

A Voice for Freedom: The Life and Achievements of William Wells Brown

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The issue of slavery was a widely debated topic during the antebellum period, which created a division in American society. The partition was quite prominent between those who wanted to continue the “peculiar institution” and the abolitionists who wanted to see an end to slavery. The abolitionist movement grew rapidly in the United States. Many outstanding white Americans and African-Americans, several of whom were former slaves, joined the movement. William Wells Brown was an African-American abolitionist who rose from the chains of slavery to significant status within the abolitionist movement and ultimately in American society. Brown enjoyed a wide-ranging career in the abolitionist movement, more so than many other notable African-American abolitionists. Brown’s popular literary works, and the awareness he brought to the capabilities of African-Americans, earned him a well-known spot in history.

William Wells Brown was born in Lexington, Kentucky, the slave of Dr. John Young. The date of Brown’s birth is unknown as it was never recorded by his master. It was not uncommon for masters to neglect recording birth dates of their slaves because they wanted to keep their chattel unaware of their ages. Keeping a slave from knowing one’s age was for the purpose of making sure that a slave would not learn how to count. Masters feared that slaves would learn basic arithmetic, aiding them in discovering how to calculate odds and averages, which would ultimately help them to escape. Some sources have listed Brown’s birth year as 1813, others have said 1814. Brown’s daughter, Josephine Brown, in her *Biography of an American Bondman by his Daughter*, lists her father’s birth date as March 15, 1815.¹

Brown was the son of a mulatto slave, Elizabeth, and a relative of Dr. Young, George Higgins. Brown was a light-skinned African-American, a feature that would aid in his acceptance among white abolitionists and plague him among fellow African-Americans who felt he appeared too “white.” Brown’s mother named her son William. When William became a house servant for the Youngs, Mrs. Young renamed Brown Sanford because the Youngs were raising their nephew who was also named William.²

Dr. Young moved to Missouri near the St. Charles River not long after Brown was born. Brown was employed as a house servant and physician hand to Dr. Young, while his mother, Elizabeth, was a field hand. This allowed Brown to be free from Young’s oppressive slave

¹William Wells Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave* 2nd ed. (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1848), 13; Jean Fagan Yellin, *The Intricate Knot: Black Figures in American Literature, 1776-1863* (New York: New York University Press, 1972), 155; L.H. Wheelchel Jr., *My Chains Fell Off: William Wells Brown, Fugitive Abolitionist* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1985), 1, ix; William Edward Farrison, *William Wells Brown: Author & Reformer* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969), 8; Josephine Brown, *Biography of an American Bondman by his Daughter* (Boston: R.F. Wallcut, 1856), 6 (hereafter J. Brown).

² Farrison, 13.

overseer, Grove Cook. Cook armed himself with a “negro whip,” a ten-foot long whip with a lead filled end, the lashes made of cowhide and wire attached to the end of the lashes. Cook used any excuse he could find to whip the slaves to keep them in submission. One morning Brown heard his mother being whipped after reporting to her field work fifteen minutes late. He could hear his mother crying from the house and was overcome with feelings of helplessness at not being able to save her. Brown wrote about this experience in his autobiography. “I heard her voice, and knew it, and jumped out of my bunk, and went to the door. Though the field was some distance from the house, I could hear every crack of the whip, and every groan and cry of my poor mother.” It was events such as this that angered Brown the most about the institution of slavery. He vowed that he would successfully escape, and devote his life to abolition.³

Dr. Young bought a new farm in St. Louis in 1827, and began having political ambitions. In order to afford both his farm and political career, Dr. Young hired Brown out to various businessmen in St. Louis. The first man that Brown was hired out to was Major Freeland, an innkeeper, who had been known to engage in fits of drunken rage, targeting his slaves. Brown was repeatedly whipped and forced to endure what Freeland called “Virginia Play,” which consisted of being beaten, tied to a chair in a smoke house and then smoked out with burning tobacco leaves. He complained about his treatment by Freeland to Dr. Young, but was sent back to continue working for Freeland. After six more months with Freeland, Brown made his first unsuccessful attempt to escape. He ran into the woods toward Dr. Young’s farm. It was not long before Brown heard the barking of the bloodhounds and climbed a tree to conceal himself from the scent of the dogs. Brown was immediately caught, returned to Freeland and severely punished.⁴

Another job that Brown was given was as a waiter aboard a steamship; a profession that he quite enjoyed and would continue until his involvement in the American Anti-Slavery Society. In 1830, Brown worked for Elijah P. Lovejoy, the editor of the *St. Louis Times*. He operated the printing press, waited on customers, and worked in the printing office. Brown was treated very well by Lovejoy, who later became the editor of the *St. Louis Observer*, a religious newspaper that focused primarily on the issue of slavery. The worst job that Brown endured, was as a “negro speculator” in 1832, in which he had to prepare slaves to be sold. Brown discusses the work that he had to perform as a negro speculator in his autobiography, *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave*: “I was ordered to have the old men’s whiskers shaved off, and the grey hairs plucked out where they were not too numerous, in which case he had a preparation of blacking to color it.” It sickened him to see his fellow race being sold into slavery.⁵

After his service in the spring of 1833 with the slave dealer, Brown made his second attempt to escape, this time with his mother. Brown and his mother were captured and returned to St. Louis after eleven days and having traveled one hundred and fifty miles by foot. His repeated escape attempts made Brown a liability to Dr. Young, who made him a field hand until he could determine what to do with him. Masters feared that slaves who attempted to escape

³ Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave*, 15, 13-15; Whelchel, 4.

