The Imperfect Revolution: Anthony Burns and the Landscape of Race in Antebellum America

Anthony Burns

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Anthony Burns
and the
Landscape of Race
in
Antebellum America

Gordon S. Barker
American Abolitionism and Antislavery
John David Smith, series editor

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Almost ten years ago, reflecting on the outpouring of literature following the publication of Gordon S. Wood’s *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* and the famous debate between James M. McPherson and Ira Berlin about “Who Freed the Slaves,” I became curious about how nineteenth-century blacks viewed the American Revolution. In particular, I wondered whether blacks in antebellum America considered the American Revolution over, and their ongoing struggle independent of that which their white neighbors had waged in the late eighteenth century, or if they believed the Revolution was still raging. I wondered whether Gordon Wood, defining the Revolution as a deep-rooted political and cultural transformation that spanned nearly one hundred years, ending in Jacksonian America, had stopped his periodization a little too soon. When I came upon Anthony Burns embracing Patrick Henry’s legendary words “Give me Liberty or Give me Death,” a philosophy that some 180,000 black Americans also embraced when they took up arms in the American Civil War and transformed it from a war for the Union into a war of liberation, I had my answers.

Many people have helped me in the realization of this project, which had its genesis in a graduate research seminar at the College of William and Mary taught by Carol Sheriff, a brilliant professor who encouraged me to follow my curiosity and who became the second reader on a dissertation committee that most graduate students can only dream of having. Melvin Patrick Ely also provided much encouragement and lent his immeasurable talent and great wisdom as chair of the dissertation committee; Ronald Schechter and Kris Lane provided insights that strengthened the final product; and Robert A. Gross of the University of Connecticut, the external reader, identified key issues for me to explore and incorporate into this book. This work would not have been realized without the support of these remarkable scholars and wonderful individuals.
I have received valuable assistance from librarians and support staff at the Earl Gregg Swem Library of the College of William and Mary, the Bishop's University Library, the James A. Gibson Library of Brock University, the Massachusetts Historical Society, the Boston Public Library, the St. Catharines Public Library, and the St. Catharines Museum. Bishop's University also provided funding for additional research and prepublication expenses. Marjorie Dawson, Wilma Morrison, and Maggie Parnall, who shared with me their interest in imprinting Anthony Burns in our collective memory, provided me with inspiration and strengthened my determination to bring this project to fruition. Cheryl Porter helped me put together the final manuscript. Lastly, without the support of my family, who patiently put up with a scholar who must, at times, have seemed to be living in nineteenth-century America, this project never would have seen the light of day. My brother George listened to me for hours discussing antebellum race relations; my daughter Nadine spent much time doing research with a historian, dusting off old newspapers and other materials—hours that she might have spent with friends. Christiane, the love of my life, shared all my ups and downs throughout this project. To her I dedicate this work.
On a beautiful but cold, windy day in Boston in the spring of 2005, I found myself alone with the two historical interpreters on duty in the Visitor Information Center adjacent to Faneuil Hall. In that venerable building, known also as the “cradle of liberty,” Boston’s leading antislavery activists harangued a boisterous crowd in 1854 two days after the capture of Anthony Burns, soon to be Virginia’s most famous fugitive slave. Denouncing the South’s peculiar institution and the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, the abolitionists called for the rescue of Burns from the “iron house of bondage.”1 They asked Bostonians to remember their heritage of 1776 and demonstrate their commitment to the principles that had been so valiantly defended by their forefathers.

Having just visited the Great Hall, imagining the excitement that must have filled the air as the likes of Theodore Parker, Wendell Phillips, and Samuel Gridley Howe called for the extension of American liberties to Burns, I asked the first interpreter, an efficient-looking woman busily organizing pamphlets on the counter, “Could you tell me about Anthony Burns and what happened here in 1854?” She gave me a blank, how-dare-you stare; motioned toward her colleague; and said to me, “You will have to ask him. I don’t know anything about Anthony Burns.” Somewhat taken aback, I

Prologue
Remembering Anthony Burns

Boston never before was so deeply moved [as during the Burns rendition]. . . .
In all her revolutionary experience she never presented such a spectacle.
—Boston Daily Evening Transcript, June 2, 1854

Faneuil Hall is the purlieus of the Court House . . . where the children of Adams and Hancock may prove that they are not bastards. Let us prove that we are worthy of liberty.
—Wendell Phillips

I may show the world that the work of 1854 is not in vain.
—Anthony Burns

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hesitantly turned to her serious-looking middle-aged colleague, also white, and said, “I would like information on Anthony Burns.” He responded curtly, “We have no printed material on Burns; the only information on him that we have here is in my head, and about all I know is that Burns was a fugitive slave returned from Boston.”

