# “The whole tribe of Northern Slave-Catchers”:
## *U.S. Commissioners and the Failures of the Fugitive Slave Law, 1850-1854*

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## Introduction

### *U.S. Commissioners and the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850*

On December 8, 1854, a mundane Friday morning quickly spiraled into chaos, as U.S. Commissioner John A. Bross and his "corps of assistants" scoured the streets of Chicago, Illinois in pursuit of a group of Missouri freedom seekers. The 28-year-old Bross—the younger brother of one of the city's leading political power brokers, "Deacon" William Bross—was the federal official tasked with implementing the contentious Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. Imbued with lofty powers to decide the fate of alleged freedom seekers, Bross had "promptly" issued several warrants of arrest at the behest of four Missouri slaveholders, and even "had his rooms swept and garnished," one newspaper sardonically noted, in preparation for a rendition hearing. But this "deliberate and well laid plan," set in motion by a tenuous alliance of federal officers and slaveholders, quickly unravelled into an embarrassing debacle. The "alarm" soon spread, and African American residents, along with many white Chicagoans, "filled the streets" in protest, "intimidating" the federal officers. Even when the Missouri claimants pointed out one of the freedom seekers, who was waiting tables at the McCardell House Hotel, Bross's deputies refused to act, seemingly "afraid." Incensed, the Missourians unleashed a verbal tirade of "oaths and threats" at Bross's assistants before hastily skipping town, their efforts "completely baffled." St. Louis pa-

pers vented their outrage at the "total failure of a recent attempt to execute the Fugitive Slave Law in Chicago," equating it to the "nullification" of the federal statute.[1]

Coming at the tail end of 1854, the imbroglio in Chicago rounded out a watershed year in the escalating sectional crisis, as a series of high-profile fugitive cases and intense political strife dominated headlines throughout the nation. Earlier in March, freedom seeker Joshua Glover was dramatically rescued from the clutches of federal authorities in Wisconsin, while just months later another escapee, Anthony Burns, was remanded from Boston under guard of a heavy military escort. In the meantime, lawmakers in Washington had shuffled through the Kansas-Nebraska Act in late May. The law's controversial embrace of popular sovereignty galvanized free soil northerners, helping to spur the rise of the anti-slavery Republican party. Yet the spectacle which unfolded in Chicago during the waning weeks of 1854 remains surprisingly absent from the well-worn timeline of events that exacerbated sectional tensions. At a closer glance, the concerted and brazen local opposition, the virtual paralysis of the federal authorities and the Missouri claimants' exasperation, which boiled over into an explosive stream of profanity, all paint a portrait that further complicates the law's historical reputation as a draconian instrument.

Much of the recent work on the 1850 law has challenged Stanley Campbell's argument, advanced in his influential monograph *The Slave Catchers* (1970), that the law was faithfully enforced by federal officials and resistance was limited to a smattering of "occasional outbursts." Recently, Stanley Harrold and Robert Churchill have highlighted the prevalence of violent oppo-

[1] "Passengers by the U.G.R.R.," Chicago *Weekly Democrat*, December 9, 1854; "The Constitution and the Law Nullified in Chicago," St. Louis *Republican*, December 9, 1854;"The Fugitive Slave Excitement at Chicago," Chicago *Press*, December 9, 1854, quoted in New York *Herald*, December 13, 1854; "Slave Excitement at Chicago," New York *Herald*, December 9, 1854; "What Is To Be Done Now!," St. Louis *Republican*, December 10, 1854; "Slave Hunt in Chicago," Chicago *Free West*, December 14, 1854; "Fugitive Slave Case," Chicago *Weekly Democrat*, December 16, 1854; "Great Excitement—Slave Catchers Again Defeated," Chicago *Weekly Democrat*, December 16, 1854.

sition among northerners, while Richard Blackett's exhaustive tome *The Captive's Quest for Freedom* (2018) foregrounds the agency of enslaved men and women who persistently defied both slave owners and the statute itself. In the process, scholars have shed new light on resistance and its ramifications—the episode in Chicago, for instance, is not even included in Campbell's appendix, still the most commonly cited list of cases which occurred under the 1850 law, while it receives a brief mention in Blackett's work.[2] Yet another layer of the story remains largely unexplored—the Missouri claimants who journeyed to Chicago in the early winter months of 1854 did not attempt to recapture the freedom seekers on their own, but with the assistance of federal officials. Wading through the archives to see how U.S. commissioners attempted to balance the demands of slaveholders with the pressure exerted by escapees, anti-slavery activists and northern communities in general can enrich our understanding of how the struggle over the controversial law actually played out on the ground.

