

To Free a Family: The Journey of Mary Walker

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Review

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Nathans, Sydney *To Free a Family: the Journey of Mary Walker*. Harvard University Press, \$29.95 ISBN 978-0-674-06212-2

Investigating a Family's Unique History

To Free a Family, by Sydney Nathans, is that rare find: an untold story of the antebellum world, reconstructed by sleuthing and persisting over time. Nathans's search began with his discovery of a wrenching letter, written in 1859, from one stranger to another. In it, J.P. Lesley, identified as a Professor of Mining at the University of Pennsylvania, writes to Mildred Cameron of Raleigh, one of North Carolina's most wealthy women, on behalf of a fugitive slave, "Mary Walker, formerly of your family." Walker, he explains, desires nothing more than to see her two children again, and "her heart is slowly breaking"(1). As an act of compassion, would Cameron allow Walker and her friends to buy them? Cameron never answered.

Moved by a mother's anguish and the earnest work of her friends to help her, Nathans began to search for further clues to their lives. From the public library in Philadelphia, to the Houghton Library at Harvard University, to boxes of letters and diaries in the attics of descendants of the Lesley's in both Minnesota and Colorado, Nathans followed the trail of Mary Walker. Only three of Mary Walker's letters have been found, but in their correspondence the Lesleys often quote her directly, or describe what she was going through. Nathans's weaving together of this information reveals a story too rarely told: what happened to fugitive slaves after they arrived in the North, and their desperate efforts to reconnect with their families. It also tells another story, an important one, about the lives of the people who befriended Walker, and lives forever changed by their work with and for her. As Nathans explains, Walker's "quest illuminates the secret strivings of thousands...a hidden epic of emancipation"(4).

According to the deposition of a free black waiter, taken in 1850, a “slender light coloured woman with dark straight hair and lightish eyes inclining to blue” first arrived in a boarding house in Philadelphia in 1846 accompanying her master Judge Duncan Cameron and his two daughters (9). One of those daughters was Mildred, and the family came north in search of a cure to her mysterious illness. Mary Walker, to her observer’s dismay, showed no interest in fleeing in 1846: she had left four children behind in Raleigh, ranging in age from two to 14. Circumstances had changed by 1848. Threatened with being banished to the Deep South, branded as “impudent,” Walker chose then to flee. She would be separated from her children either way.

Walker’s subsequent story—not her life in slavery or her journey to freedom—is what is predominantly told in *To Free a Family*. With its telling, the reader learns a great deal about the political turmoil at the time, both in Philadelphia and later in and around Cambridge, Massachusetts, as Nathans deftly weaves the stories together. In 1850 Walker fled Philadelphia—where the Camerons had again traveled—to live and work with the Lesleys, Peter and Susan. Peter Lesley was a minister, struggling with his faith, and a geologist. When his cousin in Philadelphia asked him to take in a fugitive slave—he had just recently become radicalized by the Compromise of 1850—he said yes. The relationship between Mary Walker and the Lesleys was a profound one, and the community she joined in Massachusetts sustained her until her death in 1872, seven years after she had reunited with two of her younger children in 1865.

Walker’s story is not entirely a triumphant one. Literate and an accomplished seamstress, when she was healthy she could predictably find work, but as Lesley’s letter notes, she was frequently ill, most likely with tuberculosis. For much of her life in Cambridge, as well, she tended Anne Jean Lyman, Susan Lesley’s mother, as she gradually slid into dementia, a job that was inevitably stressful. Walker’s third child died young, before she left Raleigh; her oldest fled slavery in 1852, and unsuccessfully tried to find his mother. When she reunited with her children, her daughter was 28 and her son 21; although her daughter and her husband were able to settle and make a life in Cambridge, her son had more difficulty, eventually succumbing to alcoholism. Still, at the end of a too-short life, Walker had a house on Brattle Street, friends nearby and across the country, and her children with her. At her funeral she was surrounded by flowers and “friends[,] white and colored” (249).

Walker's experience, Nathans notes, "mirrored that of thousands," her life illustrating that "for the self-emancipated, freedom was never complete." (253) Nathans' beautifully written and comprehensive recovery of this life lyrically reveals events large and small in the years from 1848 to 1872 through the prism of one meaningful life. Weaving the intimacy of letters and diaries with a careful rendering of the context, Nathans offers a profound addition to the scholarship on the Civil War Era. This would be an enormously useful text for the classroom, as well as for the Civil War buff, given the ways it enlivens and deepens the meaning of national events.

Lyde Cullen Sizer teaches at Sarah Lawrence College and was the 2000 winner of the Avery O. Craven Award. Professor Sizer recent wrote a historiographic essay on Civil War women's history.