Recognizing my disappointment and obviously seeing a need to put me on the right path, the interpreters immediately told me about the Freedom Trail. They politely advised me to forget about Burns. “The Freedom Trail,” they stressed, “was much more important.” They told me that Paul Revere was a particularly interesting figure and said that I should follow the trail of red bricks, which would lead me to the legendary night rider’s house in the North End. I knew about Paul Revere—his story was one that even my high school history teacher, a man who always spoke in a monotone, could not make dull. But I kept thinking about Anthony Burns.

I left the Visitor Information Center with mixed emotions. I knew that in late May and early June of 1854, placards and handbills about Burns covered Boston. I also knew that day after day the Burns drama occupied the front pages of the city’s newspapers. The affair also made headlines in the newspapers of other cities throughout the North and the South. Burns’s fate engaged hundreds of thousands—perhaps millions—of Americans, black and white, rich and poor. President Franklin Pierce’s administration regarded the Burns crisis as a national priority and allocated substantial resources to deal with it. The name of Virginia’s suddenly famous fugitive slave was on the lips of all Bostonians—legislators, leading lawyers, businessmen, women, shopkeepers, artisans, laborers, students, and the so-called lowlife about the wharves. That day in 2005, I had the uneasy feeling that this history was being forgotten, and that the national memory had become badly skewed. In the following pages, my first objective is to help ensure Anthony Burns his rightful place in both mainstream American history and our collective memory.

As a drama in the American struggle for freedom, Anthony Burns’s story easily ranks with Paul Revere’s ride in April 1775. Like Revere, Burns was a remarkable man who demonstrated strength of character, ingenuity, and agency. He searched for his own “Freedom Trail”; tragically, he found it only very late in his short life. Despite being born a slave, separated early in life from his mother and other family members, mistreated—even disfigured—by cruel masters, and deprived of access to education, Burns persevered in his search for a better life. He learned to read and write and became an outstanding preacher and a devoted teacher who ran a clandestine school for blacks in Richmond, Virginia, before his courageous flight north in search
of liberty. He experienced the misfortune of recapture on free soil, endured a trial in which the odds seemed to be against him, and then found himself returned to bondage before thousands of onlookers.

His spirit unbroken, Burns survived a period of solitary confinement in Robert Lumpkin’s infamous slave jail in Richmond before his master sold him to a North Carolina slave trader known for reaping huge profits by selling human property to the Deep South. Burns eventually gained his freedom as a result of the efforts of the Reverend Leonard A. Grimes and other members of Boston’s Twelfth Baptist Church, who had been deeply moved by his misfortune. They persisted in their efforts to locate him and purchased his liberty. Once free, Burns attended Oberlin College and, after a brief period in Indianapolis, became the beloved pastor of a Baptist church in St. Catharines, Ontario. Many members of his congregation were fugitive slaves and free blacks who fled to the region that was then called Canada West to avoid the risk of being kidnapped and sold into slavery. Burns’s death from consumption (tuberculosis) at the age of only twenty-eight ended a brief but singularly eventful life that had special significance for Canadians and Americans, black and white, who were increasingly determined to deal with slavery in one way or another.

Academic historians have not forgotten Anthony Burns, although typically they have failed to underscore his agency and determination. They have tended to treat him merely as an object, a victim. However, a number of very able scholars have placed him at center stage in an increasingly divided nation during troubled times. Most of these scholars note that from mid-1854 until the outbreak of the Civil War, even after he had moved to Canada, Burns continued to make headlines in newspapers in both the North and South. They also show that after Burns’s untimely death in 1862, his shadow still lingered over the divided nation and influenced public sentiment. But the way these scholars have interpreted Burns’s personal drama within the broader context of the republican experiment and the coming of the Civil War gives rise to the other principal objectives of this work.