This thesis examines the law's operations through a study of its chief enforcers, from the statute's enactment in September 1850 through the end of the calendar year 1854. Scholars have traditionally characterized this time span as the law's most successful stint, before the immense political upheaval of 1854 ushered in an era of heightened opposition.[3] However, taking stock of the law's enforcement during these first four years offers scores of surprising revelations, making

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[2] Stanley Campbell, *The Slave Catchers: Enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, 1850-1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1970), 79, 199-207; Stanley Harrold, *Border War: Fighting over Slavery before the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Robert H. Churchill, "Fugitive Slave Rescues in the North: Towards a Geography of Antislavery Violence," *Ohio Valley History* 14:2 (Summer 2014): 51-75; Robert H. Churchill, "When the Slave Catchers Came to Town: Cultures of Violence along the Underground Railroad," *Journal of American History* 105:3 (December 2018): 514-537; Richard Blackett, *The Captive's Quest for Freedom: Fugitive Slaves, the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, and the Politics of Slavery* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 145.

[3] Campbell, *The Slave Catchers*, 61-69, 75-77; Churchill, "Fugitive Slave Rescues in the North," 63-64; Churchill, "When the Slave Catchers Came to Town," 534.

clear that Bross's failure in Chicago was no isolated event: rather, by the end of 1854, slaveholders' once buoyant dreams of a national rendition system already lay largely in tatters. Following the arc of the law's intended operation, this thesis is structured thematically around the statute's three main processes, exploring each in turn. Chapter 2 looks at the apprehension of freedom seekers by U.S. commissioners and their deputies, a process contingent upon a dramatic expansion of federal power, one that has never before been studied in detail. Chapter 3 peers inside the hearing room, to observe how southern demands for prompt hearings unraveled in the face of local resistance, while chapter 4 explores how the rendition process was fraught with violent resistance. What emerges is in large part a story of failure. The law's stringent provisions clearly imperiled African Americans and grated against anti-slavery activists, though the powerful currents of resistance affected the law's enforcers, handicapping their ability to implement the statute as harshly as pro-slavery southerners had imagined. Commissioners were overawed and frustrated at nearly every turn by fierce opposition from northern communities, anti-slavery activists and freedom seekers themselves, illuminating new insights about the power of local agency and resistance in curtailing the envisioned expansion of federal power. At its core, the 1850 statute was a draconian law that was never widely enforced in a draconian way.

The struggle over the 1850 law was rooted in the lengthy history of enslaved people forging their own paths to freedom, and their enslavers' efforts to recapture and return them to bondage. In 1787, the so-called "Fugitive Slave Clause" of the U.S. Constitution recognized the slaveholder's right of recaption—a common law principle that allowed property owners to simply locate and retake their stolen property, including escaped human chattel, outside of any formal legal process. Under the clause, the status of the enslaved remained unchanged even if they

crossed state lines, and slave owners were empowered to journey anywhere in the country and seize escapees, a process that proved far more complex in practice than on paper. Within several years, Congress passed what became known as the Fugitive Slave Law of 1793, which reaffirmed slaveholders' right of recaption, but left much of the return process in the hands of northern states. Over the ensuing decades, most northern states enacted personal liberty laws, statutes that impeded recaption by mandating jury trials and offering accused escapees some semblance of legal protection, frustrating, delaying and often obstructing slave owners' efforts. While the Supreme Court declared many of these state laws to be unconstitutional in *Prigg v. Pennsylvania* (1842), the ruling also stipulated that the federal government, not individual states, was responsible for enforcing the 1793 law. A new batch of personal liberty laws soon followed, in which free states adopted a hands-off approach, barring state officials from aiding southern claimants and in some cases prohibiting the use of state jails to house captured freedom seekers.[4]

By the late 1840s, southerners were demanding a revamped fugitive slave law that would stem the tide of freedom seekers and streamline the process of returning enslaved men and women to bondage. Abjuring their "faithless" northern neighbors and their maze of personal liberty laws, southerners instead turned to the federal government. As part of the vaunted Compromise of 1850, a grand five-part bargain struck between northern and southern politicians, a new fugitive slave law emerged, an amendment to the original 1793 statute. Claimants could still proceed under their legal right of recaption, and seize freedom seekers "without process," though

