

“There Is No Place Like a Happy Home”: Information Wanted Notices, the *Christian Recorder*, and the Search for Missing Family Members in Post-Emancipation America

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Abstract

This article considers the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) newspaper, the *Christian Recorder*'s publication of the formerly enslaved “Information Wanted” advertisements through the mid-1860s to turn of the century as a means through which the AME promoted the ideal of the “family” as positive models for Blacks themselves, also challenging white prejudices concerning family life of the formerly enslaved. Conversely, the formerly enslaved used them as a public forum to narrate, and perhaps begin to make sense of, their own stories of loss and longing and articulating white southern responsibility for the heartache and traumas of slavery that they had caused.

Keywords

American slavery, domestic slave trade, Black print culture, sources of enslaved experience, The *Christian Recorder*, African Methodist Episcopal Church, Frances E. W. Harper, Julia C. Collins

Information Wanted of my children, Thaddeus, Edmund, Albert and Mary Jones, formerly of Nelson Co., Virginia. Seven years have elapsed since I was sold from them in Richmond. Their former “owner” was William S. Jones. Any information concerning them will be most thankfully received by their mother, Larcenie Mayhoe. P.S.,—Please address me at Franklinton, North Carolina, in care of Rev. J.H. Crawford, (Box 18) and a mother’s gratitude and thanks will follow you.¹

Information wanted of Sarah Williams, who I left at Halifax Court House, Va., about 25 years ago. She belonged to a man whose name was William Early, who kept a dry-goods store. Any information of her will be thankfully received by her sister, Martha Ann Good, who was taken away from Nathan Dexter, who kept a hotel at Halifax, at 12 o’clock at night when quite small, and sold in Alabama, but now lives at 225 Currant Alley, Philadelphia, Pa. N.B. Ministers in the South, please read in your churches.²

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Reading the vignettes above, posted as “Information Wanted” notices in the African Methodist Episcopal Church (hereafter AME) newspaper, the *Christian Recorder* (hereafter *Recorder*), one cannot be immune to the heartfelt grief and longing in a few simple sentences seeking information of loved ones sold from their family years before. As an historian of the emotional lives of the enslaved in the United States I was, as historian Heather Andrea Williams remarks on coming across these advertisements, “compelled to stop and pay attention. I could not simply move on.”³ I had first encountered these notices while researching the *Recorder* for a book project I was undertaking concerning Black female intellectuals in nineteenth-century America. Several of the women I had chosen to focus on were published in this Black-print newspaper during the American Civil War and into the Reconstruction era. I was therefore eager to read their contributions and reflect on their intellectual labors in the process of writing and publishing in such an important cultural artifact of Black public life. Yet, nestled between news about ongoing domestic and foreign political and military news, works of didactic fiction—poems, short stories, and serialized novels—that graced the pages of the *Recorder*, and the short ads posting about a wide variety of services, were a growing number of these pleas for information seeking to trace the whereabouts of lost loved ones. They were testimonies of love, loss, grief, and hope.

I wrote and published the book on Black female intellectuals in early 2023.⁴ Yet, these Information Wanted notices published in the *Recorder* lingered as a haunting reminder of how formerly enslaved people tried to piece their lives—and families—back together after generations of trauma caused by systems of white power and privilege that legally defined them as property. Enslaved people in the United States were forever at the mercy of a market that traded people for profit. Yet, when the Civil War began in April 1861, ostensibly on the basis of Southern States, now the Confederacy, protecting State rights to determine their own institutions, Black and white abolitionists knew that this had to be about ending slavery. When President Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation was issued on January 1, 1863, declaring all enslaved people held in states currently in rebellion against the Union, as “thenceforward, and forever free,” it helped determine the rest of the course of the war, resulting in Union victory in April 1865. The 13th Amendment, outlawing slavery in the United States, was formally ratified in December of that year.⁵ Yet, while Federal political structures were progressing to ensure enslaved people had legal freedom at the very least, formerly enslaved people acted themselves to recover some of what was left of their intimate personal lives. The emotional lives of many had been left in tatters owing to the viciousness of the pernicious systems of racial slavery that had dominated the political, economic, and cultural systems of the United States since its founding. It is the Information Wanted notices published in the *Recorder* that this article will focus upon as indicative of one of means through which the AME used the ideal of the “family” to engender positive images for Blacks themselves, but also to dispel the commonly held myths of white Americans that the African American population—particularly the formerly enslaved—were ignorant and immoral. More pertinent to this article however is to explore how formerly enslaved people used these notices as a public forum to narrate, and begin to make sense of, their own stories of love, loss, and longing. Far from reflecting on their own claims to morality, African Americans, through such notices, were suggesting that white southerners should be reckoning with their own conscience, both morally and spiritually, for the heartache and traumas of slavery that they had caused, most especially through the domestic slave trade.

The Black Press and the Search for Missing Family Members

The closing of the transatlantic slave trade by the United States government in 1808 combined with the inexorable push westward from the early 1800s onward and the expansion of antebellum slavery gave rise to the horrors of the domestic slave trade—enslaved men, women, and children sold from

the Upper South to the slave markets of places such as New Orleans. Historian, Mike Tadman has argued that between 1820 and 1860 the trade averaged each decade, some 200,000 slaves, 10 percent of the slave population from the Upper South.⁶ While with local sales, family and kinship groups might remain together, or at least, as scholars such as Emily West have documented, negotiate the barriers of living on separate plantations, with the interregional trade it was quite a different story.⁷ With different criteria of trading categories, including children from around eight years old to their mid-teens, mothers with offspring, young females in early womanhood, and prime adult males, the trade quickly translated itself, as Tadman asserts, “into a traffic in fragmented families.”⁸ The emotional costs of this trade for the families of the enslaved are unimaginable: subject to the ravages of a burgeoning market in human beings, the effect on their family life was devastating.

As Heather Andrea Williams notes, these Information Wanted notices were published in several Black print publications during the closing years of the Civil War and thereafter, including more secular newspapers such as *The Black Republican* and the *Colored American*. These Southern newspapers were short-lived however with the former only published in 1865 and the latter for three years from 1865 to 1868. However, alongside these were Black Church-sponsored publications, including the *Southwestern Christian Advocate*, the *Star of Zion*, and the *Recorder*. As Williams points out, it was these Church-based newspapers, especially the *Christian Recorder* and *Southwestern Christian Advocate* “that carried many more ads than all of the others,” and also had more reach, with the *Recorder* being increasingly accessible in the Southern states after the Civil War and into Reconstruction.⁹ Historian Michael Johnson asserts that, “From 1861 through 1870, the *Recorder* carried a total of 268 such advertisements for missing family members,” yet this figure includes those who had suffered wartime dislocation from their loved ones; it also includes notices requesting information about absent family members who had gone missing in the post-Civil War era.¹⁰ Based on my own calculations there are at least 180 notices between the years that are specified by Johnson that speak directly to familial separation caused by the sale of at least one family member, if not more, during the primary years of the domestic slave trade. It is these notices, specifically talking to separation via sale, that form the basis of the discussion in this piece.

