneux's letters suggest that Betsey and the children were to arrive first in Georgia so that they could travel with their family to Jamaica.<sup>21</sup>

In a letter of 17 February 1840 offered as testimony to the Young Men's Anti-Slavery Society, David Ruggles, a prominent black abolitionist known for aiding fugitive slaves, recalled that he had heard that the Gibsons were to leave town and called on them "about a day or two before they left." Betsey Gibson, according to Ruggles, "said that she had made up her mind to go & trust in God." Nathan Johnson was present, and it was he who seemed most reluctant about the Gibsons' departure. He worried for them that returning to the South "seemed almost like going into the Lion[']s den & that there was great danger that they would be again enslaved." He only agreed to the plan because he felt "confident" that Molyneux would keep his word and send the Gibsons to Jamaica in fulfillment of Patrick Gibson's wishes, for according to Mrs. Gibson, "Mr. Gibson had frequently told her that it was his intention to settle the family somewhere under the British Government."<sup>22</sup>

To comply with Molyneux's apparent plan to send the Gib-

<sup>21</sup> Molyneux to Johnson, 14 October 1839, Gibson Papers; Committee Report, Gibson Papers.

<sup>22</sup> David Ruggles to the Young Men's Anti-Slavery Society of New Bedford, 17 February 1840, Gibson Papers. In an interesting twist to this story, it was Ruggles who sent Douglass to New Bedford with five dollars and a letter of introduction to Nathan Johnson. Ruggles was an active abolitionist who served as Secretary of the Committee of Vigilance of New York between its founding in 1835 and his resignation in 1839. In his short life, he wrote prolifically and edited the magazine *Mirror of Liberty*, founded in 1838. See Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 33, 151-52; Harry A. Ploski and Warren Marr, II, compilers, *The Negro Almanac: A Reference Work on the Afro-American* (New York: Bellwether Company, 1976), p. 737; Jane H. Pease and William H. Pease, *They Who Would Be Free: Blacks' Search for Freedom, 1830-1861* (New York: Atheneum, 1974), pp. 208-10.

sons to Jamaica, Nathan Johnson set off for Newport with Betsey, Helen, and Jane Gibson and Margaret near the first of November 1839. Their departure soon stirred New Bedford. According to "A Friend to Humanity," who replayed events in the New Bedford *Mercury* of 29 January 1840, a prominent white citizen, Benjamin Rodman, "immediately repaired to Newport, and was in season to prevent [the Gibsons'] embarkation. By his advice they concluded to return to New Bedford." Rodman told Johnson that he would write to Molyneux to ascertain his designs for the future safety and settlement of the Gibsons. Rodman later admitted that he knew very little about the provisions made by Patrick Gibson for Betsey and the children, but he felt "happy that I acted on the suggestion of a benevolent individual" in going to Newport in search of Nathan Johnson and Betsey Gibson.<sup>23</sup> Rodman's actions were sincere, but they reflected an unwillingness to trust Nathan Johnson's judgment and reinforced speculation that he had been caught doing something wrong.

A later account of events in Newport offered much more insight into Johnson's motives. On 3 February 1840, William Littlefield, the Customs Collector in Newport, sent a written deposition to the Young Men's Anti-Slavery Society Committee. Littlefield recollected that "a color'd man, who I suppose was Johnson, applied to me for advice in relation to shipping a young color'd woman and several children to Darien." When Littlefield asked if they were slaves, Johnson said they were not; he then informed Johnson that free persons could not be cleared for travel at the Customs House. Nathan Johnson replied that the Gibsons were "manumitted slaves whom he wished to transport to the British Consul in Georgia." Under the circumstances, Littlefield advised Johnson not to risk sending the Gibsons with unknown persons. Littlefield made it clear that he was "much pleased with the conduct and deportment of Johnson in this whole affair."<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Benjamin Rodman to James B. Congdon, 29 November 1839, Gibson Papers; New Bedford *Mercury*, 29 January 1840.

<sup>24</sup> William Littlefield to the Young Men's Anti-Slavery Society of New Bedford, 3 February 1840, Gibson Papers.

This crucial information about the actual events in Newport did not become public knowledge, however, until three full months after Nathan Johnson's trip.

