

# Counterfeit Kin: Kidnappers of Color, the Reverse Underground Railroad, and the Origins of Practical Abolition.

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Journal of the Early Republic

University of Pennsylvania Press

Volume 38, Number 2, Summer 2018

pp. 199-230

10.1353/jer.2018.0025

ARTICLE

[View Citation](#)

### Abstract

Abstract:

This article examines the roles of black and mixed-race operatives in the criminal human trafficking networks that kidnapped and consigned to slavery thousands of free people of color in the early nineteenth century. The first section explores the distinctive abilities, modus operandi, and motivations of these unexpected and largely overlooked conductors on this Reverse Underground Railroad. The second section triangulates their behavior not only against that of confidence men and counterfeiters working in the shadows of the

emerging capitalist economy in the early republic, but also in relationship to that of the many African-descended men and women in the long history of American slavery whose actions thwarted other black people's dreams of liberty. The final section interrogates the distinctive ways in which free black families, neighborhoods, and communities responded to the threat posed by kidnapers of color. It argues that the efforts of black urban dwellers to publicly denounce, promptly apprehend, and violently punish by extralegal means these pernicious predators served to elaborate a new form of direct antislavery action, an early and formative species of the sort of 'practical abolition' activities more typically associated with the aftermath of the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850.

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## Counterfeit Kin

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Sam Scomp rose early. He was a runaway from a slave plantation in New Jersey and had been sleeping rough at different spots in Philadelphia for the last few nights. Probably hungry and surely stiff, Scomp set out toward the docks at the end of Market Street. His plan was to try to earn enough money to buy breakfast by helping ships' crews cart barrels and boxes from their holds into town. Just fifteen years old, Scomp was young and strong, but he did not have his own wagon or wheelbarrow and barely knew anyone. So it must have seemed like a blessing when a mixed-race man walked up to Scomp to offer him work unloading a shipment of "Peaches, Oranges, Water Melons &c" from a small sloop at anchor out by the Navy Yard. The pay was twenty-five cents, and they could use a wagon already waiting for them at the ship.<sup>1</sup>

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Richard Bell is associate professor of history at the University of Maryland. He wishes to thank Monica Lewis, Catherine Kelly, Nicole Mahoney, Shane White, Emily Clark, Adam Rothman, and two anonymous *JER* readers for their assistance in preparing this essay.

1. "Kidnapping," *African Observer: A Monthly Journal, Containing Essays and Documents* 1, no. 2 (1827), 38; Isaac Harvey, Aug. 9, 1825, Diary, 1820-1856, Isaac Harvey Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. In addition to the primary sources cited here, this account of Scomp's August 1825 abduction is reconstructed from the following secondary sources: John Henderson, Joseph Watson, Job Brown, Thomas Bradford Junr., R. L. Kennon, Joshua Boucher, H. V. Somerville, and Eric Ledell Smith, "Rescuing African American Kidnapping Victims in Philadelphia as Documented in the Joseph Watson Papers at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 129, no. 3 (2005), 317-45; Julie Winch, "Philadelphia and the Other Under-

*Journal of the Early Republic*, 38 (Summer 2018)

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of the Pennsylvania Society: for promoting the abolition of slavery; the relief of free negroes unlawfully held in bondage, and for improving the condition of the, the continuous function is parallel.

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