Broadly speaking, Burns is treated in two ways in the historical literature. First, following in the footsteps of Charles Emery Stevens, a nineteenth-century scholar who witnessed the events in Boston in 1854 and became Burns’s first chronicler, several historians have underscored the impact of the Burns drama on abolitionist sentiment in the North. They have suggested that the rendition of Burns into bondage, coming on the heels of the Kansas-Nebraska crisis, gave new impetus to the antislavery movement. For many Northerners, Burns’s return to slavery confirmed the horrors they read
about in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which was published two years earlier. In an in-depth analysis of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 and its enforcement, Stanley W. Campbell argues that Burns’s return to bondage boosted antislavery feelings and helped turn public opinion against the federal legislation. Building on Campbell’s work, Jane Pease and William Pease examine the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. Focusing particularly on the law’s contribution to sectional strife between the North and South, they portray the Burns drama as one in a long line of controversial cases that heightened Northern resistance to the federal defense of Southerners’ rights to own human property. They conclude that the Burns rendition provided evidence of the mounting costs of enforcing legislation that was becoming increasingly unpopular in the North.3

In their research on abolitionists, the Peases suggest that the Burns crisis intensified the antislavery impulse in the North. They also argue that the Burns drama spurred the abolitionists’ shift to outright “confrontation” from their earlier “disengagement” tactics emphasizing the denunciation of the Constitution and of proslavery churches. The Peases note that abolitionists introduced their new, more aggressive approach at the Fourth of July antislavery picnic in Framingham, Massachusetts, only weeks after Burns was returned to slavery in Virginia. William Lloyd Garrison burned copies of the Constitution, the Fugitive Slave Law, Commissioner Edward Loring’s decision in the Burns case, and Colonel Charles Suttle’s certified claim to the fugitive slave from Virginia. Jane and William Pease suggest that the Burns case proved to abolitionists that their previous reliance on moral suasion had been woefully inadequate.4

Stressing a groundswell in antislavery feeling in response to Burns’s return to slavery, Harold Schwartz concludes that “in effect the Fugitive Slave Law was nullified in Boston.” Similarly, linking the Burns drama with “Bleeding Kansas,” Stanley Shapiro argues that the trial of Burns “fanned into flame resentment that Kansas-Nebraska [had] kindled.” According to Shapiro, the crisis fueled Northern fears of slaveholders’ power, raised the specter of slavery pushing its way into the free states, and buoyed abolitionist sentiment, thus precipitating the courthouse riot that followed the rally in support of Burns in Faneuil Hall arranged by the Boston Vigilance Committee. The riot led to the death of a guard, a number of injuries, several arrests, and an unprecedented show of force on the part of the Boston police, the state militia, and the U.S. military.5

In his research on the Burns affair and the effects of the courthouse riot on Northern sentiment, David Maginnes concurs with Schwartz and Sha-
piro. Comparing the Burns rendition to earlier fugitive slave cases—notably that of Thomas Sims, returned to Georgia from Boston in 1851—Maginnes stresses the shifts in public opinion sparked by the capture of Burns and his subsequent return to bondage. He argues that the Burns affair boosted antislavery feelings and represented a watershed. From Maginnes's perspective, the Burns rendition changed the North; he argues that even industrialists such as Amos Lawrence, who made substantial profits dealing in Southern markets, became converts to the antislavery cause. In a similar vein, James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton portray the Burns case as a key event. They label it an antislavery “victory” and suggest that it aroused public outrage against both slavery in the South and federal support of the institution. Likewise, Charles Johnson and Patricia Smith argue that Burns’s return to bondage “affected even the most apathetic Northerners” and strengthened their resolve “to defy” the Fugitive Slave Law.

Another group of scholars emphasizes Boston’s Revolutionary heritage, founded on a commitment to liberty and equality. In arguments that overlap the views of those discussed above, these historians contend that the Burns drama resulted in the fusion of Bostonians’ antislavery leanings with their Revolutionary heritage. These scholars assert that the tragic plight of Anthony Burns forced Bostonians to confront the horrors of slavery on Massachusetts’s own free soil. The sight of a shackled slave being returned to bondage thus encouraged Bostonians to lash out against violations of natural rights philosophy, or “higher law.” David Herbert Donald’s assessment of Charles Sumner’s reaction to the Burns drama and Albert Von Frank’s work on “Emerson’s Boston” are two leading examples of this approach. Donald shows Sumner ratcheting up his antislavery campaign in response to the Burns affair; Von Frank describes the events in 1854 as a “pocket revolution” during which Emerson’s Boston took a stand for “equal justice” and “higher law,” both of which were deemed essential to a “moral universe.”

