

Fugitive Mail: The Deliverance of Henry “Box” Brown and Antebellum Postal Politics

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On March 29, 1849, in Richmond, Virginia, a thirty-four-year old, 200-pound slave named Henry Brown asked two friends to pack him in a wooden box and ship it by express mail to Philadelphia. They did and he arrived alive twenty-seven hours later with a new name and a marketable story. *The Narrative of the Life of Henry “Box” Brown*, published months later (with the help of ghostwriter Charles Stearns), made Brown quickly famous.¹ Brown toured America and England describing his escape and jumping out of his famous box. In 1850, Brown and partner James C.A. Smith added to the show a moving panorama, “The Mirror of Slavery,” depicting the horrors of slavery and the slave trade. Audiences dwindled, however, and after a dispute over money in 1851, Brown parted ways with Smith and with most of his supporters. By 1855, Brown was largely forgotten.

In the last dozen years, Henry “Box” Brown’s *Narrative* has re-emerged to enjoy a kind of academic second act in African American Studies. Recent books and articles by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Richard Newman, John Ernest, Jeffrey Ruggles, Daphne Brooks, Marcus Wood, and Cynthia Griffin Wolff celebrate the rich symbolism of deliverance in Brown’s story.² As Gates writes in his forward to a recent edition of Brown’s *Narrative*, the appeal of the tale

stems, in part, from the fact that Brown made literal much that was implicit in the symbolism of enslavement. . . . Brown

names this symbolic relation between death and life by having himself confined in a virtual casket. He ‘descends’ in what must have been a hellacious passage of the train ride—sweltering, suffocating, claustrophobic, unsanitary, devoid of light, food, and water—only to be resurrected twenty-seven hours later in the heavenly city of freedom and brotherly love that Philadelphia represented.³

Richard Newman states that the “second major trope in Brown’s confinement and emergence,” this one “transformed to the point of reversal,” is the Middle Passage: “[u]nmercifully packed together in sailing ships, Africans were pressed into enclosures little more than living tombs . . . nonhuman products for the commodity market, they were crammed into spaces designed only to maximize numbers and profits. The result was hell.”⁴ Cynthia Griffin Wolff argues that Brown chose his small box, which measured three feet one inch long, two feet six inches deep, and two feet wide, “with as keen an eye for the economies of space as the most mercenary slave captain.”⁵ Marcus Wood suggests that Brown’s “imprisonment” was “a symbolic entombment of the soul of every slave, in a state of bondage,” while his emergence was “the American spirit emerging from the moral entombment of slavery.”⁶ Daphne Brooks claims that Brown “exemplifies the role of the alienated and dislocated black fugitive subject” in the antebellum era.⁷ In short, recent scholarship focuses primarily on the symbolic value of Brown’s confinement; it is an allegory for the middle passage and a metaphor for the oppressions of slavery and for the rigid roles and categories that white abolitionists imposed on fugitive black slaves and their narratives. (Brown, a well-dressed showman, wore too much jewelry for his pious supporters’ taste; his panorama’s iconoclastic visuals too directly challenged tepid white abolitionist sensibilities; he married a white British woman, abandoning his first wife in slavery.)⁸

With the exception of Jeffrey Ruggles, none of the scholars above attends to the particulars of the private mail service that successfully executed Brown’s delivery: Adams & Co. Express.⁹ (Brooks mistakenly ascribes Brown’s delivery to the U.S. Postal Service, which did not enter the parcel business until 1912.) For these scholars, the role of express delivery is at best incidental and insignificant and at worst compromises the escape genre, which requires that Brown bravely and dramatically outwit his enslavers. (In the latter view, Brown’s traumatic journey deems Adams Express the antagonist rather than a protagonist of the story.) Yet the role of government and private express mail delivery is central to the story and the contemporary record suggests that Brown’s audience celebrated his delivery as a modern postal miracle.

As numerous works of postal history have established, in the 1840s, American workers, merchants, immigrants, and Western settlers began increasing their demand for affordable, reliable, and rapid mail and parcel delivery systems.¹⁰ The need for confidentiality increased after gold was discovered in California in

1848; prospectors and bankers demanded carriers who were not curious about the packages they were carrying. By the time of Brown's journey, a complex system involving roads, depots, railroads, ferries, bridges, and steamships was in place along the Atlantic coast by which a 250-pound crate could be transported from Richmond to Philadelphia in a little more than twenty-four hours. Adams Express advertised its capability for one or two-day delivery; the firm safely delivered Brown's box in twenty-seven hours.¹¹

The marginalization of Adams Express in the effort to resurrect "Box" Brown is particularly ironic because of the crucial role played by the postal system in the antislavery movement.¹² While political histories of the antebellum era acknowledge the role of the post office in raising tensions between the North and the South, particularly during the anti-slavery mail campaigns of 1835-1836, African American literary scholarship has largely overlooked this period. Yet in the decades before the Civil War, free blacks, fugitive slaves, and anti-slavery advocates were actively pro-post, cognizant that the bureaucratic indifference of the "impersonal network," as postal historian David M. Henkin deems it, had no color bar.¹³ In 1854, for example, Anthony Burns, a fugitive slave imprisoned in Richmond prison, communicated by mail to his Boston lawyer by slipping letters to African Americans who passed underneath his prison window, knowing that they would know how to slip letters into the post, and that the postal system cared not about the color of the writer; Harriet Jacobs famously outwitted her master by sending her family letters with New York postmarks.¹⁴

This essay reconsiders the publication, reception, and scholarly revival of *The Narrative of Henry "Box" Brown* in the context of the postal system in antebellum America, changing the tenor of the tale from an escape narrative to a first-hand account of a key moment in the history of postal policy in the United States. Brown's fleeting popularity is linked not only with his story's dependence on postal delivery, but also with the public's growing appreciation of unexpected letters and packages, fast becoming a nearly daily occurrence across America.

The U.S. postal system dates from the early republic. The post office was created in 1789, and following the British model, the post office was part of the Department of the Treasury. The primary policy objective of the American postal service was the dissemination of political news rather than personal letters; the wide circulation of information was necessary to maintain an informed citizenry far from seats of power.¹⁵ The post office established and maintained roads and routes for this purpose, balancing its accounts in part with high rates for personal correspondence. Personal mail was expensive: under the 1792 Act, rates were set at six cents for sending a single-sheet letter less than thirty miles; twenty-five cents for any distance over 450 miles; double or triple prices for two or three sheets.¹⁶ Before the turn of the century, letter writing, as Henkin writes, "was not yet common enough to warrant daily habits of inquiry and delivery."¹⁷ Under presidents Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, congress invested heavily in roads and transportation; mail volume grew from two million letters carried

annually in 1800 to nearly four million pieces in 1810 (.5 letters per capita).¹⁸ Rates were raised by 50 percent in 1815 to help defray the costs of the War of 1812, but mail continued to increase to 13.8 million letters (1.3 per capita) by 1830.¹⁹

In 1835 Andrew Jackson's Postmaster General Amos Kendall reorganized the post office to increase reliability and promote nationwide dependence on the postal system; he reformed accounting systems and contracting procedures but did not substantially lower rates. Kendall brought in postal inspectors whose duties were to "enforce the keeping of postmasters' registers of the arrival and departure of the mails; to note all failures by contractors and prepare the cases for action by the Postmaster General; to check on the postmasters' quarterly reports; and to do 'all other things which may be necessary to secure a faithful and exact performance' [in the words of the 24th Congress] on the part of contractors and postmaster."²⁰ In other words, inspectors were to ensure that letters arrived quickly and unmolested at their destination.