Thanks to scholars such as Eric Gardner and his exhaustive research on the *Recorder* we are able to better understand the importance of this publication to the history and culture of nineteenth-century Black print culture and its readership which was mostly African American.¹¹ This weekly newspaper had been established in Philadelphia by the Book Concern of the AME in 1852, an initiative started in 1817 as the first African American publishing company. As Frances Smith Foster has argued, the creation of the AME Book Concern was part of a larger African American print culture serving a fundamental purpose “in constructing African America, in ensuring the protection and progress of the ‘race’ or the ‘nation’ ... for reconstructing individual and group definitions and for advocating behaviors and philosophies that were positive and purposeful.”¹² One of the central missions of the AME Book Concern then was to promote ideals of morality, self-help, and racial uplift through its publications, most notably the *Recorder*. As Jean Lee Cole argues, the *Recorder*’s origins and subsequent production from 1852 onward was always an organ of a northern Black elite that “sought to raise the masses to its own social and cultural level” through a program of racial uplift.¹³ The *Recorder* was mindful of the special place that the AME Church had been accorded as “an instrument of God’s providence.” Thus, it was keen to provide examples of positive images of Black life and culture in order to emphasize that ideals of civility, respectability, and morality were at the center of its mission to elevate all of its readers, including enslaved people.

The *Christian Recorder* and Idealizations of the Black Family

One of the central discourses threaded throughout the *Recorder* during the Civil War era into Reconstruction and beyond was the idealization of the African American family as the center of

religious life. Antebellum idealizations of domesticity and the home in relation to raising Christian children, popularized by white authors such as Horace Bushnell, and Catharine Beecher Stowe, were also adopted to varying degrees by the AME.¹⁴ As Julius H. Bailey has argued, although the AME Church hierarchy debated the meaning of such terms and their place within the sermons they preached, “most agreed ... that family and home life and the effects on children held the key for a prosperous future for the African American race and the church.”¹⁵ The publication, under Elisha Weaver’s editorship (1862–1868) gave space to a regular column, “The Family Circle,” which, along with many other pieces published by the *Recorder* during this era, presented the African American home to be one consisting of two-parents imbued with a Protestant devotion to a Christian God that would dutifully be imparted to the children of the household through their parents. This ideal, the *Recorder* hoped, would provide the model which all African Americans—North and South; rich and poor; formerly enslaved or free—would emulate.

In November 1866 for example, the publication ran a piece titled, “Family Ties the Life of Nations,” which celebrated the family as *the* “social unit: not the man alone, as the head of the family; not the man or woman separately; not the children as the hope of the future, but the man, his wife, and the children of their union form the social unit.” This belief, the piece continued, “lies at the basis of all true social relations.” Several other pieces in the *Recorder* contributed to this discourse of the family through its idealization of its nuclear form and the positive good that would come of this.¹⁶ A poem appearing in February 1867 represented the family as a book where “the children are the leaves/the parents are the cover.” The verse went on to picture images of the family making memories together and warned the readers of the *Recorder* not to break the clasp of the book—love—which bound up the trust of the family, “lest all the leaves be scattered and lost.”¹⁷ There were frequent pieces run on the role of a wife, domestic training of young women, and the ideals of true and pious womanhood: “With Christianity as the basis of all her principles, she should seek to develop the elements of her womanhood by becoming useful.” In case men should feel disregarded in their role as fathers there were also pieces concerning their role in training their sons to be useful and productive members of society. Particular lessons were thus imparted through the pages of the *Recorder* to each member of the family in order that the various roles worked harmoniously together to make an effective whole. As the *Recorder* reminded its readers, “There is no place like a happy home.”¹⁸

The AME church and the editors of the *Recorder* were explicitly aware that for many Black families such idealized portraits of familial life were largely out of reach, wherever they lived, but particularly for the formerly enslaved whose families had been subject to the ravages of the domestic slave trade. Yet they were hopeful that discourses of home and hearth would “spur on southern blacks in their efforts to stabilize their family lives,” seeking lost family members out successfully so that once found “the domestic religious life of southerners could eventually mirror that of [white] Victorian family life.”¹⁹ The first notices searching for lost family members appeared in a scattered and haphazard fashion in the wake of Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation in January 1863. By late 1865 they had become a standard feature of the *Recorder*, nestled in between serialized fiction, short anecdotes, morality tales, and news of baptisms, marriages, and deaths.²⁰ Although, according to the *Recorder*’s agenda, these notices were a step in the right direction for the formerly enslaved in seeking to make their family lives more stable, the publication did note in February 1866 the large numbers of those “letters from persons in search of lost relatives who wish to advertise for them but do not send a single cent to pay for the notice.” The *Recorder*’s pecuniary concerns were evident here as they negotiated the tensions between promoting the ideals of protestant Christianity through the publication with the need, as they noted, to “pay the printer, the editor and the paper-maker.”²¹ The *Recorder* initially charged \$1.50 per month for advertisements in 1861, although by the late 1870s advertisements of a “special nature” were charged by the line at 23 cents. By the 1880s in a gamble to increase subscriptions the *Recorder* declared that as long as those that

placed the “Information Wanted” notices were subscribers to the newspaper there would be no charge. For non-subscribers however they were required to send “six months subscription, with notice, to insure insertion.”²²

Aside from these notices in the Black press however, there were few other means available to formerly enslaved people searching for lost loved ones. As Michael Johnson notes following the Civil War and formal emancipation, Freedpeople were not only bereft of particular family members but also a government agency to help reconnect with these lost family members.²³ The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, more commonly known as the Freedmen’s Bureau, was established in March 1865 to try to ensure a smooth transition from slavery to freedom for the formerly enslaved. While many bureau agents did what they could to reconnect families separated due to wartime dislocation or sale, typically using funds for transportation to reunite families who had been dispersed, their main preoccupation was to establish new labor systems based on contractual agreements between the employer (usually a former enslaver) and employees (the formerly enslaved, now Freedpeople). Lacking adequate funds and compassion for the formerly enslaved, coupled with, as William’s points out, bringing an abundance of “condescending arrogance as well as racism to the job” meant that the formerly enslaved were more likely to be left to navigate the recovery of lost family members themselves.²⁴ Noting the lack of coordinated and systematic support and, for many, the financial means to be able to pay for it, the formerly enslaved used Black newspapers like the *Christian Recorder* as a forum to narrate the traumas of slavery caused by the domestic slave trade. They began to do this before the war had ended and continued long after the formal abolition of slavery, these adverts finding a place in the paper’s editions as late as 1901.