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[4] Paul Finkelman, "The Kidnapping of John Davis and the Adoption of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1793," *Journal of Southern History* 56:3 (August 1990): 397-422; Thomas D. Morris, *Free Men All: The Personal Liberty Laws of the North, 1780-1861* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974); Don E. Fehrenbacher and Ward M. McAfee (ed.), *The Slaveholding Republic: An Account of the United States Government's Relations to Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Harrold, *Border War*; Blackett, *The Captive's Quest.*

most of the law's verbiage was devoted to outlining a new federal enforcement mechanism—a rendition hearing before a U.S. commissioner. Crucially, the law did not create the office of commissioner, as some scholars have mistakenly claimed.[5] Rather, it encouraged circuit courts to hire additional commissioners, who would be given special powers to hear and decide fugitive cases in a "summary manner," their decisions final and not subject to appeal, and remunerated by a slanted payment system of $10 for each individual they dispatched to slavery, and just $5 for those they released. Moreover, alleged freedom seekers would not be allowed to testify on their own behalf, and anyone who aided or harbored an escapee would be subject to hefty fines and prison time.[6] While slaveholders and the federal government aggressively sought to project their power over an expansive free soil landscape, actually bringing this macabre vision to life proved to be no simple feat.

### *Apprehending Freedom Seekers*

In enumerating southern grievances, the law's principal author, Virginia senator James Mason, first raised the difficulty in arresting and "executing process" upon freedom seekers who had found their way into the northern free states. Reception alone had proven unsatisfactory, and Mason instead imagined a national network of enforcers, comprised of U.S. commissioners and their deputies, who would apprehend escapees. This entailed an unprecedented expansion of federal

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[5] See James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 80; Eric Foner, *Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2015), 124; On the post of U.S. commissioner, see *The Statutes at Large and Treaties of the United States of America* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1845-1873), 1:333-335, 2:679-682, 3:350, 5:516-518; Charles A. Lindquist, "The Origin and Development of the United States Commissioner System," *American Journal of Legal History* 14:1 (January 1970): 6-8.

[6] *Appendix to Cong. Globe*, 31st Cong., 1st sess., 150, 1583-1590, 1616 (1850); *Statutes at Large*, 9:462-465; also see Harrold, *Border War*, 139-143; Blackett, *The Captive's Quest*, 6-13.

power, which has never before been studied in detail. Commissioners, for one, were at the center of this attempted expansion, yet have occupied at best a peripheral space in the extensive scholarship on the law. Stanley Campbell's *The Slave Catchers* (1970) mentions just nine commissioners, while the most recent addition to the literature, Richard Blackett's *The Captive's Quest for Freedom* (2018) refers to 21, though his focus on resistance precludes a more exhaustive examination of these federal officers.[7] This historiographical gap is all the more surprising given that contemporary Americans recognized commissioners as highly political actors, arbiters of the 1850 statute but also emissaries in the larger struggle over slavery, their names and controversial duties the subject of intense scrutiny in newspaper columns, pamphlets, cartoons and even fictional works.[8] A detailed study of commissioners recasts familiar narratives of the 1850 law, demonstrating how local resistance handicapped the federal government's efforts to establish a coherent body of enforcers that could efficiently handle fugitive cases. While Mason had proposed that as many as three commissioners be appointed to operate in every northern county, the reality fell woefully short of his grandiose expectations—only around 30 commissioners nationwide ever presided over a fugitive case during the law's nearly 14 years on the books.[9]

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[7] See Campbell, *The Slave Catchers*; Blackett, *The Captive's Quest*; Stanley Harrold's *Border War* does not reference a single commissioner by name, while Andrew Delbanco's *The War Before the War: Fugitive Slaves and the Struggle for America's Soul from the Revolution to the Civil War* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018) briefly alludes to three.

[8] See "Fugitive Slave Law-Hamlet in Court," New York *Atlas*, October 20, 1850; Richard Hildreth, *The White Slave; or, Memoirs of a Fugitive* (Boston; Tappan and Whittemore, 1852), 405; Richard Hildreth (ed.), *Atrocious Judges: Lives of Judges Infamous as Tools of Tyrants and Instruments of Oppression* (New York: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1856), 35, 158-161.