Although all these scholars provide insight into the Burns drama, the nation, and the times, they tend to read history backward from the Civil War. The arrest of Burns, his trial, the courthouse riot, and the crowd’s reactions to his forced departure from Boston are portrayed as critical points on the march toward the Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the extirpation of slavery from American soil. These historians treat the Burns drama much like other incidents that they suggest fueled antislavery sentiments and sectional strife during the decade before the Civil War—the publication of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the Kansas-Nebraska crisis, the caning of Charles Sumner in the Senate, Roger Taney’s Dred Scott decision, and John Brown’s Harper’s
Ferry raid, which was followed quickly by his execution. This scholarship on Burns suggests continuity and almost implies the inevitability of impending violent confrontation in the form of a civil war. There are fundamental weaknesses in such an approach.

First, the scholarship underestimates or masks the confusion and disarray in antebellum America and especially in midcentury Boston, a city fraught with religious, racial, and ethnic tension, and with class antipathy. Although antislavery sentiments certainly existed—notably the pacifist abolitionism of people such as William Lloyd Garrison, the moral high road of Charles Sumner, and the radical philosophies of outspoken activists such as Theodore Parker, men who aimed to sink the Southern “slavocracy” and nullify the Fugitive Slave Law—these were not the only attitudes displayed by antebellum Bostonians and other Americans. At critical moments such as the Burns rendition, antislavery sentiments competed with a wide range of other, much less noble opinions and beliefs. This work aims to expose the conflict and confusion, even chaos, in Anthony Burns's Boston; it suggests that the march toward the Civil War and the extirpation of slavery were not inevitable, nor was there a consensus among Bostonians and other Northern whites that such a march was necessary.

The existing scholarship on Burns is also disconnected from the rich historical literature on African Americans, including recent studies on Northern racism and earlier seminal works such as W. E. B. Du Bois’s *Black Reconstruction in America.* Most Burns scholarship focuses on the contest between Southern slaveholders seeking to exercise their rights to human property, supported by federal authorities, and Northern abolitionists, who denounced slavery as a violation of the principles enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, natural rights, and God-given higher law. The way this confrontation unfolded, however, also reflected the patterns of relations between the races in Boston and throughout the North. I endeavor to reveal the very different meanings of the Burns drama for blacks and whites and, in so doing, to demonstrate how prevailing attitudes toward race informed the behavior of key players throughout the crisis. I aim to expose the special message the Burns drama had for Northern blacks and show how it encouraged them to adopt an increasingly militant stance against slavery independent of the white abolitionists with whom they had been accustomed to working closely.

My third objective is to reconsider Anthony Burns and the coming of the Civil War. Not surprisingly, most scholars have emphasized the supposed groundswell of antislavery sentiment in the North during the Burns affair and the resulting trends in emancipation politics and sectional strife.
after the crisis. Here, too, there are problems. If the Burns rendition ignited a Northern drive for emancipation, it did so in a strange and convoluted way. While Burns languished in solitary confinement in a Richmond slave trader’s jail, most Free-Soil advocates, and certainly the Republican Party that emerged in the 1850s, continued to focus their attention on keeping western territories free from slavery rather than on liberating nearly four million enslaved blacks such as Burns.

The Republican Party grew rapidly in the aftermath of the Burns crisis to become the North’s leading political organization in the second half of the decade. Yet despite the alleged opposition of Northerners to the Burns rendition, their apparent disaffection with the federal enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, and their supposed widespread abhorrence of the peculiar institution, the Republican Party’s platform in 1856 did not advocate the repeal of fugitive slave legislation, elimination of slavery in the nation’s capital, or the abolition of slavery in the states where it already existed.11 Nor did this rising Northern party call for the extension of civil rights to African Americans in the free states. As one leading scholar has suggested, most Republican leaders believed that the advocacy of rights for free blacks might prove “politically disastrous.” Indeed, in some areas such as the Midwest, Republicans proclaimed that they, not the Democrats, were the “real ‘white man’s party.'” They “vehemently denied” any inferences that the party intended to extend rights to Northern blacks, rejected allegations that they planned to tamper with slavery in the South, and disavowed charges that they had intentions of “turning the [N]egroes loose among us.”12 Republicans tailored their party’s platform to the sentiments of the white Northern electorate, concluding that public opinion had changed little from the time of the Burns crisis to the end of the decade. For Republicans, the Civil War was initially a war for the Union; it became a war against slavery only gradually, in a process cemented by the service of 180,000 black soldiers.13 Reexamining the link between Anthony Burns and the onset of the Civil War suggests that perhaps one of the most significant impacts of the Burns crisis was on the white South, not the North. For many white Southerners, events in Boston seemed to confirm their suspicions that antislavery sentiments were on the rise in the free states, which fueled their anxiety about the future protection of their interests in a Union marked by the more rapid expansion of the North. The disorder in one of the North’s largest cities also accentuated social differences between the sections, and many white Southerners came to view their society, with slavery at its center, as especially good. Against this background, the Pierce administration’s unprecedented show of force,
which most observers agreed was necessary to ensure Burns’s return to the South, also grated against the political culture of limited government embraced by most white Southerners. In this context, many reassessed their commitment to the Union founded by their forefathers.