Understanding and Exploring the Emotional Lives of the Past

In recent years there has been a move toward making more extensive use of these notices, alongside autobiographies of the formerly enslaved, and the Federal Works Progress Administration Narratives (WPA), to help us better understand the emotional and intimate lives of the enslaved. The most far-reaching and sensitive analysis of these sources to date includes the work of Heather Andrea Williams with her groundbreaking publication *Help Me to Find My People* (2012). While undertaken with great care and awareness of the traumatic intimacies she is exploring, Williams highlights the daunting nature of writing about the emotional histories of people in the past, reflecting on the challenges of “attempting to understand the emotions of people who lived several lifetimes ago.” Yet, as Williams and others understand, this is vital work, allowing us, as scholars, to develop a deeper empathy as we “listen closely to them, reading their words over and over, hearing their sighs and silences, wanting to pick up their meaning, wanting to know what they are telling me.”²⁵ Indeed, emotionality was central to enslaved people’s ability to survive, especially in the aftermath of sale and separation from dearly beloved members of one’s family. We can also consider the Information Wanted notices as a space for laying down one’s emotions—love, longing, loss—and claiming lost family members as part of individual and collective histories of not just enslavement, but one’s own ancestry.

As Katherine Burns argues in her recently published piece concerning trauma and emotion evidenced in the Information Wanted notices, emotions were “employed as a mechanism of power” in these notices making affective and effective claims about ancestry and “bearing witness” to the suffering of loved ones.²⁶ Furthermore, historian Beth R. Wilson, highlights how enslaved women in the moment of the sale of their child, conceived of “maternal emotion itself and participated in collective emotional practices to help her manage and communicate her feeling in the aftermath.”²⁷ Wilson’s article focuses on enslaved women—as mothers—concentrating on sources such as the autobiographies of the formerly enslaved, letters written by and for them, and the WPA narratives. Yet, an important point that Wilson makes, and central to the emotionality expressed in the

Information Wanted notices, is that enslaved mothers' conceptualization of emotion was "fundamentally formed out of the material realities of enslaved womanhood." And so, they responded to the sale of their children with emotions of both profound love and deep grief "the manifestation of love severed...[making] a powerful political statement about the strength of enslaved communities, the power of mother-child bonds, and the uniquely inhuman nature of this act."²⁸ This can be traced through each and every one of the Information Wanted notices, whether it was a mother seeking the whereabouts of her children, a sister desperate for news of her siblings, or a husband anxiously looking for his wife. They are each loaded with emotions of overwhelming love, deep longing, and intense sadness for all the years lost.

The reasons that formerly enslaved people placed these notices are clear in terms of their hopes of tracking down lost family members. However, the persistence of them long after the 13th Amendment outlawing slavery in the United States was finally ratified in December 1865, and suggests that through these notices the formerly enslaved were contributing to the collective story of racial slavery narrating tales of endless love, traumatic loss, and deep longing that would be told and retold through the years. As scholar of slavery in the United States, Edward Baptist has argued, a collective history of racial slavery by those who had endured was crafted through the generations, singular memories, and collective histories blurring as a multitude of formerly enslaved people and their descendants spoke their truths to power: "Voices spoke for more than a century, talking through nights in half-lit cabins of the stealing of one million, until the last person who had lived through it fell silent."²⁹ Baptist's source base here, framing his analysis concerning the crafting of African American collective memories, is the WPA narratives conducted in the mid-1930s across the American South with the formerly enslaved and their descendants. Yet, this extends to other sources concerning the vernacular histories of enslavement including the Information Wanted notices, pinpointing particular moments when the vernacular histories of trauma as the result of racial slavery were taking shape.

Through the Generations: Searching for the Lost But Not Forgotten

It was the legal precept, that slaves were property, which ordered the racial hierarchy in the Slave South and left enslaved peoples subject to the demands of the market. As the formerly enslaved James C. Pennington remarked, "The being of slavery, its soul and body, lives and moves in the chattel principle, the property principle, the bill of sale principle; the cart-whip, starvation, and nakedness, are its inevitable consequences." It was this prescript that, in Pennington's view, left the family histories of enslaved people in utter confusion, "leav[ing] him (sic) without a single record to which he may appeal in vindication of his character."³⁰ Using Mike Tadman estimates that the interregional trade in slaves sold over 10 percent of enslaved people from the Upper to the Lower South each decade, many of these traded peoples would have experienced a seismic rupture in their familial networks, with several bearing forced separation from immediate kin such as parents, spouses, or siblings.³¹ Evidently, this not only impacted those who were traded away, but also those who were left behind. As Herbert Gutman argued in his ground-breaking research on the Black family, the break-up of a marriage through the domestic slave trade in the antebellum South:

had a geometric effect upon the slaves involved. It directly affected a particular husband and wife, their children, their parents, and other kin nearby. It also was known to slave neighbors and to those who came to know the partners after the union's dissolution. Such awareness spread over space following sale, but, when children were involved, it also moved forward in time.³²

This temporal effect of the domestic slave trade is most starkly illustrated through the pleas for information found in the *Recorder* in the post-emancipation era. With the newfound reality of

freedom and a proclamation of dignity that went with it, the formally enslaved began the anxious yet hopeful task of attempting to reclaim lost family members. The waves of emotion for the formally enslaved who posted these notices, as they nervously waited for any news of their loved ones, if indeed, it ever came at all, is inconceivable. Imagine simply not knowing: the fate of one's beloved spouse who'd provided solace from the harsh brutalities of slavery; children born, loved, and nurtured if only, at times, for the briefest of moments; siblings who'd played together, sharing secrets and fears; or perhaps a parent—mother, father, or maybe both—missing, absent, lost. All part of fractured family networks as a consequence of the pernicious realities of a trade that sold people for profit.