As postal historian Richard John notes, while the expansion of postal infrastructure between 1792 and 1835 strengthened the Union, "[b]etween 1835 and 1861 . . . the same facilities worked no less inexorably to drive the Union apart."²¹ In the summer of 1835, Northern abolitionists began a massive anti-slavery campaign, mailing abolitionist tracts to prominent Southern ministers, elected officials, teachers, and newspaper editors, seeking to turn public sentiment against slave holding. During the height of the mass mailing effort, some 175,000 separate pieces were sent through the mail.²² While Federal postal law required the delivery of all properly addressed and formatted mail through the post office, the laws of several Southern states, such as South Carolina, prohibited the dissemination of "incendiary" or inflammatory material. In July 1835, a group of prominent citizens broke into the Charleston, South Carolina post office to destroy the anti-slavery material.²³ Charleston postmaster Alfred Huger, concerned about the safety of the personal and commercial mail, began separating and refusing to distribute the abolitionist material, begging Postmaster General Amos Kendall to declare illegal the transmission of anti-slavery material to states whose laws prohibited it. Huger also pleaded with sympathetic Northern postmasters to stop the posting of these periodicals.

The abolitionists were not acting unlawfully, however, as Kendall, Jackson, and even some Southerners recognized. The United States post office was formed primarily to disseminate political information and the Constitution prohibited the government from censoring the press. Seeking to mitigate the crisis, Jackson urged Congress to pass federal laws prohibiting "incendiary publications intended to instigate the slaves to insurrection,"²⁴ but none of the bills had enough votes to pass. The campaign continued: between May 1836 and May 1837, hundreds of thousands more copies of *The Anti-Slavery Magazine*, *The Slave's Friend*, *The Anti-Slavery Record*, *Human Rights*, and the *Emancipator*, along with countless miscellaneous pamphlets, tracts, and bound volumes, arrived in Southern post offices. Kendall quietly allowed local postmasters to suppress the material,

but Congress publicly restated an 1836 U.S. Post Office regulation emphasizing that postmasters were prohibited from detaining or refusing to deliver any letter or publication for any reason. In desperation, Virginia passed a law in 1836 requiring postmasters in the state to confiscate all incendiary publications. In 1841 a Maryland act required postmasters to come before grand juries on a regular basis and testify to any inflammatory publications received in the mail. Kendall's dithering on the question of the federal role provoked outrage from former president John Quincy Adams in 1842:

Here is an officer of the United States government...who unequivocally admits that retaining papers in the post office without distribution is contrary to law, who expressly says that he does not and will not authorize it, and yet tells the postmaster who has applied to him for directions in the case, that he must act in the matter upon his own discretion. I denounce it as a violation of the freedom of the press, as a violation of the sacred character of the post office, and of the rights and liberties of all free people of the United States.²⁵

Northern abolitionists often sent the material postage due, to provide postmasters with a financial incentive to deliver the mail. Prior to the 1840s, postage was typically paid by the receiver of mail, not the sender, whether the item was a newspaper or a personal letter. The postage on personal letters remained prohibitive in the 1830s: a letter from Boston to Baltimore could cost the recipient thirty cents to collect from the post office. Most American wage workers earned only \$5 to \$15 per month and could not afford to receive a letter more than once or twice a year. Yet this would soon change. In 1839, British postal reformer Rowland Hill proposed a radical change in postal policy: prepaid postage (the stamp) that would cost the same amount (one penny) regardless of the distance traveled. Proponents argued that so many more people would use the mail that the government would not lose money.²⁶ Britain's parliament adopted the Penny Postage Act in 1840; as expected, routes and volume expanded rapidly. The total number of letters carried by the British post office doubled to 168 million in 1840, and doubled again to 322 million in 1847.

American abolitionists followed the British postal reform debates closely, hoping that lower postage would increase communication by mail between North and South. As early as 1839, abolitionist papers were reporting on overseas postage debates.²⁷ On December 19, 1840, *The Colored American* reprinted the following article from the *Emancipator* entitled "How to Forward Money Through a Post Master," to increase circulation of anti-slavery newspapers in the slave states:

Now when you wish your Post Master to send money for you to the *Emancipator*, first appeal to him, respectfully, that

you are one of those who always conform to rules, and try to make public business easy. Then ask him to do you the favor you desire. If he is a man of business, he may feel that it is too much of tax upon his time, to write a letter concerning necessary directions about the money, and other information connected therewith: so, to obviate this, have a letter already written for him, (not a letter from yourself,) that he can sign, just as if it had been prepared by a clerk of his own; there will then be nothing for him to do, but just to put his name at the bottom, close to the letter, (already directed by yourself,) and put his frank on the back. Very few Post Masters will refuse to do as much as this for any neighbor, if properly applied to.

In response to Britain's postal success, Congress created the United States Postal Commission in 1844 to recommend changes, reaffirming the post office's mandate of promoting "enlightenment and social improvement and national fellowship."²⁸ The new post office policy promoted the idea of more communication by mail; in 1840 the post office carried 40.9 million letters annually, or 2.9 letters per capita. The Reform Acts of 1845 and 1847 followed the British model of standard, low-priced, pre-paid postage; letters were charged at five cents per half ounce for distances up to three hundred miles. From 1845 to 1850 volume increased by 66 percent to sixty-nine million letters per year.

Cheap postage immediately increased the quantity, intensity, and quality of communication in America, resulting in expanded mail routes, employing more stagecoaches, railways, and ships. Moreover, while the sanctity of personal correspondence was already nominally an essential aspect of U.S. postal policy (the abolitionist mail campaign aside), the postal reforms of the late 1840s vastly increased privacy in practice. Pre-paid, weight-based postage obviated the routine close inspection of individual letters to determine fees based on distance traveled. Now nearly all letters would be treated equally, which meant postmarked, processed, and all but ignored by postal clerks. The Free-Soil *National Era* wrote in 1847 of the obligation their readers were under to the post office for the issuance of stamps, so that letters and subscription fees could be sent with little risk of exposure:

A farmer, with a supply of stamps in his secretary, if he has no change, or a person wishing to drop a letter, postage paid, into the letter-box, when the office is closed, will find them a great convenience. Subscribers to newspapers, desiring to send fractions of subscription, can enclose in a letter a set of stamps, to any amount they please, say twenty, twenty-five, or eighty cents.²⁹

Cheap postage, Frederick Douglass observed in *The North Star*, had an “immense moral bearing.”³⁰ As long as federal and state governments respected the privacy of the mails, everyone and anyone could mail letters and packages; almost anything could be inside.