[9] *Appendix to Cong. Globe*, 31st Cong., 1st sess., 1582 (1850); This figure comes from the first ever comprehensive survey of U.S. commissioners active during the period of the law's operation (1850-1864), compiled as part of this thesis project, which can be accessed at http://blogs.dickinson.edu/hist-wingert/uscommissioners/.

Recently, Robert Churchill has drawn scholarly attention to a "geography of violence," the veritable minefield of anti-slavery resistance which slaveholders waded through in their efforts to recapture enslaved men and women, ranging from rescues by force to threats of bodily harm directed at claimants.[10] However, there also existed what could be termed a geography of enforcement. While the vast majority of U.S. commissioners never handled a fugitive case, a small corps of commissioners intermittently kept alive the law's signature promise of efficient renditions. The remarks of southern journalists, coupled with the actions of those slaveholders who ventured north in pursuit of freedom seekers, reveal that many white southerners developed an acute awareness of complaisant and hostile commissioners, and learned how to manipulate the mechanisms of enforcement. Wary of the federal commissioners in Chicago, most claimants attempting to recapture freedom seekers in the city instead obtained warrants of arrest from Springfield, Illinois commissioner Stephen A. Corneau, who had a reputation for enforcing the law.[11] Yet Chicago commissioner George W. Meeker's decision to release an alleged freedom seeker in June 1851 earned him lasting southern scorn. Nearly four years later, when Meeker announced his resignation, the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* bristled: "He can be spared."[12] As a

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[10] See Harrold, *Border War*; Churchill, "Fugitive Slave Rescues in the North," 51-75; Churchill, "When the Slave Catchers Came to Town," 514-537; also see Cheryl Janifer LaRoche, *The Geography of Resistance: Free Black Communities and the Underground Railroad* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2013); Kellie Carter Jackson, *Force and Freedom: Black Abolitionists and the Politics of Violence* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019).

[11] Claimants pursuing freedom seekers in Chicago obtained warrants from Corneau, rather than Chicago commissioners John A. Bross or Philip A. Hoyne, on at least two occasions: the Eliza Grayson Case (1860) and Harris Family Case (1861). See "Great Fugitive Slave Excitement—A Colored Girl Rescued," Chicago *Evening Journal*, November 13, 1860; "Another Fugitive Slave Case at Chicago," New York *Times*, April 4, 1861.

[12] New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, February 18, 1855.

result, the law's enforcement largely revolved around several key hubs, with just four officers accounting for nearly half of the successful renditions between 1850-1854.[13]

Within this geography of enforcement, the arrest process was predicated on two factors: a claimant's ability to locate a receptive commissioner, who would issue a warrant of arrest, and that commissioner's use of Section 5 of the law, which empowered them appoint "any one or more suitable persons, from time to time" as deputies to execute their warrants.[14] Although Section 5 was the very mechanism within the law designed to facilitate the arrest of freedom seekers, scholars have paid almost no attention to its function. The overlooked letters and diaries of commissioners and their assistants, alongside court records, reveal how critical deputies were to the law's enforcement. Harrisburg, Pennsylvania commissioner Richard McAllister's sizable force of deputies was a major selling point of his short-lived operation, as he boasted that his "fearless and efficient body of officers" could quash any "mob violence" and ensure claimants' safety.[15] Yet not all commissioners employed such a determined and well organized force, as evinced by Bross's fiasco in Chicago. The picture this presents is revealing—southerners, tired of northern states' personal liberty laws, had turned to the federal government to provide a uniform and efficient means of recovering their human property. However, even under the 1850 law,

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[13] U.S. commissioners Edward Ingraham (Philadelphia, PA), George W. Morton (New York, NY), Richard McAllister (Harrisburg, PA) and John L. Pendery (Cincinnati, OH) were responsible for 39 of the 84 successful renditions nationwide between September 1850-December 1854. For more details on the rendition figures, see the accompanying thesis site, http://blogs.dickinson.edu/hist-wingert/uscommissioners/.

[14] *Statutes at Large*, 9:462-465.

[15] "The Harrisburg Slave Case—Delivery of the Four Fugitives to their Masters," Baltimore *Sun*, September 30, 1851.

slaveholders still found themselves navigating a treacherous and irregular enforcement landscape.