⁴ Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave*, 20, 20-22; Farrison, 17-19.

⁵ Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave*, 42, 26-42; Brown, 21; Farrison, 20-21.

would incite the same notions in other slaves. Brown was sold for five hundred dollars to a “merchant tailor,” Samuel Willi. Willi purchased Brown in the hopes of hiring him out to steamship captains. After only six months, Willi felt that Brown was not a sound investment. On October 2, 1833, Willi sold Brown to a steamship owner, Enoch Price. It is believed that Price paid anywhere from \$650 to \$700 for Brown. Under the ownership of Price, Brown spent most of his time aboard Price’s steamship, the *Chester*.⁶

Brown used his new post as an opportunity to escape. He waited for the *Chester* to sail into free state territory before he made his getaway. The *Chester* docked in Cairo, Illinois, a free state, on December 29, 1833. Fearing that Illinois was still too close to St. Louis, where his master Price was living, Brown decided to wait for a better port. The *Chester* traveled from Illinois to Louisville, Kentucky, finally docking in Cincinnati, Ohio, late at night on December 31. Due to the late hour, none of the freight or passenger cargo would have been unloaded until the next morning. Brown believed that the commotion of unloading passengers and cargo the following morning would serve as the perfect opportunity to escape undetected.⁷

During the disorder of the *Chester* unloading her passengers and cargo, Brown disembarked from the ship and picked up a trunk that was lying near by. He very calmly carried the trunk unnoticed to the edge of the woods. Once there, Brown dropped the trunk and ran into the woods, hiding until nightfall before he continued his escape. Like so many other fugitive slaves, Brown followed the North Star as he slowly made his way to freedom. At first, Brown trusted no one and was determined to make it to freedom without aid. “I had long since made up my mind,” Brown stated in his autobiography, “that I would not trust myself in the hands of any man, white or colored. The slave is brought up to look upon every white man as an enemy to him and his race; and twenty-one years in slavery had taught me that there were traitors, even among colored people.”⁸

Brown was caught in a storm of freezing rain after five days. He became quite sick and his feet succumbed to frostbite. After two more very painful nights of walking, he knew that he needed help. Brown hid in a ditch alongside a wooded road, until he saw a Quaker by the name of Wells Brown. Wells Brown took him in and cared for him until he was able to continue. Brown stayed with Wells Brown and his wife for fifteen days, during which time they nursed him back to health, made him new clothes, purchased him new boots and gave him food and money that helped him on his journey. Later, when Brown took a new name as a free man, he reclaimed his original name and added the name of Wells Brown to it out of gratitude to the care given by the Quaker and his wife. In the opening of his autobiography, Brown recounts a letter to Wells Brown in which he expresses his gratitude. “Thirteen years ago, I came to your door, a weary fugitive from chains and stripes. . . . Even a name by which to be known among men, slavery had denied me. You bestowed upon me your own. Base, indeed, should I be, if I ever forgot what I owe to you, or do anything to disgrace that honored name!”⁹

Brown reached Cleveland, Ohio at the end of January 1834. Brown hoped that he could

⁶ Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave*, 65-73, 75-77; Farrison, 35-39, 39-42.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 46; Brown, 37.

⁸ Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave*, 94-95; Farrison, 51.

⁹ Brown, *William W. Brown, Fugitive Slave*, v, 98-100; Farrison, 57-59.

board a steamship on Lake Erie and sail to Canada. Upon reaching Cleveland, he found that the lake was frozen and no ships were running. Brown had two choices, he could either go by foot to Canada through Detroit or Buffalo in the middle of winter or he could wait in Cleveland until the spring. Brown chose the latter. He worked odd jobs through the winter and once the spring came he took a job as a steward aboard the steamer *Detroit*.¹⁰

While living in Cleveland, Brown advanced what little knowledge of reading and writing he obtained from being a house servant. Brown began reading magazines, books, newspapers; whatever he could get his hands on. Brown also used some of the money he had earned to buy not only a spelling book, but also candy that he used to bribe the children of his employer to teach him how to write his letters. Brown was frequently seen practicing his writing skills on fences before the children, who corrected him when it was needed. Once Brown improved his reading skills, he subscribed to the popular anti-slavery newspaper, *Genius of Universal Emancipation*. The admired newspaper was published by a Quaker named Benjamin Lundy.¹¹