Those searching were mothers like Charity Ward, who placed her advertisement in May 1866, seeking news of the whereabouts of three of her sons: Andrew, Ransom, and George, who were "taken from me and sold when they were quite small." Charity was also looking for her twins, "one called Martha Ann and the *other had no name*." The implication of this being that the twins were sold before their mother had chance to name them both.³³ Other notices were more detailed in their information, naming individual enslavers and traders who played a central part in the sale of family members. Hagar Outlaw was searching for her eight children sold from her in Wake Forest, North Carolina, to different traders or buyers: Cherry, Viny, Mills, Noah, John, Eli, Thomas Rembry, and Julia. Hagar's advertisement seeking news of her "dear ones," placed in March 1866, read like a charge sheet, detailing their names and those who purchased them, and if known, where they took them: her son, Noah, was taken to Alabama by Joseph Turner Hillsborough; while her daughter, Julia was carried to the New Orleans' market and sold by Dr Outlaw.³⁴ As Heather Andrea Williams points out this strategy may have been used by formerly enslaved people placing these notices in order to "counter the impermanence of their own public identities." She further adds that it might have brought "some degree of satisfaction to be able to lash out against those who had brought about their losses."³⁵ Yet, it should also be seen as an important form of speaking truth to power, reckoning with the brutal histories of the domestic slave trade by naming (and indeed shaming) those involved. Indeed, as Katherine Burns argues, through the act of naming enslavers and those who traded them, adverts such as Hagar Outlaw's "served to publicly condemn both [their] enslaver[s] and ... enslavement."³⁶ Hagar and others who posted comparable notices were wholly engaged in telling their truths about the devastating impact of the domestic slave trade on their lives and those who played a major part in causing such pain.

Others who were looking were husbands and fathers searching for their families whom they had been sold away from. These included men such as Lewis Wade, who wanted to "learn the whereabouts of his wife, Lucy, and three children ... Benjamin, Harriet, and Charlotte." Although Lucy and the children had been enslaved to a different enslaver than Lewis, presumably they had conducted an abroad marriage, where Lewis would visit the family on a Sunday and in the evenings, either through gaining permission and a pass from his own enslaver, William Thompson, or else in secrecy, hoping and praying that the clandestine visit would not be discovered by the patroller gangs or either respective enslaver. Lewis's advert was placed in July 1866, sixteen years after he had left his family in 1850 in Rockbridge County, Virginia. The readers of the *Recorder* were not given further information as to the conditions of Lewis's departure—sale, planter migration, or his escape. All that was revealed was that Lewis was now living in Canada—a refuge for enslaved people who had removed themselves from enslavers through self-liberation in the antebellum era—where he requested news of his missing family members to be sent.³⁷

As with Lewis, who had been separated from his family for over a decade, several of the notices spoke of the heartaches of long-term separations, caused by the sale of one or more family members, years before. Alfred Skinner was one such individual who ran a notice in the *Recorder* on the April 14, 1866, seeking information about his mother, Rebecca, a brother, Washington, and his seven sisters: Nancy, Keziah, Hester, Martha, Joanna, Catharine, and Griseilla Skinner. They had all been sold fourteen years before by Joshua Skinner of North Carolina to an enslaver by the name

Dr Urley who lived in South Carolina. Presumably Alfred had not heard from any of them since. Imagine fourteen years of separation and no means of contact. Fourteen years of not knowing a loved one's fate: had Dr Urley been a cruel enslaver? Perhaps he had sold them yet again, or divided them further, selling them in lots? Had Alfred's mother suffered under the weight of not being allowed to take Alfred too or leaving a lover or husband behind? Had his siblings found love, had children perhaps—what was their fate? Did his brother take sick, had his sisters survived? Personal, intimate, and heartbreaking questions that were as yet unanswered and unknowable. Other separations were even longer, occasionally marking a whole generation. This was certainly the case for Soph Dandridt, who placed her advert on July 7, 1866. Soph was sold from Queen Anne County, Maryland, twenty-five years previously. She was now seeking information about her parents, Samson and Clare King, two brothers—Littention and Joseph—and her sister, Lea, who'd she'd been forced to leave behind.³⁸ At times, lingering memories and hauntings of the past meant the figures were shadowy, less distinct. At times names and places were disremembered and fractured in terms of time; at other times the sale had been so long past and those sold so young that there was no way of piecing together a coherent story of their loss.

On June 18, 1870 a request for information was published in the *Recorder* for Emily Helms, "or if dead her heirs." Emily had been sold away from her mother, Matilda Whitworth, and father, Lewis Helms, when she was eleven years old, "some twenty-five years ago (about 1844)." The family had been enslaved in Nashville Tennessee at the time of Emily's sale to Mississippi. Now five years after emancipation and over two decades since her sale, attorney at law, William Fletcher, of Kalamazoo, Michigan, had been employed to seek information as to Emily's whereabouts. Which member of Emily's family was searching for her is not clear and perhaps Mr Fletcher had news of a legal matter for Emily or her descendants, hinted at by the number of times this notice ran, placed in each weekly edition of the *Recorder* from July 2 through November 26, 1870. Given the fee the *Recorder* charged, stating in 1867 that the cost of placing an advertisement "of a private nature" would be charged at "twelve and half cents per line of nine words," payable as cash in advance this would have been no small expense for the Helms's and most other Freedpeople who ran such notices in the postbellum world where Freedpeople had little spare income to spend.³⁹ The Helms's choice to employ an attorney as their conduit of information may also have been a practical decision to ensure any information regarding Emily was passed on to a fixed address. Through his status, Mr Fletcher might have been selected in order that it provided the Helms' family with a character reference, suggesting that there were respectable and upstanding people who believed in the law. What is certain in the notice however are the silences haunting the Helms and their descendants, as they searched for their missing daughter. Sold as an eleven-year-old child, the family were now trying to locate a thirty-six-year-old woman, whose last known location was somewhere in the State of Mississippi twenty-five years previously.⁴⁰

Other placed notices were pleas for information on the whereabouts of entire families: intimate links between and over generations left in tatters as enslavers prioritized dollars over paternalism, and slave traders serviced a rapidly growing market in chattel labor.⁴¹ Such notices were placed by women such as Martha Shepherd, who sought news of her mother, Virginia, her five siblings—Mary, Louisa, Mandy, Caroline, and William H.,—her uncle Paten and her two aunts: Dilsby Madison and Martha Young. As Martha explained through her brief commentary, the family members listed in the notice had all resided in Prince Edward County, Virginia. That was until Martha's mother and four of her siblings had been sold to a trader named Sam Jenkins at Prince Edward County Court House to location unknown and the family network had been subsequently set adrift.⁴² Mary Turmin sought news of her husband, Benjamin Harper and her daughter, Malinda. Yet she also hoped to hear of others including her mother-in-law, "Amy A. Cox, Rily Harper, Augusta and Willis Normond, Sarah Normond, Lucinda Freeman, Gracie A. Cox, Polly Mitchell, and Lizzie Harper, [all] relatives of my husband."⁴³