In short, the power of prepaid postage delighted the increasingly middle-class and commercial-minded North and increasingly worried the slave-holding South.³¹ Slavery, as Emerson noted in 1844, “does not love the whistle of the railroad; it does not love the newspaper [or] the mail-bag.”³² Lower costs could increase the possibility of another sustained mail campaign. The question of mail inviolability had not yet been settled and abolitionist materials were still confiscated in the South. In 1849, a mob seized mailbags in Pendleton, South Carolina after abolitionist newspapers arrived in the town post office. Frederick Douglass’s *North Star* reprinted an item entitled “Incendiary Publications by Mail” (from “a S.C. Paper”) on July 6, 1849:

The South is now being flooded with abolition documents and newspapers. Whilst the Anti-slavery *Standard* continues its offensive visits, we observe another of the same sort—the *Pennsylvania Freeman*—has commenced to be circulated in the Southern States. We respectfully invite the attention of President Taylor, “the man of the South,” to the management of the Post Office Department. These documents are Treasonable. The *Freeman* denounces the Constitution of the United States as “an infamous and wicked covenant.” These publications are not only insulting to the people of the South, but are intended to overthrow our institutions and plunge the country into the direst evils. The Government, under the Constitution, we believe, has the entire control of the Post Office Department, and also the power to regulate what matters shall be carried through the mail. In the absence of legislative enactment then—for we believe no law exists on the subject, Mr. Calhoun’s bill in 1836 having been lost at its final reading in the Senate—we conceive it to be the duty of the Executive—a duty which he owes to the people of the South—that he should endeavour to fill the Post Office Department with men who will not, by virtue of their office, aid in circulating these documents in the Southern States where they are prohibited by law.³³

Once again, several prominent, constitution-minded Southern leaders opposed government intrusion into the content of the mails on principle, arguing that neither the President nor the Cabinet had the power to withhold a private letter. The *Raleigh [N.C.] Register*, argued in 1849:

For the sake of turning the excitable sensibilities of the Southern people to political account, it is boldly maintained to be the duty of the head of the Post Office Department to authorize his subordinates to open letters and packages supposed to contain objectionable matter. This principle being once established, the liberty of the Press becomes a nullity, and the dominant party is invested with full powers to suppress the promulgation through the mails of any opinions which they disapprove. If the Post Master General can prohibit the delivery of Abolition newspapers and letters, and authorize them to be opened, there is nothing to prevent him from exercising the same censorial power over his political opponents.³⁴

The writer blithely dismissed any concern about slave correspondence by claiming that slaves are unable to read and owners have a right to “forbid any sort of intercourse with them.” Moreover, they are not citizens, he continued, and “in fact, they have no surname, by which one may be distinguished from another; and a Post-master is not bound to know one slave from another, they being in the eye of law, not persons, but property—such is the estimation in which they are held by the State laws.”

Thus national postal policy—as well as postal politics—remained ambivalent in the antebellum era. On the one hand, a person’s right of free expression and free use of the mails could not be curtailed. On the other hand, if the Federal Government were going to remain in the mail business, how far would it go to guarantee the radically egalitarian (and potentially disruptive) policy that anyone, anywhere, had the right to send a newspaper or a letter to whomever he or she wanted?

Private mail and express firms offered a practical solution to the specter of political postal intrusion. In 1844, radical abolitionist Lysander Spooner founded the private American Letter Mail Company, arguing that there was nothing in the constitution that prohibited competition with the government post office.³⁵ New package express and private mail companies, faster and cheaper than the post office, emerged up and down the east coast. Their success competing with the post office was another factor influencing congress’ postal reforms of 1845.³⁶ The United States postal service (unlike its British counterpart) had not yet begun carrying parcels, leaving until 1913 this lucrative business to private carrier companies whose standards for privacy and efficiency exceeded the government post.

The Adams & Co. Express, founded in 1840, proved almost immediately that confidentiality and dependability were marketable business assets.³⁷ By 1843, Adams had routes in Virginia, and in just a few years, according to Edward Everett, had delivered “mountain piles of newspapers” as well as magazines and other journals “to the cities of the South and West, as far as St. Louis and

New Orleans.”³⁸ Adams Express was soon the shipper of choice for abolitionist publications, as this April 5, 1855 letter in the *National Era* indicates:

To the Editor of the *National Era*:

In reply to your circular, received this morning, we enclose a check for twenty dollars. Send us fifty copies of “Facts for the People,” per Adams’s Express, and fifty into some dark corner, where there is any prospect of light arising from their distribution. You shall hear from us again respecting the balance of the money. Our Baltimore friends, who send this, are always prompt. Living in a slave State, they fully realize the great importance of maintaining vigorously the position we have gained at Washington.

Adams Express capitalized on its reputation for reliability and confidentiality by safely shipping heavy crate-loads of gold dust from California mines to East Coast banks after 1849. The company was successful in part because it promised never to look inside the boxes it carried. In short, Henry “Box” Brown’s success depended almost entirely on Adams Express’s policies of discretion and efficiency.

Henry Brown’s narrative offers little information about his postal consciousness prior to his self-shipping. After an uneventful childhood on a Virginia farm, Brown was sent to Richmond to work in a tobacco factory owned by the master’s son. Over the span of twelve years he was able to earn money enough to marry a fellow slave, rent a house, and live with her and their three children.³⁹ One day, however, he returned home from work to find that his family had been sold away. Out of his mind from despair, he prayed, and, “as if from above, there darted into my mind these words, ‘Go and get a box, and put yourself in it.’”⁴⁰

Henry “Box” Brown published the first version of his story in 1849, a few months after his escape. The narrative was ghostwritten and printed by white abolitionist Charles Stearns, who crafted the tale to conform to the emerging expectations of the slave narrative genre: it is pious, respectful, dramatic, and targeted to sentimental, abolitionist readers.⁴¹ Stearns credited Brown’s survival not on Adams Express but on God’s blessing, emphasizing the “Hymn of Thanksgiving” that Brown sung after his box was crowbarred open in Philadelphia:

I waited patiently, I waited patiently for the Lord, for the Lord,
And he inclined unto me, and heard my calling;
I waited patiently, I waited patiently for the Lord,
And he inclined unto me, and heard my calling;
And he hath put a new song in my mouth,
Ev’n a thanksgiving, Ev’n a thanksgiving, Ev’n a thanksgiving
unto our God.