Brown risked his new found freedom to aid other slaves to escape the bondage of slavery. He had growing aspirations to be involved in the anti-slavery cause no matter the risk to his own freedom. Given Brown's fugitive slave status, if he had been caught while he helped other slaves, he would have been returned to his master. "It was my great desire," Brown wrote, "being out of slavery myself, to do what I could for the emancipation of my brethren yet in chains, and while on Lake Erie, I found many opportunities of 'helping their cause along.'" Brown used the opportunity of working on the *Detroit* to arrange for fugitive slaves to be taken to Detroit or Buffalo, where they then could cross into Canada to freedom. Between May and December 1842, Brown helped sixty-nine slaves reach Canada, all funded through his own earnings.¹²

In the summer of 1834, Brown met Elizabeth Schooner while the *Detroit* was docked back in Cleveland. Their courtship was rather quick and the two were married by the end of the summer. In late spring 1835, the two had their first child, a daughter. She died within a few months after she was born, which caused much heartache for the couple. The death of the Browns's first child was the beginning of what would be a history of problems in their marriage. In the spring of 1836, Brown's wife gave birth to their second child, Clarissa.¹³

Brown moved his family to Buffalo, New York, a few months after Clarissa's birth. He subscribed to William Lloyd Garrison's abolitionist newspaper, the *Liberator*. Through the *Liberator*, Brown became interested in the work of the American Anti-Slavery Society. Also while in Buffalo, he noticed that many African-Americans had succumbed to alcohol. Brown had become quite repelled with alcohol and drunkenness while working for Freeland. This led him to found, and lead, a temperance movement among the African-American population. Brown had built-up the organization to five hundred African-American members in three years out of a population that was no more than seven hundred. Through the temperance society, Brown was able to practice, and perfect, his public speaking skills.¹⁴

¹⁰ Ibid, 57-61; Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave*, 102; Whelchel, 16.

¹¹ Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave*, 107-108; Yellin, 156.

¹² Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave*, 107, 107-108.

¹³ Farrison, 62, 66-68; Brown, 46.

¹⁴ Farrison, 69; Yellin, 156; Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave*, 108.

In the summer of 1839, Brown and his wife had their third daughter, Josephine, who later wrote a biography of her father. Josephine was clearly preferred by her father, as no other child was ever mentioned in his writing. Josephine also favored her relationship with her father as she felt that she was the only one capable of writing a fair biography of him when she took up the task in 1856.¹⁵

Brown studied the successful revolution of the Haitian negroes in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. What interested him most was that fellow blacks were victorious in their fight against bondage and placed themselves at the head of the government. Fascinated, Brown took a trip to Haiti in 1840. Brown also traveled to Cuba and the West Indies. Haiti most impressed Brown that he later took up the cause of Haitian immigration for a short period in 1861. Brown's trip to Haiti, his leadership in the temperance movement, and his work on the Underground Railroad gave him significant recognition with the American Anti-Slavery Society. His popularity earned him a spot as a lecturer with the New York Anti-Slavery Society in fall 1843. Brown wrote that from the start of his time on the anti-slavery lecture circuit he "ever since devoted [his] time to the cause of [his] enslaved countrymen."¹⁶

As a lecturer for the New York Anti-Slavery Society, Brown traveled across much of the Northeast and into parts of the West and he made sure never to cross into slave states. The majority of Brown's speeches were about the slave trade and attitudes that whites had toward the "peculiar institution." A recurring theme that Brown used in his lectures was the incorrect notion that was held by many whites that slaves were contented in their bondage regardless of brutal tactics used by masters and overseers. Brown was well received by white audiences due to his mulatto heritage. Many viewed his light skin as being practically white.¹⁷

In a speech Brown delivered in Pennsylvania, he stated: "They tell us that the slave is contented and happy. . . . Should that fact weigh a single moment upon the minds of intelligent persons in favour of enslaving a race because they happen to have skins not coloured like your own?" Brown regarded himself as a voice for those who could not have spoken for themselves, for the African-Americans that were still in slavery, and for the free blacks who were too afraid to speak for themselves.¹⁸

Inspired by the favorable reception he received on the lecture circuit, Brown wrote his autobiography, *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave* in 1847. Four editions of his *Narrative* were published; the second came out only a year after its original publication. Eight thousand copies of the first edition were sold. Brown's autobiography brought him international

¹⁵ Farrison, 73.

¹⁶ Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave*, 108; Farrison, 74.

¹⁷ William Wells Brown, *Speech by William Wells Brown, Delivered at the Horticultural Hall, West Chester, Pennsylvania, 23 October 1854*, vol. IV of *The Black Abolitionist Papers*, ed. C. Peter Ripley (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 245-255; William Wells Brown, *Speech by William Wells Brown, Delivered at the City Assembly Rooms, New York, New York, 8 May 1856*, vol. IV of *The Black Abolitionist Papers*, ed. C. Peter Ripley (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 339-345; William Wells Brown, *Speech by William Wells Brown, Delivered at the Cincinnati Anti-Slavery Convention, Cincinnati, Ohio, 25 April 1855*, vol. IV of *The Black Abolitionist Papers*, ed. C. Peter Ripley (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 287-289.