### *Due Process*

Inside the hearing room, the law's most controversial features were seldom implemented as harshly as its supporters had intended. While historians are apt to recite the law's draconian provisions, a closer look at the hearing transcripts transforms our understanding of the 1850 law, revealing just how frequently attempted renditions went awry. For one, Mason and other southerners had repeatedly expounded upon the importance of "summary" hearings. The new federal enforcement mechanism was designed specifically to avoid time-consuming jury trials, the type of delays which Mason argued "would effectually defeat the right of reclamation" by loading claimants with onerous legal and transport fees, all with no guarantee of success. In an effort to expedite the process, the law's framers made it clear that the rendition hearing was not a trial. Rather, commissioners were merely to assess whether the documentation marshaled by the claimant constituted a "*prima facie* case," evidence that under normal circumstances would be sufficient to commit a defendant for trial. However, though the law made no mention of the accused's right to a legal defense, commissioners routinely bowed to external pressures and allowed anti-slavery lawyers to crowd inside their hearing rooms, scrutinizing the process and prolonging what were supposed to be "summary" proceedings. Many cases spiraled into full blown trials, spanning multiple days and even weeks.[16]

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[16] *Appendix to Cong. Globe*, 31st Cong., 1st sess., 386, 1584 (1850).

Local resistance profoundly shaped the law's implementation, as northern communities, anti-slavery activists and freedom seekers exerted enormous pressure, forcing commissioners to deviate from the stringent spirit of the statute. During a June 1853 hearing in Indianapolis, as word spread through the city that a "summary" hearing was in progress, "the people began to assemble," making it clear that the "public sentiment would require a more deliberate trial." Commissioner William Sullivan granted a nine week adjournment "out of respect to public opinion," enabling the defense for accused freedom seeker John Freeman to gather witnesses who could vouch for his freedom.[17] Around the same time in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Commissioner Jacob Sweitzer infuriated southerners by admitting testimony from six African American witnesses, including the noted abolitionist Martin Delany, which led to the release of alleged freedom seeker Calvin Jones. "Who believes that a slave can ever be reclaimed at any cost," demanded a Mississippi editor, so long as "free negro testimony be admitted before a United States Commissioner to contradict the testimony of a white person of good character?" The 1850 law, seethed the disillusioned Mississippian, "has proved but as a bauble thrown out to amuse a child while he is robbed of all that he loves and values."[18]

### *Renditions and Rescues*

Even if a claimant had successfully navigated the arrest process and obtained a favorable decision from a U.S. commissioner, slaveholders still confronted the daunting task of returning south

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[17] "John Freeman—Habeas Corpus," New Lisbon, OH *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, July 16, 1853; Oliver Hampton Smith, *Early Indiana Trials and Sketches* (Cincinnati, OH: Moore, Wilstach, Keys & Company, 1858), 278-279.

[18] "The Fugitive Slave Law," Natchez, MS *Free Trader*, June 14, 1853; "The Fugitive Slave Law—Novel and Important Case," Memphis, TN *Appeal*, quoted in Huntsville, AL *Democrat*, June 16, 1853.

with their recaptured human property. On the Senate floor, Mason had reminded his colleagues about the ever-present threat of rescues by an "armed mob," and accordingly built into the law a rendition mechanism which allowed slaveholders to demand assistance from federal officials in returning escapees. After a commissioner issued a certificate of removal—which empowered claimants "to take and remove" a captive "back to the State or Territory from whence" they had escaped—a slaveholder could make out an affidavit under Section 9 of the statute, attesting that they had "reason to apprehend that such fugitive will be rescued by force from his or her possession." In this event, it became the "duty" of the presiding commissioner to "employ so many persons as he may deem necessary to overcome such force."[19]

Even under the 1850 law, the threat of rescue loomed large, frequently unnerving both claimants and U.S. commissioners alike. Lately, scholars have traced the lengthy history of northern resistance to slave catching forays back to the 1780s, highlighting the breadth of white northerners' antipathy towards violent recaption attempts and the sizable array of rescue efforts spanning multiple decades.[20] However, in treating with the period from 1850-1854, historians often cite the renditions of Thomas Sims in 1851 and Anthony Burns in 1854, where large displays of federal force quashed resistance in the heart of Boston.[21] Yet focusing on these two cases

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[19] *Appendix to Cong. Globe*, 31st Cong., 1st sess., 1583 (1850); *Statutes at Large*, 9:462-465; For the verbiage of the certificate of removal, see Certificate of Removal in the Matter of Moses Honner, Fugitive Slave Case Files, 1850-1860, RG 21, Records of District Court of the United States, 1685-2009, National Archives and Records Administration, Philadelphia, PA.