Jeffrey Ruggles's indispensable biography of Brown fleshes out the details left out of Brown's narratives: how Adams Express was chosen, how the box was made, how the destination address was selected.⁴² Adams, Ruggles observes, advertised the one-day trip in local papers; speed required coordination between the railroad and steamship companies to convey freight over the various waterways between Richmond and Philadelphia—the Potomac, the Chesapeake, the Susquehanna River.⁴³ Ruggles also finds evidence that Samuel A. Smith, a Richmond shoemaker and acquaintance on whom Brown relied for assistance, was a gambler who sold lottery and policy tickets and may have been associated with a Philadelphia gambling pool. Smith thus would have had a personal interest in mail and parcel privacy, since selling lottery tickets by mail was illegal.⁴⁴ While Smith's motives for helping Brown remain a matter for speculation, in early March of 1849, Smith traveled to the offices of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society to ask James Miller McKim, William Still, and Cyrus Burleigh for help with Brown's plan to ship himself north. Smith's correspondence with McKim about the timing of the trip, particularly his attention to the breakup of the ice on the Susquehanna, indicates his—and perhaps Brown's—practical understanding of the conditions necessary for the box to arrive swiftly enough for Brown to survive the journey.⁴⁵

Brown omits these details from his published narratives, simply stating that he confided in a friend who wrote to an acquaintance in Philadelphia and arranged for the box to be sent north by express mail. The drama begins when Brown gets in, with a bladder of water and a gimlet to bore additional breathing holes if needed:

I laid me down in my darkened home of three feet by two, and like one about to be guillotined, resigned myself to my fate. My friend was to accompany me, but he failed to do so; and contented himself with sending a telegraph message to his correspondent in Philadelphia, that such a box was on its way to his care.⁴⁶

The various legs of the journey are described in painful detail. Brown is first carried to the express office, head downward (although the box is labeled "this side up with care"); he is then carried to the depot, "tumbled roughly into the baggage car," though he is now "right side up;" he is put aboard a steamboat on his head again, then providentially tipped on his side after an hour and a half. "Soon after this fortunate event," Brown writes,

we arrived at Washington, where I was thrown from the wagon, and again as my luck would have it, fell on my head. I was then rolled down a declivity, until I reached the platform from which the cars were to start. During this short but rapid journey, my neck came very near being dislocated, as I felt it crack, as if it

had snapped asunder. Pretty soon, I heard some one say, “there is no room for this box, it will have to remain behind.” I then again applied to the Lord, my help in all my difficulties, and in a few minutes I heard a gentleman direct the hands to place it aboard, as “it came with the mail and must go on with it.”⁴⁷

Brown is tumbled into a car, briefly head downward, then righted and brought to the depot in Philadelphia at three o’clock in the morning. Three hours later, Brown is brought to the home of the abolitionist acquaintances who open the box. Though weak, he stands and sings a hymn.

Charles Stearns’s editorial hand—thickly laying on the “True Abolitionist Style,” as Olney puts it⁴⁸—is clearly evident in such phrases as “applied to the Lord” and “snapped asunder.” Daphne Brooks argues that this rhetoric serves to repress and confine Brown’s voice: “Stearns’s editorial body multiplies in size while Brown’s figure gradually dwarfs and collapses into the very box of his escape.”⁴⁹ Brown is present, she continues, “yet discursively entombed, forced underground into a manhole of his own making once again as Stearns’s overbearing and “ghostly” editorial hand threatens to place a stranglehold on the text.”⁵⁰ Undoubtedly the sense that Brown’s own account of events must be more accurate than Stearns’s record led Newman and Gates to republish the 1851 version, *Narrative of the life of Henry “Box” Brown, Written by Himself*, published in England, where Brown had fled after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. John Ernest too has chosen the 1851 version for his new annotated version of Brown’s *Narrative*.⁵¹

There is no evidence to suggest that the 1851 narrative is any more accurate or authentic than the 1849 version; in fact, Brown embellished the facts of his journey in the second telling for dramatic impact. He adds, for example, the following commemorative song:

Here you see a man by the name of Henry Brown,
Run away from the South to the North;
Which he would not have done but they stole all his rights,
But they’ll never do the like again.

Chorus—Brown laid down the shovel and the hoe,
Down in the box he did go;
No more Slave work for Henry Box Brown,
In the box *by Express* he did go . . .

When they packed the baggage on, they turned him on his head,
There poor Brown liked to have died . . .

When they got to the cars they threw the box off,
And down upon his head he did fall,

Then he heard his neck crack, and he thought it was broke,
But they never threw him off any more.

...

The friends gathered round and asked if all was right,
As down on the box they did rap,
Brown answered them, saying "yes all is right!"
He was then set free from his pain.

Brown sang this song publicly (and published it in broadside) soon after his escape, but Wood suggests that it was "not considered appropriate for printing in the 1849 American edition."⁵² It is likely that the song (with its emphasis on pain) was added in 1851 to compensate for the relative absence of physical suffering as a slave. Brown warns his readers that they should not expect tales of the "untold horrors" of slavery—not the "horrid inflictions of the lash upon my naked body; of cruel starvings and of insolent treatment"—but rather "the beautiful side of the picture of slavery" and the "partial kindness" of a master:

I did not receive but one whipping. I never suffered from lack of food, or on account of too extreme labor; nor for want of sufficient clothing to cover my person. . . . Far beyond, in terrible suffering, all outward cruelties of the foul system, are those inner pangs which rend the heart of fond affection, when the "bone of your bone, and the flesh of your flesh" is separated from your embrace, by the ruthless hand of the merciless tyrant. . . .⁵³

Yet Brown's song reduces his slave experience to one line, "they stole all his rights," while the express handlers become the villains who cruelly "threw the box off" as if they knew there was a man inside. The song's emphasis on the pain of the journey undermines the central point of Brown's narrative—that emotional trauma is as injurious to slaves as physical. In the context of his larger narrative, the song trivializes the role of those who knew that he was a person but treated him as an object in order to criticize those who treated him as an object when he was, in fact, an object.⁵⁴

The song may have irked pro-mail abolitionists, especially fans of the private express services. In the 1850s, the abolitionist press continued to report on mail delivery services, both government and private. Adams Express was the favorite shipper of abolitionists, even praised by name in the *Provincial Freeman* in 1854 for its "faithfulness, integrity, promptness, and enterprise."⁵⁵ The song belittles the labor of workingmen, the very ranks Brown might be expected to join upon achieving his freedom.⁵⁶ After escaping and moving to Massachusetts, for example, Frederick Douglass writes of his willingness to "saw wood, shovel coal, carry the hod, sweep the chimney, or roll oil casks." Brown's 250-pound box is a heavy load. Though Wood calls the express system advanced industrial

technology, Brown himself acknowledges the sweat labor of hefting the box onto (and off of) a wagon, railroad cars, a steamboat, and a horse cart.⁵⁷

Brown's 1851 narrative praises the carriers' efficiency even as it criticizes their roughness:

I had no sooner arrived at the office than I was turned heels up, while some person nailed something on the end of the box. I was then put upon a wagon and driven off to the *depôt* with my head down, and I had no sooner arrived at the *depôt*, than the man who drove the wagon tumbled me roughly into the baggage car, where, however, I happened to fall on my right side. . . . The next place we arrived at was Potomac Creek, where the baggage had to be removed from the cars, to be put on board the steamer.⁵⁸