¹⁸ Brown, *Speech by William Wells Brown, Delivered at the Horticultural Hall, West Chester, Pennsylvania*, 247, 245-255.

popularity as it offered an eerie insight into the life of slavery as Brown detailed, often graphically, the treatment he endured and witnessed. The preface of *Narrative* was written by two fellow white abolitionists, Edmund Quinsy and J.C. Hathaway. The purpose of Brown having Quinsy and Hathaway write his preface was to give validation in the “white” world to Brown’s story. He believed that many white Americans would not read his autobiography without including the acceptance that Quinsy and Hathaway had given to Brown. Brown’s *Narrative* became the best selling “slave narrative” before the outbreak of the Civil War. What attracted readers to Brown’s autobiography were his vivid descriptions of the experiences all slaves had, rather than having simply discussed his own life.¹⁹

Slave narratives became increasingly popular among abolitionists and abolition supporters. Like Brown’s autobiography, slave narratives offered access into the world of slavery that could only be obtained, and uncovered, by a slave. Brown did not write *Narrative* in order to establish himself as an author. He wanted to show a side of slavery that had not been shown before. Brown wanted to make a direct attack on slavery. He believed that the previous slave narratives that had been published did not give an accurate account of the harsh realities of slavery. Brown felt that his speeches only reached those who were able to attend them. Therefore, he wanted to get his abolition message to a wider audience all across the United States. With his autobiography, he was even able to reach his former master, Enoch Price. Price conceded that while the stories that Brown had told of slavery were true, Price still believed in the institution of slavery. Price also offered to sell Brown to the Massachusetts Slavery Society, or Brown could have bought his own freedom, for \$325, noting that it was half of what Price had paid for him. However, Brown felt that he had already been a free man and did not need to buy his freedom.²⁰

In May 1847, Brown moved his family to Farmington to work with the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. Brown continued the same manner and tone of his speeches as he had in New York. In June 1848, Brown compiled popular slave songs and published *The Anti-Slavery Harp, a Collection of Songs for Anti-Slavery Meetings*. *The Anti-Slavery Harp* was so popular, that Brown published a second edition a year later. While in Farmington, Brown and his wife, Elizabeth, separated. Elizabeth promptly returned to Buffalo, leaving the children with Brown. The couple continually discussed divorce; however, they never followed through.²¹

Due to the growing popularity of Brown’s works and speeches he gained status in the abolitionist movement. In May 1849, Brown was appointed as a member of the prestigious “Committee of Conference on the State and Prospects of the Cause,” joining Fredrick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, and Samuel May, Jr. The purpose of the committee was to determine the logistics and tone of the anti-slavery conferences that were held, as well as what speakers

¹⁹ Whelchel, 63, x; William L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 144-145; Rafia Zafar, *We Wear the Mask: African Americans Write American Literature, 1760-1870* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 79-80.

²⁰ Gilbert Osofsky, ed., *Puttin’ On Ole Massa: The Slave Narratives of Henry Bibb, William Wells Brown, and Solomon Northup* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1969), 9-10; W. Edward Farrison, “William Wells Brown, Social Reformer.” *The Journal of Negro Education* 18 (1949): 29-32; Farrison, 120.

²¹ *Ibid*, 107-108; Vernon Loggins, *The Negro Author: His Development in America to 1900* (New York: Kennikat Press, Inc., 1964), 162.

would have been invited. Brown was also selected as a member to the finance committee for the American Anti-Slavery Society. Two months later, he was chosen to be a delegate at the Peace Congress held in France later in the summer. Brown wanted to travel to Europe not only because of the Congress, but because he felt it was important to follow in the footsteps of Frederick Douglass and Charles Lenox Redmond. Brown carried his message of the plight of American slavery to the British people, just like his predecessors had done.²²

Brown sailed aboard the steamship *Canada* on July 18, 1849. When Brown boarded the ship he thought he would return within the year. Unfortunately, while Brown was in Europe the harsh Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 was passed in the United States, making his return a dangerous decision given his fugitive status. Brown arrived in Liverpool on July 28. He toured around Liverpool for three days and then went on to Dublin, Ireland before he continued to Salle de Sainte Cecile for the Congress.²³

The Peace Congress started on August 22, 1849. Victor Hugo presided as president over eight hundred delegates, with twenty having come from the United States. Brown was widely recognized and received among the attendees, not only because he was a fugitive slave, (he was not the only one) but mainly because he was light skinned. Many felt that he could almost pass for a white man, a feature that quite plagued Brown. Brown addressed the assembly on the final day of the Congress. He spoke out against what he called the “war spirit,” discussing what he viewed as a war between the slave and the enslaver in the United States. He called for “abolition of the war” in the United States. Though Brown was happy that the Congress had taken place and allowed for ideas about the abolition of slavery to have been discussed, among other issues, he had little hope for its success.²⁴

Brown returned to England after he spent ten days traveling around Paris. With the help of acquaintances that he made while in Paris, Brown began a career on the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society lecture circuit. Brown lectured across France and Great Britain on the evils of the “peculiar institution” in the United States. Brown hoped to enlist the British and French abolitionists through his speeches to pressure the United States into ending slavery. Brown compared the plight of slavery in America to the labor class in Britain because he hoped that it would relate more to the British citizens. After the Fugitive Slave Law was passed, Brown used the oppressive law as more ammunition in his speeches.²⁵

In 1852, Brown wrote *Three Years in Europe; or, Places I Have Seen and People I Have Met*, a compilation of correspondences from friends in the United States and notes he took on his travels of Europe. He connected his letters and notes with a narrative of his memories and the histories associated with the places he traveled in Britain and France. Brown wanted to give British society a look at the fugitive slave’s opinion of the difference of a black man’s treatment in Europe versus the United States during the late-nineteenth century. *Three Years in Europe* was the first travel history book of Europe published abroad by an African-American. In the preface, Brown stated; “the fact of [the letters] being the first publication of a Fugitive Slave, as

²² Farrison, 147-151; Whelchel, 19.