While many of these adverts were undoubtedly an immediate response to the actualities of freedom, the Information Wanted notices—searching for husbands, wives, children, siblings, and others lost through the domestic slave trade—persisted beyond the immediate post-Civil War years, stretching into the late 1860s and extending well into the 1870s and beyond. In May 1869 men like Mingo Chism of Iowa were still seeking information about lost family members, including his mother, Parthenia Chism, and his six siblings—Jackson, Green, Willis, Smith, Mary, and Phillis—who he was sold from in Missouri about eighteen years past.⁴⁴ In July 1870 the *Recorder* ran an advert on behalf of Moses Sissney, seeking information about her five sisters: Jennette, Eliza, Caroline, America, and Elizabeth; a brother, Harry; and her mother, Dinah Hickson. As she explained, despite the brevity of the placed notice, “They were sold from Liberty, Mo., over thirty years ago, and the last time I heard of them they were on Red River. They belonged to Andy Hickson, and were sold to a man named Francis Benware.”⁴⁵ Mingo and Moses’s notices were published so long after their initial separation from family members they must have lacked certainty over whether any of their relatives were still alive and a hopeless of ever finding them even if they were. The *Recorder* posted these notices as evidence that African Americans were continuing to strive for the family ideal—despite the impact that slavery had upon these cherished ties. Yet, posting these notices doubtless served other purposes for the formerly enslaved themselves in terms of working through the mental and psychological anguish that slavery and its consequences had caused them. Contributing to a collective discourse among African Americans in the post-Civil War period concerning their public expressions of grief, anger, and resentment toward racial slavery and its collaborators, Mingo Chism and Moses Sissney were setting down their truths, their stories, their sorrow, regardless of whether they found their missing family members.

Efforts to Aid the Search: AME Ministers and Small Tokens of Gratitude

Several of the notices searching for information ran several times in subsequent editions of the *Recorder* and many, including Moses Sissney’s notice, above requested that pastors of Southern churches read the notices to their congregations. Those who were seeking information were painfully aware of the limited numbers of the formerly enslaved who were able to read, and consequently they were reliant on ministers of the AME in the South, by 1870 numbering over 500, to communicate their pleas for help across the former slave states in the hope of recovering information about their lost family members. Julius H. Bailey has argued that by the early 1870s “a large majority of the AME church membership were former slaves.”⁴⁶ This gave Southern AME ministers the opportunity to stress the ideals of family at the core of their theological discourse, yet they were also encouraged by those who placed the notices and the *Recorder* itself to read them aloud to their congregations. Those placing the notices were desperate for them to be read in Black Churches across the South in the hope that a parishioner would either recognize themselves or the story being retold. As Michael P. Johnson asserts, this word-of-mouth strategy “grew out of quiet, unofficial grassroots efforts of freedpeople to help themselves.”⁴⁷ The hopeful individuals posting the announcements were reliant on these congregations to spread the word beyond the AME parishioners to family, friends, and associates, and that they, in turn, would tell others, serving to illustrate the acknowledged power of orality in a largely non-literate community. Although perhaps unaware of their contribution to what Edward Baptist has called the “vernacular memory of slavery,” requesting that these notices were dispersed across the South meant collective memories of slavery were being created, “showing who a people thought they were and how they got to be that way. They compose[d] it of their own rough earth and crooked timbers, their own everyday metaphors and experiences.”⁴⁸

Other notices offered a small reward for information about lost loved ones, a calculated cost on top of the fee charged by the *Recorder*, to encourage the readers to spread the word further or perhaps ask

more questions. Notices such as the one placed on April 14, 1866 with no name supplied offered “payment for [their] trouble of informing me” of the whereabouts of their five children: Mary, Daniel, William, Turner, and Annie Cooper. Their last known location was Mississippi just before the Battle of Bull Run, when their enslavers, Andrew J. Clark and John W. Baker, had removed them from Fauquier County, Virginia. This notice also requested that ministers in Mississippi “inform their congregations of this notice.”⁴⁹ Another such notice was posted in September 1866 by Duff Green promising a reward of \$50, a rather substantial sum for a Freedperson, for any information relating to his daughter, Elsie, “who was sold in Columbus, Georgia, in 1864, to a Mr. Garret.”⁵⁰

Vernacular Histories of Enslavement and the Recorder’s Information Wanted Notices

Edward Baptist has remarked on the common vernacular linking the WPA narratives, taken down in the late 1930s from the formerly enslaved, and the longer published narratives of enslaved men and women of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He argues that words such as *stolen* were employed in both sets of sources and formed part of a common collective vernacular among the enslaved and later Freedpeople and subsequent descendants to articulate their feelings on antebellum slavery and the domestic slave trade:

[D]espite the fact that the 1930s interviews came chronologically later, they are our best source for the pre-emancipation nature and creation of this critique. They provide a window on antebellum ways of remembering as well as a look at the probable roots of much of the literary production by 19th-century fugitives who stole themselves.⁵¹

Yet, the notices in the *Recorder* must also contribute to this collective vernacular. There were certainly closer in time to the end of racial slavery in 1865 than the 1930s interviews and therefore can also be considered as a crucial source to consider formally enslaved people’s condemnation and critique of the domestic slave trade and its impact on them as individuals and as a collective people.

Similar to the WPAs and longer published slave narratives, the tone that several of the Information Wanted notices were written in spoke to the horrors of the domestic slave trade and racial slavery *per se* through the eyes of those who had suffered it. Verbs such as *taken* and *owned* were used throughout the notices confirming the lack of choice individuals had over their lives. For example, Amanda Wilson placed a notice in August 1865 seeking information as to the whereabouts of her mother, Emily Wilson. Emily had been enslaved to John K. Wilson in Montgomery, Tennessee. However, in 1856, “she was sold and *taken* to Mississippi.” Amanda was also looking for her two sisters, Eveline and Harriet, who were removed to Kentucky and Texas respectively in the same year that their mother was taken. In March 1866, Elizabeth Williams was searching for her four children: Lydia, William, Allen, and Parker. They had all been enslaved, Elizabeth included, by John Petty, of Franklin County, Tennessee, until she was sold to Marshal Stroud in 1841. Around 1853, Elizabeth was “*taken* to Arkansas ... never see[ing] the above-named children since.” Elizabeth’s notice was particularly candid in her assessment of slavery and the heartbreak it had caused, commenting in her closing lines that: “Any information given concerning them, however, will be very gratefully received by one *whose love for her children survives the bitterness and hardships of many long years spent in slavery.*”⁵² Information Wanted notices such as those posted by Lucinda Reynolds and Catharine Mason inserted inverted commas over words such as *property*, to further emphasize the irrationality of a market that traded in people and to mark their contempt for such a system.⁵³