"No sooner" had he arrived that they made sure that the address was secured to the box; "no sooner" had he arrived at the depot than they put the box in the baggage car; next, the box was taken off the car and put on the steamer. One can imagine how even twenty-first century express services would admire the lack of delay between the stages of his journey.⁵⁹ Perhaps partly because of Brown's heavy use of passive voice ("I was placed," "I was carried," "I was taken," "I was tumbled"), recent critics overlook the workers who are doing the placing and carrying. "Crouched in the fetal position with the box tossed upside down three or four times, Brown traveled three hundred and fifty miles—having only a flask of water and a few biscuits as sustenance," Wolff writes, as if the traveling was magic.⁶⁰

Finally, Brown adds some curious dialogue to make the express carriers appear more cold-blooded than they were in the first version:

The next place at which we arrived was the city of Washington, where I was taken from the steam boat, and again placed upon a wagon and carried to the *depôt* right side up with care; but when the driver arrived at the *depôt* I heard him call for some person to help to take the box off the wagon, and someone answered him to the effect that he might throw it off; but, says the driver, it is marked 'this side up with care'; so if I throw it off I might break something the other answered him that it did not matter if he broke all that was in it, the railway company were able enough to pay for it. No sooner were these words spoken than I began to tumble from the wagon, and falling on the end where my head was, I could hear my neck give a crack, as if it had been snapped asunder and I was knocked completely insensible.⁶¹

The remark about liability and railroad wealth did not appear in the 1849 version nor could it have. American railroads were struggling or losing money in 1849; it was not until the first federal land grant of 2.6 million acres to Illinois Central in 1850 that anyone thought that the railroad companies would become profitable. It was not until 1851 that the public began to perceive railroads as wealthy.⁶² Furthermore, the remark about liability for breakage is anachronistic: the case law was anything but settled, but the responsibility for the safe delivery was certainly with Adams Express and the workers would have known it.⁶³

Brown may have embroidered his story in his 1851 retelling out of anger: twenty-seven hours of being cooped up, banged about, thrown off a baggage truck, and twice placed upside down was clearly painful. Stearns' initial decision not to give Adams Express any credit for the successful delivery may have been a marketing decision: since Brown didn't experience torture, the drama of the narrative had to reside in the manner of escape and it had to be gripping. If Brown's story was not "one of horrid inflictions of the lash upon [his] naked body; of cruel starvings and of insolent treatment," he still needed some way to demonstrate his emotional anguish.⁶⁴ A traumatic journey proves the lengths he was willing to go to escape.

Brown and Charles Stearns do acknowledge the humor of the situation. Stearns he warns readers in a footnote to the 1849 version not to enjoy too greatly Brown's plan to ship himself North in a box: "Reader, smile not at the



Figure 1: Lithograph by Samuel Rowse (1850). Courtesy of Library of Congress.

above idea, for if there is a God of love, we must believe that he suggests steps to those who apply to him in times of trouble, by which they can be delivered from their difficulty.”⁶⁵ Calling Brown’s tale “the potent slapstick of the triumphant underdog,” Wood acknowledges that the tale contains “a certain element of low comedy,”⁶⁶ describing the 1850 lithograph: “The audience are presented as amused—their expressions exist somewhere between smirking incredulity and laughter”⁶⁷ (Figure 1). Brown himself jokes in his report (in both versions) of eavesdropping on this conversation: “I could now listen to the men talking, and heard one of them asking the other what he supposed *the box contained*; his companion replied he guessed it was ‘THE MAIL.’ I too thought it was a mail but not such a mail as he supposed it to be.”⁶⁸

The mail carriers’ blindness to contents of the box humanizes the uncomfortable fugitive inside, but the mail carriers were not responsible for the initial project of dehumanization. Moreover, their indifference to the particulars of any parcel or letter guarantees a certain amount of freedom to communicate. For example, the fugitive slave Harriet Jacobs (Linda Brent), hiding in an uncomfortable crawl space, uses the post office to throw him off the trail:

I had directed that my letters should be put into the New York post office on the 20th of the month. On the evening of the 24th my aunt came to say that Dr. Flint and his wife had been talking in a low voice about a letter he had received.... He seated himself in the chair that was placed for him, and said, ‘Well, Martha, I’ve brought you a letter from Linda. She has sent me a letter, also. I know exactly where to find her.’⁶⁹

The postman who delivers the letter and the master who receives it may be equally comically blind, but the reader’s laughter in Jacobs’s narrative is solely directed at the slave master. In Brown’s case, the reader’s attention is directed away from slavery toward the mail carriers; laughter takes our attention away from slavery.

Abolitionists managed to support Henry “Box” Brown without appearing anti-post by deeming Brown a modern-day Lazarus, a Noah emerging from the Ark, even the Resurrection of Jesus, all examples of Divine intervention in daily life on behalf of the good and worthy.⁷⁰ Brown claims that God intervened *via* the Adams Express Company:

The first thing I heard, after that, was some person saying “there is no room for the box, it will have to remain and be sent through to-morrow with the luggage train”; but the Lord had not quite forsaken me, for in answer to my earnest prayer. He so ordered affairs that I should not be left behind; and I now heard a man say that the box had come with the express, and it must be sent on. (61)

Stories of postal deliverance have always shared some of the supernatural spirit of religious deliverance. As Edward Everett mused, just before the Civil War, “when I contemplate the extent to which the moral sentiment, the intelligence, the affections of so many millions of people,—sealed up by a sacred charm within the cover of a letter,—daily circulate through a country, I am compelled to regard the Post-office, next to Christianity, as the right arm of our modern civilization.”⁷¹ Marcus Wood writes that Brown’s box was “womb and tomb, object of torture and vessel of liberation. . . . a paradox [and] a holy abolition relic.”⁷² Stripped of allegory and religious sentiment, however, Brown’s tale is the story of 250 lbs of freight (contents plus container) that Adams Express carried 300-plus miles in one day without mishap.

The historical record suggests that by choosing Adams Express, Brown picked the most reputable company to ship him. W.F. Harnden, the first Express business in the United States (established in 1839), had let its domestic express package business lapse in the early 1840s when it had gotten into the human transport business, ironically enough, bringing thousands of German and Irish immigrants to America; Adams Express grew by snapping up customers fed up with Harnden’s unreliability. Too often, that is, Harnden’s packages sat on doorsteps, delayed for days—a fate fortunately escaped by Henry “Box” Brown.⁷³

Jeffrey Ruggles uncovers information that complicates Brown’s version of his family relations. According to Brown’s narratives and public statements, his wife and children were sold away from him and he devised his plan to escape in order to get them back. But letters written by Brown’s partner, James. C. A. Smith (no relation to the Samuel Smith who boxed Brown up), explain that Brown’s wife’s new owner wrote a letter to Brown in 1849, soon after Brown became well known, offering to sell Brown’s family back to him. Brown apparently declined the offer.⁷⁴ The news put the publishers and promoters of “Box” Brown’s story in a difficult position. Frederick Douglass never wanted the story publicized in the first place; as he lamented in 1855, “had not Henry Box Brown and his friends attracted slaveholding attention to the manner of his escape, we might have had a thousand Box Browns per annum” (339).⁷⁵ Neither Adams Express nor their anti-slavery customers wanted adverse publicity at the same time that they were mailing crates full of anti-slavery newspapers, journals, broadsheets, pamphlets, posters, sermons, and tracts to the South. Brown’s loss of support from the abolitionist community in America and England is probably due to all of these causes in combination.