²³ Whelchel, 145-151; William Wells Brown, *The American Fugitive in Europe. Sketches of People and Places Abroad* (Boston: John P. Jewett and Company, 1855), 35-42.

²⁴ Farrison, 147-151; Whelchel, 19.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 18-20; Loggins, 162.

a history of travels, may carry with them novelty enough to secure for them . . . the attention of the reading public of Great Britain." *Three Years in Europe* proved to be a huge success for Brown not only in Britain, but also in the United States.²⁶

Brown used the success of *Three Years in Europe* to publish another book in London, this time a novel. In November 1853, Brown became the first African-American to publish a novel, *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter*. *Clotel* was the story of a slave girl who was the daughter of former President Thomas Jefferson and one of his slaves. Due to the controversy over the rumors that Thomas Jefferson had fathered a child by a slave, Brown revised his novel several times throughout his life to make it more commercially acceptable to his audience. Brown changed, among other things, the status of *Clotel's* father. References to Thomas Jefferson were no longer as a President but as a United States Senator. The name Thomas Jefferson was also omitted as well as any reference to alleged descendants of his from an affair Jefferson was alleged to have had with one of his slaves.²⁷

Clotel was often autobiographical. He combined stories from other slave narratives, and tied those stories to the lives of the characters in *Clotel*. Brown made the brutal treatment of slaves by their masters and the splitting up of slave families quite apparent. In the preface, Brown made a very poignant statement on the issue of slavery. "On every foot of soil, over which *Stars and Stripes* wave," observes Brown, "the Negro is considered common property, on which any white man may lay his hand with perfect impunity." Brown's statement, along with the situation resulting in *Clotel's* birth, also emulated his feelings over his own birth.²⁸

Clotel began with a brief autobiography of Brown entitled "Narrative of the Life and Escape of William Wells Brown: Memoir of the Author." Brown hoped that by including his autobiography, he had given validation to the novel. He wanted his reading public to know that he had first-hand knowledge of the cruelties of slavery. Brown's struggle with his mulatto status also contributed to his inclusion of an autobiography. He made sure that his readers knew that he was a black man, a fugitive slave, and an abolitionist. Brown believed that he needed to set the stage for his readers who might have been skeptical of his abilities as a fiction writer because he was the first of his race to publish a novel.²⁹

The original publication of *Clotel* was not well received in England mainly because of the graphic and often abrasive tone that Brown took in his narrative. British readers were also put off by Brown's often complicated plot and found it hard to keep up with the various characters. In the London reviews of *Clotel* many journalists referred to Brown's novel as "melodramatic, digressive, propagandistic and conventional." Many readers had a problem relating to Brown's use of slang language and southern images of which many Europeans had no first-hand knowledge. Other sources have attributed the lack of *Clotel's* success to the fact that Brown

²⁶ William Wells Brown, *Three Years in Europe: or, Places I Have Seen and People I Have Met* (London: Charles Gilpin, 1852), xxxi; Andrews, 171-172; Whelchel, 18.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 45; Farrison, 388.

²⁸ William Wells Brown, *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States* (London: Partridge & Oakey, 1853), 3; M. Giulia Fabi, "The 'Unguarded Expressions of the Feelings of the Negroes:' Gender, Slave Resistance, and William Wells Brown's Revisions of *Clotel*," *African American Review* 27 (1993): 639-641; Whelchel, 45; Loggins, 165; Zafar, 86.

²⁹ Jo Ann Marx, "Use of Language and Narrative Technique in Four Antebellum Black Novels" (PhD diss., The University of Kentucky, 1992), 182-183; Fabi, 641.

published the novel only a year after the popular *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, by Harriet Beecher Stowe. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was believed to be easier to read and less confrontational than *Clotel*. With the two novels published so closely together, *Clotel* was often compared to Stowe's widely successful work, with Brown's piece coming up short.³⁰

Friends of Brown's in England purchased his freedom from his former master, Enoch Price, in April 1854. Previously, Price offered to sell Brown for \$325; however, when he was approached by the fugitive slave's British friends, Price raised the amount to \$1,844. Brown's friends were not fazed by the amount and they gladly paid Price his fee. Brown believed that he was about forty years old when he finally attained his legal freedom. Now able to return to the United States, Brown boarded the *City of Manchester* in September to sail home after a brief visit with his daughter Clarissa who had moved to London. With his works in high demand, his writings both at home and abroad brought him recognition as an exceptional writer. Brown resumed writing as soon as he returned to the United States. He published *St. Domingo: Its Revolutions and its Patriots* in December, Brown's first attempt at writing history.³¹

