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Fugitive Slaves, Vigilance Committees, and the Abolitionists' Revolution, 1835-1860

Historians have long considered the American Civil War and emancipation as a "revolution." Yet, most academic historians have been reticent to describe the abolitionist movement that made emancipation possible as self-consciously revolutionary. Instead, they treat abolitionism as a liberal, middle-class reform movement that had un-intended consequences and remained far removed from the daily toils and troubles of slaves. The understudied history of vigilance committees belies this widely held understanding of abolitionism. Vigilance committees were urban antislavery organizations committed to protecting northern free black neighborhoods from slave catchers and to helping runaway slaves along the Underground Railroad. The committees built up elaborate fugitive aid networks that included prominent abolitionists, sailors, black workers, white and black feminists, and a wide array of other radicals. More importantly, the vigilance committees provided the setting in which antislavery radicals of all stripes first came into contact with thousands of fugitive slaves, learning from their experiences within the "prison house" of plantation capitalism. In narrating this history, my paper will argue that the creative learning between abolitionists and runaways, facilitated by the vigilance committees, made abolitionism revolutionary in its practice and then in its theory. In practice, runaways taught the committees that the antislavery movement needed to be grounded in the aspirations and resistance of the enslaved. This required new forms of disobedience and direct action to help runaways. Eventually vigilance committees, runaways, and their proletarian allies formulated plots for slave revolution and planned John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry. In theory, as well, runaways and committees revolutionized abolitionism. Runaways rewrote the political economy of slavery from their perspective, and the committees described the American system of "slave-power" expansion occasionally as capitalist and always as imperialist, patriarchal, and racist. The committees also elaborated a historically-grounded theory of anti-slavery, anti-imperial revolution based upon the self-activity of the enslaved. Marronage, the Underground Railroad, and the Haitian Revolution were all re-envisioned as connected moments in an international revolution against slavery. In short, as one vigilance committee member put it, "in Revolutions, the practical end always comes first and the theory afterwards." The dictum applies to abolitionism as much as to other revolutionary movements.