Brown’s tale has always invited grandiloquent allegorizing—he is a Houdini, a jack-in-the-box, “a large black man unfolding from a little wooden crate like some genie from a bottle”⁷⁶—but the Middle Passage was not evoked in the contemporary record, though news articles describe the halls that he initially played to in America and England as “tightly packed almost to suffocation.”⁷⁷ In the context of antebellum postal politics, American mail and express workers

are clearly not analogous to a slave ship crew: there were too many documented cases of real cruelty under slavery to blame the express carriers for roughness. The Adams Express workers were essentially just mailmen doing their job. The deliverance of Henry “Box” Brown to freedom was a matter of express efficiency; the novelty and entertainment value of a live, overnight package kept him in the public spotlight for a brief moment; life and progress went on.

Notes

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1. Henry Box Brown and Charles Stearns, *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown Who Escaped from Slavery, Enclosed in a Box 3 Feet Long and 2 Wide. Written from a Statement of Facts Made by Himself. With Remarks Upon the Remedy for Slavery* (Boston: Brown and Stearns, 1849). There are two versions of Henry “Box” Brown’s Narrative: the first credited the Charles Stearns’ authorship; the second was published two years later in England: Henry Box Brown, *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself* (Manchester: Lee and Glynn, 1851). References to the first version will be cited parenthetically or in the notes as 1849. References to the 1851 version will be cited parenthetically as 1851.
2. Henry Box Brown, *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself*, Intro. by Richard Newman and Forward by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002); John Ernest, *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996); Jeffrey Ruggles, *The Unboxing of Henry Brown* (Richmond: Library of Virginia, 2003); Cynthia Griffin Wolff, “Passing Beyond the Middle Passage: Henry ‘Box’ Brown’s Translations of Slavery,” *Massachusetts Review* 37 (Spring 1996): 23-39; Marcus Wood, *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America, 1780-1865* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2000).
3. Gates, forward to Brown, *Narrative*, ix-x. See Ernest for a comprehensive exploration of the differences between the two versions.
4. Newman, “Introduction,” Brown, *Narrative*, xxx.
5. Wolff, “Passing Beyond the Middle Passage,” 27.
6. Wood, *Blind Memory*, 110.
7. Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*, 67.
8. See Ruggles, *Unboxing*, 73-74.
9. Also known as Adams Express and the Adams Express Co. Contemporary reports of Brown’s journey followed Brown’s lead in not mentioning Adams by name until 1872, when William Still’s *The Underground Rail Road* subtitled his chapter on Brown “Arrived by Adams Express.” See Ernest, *Narrative*, Appendix B, “Henry Box Brown in the Press,” 159.
10. See David Henkin, *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communication in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006) and Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).
11. See Ruggles, *Unboxing*, 28-31 for details on Adams’s claims of swift transport.
12. See Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 39.
13. Henkin, *The Postal Age*, 2. See also Elizabeth Hewitt, *Correspondence and American Literature, 1770-1865* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), particularly Chapter 4, “Jacobs’s letters from nowhere,” which details the ways that slaves used Southern post offices before and during the Civil War.
14. Henkin, *The Postal Age*, 1; see also Hewitt, *Correspondence*.
15. See Richard B. Kielbowicz, *News in the Mail: The Press, Post Office, and Public Information* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989).
16. Gerald Cullinan, *The United States Postal Service* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973), 38-44.
17. Henkin, *The Postal Age*, 17.
18. John, *Spreading the News*, 4.
19. John, *Spreading the News*, 4.

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20. Leonard D. White, *The Jacksonians: A Study in Administrative History, 1829-1861* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1956), 277.

21. John, *Spreading the News*, 260. As Hewitt puts it, "Although the expanding national postal system was conceived of as the structure that would unite the States, in larger measure it served to inflame, and not cool, increasing factionalism between North and South, and the mail became an early source of conflict between pro- and anti-slavery forces" (*Correspondence*, 113).

22. See Clement Eaton, "Censorship of the Southern Mails," *The American Historical Review* 48 (January 1943): 266-280. See also Hewitt, *Correspondence*, 115-117.

23. See John, *Spreading the News*, 257-280, and Eaton, "Censorship of the Southern Mails," 266-280. See also White, *The Jacksonians*, 516.

24. Quoted in Eaton, "Censorship," 270.

25. John, *Spreading the News*, 279.

26. Letters, according to Hill, "were constantly refused on account of the heavy postage demanded, or remained many weeks in the postmaster's hands, when the persons to whom they were addressed were poor – mothers sometimes even pawning their clothes to pay for letters from their children, or having to wait till, little by little, they could save up the money necessary for that purpose" (Quoted in Howard Robinson, *The British Post Office: A History*. [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948], 8). "In those days, the visit of the postman, so far from being welcomed, was, as a rule, dreaded. Letters were almost always sent unpaid, and the heavy postage demanded for what might sometimes turn out to be merely trade circulars was a serious tax grudgingly paid, or, amongst the poorer classes, the letter had to be refused as too expensive a luxury" (Robinson, 3). Farrugia suggests that the letter box may have descended from the *tamburi* of Florence, the little boxes in which the church would receive anonymous denunciations of local officials or other suspicious persons. (Jean Young Ferrugia, *The Letter Box: A History of Post Office Pillar and Wall Boxes* (Sussex: Centaur Press Ltd., 1969), 3.

27. "If Great Britain with her enormous debt and large yearly expenditures, can venture upon the experiment of reducing postage to this minimum rate, a similar trial in this country, we think, need not occasion any very great apprehensions. It is believed by many judicious persons who have looked into the subject, that there will be, in fact, no diminution of revenue at all, but that the great increase of correspondence encouraged by the lowness of the rate will make up the full amount of postages usually received," *Colored American*, September 28, 1839. See also Kielbowicz, *News in the Mail*, 82-83.

28. Cullinan, *The United States Postal Service*, 66.

29. July 29, 1847. The post-office and express mail's promise of confidentiality was particularly appealing for abolitionist publishers who needed to send mail and newspapers to the South. Frederick Douglass, as noted above, regularly kept readers of *The North Star* apprised of changes in Post Office regulations: "The new post office bill for newspapers, which passed the House of Representatives recently, has restored to publishers of papers the right to forward them free of postage to subscribers residing in the county, or within 30 miles of where the paper is printed. Papers sent a hundred miles pay half a cent, and over one hundred miles one cent postage—if of no greater size than nineteen hundred square inches. Papers of greater size, with pamphlets, magazines, &c., will pay two cents an ounce, and one cent for each additional ounce" (October 6, 1848).