Brown was enthralled with the success of the Haitian revolution, which led him to write a history of the event. It was a short, thirty-eight-page history that was initially a lecture that he delivered in London and Philadelphia. Brown continually celebrated the determination of the slaves to attain their freedom, an act that Brown wished he could have seen in the United States at the time, leading to abolition. In fact, *St. Domingo* was the first time that Brown used history to project his beliefs. In the closing paragraph, Brown stated; "And, should such a contest [for liberty] take place, the God of Justice will be on the side of the oppressed blacks. The exasperated genius of Africa would rise from the depths of the ocean, and show its threatening form; and war against the tyrants would be the rallying cry."³²

In 1855, Brown published *The American Fugitive in Europe: Sketches of People and Places Abroad*. His book was what Brown called an "American" version of his popular *Three Years in Europe*. Although the two books were principally the same in content, Brown felt that it was necessary to adapt an edition of his popular European book for his American audience. Much like the first version, Brown described his travels in Europe through the eyes of a black man, noting the differences in the treatment that he received. During the time that he toured Ireland before the Peace Congress convened, Brown went to see the home where the famous poet, Thomas Moore, was born. "The following verse from one of his poems was continually in my mind," wrote Brown, ". . . 'Where is the slave so lowly, Condemned to chains unholy, Who could he burst [h]is bonds at first, Would pine beneath them slowly?'"³³

Brown went back to lecturing for the American Anti-Slavery Society when he returned to the United States. The tone of his speeches and lectures changed from the problems of the institution of slavery to an attack on white Americans and a few white abolitionists who Brown

³⁰ Ibid, 647-648; Blyden Jackson, *A History of Afro-American Literature: Volume I: The Long Beginning, 1746-1895* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 334; Marx, 9-10; Farrison, 228.

³¹ Loggins, 162; Farrison, 238-246.

³² William Wells Brown, *St. Domingo: Its Revolutions and Its Patriots* (Boston: Bela Marsh, 1855), 38, 3-38; Farrison, "William Wells Brown, Social Reformer," 33.

³³ Brown, *The American Fugitive in Europe: Sketches of People and Places Abroad*, 44; Loggins, 162; Farrison, 238-246; Whelchel, 18-19.

felt were not presenting the issues of slavery accurately. Brown was most critical of the Reverend Dr. Nehemiah Adams from Boston. Adams had published *A South-Side View of Slavery; or, Three Months at the South, in 1854* which detailed Adams's stay in the South. Brown believed that Adams gave an "apologetic" look at slavery, having downplayed the violent and demoralizing aspects of the institution of slavery. In his speeches about *A South-Side View of Slavery*, Brown addressed what he saw as the Reverend's problem which was the fact that Adams only spent three months surrounded by slavery. Brown felt that three months was not enough time for the Reverend to fully understand the problem of slavery. Instead, Brown suggested that the twenty years that he had lived as a slave had made him an expert and qualified to point out the inequities in the Reverend's account.³⁴

Brown continued to become enraged by *A South-Side View of Slavery*, which prompted him to make history again in 1858 when he published *The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom*. He became the first African-American to have a play published. *The Escape*, much like *Clotel*, was autobiographical of Brown's own life. In *The Escape*, Brown depicted slave life as he had known it to be in the 1850s, the height of the tensions between the North and South in the United States. Race identity played a huge role in his play. Brown emphasized the distinct differences between whites and blacks during the nineteenth century which he hoped would shed light on the lack of recognition of the concerns of African-Americans in the United States. No stereotype is free from criticism by Brown in *The Escape*. He even included a character, simply named Mr. White, who represented the Reverend Dr. Adams. Mr. White was a white Northern abolitionist who traveled to the South to study the institution of slavery in the exact same way that Adams had done. Brown portrayed Mr. White as inept and incapable of understanding slavery and had a few of the African-American characters heavily criticize Mr. White for doing nothing to alleviate their situation.³⁵

Brown's play also emphasized the issue of male masters who took advantage of their female slaves. The male master in Brown's play, Dr. Gaines, was romantically interested in one of his female slaves, Melinda. However, Dr. Gaines's advances toward Melinda were not reciprocated. In that story line, Brown hoped to show how many male masters attempted take advantage of their female slaves, who were helpless toward their master's desires. Brown felt that type of circumstance led to his own birth, as well as the births of many mulatto slaves. The issue of unwanted sexual advances by male masters on female slaves angered Brown greatly. He believed it was another example of how African-Americans had no freedoms, not even freedom over their own body.³⁶

Brown became involved in the Haitian Immigration Bureau in 1861. He changed the tone of his anti-slavery lectures. Although Brown was against colonization, he believed that African-Americans deserved a place to go to escape slavery and racism in the United States. He believed that Haiti was a perfect place for former slaves because it had been a symbol of what

³⁴ Farrison, 254-255.

³⁵ John Ernest, introduction to *The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom*, by William Wells Brown (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2001), x-xli; John Ernest, "The Reconstruction of Whiteness: William Wells Brown's *The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom*," *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 113 (1998): 1109-1110.