[20] Paul Finkelman, "Fugitive Slaves, Midwestern Racial Tolerance, and the Value of 'Justice Delayed,'" *Iowa Law Review* 78:1 (October 1992): 89-142; Harrold, *Border War*, 10-11, 23-29, 111-115; Churchill, "Fugitive Slave Rescues in the North," 51-75; Churchill, "When the Slave Catchers Came to Town," 514-537; Matthew Pinsker, "After 1850: Reassessing the Impact of the Fugitive Slave Law," in Damian Alan Pargas (ed.), *Fugitive Slaves and Spaces of Freedom in North America* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2018), 93-115.

[21] See Campbell, *The Slave Catchers*, 118-120, 124-132; McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 83, 119-120.

as emblematic of the law's operations as a whole is misleading. Throughout the law's first four years on the book, African American communities and their white allies consistently marshaled opposition to the statute on the ground. Large crowds routinely congregated outside of hearing rooms, while commissioners and claimants huddled down inside. During one hearing at Chicago in June 1851, a journalist observed that the "stair-ways and passages" to the hearing room were "filled up by a mass of quiet, but deeply interested and determined men," estimating that "nine-tenths of them were friends of the slave."[22] This was nothing out of the ordinary, and as commissioners were well aware, these large assemblages often escalated into forcible rescue attempts. In 1851 alone, Shadrach Minkins was dramatically rescued from federal custody in Boston; a Maryland claimant was shot and killed by a freedom seeker in the presence of federal officers; and in Syracuse, New York, escapee Jerry McHenry was forcibly rescued from a hearing room. The ensuing years witnessed more rescues, from an alleged freedom seeker named Lewis, who deftly slipped out of a Cincinnati, Ohio hearing room in October 1853, to the brazen defiance of the law by ax-wielding Wisconsin anti-slavery activists, who in March 1854 beat down the door of a Milwaukee prison and rescued escapee Joshua Glover from custody.[23] Mason had feared precisely this sort of "mob" violence, though even the law's carefully crafted rendition mechanism was repeatedly overwhelmed by widespread anti-slavery resistance.

It was a trend of resistance that culminated in mid-December 1854 at Chicago, where concerted local opposition brought the machinery of the new federal enforcement mechanism to

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[22] "Slave Hunt in Chicago," Chicago *Western Citizen*, June 10, 1851.

[23] "The Fugitive Slave Case—Escape of Lewis—Great Excitement," Cleveland, OH *Plain Dealer*, October 24, 1853; Milwaukee, WI *Sentinel*, quoted in "Great Excitement—Arrest of a Fugitive Slave," *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, March 24, 1854.

a grinding halt. Four years in, slaveholders had already grown disillusioned with the new law, despairing that it could ever be meaningfully enforced. The law, a Natchez, Mississippi editor had wryly observed the previous summer, was touted as the "great panacea for all our ills," but "an attempt to reap its fancied benefits" found claimants dodging the "insults of abolition mobs" while hazarding their own physical safety. Following the fiasco in Chicago, the disgruntled St. Louis journalist who bemoaned the "nullification" of the Fugitive Slave Law joined a chorus of pro-slavery southerners who were already deeply frustrated by what they perceived as the statute's inadequacies.[24] Yet their vexation was equalled, if not exceeded by that experienced by African Americans and their white allies. So long as the law remained on the books, black men and women residing throughout the north recognized the danger it posed to their livelihoods. The law was clearly draconian in intent, and the rendition process (when it worked) was cruel and inhumane. The persistence and depth anti-slavery resistance, however, helped to ensure that the powerful and nightmarish federal enforcement mechanism imagined by James Mason never fully materialized. Examining the law's operations from 1850-1854, this thesis juxtaposes the draconian designs imprinted upon the statute book with the turbulent reality on the ground. Understanding the ways in which anti-slavery forces frustrated U.S. commissioners adds crucial nuance to our histories of the 1850 law, illuminating the tenuousness of the federal government's authority and the power of local agency.

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[24] "The Fugitive Slave Law," Natchez, MS *Free Trader*, June 14, 1853; "What Is To Be Done Now!," St. Louis *Republican*, December 10, 1854.