30. *The North Star*, November 17, 1848. Not surprisingly, because of its rural and agricultural (rather than urban, mercantile, and financial) economy and lower literacy rates, mail volume remained lower in the South than the North throughout the century. In 1849, *The National Era* carried an article entitled "Who Supports the Post Office?" accompanied by a table showing that the profits from mail delivery in free states was subsidizing the mail in slave states: "According to the foregoing table, the net postage paid by the free States, in the fiscal year 1847, was \$1,659,412; and the expense of transporting the mails in the same States, for the same year, was \$1,088,308 - leaving a clear surplus to the Department of 571,104. From the slave States, (exclusive of the District of Columbia, where the postage is mostly paid by the Government itself, on franked matter,) the postage received, during the same time, was but \$664,079; while the expense of transporting the mails therein was \$1,318,541—leaving a deficit of \$654,462, to be made up by the surplus paid by the free States, and from the Treasury" (November 29, 1849).

31. Postmaster General Kendall was widely criticized for dragging his feet in instituting a policy similar to Britain's. There had been a time when slaves had actually carried the mail in parts of the South, but in 1802, when the Department raised fears that knowledge of regional geography and citizenry could be used for reasons other than carrying letters, Congress decreed that only free whites could carry the mail (Cullinan, *United States Postal Service*, 45). Southern political interests had always kept a close eye on U.S. mail policy.

32. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Address Delivered in Concord on the Anniversary of the Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies, August 1, 1844," in *Emerson's Poetry and Prose: A Norton Critical Edition* (New York: W. W. Norton 2001), 348.

33. *The North Star*, July 6, 1849. Several years later, questions of mail privacy were still being debated in the Free Soil *National Era* article:

One of these men testified before the Court, that the opening of letters by mail agents, employed to ferret out rascality, is a common practice, not formally authorized by the Department, but winked at! This is a revelation for which we were not prepared. We had supposed the correspondence of the People sacred; but it seems that our letters, containing money, or on the most confidential matters, are at any moment liable to be opened and examined by rogue detectors, who themselves may be as unscrupulous as the scoundrels they are after, and who besides have peculiar facilities for the commission of crime. The Department ought never to have winked at a practice so abominable, and we hope the Judicial Power will now so vindicate the Law, as to put a stop forthwith to such an abuse (Editorial, June 14, 1855).

34. *The Raleigh Register*, reprinted in the *North Star*, October 5, 1849.

35. Spooner's Mail Company was similar to the several other private mails at the time, but he went about his business more openly. On January 11, 1844, he informed the Postmaster General of his plans to establish a letter mail company from Boston to Baltimore and sent a copy of his famous treatise, "The Unconstitutionality of the Laws of Congress Prohibiting Private Mails." Two weeks later he was open for business, and advertised in all the major newspapers. The American Letter Mail Company had its own stamps, its own agents, and in a few months, was doing a brisk business between Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore.

36. In the 1840s, the U.S. government competed for the delivery of letters with the new express businesses—Adams & Co, Wells & Co, (soon to be Wells, Fargo as well as American Express) and others. See Alvin F. Harlow, *Old Waybills: The Romance of the Express Companies* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1934). See also *The National Era*, November 29, 1849: "It has been ascertained that nearly two hundred expresses daily leave the city of Boston. Who will use the Post Office with his letters, when he can send them cheaper, quicker, and safer, by private expresses?"

37. Harlow, *Old Waybills* [xx]

38. Edward Everett, *The Mount Vernon Papers* (New York: D. Appleton, 1860), 252-252. The Adams Express Company helped Loyal Publication Society in 1864 by sending out hundreds of thousands of pro-Union publications and pamphlets to Union military hospitals and Union forces in the South. In the 1843 case of *United States vs. Adams & Company* the judge ruled that under federal postal regulations it was illegal for anyone to set up a company to carry and deliver the mail, but not illegal for passengers to carry mail.

39. John Ernest notes that Brown's 1849 Narrative mentions Nat Turner's uprising three times while the 1851 Narrative only mentions Turner once; the reasons for this, Ernest suggests, are unclear (*Narrative*, 14).

40. Brown, 1849, 59.

41. Both the 1849 and the 1851 editions include prefaces and attestations that describe divine deliverance and that equate the mail-handler with the slave-holder. Abolitionist J. McKim's letter of authentication in the 1851 edition attests to the "resurrection" from Brown's "living tomb" (iv).

42. After painstakingly corroborating names, places, and events, Ruggles states that the 1849 narrative is generally reliable, though some of the dialogue is probably reconstructed (*Unboxing*, 63).

43. See John B. Mordecai, *A Brief History of the Richmond, Fredericksburg and Potomac Railroad* (Richmond: Old Dominion Press, 1941) as well as James E. White, *A Life Span and Reminiscences of Railway Mail Service* (Philadelphia: Deemer & Jaisohn, 1910).

44. See Ruggles, *Unboxing*, 22-23. See also Rothman, Michael and Hollis Robbins, "Government Regulation of Gambling Advertising," *Journal of Gambling Studies* 7 (Winter 1991): 337-360.

45. Ruggles, *Unboxing*, 28-29.

46. Brown, 1849, 60.

47. *Ibid.* 61-62.

48. James Olney, "'I was Born': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature," *Calaloo* 20 (Winter 1984): 46-73.

49. Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*, 71. See also John W. Blassingame, "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems," *Journal of Southern History* 41 (November 1975): 473-492. Blassingame writes that, "many of the more reliable narratives contain elements which cannot be attributed to blacks. Certain literary devices which appear in the accounts were clearly beyond the ken of unlettered slaves" (478). Olney concludes that the pen that wrote the first narrative "was held not by Box Brown but by Charles Stearns" (58); and that Brown's narrative is "dressed up in the exotic rhetorical garments provided by Charles Stearns" (58). Written in the "True Abolitionist Style" (Olney, "'I was Born,'" 71). Newman: "unable to read or write and with little access to printers or publishers, Box Brown was not free from saying what other people wanted him to say. Only in England did he experience the freedom to express himself in his own way. The Manchester edition is obviously closer to Brown's own telling of his own story" (xii). Ernest: "the 1851 narrative constitutes a motivated departure from the 1849 version" (*Narrative*, 2).

50. Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*, 75-76.

51. *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written By Himself*, Ed. John Ernest (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

52. Wood, *Blind Memory*, 109.

53. Brown, 1849, 12-13.

54. "Brown's display of endurance crouching in his crate converts the slave's body into an elastic tool capable of transgressing and transcending extreme corporeal limitations" (Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*, 120).