³⁶ Brown, *The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom*, 10-12

former slaves were able to achieve. The successful Haitian negro revolt in the early part of the nineteenth century, and the subsequent government that was headed by blacks, made Brown believe that those conditions would aid former slaves to assimilate to the change in Haitian society. However, Brown's involvement in Haiti proved to be unsuccessful and he abandoned the movement after only a year.³⁷

After the success of his first historical writing, Brown published his second history in 1863. *The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements* was regarded as Brown's best historical work. He attempted to refute nineteenth century claims that African-Americans were a substandard race by arguing for justice, freedom, and an end to slavery. "It does not become the whites," stated Brown, "to point the finger of scorn at the blacks, when they so long been degrading them." The largest section of the book is entitled "The Black Man, His Genius and His Achievements," where Brown detailed the lives and accomplishments of famous African-Americans who made a difference in the fight to end slavery, such as Henry Bibb, Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey and Frederick Douglass. Fifty-seven African-Americans in total were detailed in *The Black Man*. Brown wanted to show his readers that African-Americans were not as inferior as many had believed them to be. He dedicated *The Black Man* "to the advocates and friends of Negro freedom and equality, wherever found." Brown wanted the world to know that African-Americans were better than just slaves and that they were capable of making a difference in American society.³⁸

In January 1863, Brown was selected to speak at an Emancipation Proclamation celebration in Boston. One of Brown's tasks was to read again for the audience President Abraham Lincoln's famous address. Brown spent much of the month of January traveling across Massachusetts and New York to attend and lecture at various Emancipation Proclamation celebrations. In his speeches, Brown weighed in on the side of caution toward African-Americans becoming overly excited about the Proclamation. He emphasized to his audience that the promise of an end to slavery in the South would not become a reality until the Confederate Army had been defeated. Brown expressed that the Proclamation would fulfill its pledge and equal citizenship would be granted to all African-Americans. He ended his speeches with a call to all African-Americans to join state and national militias as a way for them to not only fight for their freedom, but to assert their right to citizenship. Under the permission of Edwin M. Stanton, the Secretary of War, on January 28, Brown was asked to become an official recruiting agent for the formation of a Negro regiment for the state of Massachusetts. Due to the small population of African-Americans in the state of Massachusetts in the late 1800s, Brown recruited African-Americans from New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. He had an integral part in the formation of the Fifty-Fourth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry. The group of soldiers were given a hero's sendoff at the New England Anti-Slavery Convention that was held in Boston on May 28 where Brown served as the keynote speaker. He gave a short speech in which he praised the men for showing their commitment to the Union and to abolition. Brown

³⁷ Farrison, 351-353, 355-356.

³⁸ William Wells Brown, *The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements* (New York: Thomas Hamilton, 1863), 32, 3, 51-310; Edward M. Coleman, "William Wells Brown as an Historian," *Journal of Negro History* 31 (1946): 54-55.

also noted that the United States had finally realized that African-Americans had “potential” and were capable of defending their nation.³⁹

Having been involved in recruiting for an African-American militia inspired Brown to research his third history about the achievements of African-Americans. In 1874, Brown published *The Rising Son; or, The Antecedents and Advancement of the Colored Race*. Much in the same context of Brown’s *The Black Man*, *The Rising Son* traces the lives of significant African-Americans. However, what made *The Rising Son* unique was that instead of just focusing on African-Americans, Brown looked at the work of blacks across the globe. *The Rising Son* began in Africa, tracing black Africans through Ethiopia, Egypt and then progressed to Jamaica and on to Santo Domingo. Brown wanted to show readers that there many prominent and intelligent individuals of the African race that dated back to antiquity. He also showed that his race continued to progress and achieved greatness even while enslaved in the United States and Latin America. Brown expanded on some of the African-American biographies he included in *The Black Man*. He hoped to show fellow African-Americans during the late-nineteenth century that they too could achieve success and they needed to have pride in their race and origins.⁴⁰

In *The Rising Son*, Brown also expanded on his first history about the St. Domingo slave revolution of the early-nineteenth century. Clearly, Brown was quite fascinated with the achievements of the slave revolution as he continued to write about the event throughout his life. He dedicated thirteen chapters of *The Rising Son* to the history of Santo Domingo. Brown believed that by expanding on his first history, he would be able to show the reader that there were many analogies between the former institution of slavery in the United States and the experiences that took place in Haiti. He detailed how many mulatto slaves were sent to Paris to be educated and returned to Haiti. With their knowledge, the slaves educated their fellow slaves, which eventually inspired them to rise up against their masters. Brown wanted to press upon the newly freed African-Americans the importance of an education and knowledge in being able to overcome the bondage of slavery. He hoped that African-Americans would learn that they too could achieve success and show the world that they were better than their former status as a slave.⁴¹

Brown was emboldened by the popularity of *The Black Man* and *The Rising Son*. He believed that the popularity of the two works was a calling for him to focus on educating the United States on the potential of African-Americans. Brown continued to use history to show Americans the achievements of African-Americans until his death. In 1880 he published his last two histories, the first of which was *The Negro in the American Rebellion: His Heroism and His Fidelity*. When Brown began the research for *The Negro in the American Rebellion* he had intended only to highlight the role African-Americans played in the American Civil War. However, he found that in the course of his research that the activities of African-Americans before the Civil War would also be valuable to include. “Feeling anxious to preserve for future

³⁹ Farrison, 379-381.