Serialized Fictions Reflecting Realities: Frances E.W. Harper's *Minnie's Sacrifice*

As the search for lost loved ones began to filter onto the pages of the *Recorder* in the closing years of the Civil War there were also other more literary examples drawn from the pages of this publication that sought to reflect on the silenced traumatic past of slavery and articulate the pain and sorrow of lost and reclaiming loves. For the *Recorder* these pieces placed family at the center of the story and perhaps more importantly, focused on the significance of family stability and faithfulness, lest tragedy should occur as a result of telling untruths. One such example is the serialization of Frances E. W. Harper's *Minnie's Sacrifice* in the pages of the *Recorder* over a seventh month period beginning in March 1869. Rediscovered in the early 1990s by literary scholar Frances Smith Foster, along with two other of Harper's novels, *Sowing and Reaping*, serialized in the *Recorder* from early August 1876, and *Trial and Triumph* running from October 4, 1888, these earlier publications, as Smith Foster opines, meant that Harper, who "long been recognized as the most popular African American poet prior to Paul Laurence Dunbar ... [can] now claim her place as a prolific and innovative prose pioneer as well."⁵⁴

Harper was born into a free Black family in Maryland, a slave state, on September 24, 1825. Thus, she occupied a precarious position as an African American woman in a slave state making up part of the free colored minority of the antebellum Upper South. Orphaned by the time she was three years old, her maternal uncle, William Watkins and his wife, Henrietta raised Harper as their own. William Watkins was a passionate abolitionist and a major influence on Harper's early life, as Melba Joyce Boyd has argued: "her guardian-uncle became her father, her teacher, and political mentor. Known for his radical antislavery speeches and incendiary essays.... [he] taught his outspoken racial pride and independence at his Academy for Negro Youth."⁵⁵ Harper attended Watkins's Academy where her love of literature and writing flourished. By the mid-1850s she had delivered her first lectures on the wrongs of slavery and had confirmed herself as an antislavery activist, orator, and writer.

Previous to her publication of *Minnie's Sacrifice*, Harper had contributed just one other short literary story to the *Recorder* concerning the importance of poetry in April 1873. However, the weekly publication often ran notices publicizing Harper's lectures in Philadelphia during the early years of Reconstruction. For example, in the *Recorder's* announcement of her lecture at Union Church on July 17, 1866, the publication defined her as a "distinguished Lecturess (sic) and great thinker."⁵⁶ On the January 26, 1867 the paper announced her upcoming "new and eloquent lecture on 'National Salvation.'" Readers were urged to spend the 35 cents ticket cost to see her speak.⁵⁷ The serialization of her novel in March 1869 then was much anticipated. The *Recorder* announced its pending publication by congratulating its readers "on making this announcement [for] as a writer, whether of prose or poetry, Mrs. Harper stands foremost of all the colored women of our day."⁵⁸

The protagonists of *Minnie's Sacrifice*, Minnie and Louis, are both born into slavery, being the biracial children of respective slaveholding fathers and enslaved mothers, Ellen and Agnes. Both children are, as one of the white characters attests to "just as white as I am." Minnie bears the mistresses' hatred for being the child of her husband, St. Pierre Le Grange, and her enslaved mother, Ellen. She is removed from the household, Le Grange informing his wife, Georgietta, that he has sold five-year-old Minnie to a trader, "Who thought the child so beautiful ... that he gave him five hundred dollars for her."⁵⁹ In actuality however Le Grange had sent Minnie North, to Pennsylvania, where she lived with the Quaker family, Thomas and Anna Carpenter. Louis is the newborn son of favored enslaved woman, Agnes, who dies in childbirth. Following her death, Louis is adopted by his father, his mother's enslaver, Bernard Le Croix. This adoption is at the insistence of his only and beloved daughter, Camilla, whose own mother, Le Croix's wife, had died when she was six years old. While Le Croix is initially reluctant to accede to his daughter's wishes, he eventually relents: "the plan [of adoption] rather suited him; for then he could care for him as a son, without acknowledging the relationship."⁶⁰

Both Minnie and Louis grow up unaware of their racial heritage and consequently develop decidedly different attitudes to the institution of slavery and the Black race: Minnie being raised by Quakers in the North develops an anti-slavery perspective and helps the Carpenter's harbor enslaved people who had self-liberated; Louis, on the other hand, raised by a southern enslaver as his adopted son, is decidedly pro-slavery and chooses to fight for the Confederacy when the Civil War breaks out. Despite their differing perspectives they meet and fall in love. When their true parentage is revealed, Louis declares that he "can never raise a hand against my own race," deserting the Confederate army to escape to Union lines and find refuge in the North. Meanwhile Minnie, on finding out that she "was colored ... made up my mind ... that I would live out my own individuality and do for my race, as a colored woman, what I could never accomplish as a white woman."⁶¹

There are several important themes that run through *Minnie's Sacrifice*, not least the call for harmony in light of Reconstruction debates and dissension concerning Black citizenship and suffrage. One of the most relevant and timely messages of Harper's novel however, given that the pages of the *Recorder* also gave copious column inches over to the sanctity of the family that sat alongside Information Wanted notices, was the issue of the knowledge of one's own family history. Both Minnie and Louis are separated from their racial heritage from birth. The fate of their own lives and that of their enslaved relatives represents an absence in their histories and as such they are unable to piece together their genealogy due to the fractures in their family records. Although Minnie and Louis are both shielded from the brutal realities of Southern slavery through their early adoption into white society, the truth of their birth and the consequent knowledge of their actual families are silenced. Their young lives are subject to a fabricated history, much like Walter Johnson's analysis of the ways in which people were turned into products via the domestic slave trade, "detached from their pasts and stripped of their identities."⁶² While not on the same agonizing terms of the familial separations forced through the domestic slave trade, one of the points Harper is making in *Minnie's Sacrifice* concerning broken bloodlines and silenced histories is central to the Information Wanted notices also appearing in the *Recorder* and the histories of the domestic slave trade in the United States.