Walking the Freedom Trail after my encounter at the Visitor Information Center, I could not help but think that the Freedom Trail and the Anthony Burns drama were, however, somehow closely connected—both, after all, revolved around American liberty and rights. Theodore Parker, Wendell Phillips, and the other champions of liberty who spoke at the Faneuil Hall rally talked of extending the Revolution of 1776 to all Americans, including the unfortunate Burns, who was then imprisoned in Boston’s courthouse. For decades, black Bostonians, who proved to be Burns’s most steadfast allies during and after the crisis, had used similar terms to frame their demands for rights enjoyed by their white brethren. In their struggle against discrimination in all walks of life—religion, education, public transportation, even marriage rights—they typically invoked the principles of 1776. As they did so, many black Bostonians also reminded their white neighbors of the heroic contributions to the Revolution of some of their black forefathers. On the eve of the Civil War, black abolitionists throughout the North appealed to the “first principles of the Declaration of Independence, especially to the right of revolution,” and they frequently “invoked Patrick Henry’s choice between life and death” as they voiced their demands for immediate abolition.14

Yet many who opposed the abolitionist rhetoric heard in Faneuil Hall during the Burns drama likewise invoked the Revolutionary cause. They justified their support of the Pierce administration’s enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law as a means of conserving the Revolution of 1776 and of not jeopardizing the gains they believed the New Nation had already achieved. For many Bostonians, the Revolution and its meaning were thus at issue. For some, black and white, the Revolution was still going on; it was “unfinished.”15 For others, the results of the Revolution were not yet secure; the Revolution needed to be conserved. In both cases, the Revolution and its meaning shaped collective memory—albeit in very different ways. Another of my principal objectives is to elucidate the connection between the Freedom Trail and the torturous path trod by Anthony Burns. In so doing, I show why it was so important to Burns and others close to him that “the work of 1854” not be “in vain.” I show too why Anthony Burns must also be considered a Revolutionary.16

Finally, like so many of his African American brethren, Burns, during his final years, fought his Revolution from Ontario, a place that became
free soil during the first half of the nineteenth century and beckoned fugitive slaves and free blacks who sought not only to build new lives but also to elevate the condition of their race. In the following pages, I emphasize the links between the antislavery challenge in antebellum America and the worldview embraced by many of Canada’s early blacks, including Anthony Burns. The fight against slavery transcended national boundaries, and the strategic importance of Canadian communities increased after the British parliament’s passage of the Imperial Emancipation Bill in 1833 and, even more so, after President Millard Fillmore’s administration began implementing the harsher fugitive slave legislation in 1850. Canadian blacks demonstrated remarkable agency and resolve in making Britain’s northern dominion the safe haven it became. The struggle for American liberties stirred many black militants on the northern side of the forty-ninth parallel, and Anthony Burns was among them.
CHAPTER 1

Perceiving the North Star

It is a pity . . . that agreeable to the nature of things Slavery and Tyranny must go together and that there is no such thing as having an obedient and useful Slave without the painful exercise of undue and tyrannical authority.

—A North Carolina planter

She [my mother] had been the source of all his wealth; she had peopled his plantation with slaves; she had become a great grandmother in his service. She had rocked him in infancy, attended him in childhood, served him through life, and at his death wiped from his icy brow the cold death-sweat, and closed his eyes forever. She was nevertheless left a slave—a slave for life—a slave in the hands of strangers; and in their hands saw her children, her grandchildren, and her great grandchildren, divided, like so many sheep, without being gratified with the small privilege of a single word, as to their or her own destiny.