⁴⁰ Coleman, 56-57; Whelchel, 27-28.

⁴¹ Ibid, 27-28; William Wells Brown, *The Rising Son; or, The Antecedents and Advancement of the Colored Race* (Boston: A.G. Brown & Co., Publishers, 1874), 262-336.

reference an account of the part which the Negro took in suppressing the Slaveholders' Rebellion," observed Brown, "I have been induced to write this work. In doing so, it occurred to me that a sketch of the condition of the race previous to the commencement of the war would not be uninteresting to the reader."⁴²

Brown stated in his preface that he had "waited patiently" for someone else to undertake the writing of African-American involvement in the Civil War, but since no one had before him, Brown felt it was his duty. He began *The Negro in the American Rebellion* with the first ship that carried African slaves to the colonies in 1620 and then moved on to African-American involvement in the American Revolution and the War of 1812, which was all combined in one chapter. Brown then moved on to detail the slave revolts that occurred prior to the outbreak of the Civil War, such as Denmark Vesey in South Carolina, the Nat Turner Rebellion and John Brown's Raid. He also detailed for the reader the history of the cotton gin and the Dred Scott decision and the effects those two important incidents had on the continuation of the institution of slavery in the South. Brown addressed the oppressive Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, which had personally affected him and his exile in Europe, and the controversy over *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a publication that his own *Clotel* was often compared.⁴³

In his sections on the Civil War, Brown felt that it was unnecessary to detail for the reader every armed conflict that an African-American was engaged. Instead, he focused on what he felt was important. The majority of his research for that section of his book came from newspaper accounts, battlefield "correspondents," and officers and enlisted soldiers who served in the war. Brown made sure to include a section that detailed his own work in the formation of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment. Thirty-four of the forty-five chapters of *The Negro in the American Rebellion* were dedicated to African-Americans in the Civil War. Brown concluded his book with a look at the harsh treatment that the newly freed slaves received in the South during Reconstruction. Brown hoped that his book would aid in an understanding of the loyalty that African-Americans had to the United States in its hour of need even though they had been enslaved by some of its countrymen. He also wanted to show that African-Americans were deserving of equal rights and citizenship in the United States because of their service during the Civil War, as well as, the American Revolution and the War of 1812.⁴⁴

In Brown's final history, *My Southern Home; or, The South and Its People*, also published in 1880, he continued the conclusion of his *The Negro in the American Rebellion*. Brown felt it was his final duty to move from abolitionist to crusader for equal rights and citizenship for African-Americans. He believed that the Emancipation Proclamation had only been the beginning for African-Americans and that they needed to remind the United States what had been promised to them by President Lincoln. Brown found that many African-Americans believed all they were entitled to was their freedom, which saddened him greatly. He wanted African-Americans to realize that they deserved equality and citizenship and he hoped that they would continue to fight for their rights.⁴⁵

⁴² William Wells Brown, *The Negro in the American Rebellion: His Heroism and His Fidelity* (Boston: A.G. Brown, 1880), x; Farrison, "William Wells Brown, Social Reformer," 34.

⁴³ Brown, *The Negro in the American Rebellion: His Heroism and His Fidelity*, vi, vii-viii.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, x-xvi; Farrison, "William Wells Brown, Social Reformer," 34.

⁴⁵ Whelchel, 56-57.

Through *My Southern Home* Brown demonstrated the reasons he believed for why African-Americans had not excelled when they had acquired freedom. He found it was because they had been degraded by the institution of slavery and suggested that slavery caused African-Americans to be inexperienced for many areas of employment. Brown worried that former slaves would believe that they were only capable of being field laborers. He alleged that the conditions of the South during Reconstruction had been proof that slavery was an evil to both former planters and slaves. Brown encouraged African-Americans to become educated and not continue to be complacent toward what had been entitled to them; citizenship and equality. Brown had urged all African-Americans to combine their interests and fight for equality in the conclusion of *My Southern Home*.⁴⁶

Brown died in his home in Chelsea, Massachusetts in 1884. His funeral services were held privately at his home. However, a public service was offered at the Zion Methodist Episcopal Church in Boston, which was packed with friends, relatives, and fans. Brown's varied career had earned him a level of popularity which secured for him a legacy as an impassioned abolitionist, an advocate for equal rights, and a critical historian. William Wells Brown enjoyed a long and successful career in the abolitionist movement. He began in the bondage of slavery and ended his life as renowned writer, historian and successful abolitionist. He was a powerful voice for the advancement of African-Americans, particularly through his vast amount of publications. William Wells Brown should be remembered as one of America's greatest abolitionists.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Ibid, 56-60.

⁴⁷ "Obsequies of Dr. Brown," *Boston Globe*, November 10, 1884.