Meanwhile, after returning to New Bedford, Rodman wrote to Molyneux on behalf of "the family of coloured persons, who were sent here by the late Mr. Gibson of Georgia for education." Rodman asserted his belief, shared by many people in New Bedford, that Betsey and the children were to be sent to Jamaica to enjoy a settlement created by the provisions of Gibson's will. "I have these facts from Nathan Johnson," Rodman declared, "who is now willing to promote their departure for Jamaica." Rodman insisted, however, that the Gibsons enjoyed freedom as their legal and natural right and that many persons who felt "an interest in their welfare" wanted to know to "what extent and in what form their late master manifested his desire for their freedom, protection and happiness." He addressed Molyneux as the executor of Patrick Gibson's estate, adding that "there is no one more suitable to be applied to in Georgia for the information desired."<sup>25</sup>

Molyneux's brief reply electrified the town. "By Mr. Molyneux's [*sic*] answer," Rodman exclaimed, "you will learn that there was no foundation for the expectation entertained that [the Gibsons] were either going to Jamaica or to enjoy the freedom which they are now legally entitled to."<sup>26</sup> Molyneux denied that he was the executor of Patrick Gibson's will and snidely asked that Rodman pay the proper postage if he should write again. But it was Molyneux's postscript that created the major sensation. "With the exception of the facts of the Slaves alluded to having been sent to New Bedford for education," he proclaimed, "every circumstance stated in your Letter is untrue."<sup>27</sup> Molyneux had not only denied that

<sup>25</sup> Benjamin Rodman to Molyneux, 6 November 1839, Gibson Papers; *New Bedford Mercury*, 29 January 1840.

<sup>26</sup> Rodman to James B. Congdon, 29 November 1839, Gibson Papers.

<sup>27</sup> Molyneux to Rodman, 13 November 1839, Gibson Papers; *New Bedford Mercury*, 29 January 1840. Rodman rather sanctimoniously sent twenty-five cents to the Savannah Postmaster on 25 November 1839 to cover his postage, adding that "I am in hopes [Molyneux] will no longer consider me in his debt." Rodman to S. N. Douglas, printed in *New Bedford Mercury*, 29 January 1840.

Patrick Gibson had made any provisions for his family in his will, but the agent emphatically referred to them as slaves.

Many in the Afro-American community were agitated by this disturbing turn of events, and some sought informed answers on their own. On 5 December 1839, the Reverend Henry Jackson, the black pastor of the integrated First Baptist Church of New Bedford, wrote to an unnamed friend in Savannah, Georgia. Jackson addressed his correspondent on "behalf of the standing committee of this church," responsible for settling matters of concern to fellow parishoners. Congregants included Mrs. Nathan Johnson, a member since 1820, and Betsey Gibson, "widow of Patrick," who was baptized by Jackson's predecessor in June 1838.<sup>28</sup> Stating that he and others believed that Patrick Gibson had left a will for the benefit of his family, Jackson inquired if a copy could be obtained. In lieu of seeing the will, Jackson asked that three questions concerning it and the disposition of Gibson's estate be answered. Jackson also posed a fourth and final question: "Can persons, who have been slaves in Georgia and brought to the North, returning, enjoy their freedom?"<sup>29</sup>

Jackson received a prompt and helpful reply dated 4 January 1840. The executors of the will were identified as Major Jonathan Thomas of McIntosh County and Richard R. Cugler of Chatham County, just as William Gibson had outlined in an earlier letter to Nathan Johnson. "Mr. Mollineaux [*sic*] resides in Savannah," added the investigator, "and I know of no other person that those people can look to but him." The informant stated that "according to the laws as I understand them, no [ex-]slave can be free to remain in this State," except through a special act of the state legislature. Moreover, no slaves could be manumitted by will or be transported to a free state after the owner's death because

<sup>28</sup> Membership list is in *Articles of Faith and Covenant of the First Baptist Church, William Street, New Bedford, Mass., with a sketch of its history and a catalogue of its members* (Providence: H. H. Brown, Printer, 1840); for additional information on Jackson's ministry, see *History of the New Bedford Churches* (New Bedford: Daily Evening Standard Press, 1854), pp. 15–16.

<sup>29</sup> Rev. Henry Jackson to an anonymous correspondent, 5 December 1839, printed in *New Bedford Mercury*, 29 January 1840.

"[s]uch a will could not be admitted to record."<sup>30</sup> A copy of the eighth clause of Gibson's will, probated in McIntosh County, was enclosed in the letter, and it was printed in the *New Bedford Mercury* on 29 January 1840. It read in part:

I give and bequeath unto my friend Edmond Mollineaux [*sic*] Jr. of Savannah, the sum of Twenty Thousand Dollars, likewise the following Slaves, (No. 34) thirty-four in number, to wit: Toby, my driver, and his wife Chloe, with their issue, to wit, Betsey and her two children Helen and Jane, now in New Bedford, Massachusetts, Louisa and her children, to wit, . . . Nancy and her child Harey and her future issue, Charlotte and her child and her future issue, Toby, Greenock, Alice, Rosannah, Billy and Daniel Jones and Henry, (Toby's sons by Nancy, lately dead) Mary (daughter of Lydia) and her children to wit, Margaret, now in New Bedford, Catherine and Adeline and her future issue, Lydia (Mary's mother) and her grandsons, . . . to him the said Edmond forever.<sup>31</sup>

