



The Fugitive's Gibraltar: Escaping Slaves and Abolitionism in New Bedford, Massachusetts

Kathryn Grover

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Between 1790 and the Civil War, New Bedford, Massachusetts, became known not only as the whaling capital of the world but also as one of the greatest asylums for fugitive slaves. As many as 700 of the city's black residents were said to be fugitives. Among those who found safe haven there were Frederick Douglass, Henry Box Brown, and others whose accounts of escape from bondage were published and widely circulated among reformers of both races. But how did New Bedford come to be seen as a haven for fugitives, and was antislavery truly, as one whaling merchant put it, "the ruling sentiment of the town"? In this well-researched study, Kathryn Grover addresses these questions. She documents fugitive traffic in and around New Bedford and analyzes it within several spheres -- the origins, persistence, and growth of the city's African American community; the place of Quaker ideology in shaping the extent and character of local opposition to slavery; and the role of the city's coastal trading and whaling industries in the presence of fugitives in the port. Through an intensive examination of demographic data, fugitive narratives, Underground Railroad accounts, and correspondence, Grover concludes that the issue of helping fugitives in fact divided white abolitionists at the same time that it strengthened the resolve of abolitionists of color.

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