—Frederick Douglass

I do not think it was intended for any man to be a slave. I never thought so, from a little boy. The slaves are not contented and happy. They can't be: I never knew one to be so where I was.

—Henry Banks, a fugitive slave from Stafford County, Virginia

When John Suttle’s most valuable female slave gave birth to Anthony Burns, her thirteenth child, on May 31, 1834, while Anthony’s father, her third husband, lay dying from the effects of stone dust inhalation, the United States was embarked on yet another period of remarkable economic expansion. The Union had recovered from the Panic of 1819, resolved the Missouri crisis, and survived the Bank War and the Nullification Crisis. President Andrew Jackson, in his own view, at least, had defended the Union from self-interested financial elites and then from South Carolinian advocates of state sovereignty—in both instances, men who failed to recognize the wisdom and virtue of the Founding Fathers. As the market economy expanded westward, Americans looked beyond the Appalachians and across the Great Plains to the Pacific; within a decade, the Democratic
editor John O’Sullivan would speak of America’s providential mission “from sea to shining sea” and coin the phrase “Manifest Destiny.”

Like so many other African Americans who had toiled on plantations, in industry, or in the homes of their masters, Anthony Burns’s forefathers and family had been instrumental in building the New Nation. John Suttle of Stafford County, Virginia, operated a large quarry that had supplied much of the stone for America’s grand new capital on the Potomac. It was Suttle’s slaves who quarried the stone; transported it; and, like Anthony’s father, sometimes succumbed to the nefarious effects of its dust. With a slaveholder in the White House in 1834 and a Southern economy dependent on King Cotton, slavery seemed well entrenched, and Anthony Burns would quickly learn that he was a member of a caste that did not have the right to share in the nation’s growing riches or even in the fruits of his own labor. His role was to serve the master who owned him. As Burns matured, his growing strength would be a two-edged sword; he could take pride in his prowess but, as a slave, he knew that his increased physical strength and stamina raised his value on the market and that his owner had the right to hire him out or even sell him to the Deep South, where labor was in short supply and sellers received a very good premium for able-bodied slaves.

Even sooner than that, however, Burns learned that a crisis in the “big house,” including the death of a master, often precipitated heart-wrenching change in the lives of slaves. When Anthony was just a toddler, John Suttle died and his family came upon hard times, exacerbated by the devastating recession of 1837 and his widow’s tendency to live well beyond her means. Burns was about three years old when his mistress lost the quarry and had to sell five of Anthony’s siblings to reduce her debts. She then moved to the neighboring village of Aquia. Still unable to pay her bills, Catherine Suttle hired Anthony’s mother out to a white family living at a considerable distance from her new home, thus separating the aging female slave from her remaining children. Until he was six years old and Mrs. Suttle suddenly died, Anthony saw his mother only when his mean-spirited mistress permitted him to accompany her on trips to collect his mother’s wages from the white folks who had hired her.

After Catherine Suttle’s death, her son Charles, a deputy sheriff and a colonel in the militia, took control of the family’s affairs, and Anthony confronted more change. Charles Suttle covered his mother’s debts by mortgaging the family’s remaining slaves and, with the exception of Anthony and his sister’s baby, hired them all out to meet the mortgage payments. Anthony went with his sister, who was sent to work for the Hortons, a white family
who operated a schoolhouse; he was given the task of babysitting his sister’s child while she completed her chores. At the Hortons’, he learned that only white children could attend school but, demonstrating youthful curiosity and ingenuity, he ran errands for some white children and secretly obtained a primer, which he used to learn the alphabet.3

The following year, when Anthony was only seven years old, Suttle hired him out to live with and do menial chores for three spinsters. The elderly ladies were religious, and their constant reference to the scriptures served as Burns’s introduction to the Bible. He had been with the women for twelve months when Suttle hired him out to a schoolteacher’s family, where he had more opportunities to advance his learning. Burns found access to books and other educational tools. “His thirst for knowledge thus whetted,” he induced some white pupils to teach him to spell by “performing antics and drolleries” for them. He remained with the schoolteacher’s family for two years. When they requested to have him for a third year, Anthony boldly refused to stay, indicating to his master that “he had been in some respects shabbily treated.” Suttle consented to the ten-year-old slave’s demand to go elsewhere and hired him out to William Brent, a friend who later also became the slaveholder’s agent.4