Clearly, the Gibsons had never been freed by Patrick Gibson, neither in his lifetime nor upon his death. As chattel property deeded to Edmund Molyneux, Betsey Gibson and her children as well as Margaret could be treated as Molyneux saw fit, in accordance with the laws of Georgia.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> By an act of 1801, the Georgia legislature forbade emancipation of any slave except by its own authority and made it unlawful to record "any deed of manumission, or other paper which shall have for object the manumitting . . . any slave." A subsequent act in 1818 increased the penalties for failure to comply. Helen T. Catterall, *Judicial Cases Concerning American Slavery and the Negro*, 5 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institute, 1931), 3:1. See also, Ira Berlin, *Slaves without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), pp. 138–40; W. McDowell Rogers, "Free Negro Legislation in Georgia before 1865," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 16 (March 1932): 27–37.

<sup>31</sup> Anonymous correspondent to *Jackson*, 4 January 1840, printed in *New Bedford Mercury*, 29 January 1840. The actual will was destroyed in a fire at the McIntosh County Court House in 1864. The four black slaves Molyneux owned in 1840 may have been among those he received from Gibson, but by 1860 Molyneux had clearly freed, sold, or deeded to his wife any slaves he may have received as property bequeathed by Gibson.

<sup>32</sup> At two points in the Committee Report, the young black girl educated along with Helen and Jane Gibson is referred to as "Margaret Molyneaux"; otherwise she is called "the other girl," "the child Margaret," and the "young companion" to Betsey's daughters. In the *New Bedford Mercury* of 29 January 1840, Margaret is called "another female slave, born on [Gibson's] plantation, by name of Margaret." The two references to "Margaret Molyneaux" in the Committee Report may simply reflect the realities of Patrick Gibson's will. Margaret was cut off from her black

Indeed, these last pieces of information are crucial to understanding the puzzle of Nathan Johnson's purported kidnapping of Betsey Gibson and her daughters. It was illegal for Patrick Gibson to manumit his slaves; the large bequest of \$20,000 to Edmund Molyneux, then, was almost surely support for the care of slaves entrusted to him. The Special Committee of the Young Men's Anti-Slavery Society concluded that, despite rumors to the contrary, "we cannot find any evidence . . . that Edward Molyneaux, Jr. [*sic*], has been endeavoring to kidnap and carry away into slavery the children of his friend and those children's mother." To explain his "laconic" reply to Benjamin Rodman, the committee speculated that having his integrity questioned by a stranger had offended Molyneux. Moreover, he had made repeated efforts to have Nathan Johnson send Betsey Gibson and her children to Darien, Georgia, only to have these plans fail. The first attempt fell through because Betsey refused to go; the second failed because Betsey and her children could not embark at Newport except as slaves, which Johnson would not allow. The committee therefore concluded that Johnson "cannot be charged with having violated his duty as a faithful guardian of their rights, or as a member of this society."<sup>33</sup>

Following its hearty vote of confidence for Nathan Johnson, the special committee set out to clear his name with the public. The committee determined that "All the facts . . . were wholly unknown to Mr. Johnson, well as the rest of this community, . . . for which he has been called to answer at the bar of public opinion."<sup>34</sup> In short, Johnson and Betsey Gibson had believed, erroneously, that Patrick Gibson had freed his slaves and had provided liberally for their settlement. They did not know that the laws of Georgia prevented

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family, which had no legal status in any case, and after Gibson died, she also lacked a guardian. Since Gibson had deeded Margaret to Molyneux, he alone could be charged with legal responsibility for her; thus, his surname was given to her by the committee to distinguish her status from that of the Gibsons. It is not likely that Molyneux was Margaret's father, because such information surely would have surfaced during the investigation of Nathan Johnson.

<sup>33</sup> Committee Report, Gibson Papers; *New Bedford Mercury*, 23 February 1840.

<sup>34</sup> Committee Report, Gibson Papers.

slave manumission. Johnson's exoneration was aired in full at the Young Men's Anti-Slavery Society meeting of 17 February 1840. Excerpts of the committee report appeared in the *New Bedford Mercury* on 23 February 1840, and *The Liberator* printed the entire report verbatim in two parts, on 6 and 13 March, entitled "Interesting and Important Investigation—The Innocent Defended." Three full months had elapsed between the formation of the special committee and the public release of its thorough and conclusive final report.



The story of Nathan Johnson's "kidnapping" of Betsey Gibson and her children illustrates issues of historical note in antebellum America. Despite Patrick Gibson's paternalistic treatment of his slave "wife" and children, there were obvious limits to what he could do to aid them. Gibson's position as a benevolent planter placed him on the fringe of Southern society in the 1830s. He could not freely manumit his slaves because state laws prohibited such actions; he could offer Betsey and her daughters only quasi-freedom, a "fugitive" freedom contingent upon their residence in the North.