55. See for example the article, "Adam's Express," in the *Provincial Freeman*, April 22, 1854:

On a certain day in the year 1839, a man with a carpet bag might have been seen . . . embarking on board the Norwich steamboat for Boston. The man was a Boston Yankee, Alvin Adams by name; the carpet bag contained a few parcels which individuals had entrusted him, to be delivered promptly in the city of his destination; his capital was in his business; his reputation was his personal acquaintance; he was nothing in short but a man with a carpet bag or is what is now called Express Messenger on the smallest scale. Faithfulness, integrity, promptness, and enterprise, brought wonderful things out of that carpet bag; a richer treasury than Fortunatus's purse, and a more magical beauty agency than Aladdin's lamp. The possessor is now, after the lapse of fifteen years, the head of a house which carries to and fro in its "carpet bags," for the accommodation of the public, an amount of treasure, in the shape of merchandize, gold and silver, notes and valuables, not less than one million of dollars every day, or \$365,000,000 per annum. Their offices are in every city or commercial depot from New York to San Francisco and Australia—not to mention the Japan office, for which Commodore Perry has gone to pave the way. Their agents and assistants number about three hundred. Their capital is, of course immense, and the circumstances of the Gold market of California, their connection with it as forwarders, and the extraordinary share of public confidence earned by their honorable career, have lately constrained them to act in San Francisco as Bankers, on a large scale, where they have just sustained a "run" (occasioned by an accidental rumor) to the amount of \$500,000, in a manner which has added largely to the confidence and popularity which they before enjoyed. Such is one of the features of the wonderful age in which we live. —*New York Courier and Enquirer*."

56. The question of wage labor and its relationship to slavery was a constant topic among abolitionists in the 1840s and 1850s. According to an 1848 article in *The North Star*, wages for labor in New England, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and New York ranged from \$12 to \$15 a month; in Maryland, from \$8 to \$10; in North Carolina from \$7 to \$8; and in South Carolina and Virginia, \$5 per month. "It is well for the laboring man, for those everywhere who work for wages, to ponder these facts. They have often been told that slavery is their worst enemy—that it dishonors labor, and drives them out of employment—but here are facts stated which demonstrate to what extent, in a pecuniary sense, the system of slave labor injures them. It cuts down their wages" (June 30, 1848). Brown's fans then and now endorse his passivity (he "was entombed"), effectively disposing of the idea that the Adams workers did any work at all. The "portable prison," as Charles Stearns put it, in which Brown "pursued his fearful journey," becomes a site of suffering, not a weight to be carried.

57. Wood, *Blind Memory*, 84.

58. Brown, 1851, 59-60.

59. Even so, Wolff argues that the journey was *not* swift—that Brown's "dazzling triumph" was surviving the "harrowing ordeal" (28). "The emphasis on the pain he endured during this form of prolonged and self-willed torture in order to obtain freedom sheds strategic light on Brown's skillful abilities and his depth of endurance in claiming control and ownership over his body," Brooks adds ("Passing Beyond the Middle Passage," 122).

60. *Ibid.*, 27. For Brooks, "Brown's boxing spectacle reaffirmed an African American appropriation of the black body, making that body 'vanish' in the midst of the panoptic culture of slavery and under the peculiar institution's diligent and watchful eye" (*Bodies in Dissent*, 121).

61. Brown, 1851, 61.

62. From 1850 to 1871 the Illinois Central received grants of over two and a half million acres, most of which was subsequently sold at \$11 to \$12 an acre, with receipts estimated at \$30 million. Opposition to the giving away of public land came from President Franklin Pierce, who spoke out four years later against further land grants. Too much of the most valuable land was passing into private and railroad ownership. Another prominent voice against the land grants was Horace Greeley: "Settle the lands compactly and railroads will be constructed through them rapidly and abundantly. Establish the principle that improved land is a free gift of God, to be dispensed as air and water, to all who need, and as they need, and ample capital will be released from land speculators to construct

any number of railroads.” Roy Marvin Robbins, *Our Landed Heritage: The Public Domain, 1776-1970* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1976), 165.

63. See Leonard W. Levy, “Chief Justice Shaw and the Formative Period of American Railroad Law: II,” *Columbia Law Review* 51, no. 7 (November 1951): 852-865. See also: *A Selection of Leading Cases, on Various Branches of the Law: With Notes by John William Smith, John Innes Clark Hare, Horace Binney Wallace, John William Wallace* (Philadelphia: T. & J. W. Johnson, 1855), 313-314; and William Wagener Porter, *A Treatise on the Law of Bills of Lading* (Philadelphia: Kay and Brother, 1891), 92.

64. Brown, 1849, 12.

65. *Ibid.*, 59.

66. Wood, *Blind Memory*, 109. Humor does not always sit well in the midst of an anti-slavery discourse designed to provoke sympathy and outrage, however. Certainly part of the power of narratives by William Wells Brown and Harriet Wilson is the leavening of humor, particularly scenes of hoodwinking the master or ridiculing the mistress. Inherently, the position of the master is both cruel and comic: both elements are a matter of the job’s required blindness to the slave’s humanity. Masters, mistresses, and overseers must assume that the person in front of him or her is less than human, a laboring machine. In the hands of a deft author, the roles are reversed: the dehumanizing master (or mistress) is revealed as the sightless robot and the suffering slave is fully human.

67. Marcus Wood: “In the very process of retelling his story he provided it with the comic and folkloric elements which were to typify it popular assimilation. After all, Brown had the confidence to embrace the bathetic elements of the tale. A man shipped in a box, turned on his head, tumbling out ruefully having tricked the entire force of the slaveholding south, is, at one level, the stuff of slapstick. But it is the potent slapstick of the triumphant underdog” (*Blind Memory*, 109). “By law, no more than a piece of property, he would become a piece of ‘portable’ property, recreating himself as ‘free’ by shipment from Baltimore to Philadelphia in a ‘Middle Passage’ to independence—courtesy of the Adams Express” (Wolff, “Passing Beyond the Middle Passage,” 26-27). Brown’s story evokes perhaps the oldest and most entertaining story of people hiding in a container: the story of the Trojan Horse.

68. Brown, 1849, 60.

69. Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 195.

70. (Wood, *Blind Memory*, 110). Wood points out that Brown selected his thanksgiving hymn because it emphasized the theme of resurrection: “I waited patiently for the Lord; and he inclined unto me and heard my cry. He brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock” (80).

71. Everett, “Adams Express,” 257.

72. Wood, *Blind Memory*, 91.

73. See Harlow, *Old Waybills*, for details on Herndon.

74. See Ruggles, *Unboxing*, 73, 74, 134.

75. The review of Box Brown’s book in Douglass’s paper *The North Star* (September 28, 1849) spends most time on Brown’s sufferings before his Express journey and downplays the particulars of the journey. Later Douglass would note the importance of mail to other escape schemes: “Many slaves could escape by personating the one of one set of [free colored person] papers; and this was often done as follows: A slave nearly or sufficiently answering the description set forth in the papers, would borrow or hire them till he could by their means escape to a free state, and then, by mail or otherwise, return them to the owner” (643). See Frederick Douglass, “Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself,” (1892). *Autobiographies*. Library of America, 1994, 643.

76. Wolff, “Passing Beyond the Middle Passage,” 27.

77. Audrey A. Fisch, *American Slaves in Victorian England: Abolitionist Politics in Popular Literature and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 119. Fisch quotes this line from an article in the *Bradford Observer*. *The Wolverhampton and Staffordshire Herald* attacked Brown’s panorama, calling it “a jumbled mass of contradictions and absurdities, assertions without proof, geography without boundary and horrors without parallel;” March 17, 1852 (Quoted in Fisch, *American Slaves*, 74). Brown sued and won.