The youthful Burns spent two formative years at Brent’s Falmouth, Virginia, plantation. For the first time in his life, he found himself among a large group of enslaved blacks and became immersed in a very vibrant slave community.5 In the quarters at night, he heard older slaves telling stories about freedom in the North, which he later said “kindled a fire in his young breast that never went out.” By his own account, Burns resolved to continue his learning by whatever means possible and someday escape bondage. He decided to pressure Suttle to hire him out to different employers so that he could gain more knowledge, which he believed would increase his chances of successful flight. At the end of Burns’s second year at Falmouth, when Brent asked Suttle to extend the young slave’s term for another year, Burns again asserted himself and refused to stay. Perhaps recognizing that escape was the form of resistance that cost slaveholders the most, Burns told his master that if he were forced to stay with Brent, he might make for “the woods.” Suttle acquiesced and found another employer during the Christmas hiring season who would pay the twelve-year-old slave wages that he, the master, could pocket.6

Suttle struck a deal with a Yankee named Foote who had purchased a sawmill at Culpeper in north-central Virginia. Although Burns took an immediate dislike to the man and protested the arrangement, Suttle sent him off
to Culpeper. Foote and his wife proved to be harsh masters who believed in making their slaves “stand in fear.”7 They often beat their bond people with “a board perforated with holes and roughened with tar and sand,” designed to “smart without deeply cutting up the flesh and thereby diminishing the market value of the slave”;8 the Footes did not want to inflict the kind of harm that would cause them to have trouble with the masters of the slaves they hired. Foote, however, was a careless man, and one day he started the sawmill without warning Burns. The young slave, who had been performing maintenance on the equipment, caught his hand in a wheel and found himself thrown against the machinery. Burns’s hand was mangled so badly that the bone protruded; it remained disfigured for life. His face was also severely cut, and it too remained scarred. Foote returned the injured slave to an unhappy Suttle, who had recently moved to Falmouth.

During Burns’s recovery, townspeople in Falmouth experienced the “fervors of the camp-meeting”; the last wave of what would later be called the Second Great Awakening was sweeping the countryside, fueled partly by a scarlet fever epidemic that struck fear in the hearts of many Virginians. The heightened religious feeling took hold of Burns, who requested his master’s permission to be baptized. Although Suttle initially refused, he eventually granted his slave’s request. Burns was baptized and became a member of the Falmouth Baptist Church. Imbued with this new spirituality, Burns discovered his “gift at exhortation,” which awakened in him a desire to preach. In the months that followed, he began slipping away to “hush arbors” under the cover of night in order to preach and worship with fellow slaves away from the watchful eyes of their masters and of slave patrollers. Despite his young age, Burns conducted marriage and funeral services for bond persons.9

After Burns’s time with Foote, his next employer was a Falmouth townsman, who quickly re-let him to a local merchant. The latter sought to hire Burns directly at the end of the year. Resenting the merchant’s treatment of him, Burns, now sixteen years old, insisted again that Suttle make different arrangements, and he was placed in the service of a tavern keeper in Fredericksburg for the next year. He remained in Fredericksburg the following year as well, working in an apothecary. One evening, he met a fortune-teller; she rekindled his dreams of freedom by telling him that he would not be a slave for long.

Burns’s yearning for liberty was also fueled after Suttle, having moved to Richmond, sent for him. He wanted to hire his young slave out at the more lucrative rates prevailing in the Virginian capital. Burns spent his first year
in Richmond working at a flour mill where one of his brothers was also employed. Suttle then placed him with a Richmond druggist named Millspaugh, who did not have work for him but, like the Falmouth townsman, wanted to make money by re-letting him to others. In fact, Millspaugh told Burns to hire himself out in the bustling Richmond market at any rate that would allow the druggist to reap a profit after covering the $125 annual payment agreed to with Suttle. The young slave found work in the Richmond harbor, where he met not only free blacks and whites who lived in the city but also “men whose birthright was in a free land.” Although Burns enjoyed his new surroundings, secretly taught some fellow blacks to read and write at night, and fell in love with a slave woman, the young man still yearned to be free. In early 1854, he made his final preparations for flight and shared his dream with a sailor on a ship that was about to set sail for Boston. Being pious, Burns was concerned about reconciling his flight with Christian teachings. He studied the scriptures and concluded that “the Bible set forth only one God for the black and white races,” and that he had an “inalienable right to liberty.”