While the silences of racial heritage are central to Harper's novel, Minnie's discovery of her true racial heritage is initially fraught with tension. Her Black mother, Ellen, eventually locates her in the northern home she had been secretly sent to after several years of Ellen believing she had been sold to a trader. She is overjoyed at finding her "dear, darling, long-lost child." Yet, Minnie is left aghast at this sudden and unexpected circumstance, responding to Carrie, her friend who questions who the woman is: "She says that she is my mother, my long-lost mother." Carrie scoffs at this assertion, calling it out as a ludicrous claim and seeking reassurance from Minnie that this cannot be true: "She can't be your mother. Why don't you see, she is colored."⁶³ Despite her initial distress, Minnie is eventually reconciled to her racial ancestry and chooses to marry Louis, also a man of biracial descent whose complicated ancestry is woven into Harper's story. In the aftermath of the Civil War, they choose to dedicate their lives to supporting the formerly enslaved in the former Confederacy, where Minnie takes on the role of teacher in a freedmen's school. It is here she meets her tragic fate, presumably killed by white Southern vigilantes for her role in the work of racial uplift.

Although Minnie eventually declares her steadfast commitment to supporting those of her mother's race, she is clearly initially shaken by the revelation that her assumed racial and class identity has been a lie. Literary scholar Crystal S. Donker argues that an alternative reading of Harper's serialized *Recorder* novel is that it was a direct response to the Information Wanted notices published in the same newspaper. When Ellen seeks the whereabouts of Minnie, she locates her far removed from her ancestral ties and socially distinct from a woman of Ellen's status, enslaved and of African descent. Thus, Donker argues that *Minnie's Sacrifice* asks the deeply complex and complicated question in response to the Information Wanted notices of "[w]hat happens when the one is sought does not want to be found."⁶⁴ As she further points out, numerous other novels written by

African American authors in the post-emancipation era and into the late 1890s frequently reminded their readers that “reunion is an anxious and heavily fraught endeavor, not a happy one.”⁶⁵

Inverting the African American spiritual tradition of call-and-response, Donker develops an innovative analysis positioning the Information Wanted notices published in the *Recorder* as a collective “call,” “stand[ing] for itself and related and adjacent others,” yet usually bereft of a response, at least within subsequent editions of the newspaper.⁶⁶ In turn, Donker positions Harper’s *Minnie’s Sacrifice* as “response” to this quest for family reunion, highlighting the tense nature of such a search and the dangerous violence still prevalent against Black people and reunion of their families. Through *Minnie’s Sacrifice*, Doner suggests that Harper encourages the formerly enslaved as Freedpeople to engage in the work of uplift through a focus on labor for their own benefit, rather than for the profit of others. As Donker notes: “Whereas for the formerly enslaved labor was the principal source of displeasure and inequality in Black life, the work of uplift requires labor to achieve the peace, equality, dignity, and prosperity that many saw as a right of citizenship.”⁶⁷ Harper’s protagonist, Minnie, sacrifices her life working for racial uplift through the labors of education. Louis, in turn, vows to remain in the South after Minnie’s death, to do the vital work of bringing peace to the region through his “labors of love and faith.”⁶⁸

As I have explored elsewhere, the work of racial uplift was central to the intellectual labors of many Black women in the nineteenth century, including Harper.⁶⁹ These included the first Black female political writer in the United States, Maria W. Stewart, the first Black woman to assume the position of editor of a newspaper in North America, *The Provincial Freeman*, Mary Ann Shadd Cary, and others that were published in the *Recorder* during the American Civil War, including Edmonia G. Highgate and Julia C. Collins. Themes of self-help and dignity in labor were key to these women’s writings, as they were to Harper’s own work. At the center of such subjects was the overarching theme of racial uplift, even more important in the wake of their legal freedom in 1865 and the subsequent Reconstruction Amendments that provided those of African descent with at least the legal rights of citizenship and civil justice. *Minnie’s Sacrifice* certainly would have been grounded in such ideals, and more than likely as a response, in part, to the Information Wanted notices that filled the pages of the *Recorder*. Yet, although Harper’s central message of racial uplift through labor was heard in *Minnie’s Sacrifice*, the Information Wanted notices did not stop “calling” for news of dearly departed loved ones, lost in slavery. These “calls” persisted long after *Minnie’s Sacrifice* was published and continued to haunt the pages of the *Recorder* for several generations.

“And I am Happy”: The Hopes and Tragedies of Familial Reunion in Julia C. Collins’s *Curse of Caste*⁷⁰

Harper’s serialized novel of 1869 was not the first episodic publication in the *Recorder* during this early post-Civil War era that spoke to the traumas of broken bloodlines and its consequences for the stability of the family. Julia C. Collins’s *The Curse of Caste; or The Slave Bride* was published in the *Recorder* between February 25 and September 23, 1865, providing a narrative that resonated deeply with the Information Wanted notices. As the story reached its conclusions however, Collins’s untimely death from tuberculosis in November 1865 meant the readers of *Recorder* were left with an unexpected and unresolved silence over how the story ended.⁷¹ Unlike Harper, who by the 1860s was a known and celebrated campaigner for Black civil rights, Collins died relatively unknown and perhaps at the beginning of a greater intellectual journey. Indeed, as Veta Smith Tucker points out, “When Collins died ... just 19 months after her publishing debut—her voice was silenced for more than a century.”⁷² Collins had been a regular contributor to the *Recorder* from April 1864 when she penned a short essay on “Mental Improvement.” Following this she

wrote on a variety of subjects including: "School Teaching," "Intelligent Women," "Originality of Ideas," "Life is Earnest," and "Memory and Imagination," always with a didactic tone and moral instruction concerning racial uplift, the dignity of the African American, and lessons of self-help. Historian Mitch Kachun, who rediscovered Collins' writings in the archives, argued in 2006 that, "Until quite recently ... most people, including leading scholars in the field, had never heard of Julia C. Collins, let alone incorporated her work into our understanding of Black literary traditions." Kachun puts her "erstwhile invisibility" down to, in part, the incomplete nature of the novel and the limited nature of publication options for African Americans of this era.⁷³ Although Kachun has managed to piece various elements of Collins's personal history together still, "some of the basic questions about her life remain unanswered," including the location of her birth, whether she was born enslaved or free, her ancestral heritage, and when and where she received her education.⁷⁴ Jean Lee Cole argues that Collins was evidently part of a Northern Black elite evidenced by her "narratorial distance from the enslaved and servant characters" in *The Curse of Caste*, yet the reality of Collins's known biography mirrors the Information Wanted notices where only fragments of an individual's past lives are laid out, with the complex genealogical contours of Collins' life remaining unknown and unknowable.⁷⁵