The public discussion of Nathan Johnson's character and actions reveals the extent to which blacks, free and fugitive slave, fell under the scrutiny of whites in antebellum America. Even when blacks and whites ostensibly worked together in the same abolitionist cause, whites always had the upper hand. Johnson could not be cleared on his word alone but had to await the judgment of the largely white anti-slavery society in which he had admirably served.

Tensions developed among both black and white citizens as news of events surrounding Betsey Gibson emerged. Whereas white abolitionists might moralistically preach "no union with slaveholders," black abolitionists were more practically concerned with the welfare of individual slaves. In part, such differences may explain why Nathan Johnson risked public repudiation to assist Betsey Gibson and her

children. New Bedford's black citizens appear to have split on their views of the respective plights of Nathan Johnson and Betsey Gibson. Black waiters had refused to work under Johnson at a local ball when the scandal first became public, yet the black abolitionist David Ruggles, who had long been acquainted with Johnson, testified to his unrelenting faith in Johnson's actions and character.

Finally, the Nathan Johnson "trial" demonstrated how battles were fought among abolitionists themselves. "Through intramural conflict," writes one historian, "abolitionists were able to set their own exacting standards for belonging to the group." Many antislavery activities, such as bazaars and conventions, simply strengthened the commitment of those already devoted to the cause rather than converting "unbelievers."<sup>35</sup> Thus, the public meetings and published committee report of the Young Men's Anti-Slavery Society of New Bedford gave notice of the abolitionists' zeal by demonstrating that no one—not even a respected black leader—was above reproach. Those who were interested in aiding fugitive slaves would be educated by Johnson's tribulations, for Johnson was obliged to prove that he was worthy of remaining an active member of his antislavery organization.

After his "acquittal," Nathan Johnson resumed his participation in public activities. Only six months after the complete committee report appeared on the front pages of *The Liberator*, William Lloyd Garrison was pleased to note that "N. Johnson" of New Bedford was elected a vice-president of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society Convention at Worcester. Garrison lauded Johnson and others as "fine specimens of genuine, unshackled abolitionism."<sup>36</sup> In November 1844, Johnson wrote to Maria Weston Chapman offering his support to *The Liberty Bell* and adding with fervor: "I hope its notes may sound till all the People are

<sup>35</sup> Ronald G. Walters, *The Antislavery Appeal: American Abolitionism after 1830* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), pp. 7-9, 23.

<sup>36</sup> *The Liberator*, 9 October 1840.



roused, and gathered in their might, to Battle for Liberty.”<sup>37</sup> Five years later, he joined the stampede to California and did not return until 1871, when his wife died. From her he inherited a monthly pension of \$29.16, paid until his own death on 11 November 1880.<sup>38</sup> Betsey Gibson lived with both daughters and their families in New Bedford through the mid-1850s, when she moved to Fall River, Massachusetts, where she died on 28 December 1863.<sup>39</sup> Both Betsey Gibson and Nathan Johnson were buried in New Bedford.

<sup>37</sup> Nathan Johnson to Maria Weston Chapman, 14 November 1844, Boston Public Library Rare Books Collection. Quotation by courtesy of the Trustees of the Boston Public Library.

<sup>38</sup> Upon his departure for California, Nathan Johnson left to his wife the power of attorney and all property, which was worth \$15,500 in 1850. In 1865, Mary Johnson was listed incorrectly as a “widow” in the New Bedford City Directory, because her husband still resided in the west. Mary Johnson left the monthly pension to Nathan Johnson provided he return to New Bedford within two years of her death. See “City’s first black lawyer rose from slavery”; Seventh U.S. Census, 1850, Bristol County, Massachusetts; New Bedford Death Records; Abraham Taber, *New Bedford Directory*, 1865, printed by Fessenden and Baker.

<sup>39</sup> Betsey Gibson never married, although at New Bedford she did enter an intention to marry Henry Tim in 1842. For unknown reasons, this marriage did not take place. In 1850, she lived in New Bedford in a household composed of her two daughters, their husbands, and their children. Both Jane and Helen Gibson had married black seamen, and both had two daughters. On Betsey Gibson’s death certificate, no distinction was made to color, although she was listed as a “married” female, aged sixty-one, born in Georgia of an unknown father and “Cloey Gibson.” *Vital Records of New Bedford to 1850*, vol. 2 (Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 1932); Seventh U.S. Census, 1850, Bristol County, Massachusetts; *The Fall River Directory, City Record, The Names of the Citizens, and a Business Directory* (Fall River, Mass.: Robert Adams, 1864), p. 140; New Bedford Death Records.

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