The Curse of Caste had largely been forgotten about as an important contribution to the pages of the *Recorder* until scholars such as Mitch Kachun recovered Collins's work. Several literary specialists have subsequently explored Collins's novel and her essays in the *Recorder* as a significant body of writing by a Black woman in the Civil War era. The serialized novel revolves around Claire Neville, the daughter of an enslaved biracial woman, Lina, and Richard Tracy, the son of Colonel Frank Tracy, a New Orleans enslaver. The young couple meet and fall in love aboard a riverboat back to Mississippi, neither of them aware of Lina's status, until Lina's enslaver (and father) sells her to Colonel Tracey. Richard subsequently purchases and emancipates her. The couple then flee to Connecticut, marry, and live out six months here in marital harmony, with their "competent colored ... housekeeper" Juno.⁷⁶ Disaster ensues when Richard returns to New Orleans to try and make peace with his father, who disinherits and shoots him. With his prolonged absence and having not heard from him, Lina assumes Richard has forsaken her, gives birth to her baby daughter, and then dies, "living long enough to kiss and bless her babe, and to whisper in the ear of Juno to call her Claire Neville Tracey."⁷⁷

Lost letters and deceitful friends mean Richard is doubly bereft when he learns of Lina's death and the supposed death of his baby daughter. The Tracy household is haunted by the filicidal conflict between father and son, and a distraught and bereaved Richard flees to Europe. Claire meanwhile grows up under the guardianship of the housekeeper, Juno, who swears herself to secrecy regarding her young ward's parentage. After she graduates from a Northern seminary however, Claire assumes the position of governess to the Tracy family of New Orleans, unaware of the ties that already bind them together. This is where the family secrets begin to unravel. Richard plans to reunite with Claire, traveling to New Orleans to meet with his daughter and reveal the truth about her parentage and birth, while Colonel Tracy is also ready to welcome his son back. Yet it is there the story ends. The *Recorder* announced in its last September edition of 1865 that Mrs Julia C. Collins was reported as suffering from an illness. Rather ominously the *Recorder* hoped that "her sickness is not unto death," wishing her "a speedy return to health and the continuation of her beautiful story."⁷⁸ The newspaper broke the news in mid-December that Mrs Collins had died on November 25, consoling its readers on their disappointment on "hearing that they are to be deprived of the pleasure of reading the balance of the beautiful story which she was writing for our paper."⁷⁹ Perhaps as life mirrors art, the unfinished and unresolved histories of the fictional Claire Neville Tracey and her biracial heritage, were reflected in the thousands of Information Wanted notices published in the *Recorder* alongside Collins's serialized novel. As scholar of English, Edlie Wong asserts, through Claire's unraveling of her complicated ancestry, "Collins explores the psychic significance of knowing

one's personal and family histories for those in the generation immediately after slavery."⁸⁰ In the process she was telling the truths of countless African American families who were attempting to piece together shattered and fragmented family pasts, the past forever haunting the present, the past never dead, never concluded.

Much more than the untimely death of the author however, Collins' novel was particularly prescient in its focus. It voiced several of the themes that troubled African Americans in the wake of freedom concerning forgotten histories and silenced voices. When Colonel Frank Tracy rebukes his son, Richard, for declaring his love for the enslaved Lina, he declares his intention to disinherit his son, not only from the family's wealth, but also from their name: "your name shall be as that of one who slept a century in his tomb, uncared for and forgotten."⁸¹ Collins here is undoubtedly drawing parallels to the histories of enslaved peoples—the painful hauntings of violent brutality, emotional longing, unbearable suffering, and quiet and persistent grief that lay in a graveyard of disremembered memories which others were keen to forget. Collins herself remarked in her essay on "Memory and Imagination," on the ways in which the "ghost-haunted chambers of the brain...[bring] out the skeleton we have hidden and fain would forget." While memory could be kind and gentle, Collins reminded her readers that recollections of the past were not always welcomed:

[O]ut of these chambers come troops of spirits with dark, foreboding aspects, to act over again some dark scene in life's drama, some act of the recollection of which we are vainly seeking to bury in oblivion; but they are engraved on the tablet of memory, and, while reason remains shall haunt our visions and the skeleton remains in the far away corner of the brain to be reproduced perhaps in our brightest hours, or happiest moments.⁸²

As Wong has argued in her piece relating to Collins's work and its links to memory and forgetting, "Far from a dead object, memory, especially of grief and pain, is very much a living property that has the power to shape the future in its own image."⁸³ The *dark scene in life's drama* that Collins refers to can also be found in the Information Wanted notices in the *Recorder* at the point of sale and subsequent separation. These notices pointed to historical actors bereft of the agency in "that moment"—the point of sale—as enslaved people to prevent the stark realities and realization of separation. These notices posted sometimes generations later acted as way to reclaim that agency and voice the everyday traumas of racial slavery in the American South: now hear my story, hear the uncared for and forgotten history of a peoples.

Collins's novel also raises questions, as Harper's *Minnie's Sacrifice* does, about the fractured nature of African American family history. The abuses of power and privilege that run through the accounts of the formerly enslaved and their descendants concerning their kinship ties and enslavers and traders complete disregard for this are echoed in these novels. The silenced (often figuratively and literally dead) enslaved mothers, their orphaned biracial (but unknowing) children, and the patriarchal dictates that govern the racial hierarchy of the slaveholding South that feature in both *Minnie's Sacrifice* and *The Curse of Caste* should be read as a knowing commentary on the traumatic legacy that southern slavery and the domestic slave trade had left Freedpeople in, in the wake of emancipation. Many lost family members proved to be untraceable, despite the notices being republished time, and again in countless editions of the *Recorder*. There is a sparse reference in a notice placed by Robert Buckner in July 1867 that he had located one of his children—Reuben—in Chillicothe, Ohio, thanks to a previous notice in February of that year. Yet Robert was still seeking news of his daughter, Mary, and two other sons, George and Robert R. Wilford who he had not located yet.⁸⁴ As Crystal Donker argues, "the absence of a response to the ads' calls for familial union meant that readers [of the *Recorder* found themselves in an unfinished loop."⁸⁵ The *Recorder* kept taking these notices well into the 1870s and beyond, despite their evident lack of success in terms of response in the pages of the newspaper itself. Perhaps this was the *Recorder's* way to

show continued Christian compassion and empathy to Freedpeople and their efforts to locate family members who had been lost in slavery. It also provided evidence to readers of the *Recorder* that despite the horrors of slavery and all they had endured, that Freedpeople could now become citizens of the nation, guided by morals of decency, virtue, and integrity that the “family” was the cornerstone of. Yet, long after the slow and gradual demise of racial slavery and the tyranny of racial violence and discrimination against African Americans through Reconstruction on into Jim Crow and beyond, tales of reunification, such as Robert Buckner’s sat alongside countless other recollections of still-absent kin, crafting a collective memory of slavery and its aftermath which so often went unanswered.

Conclusion

In 2021, at the age of 64, my father found his birth mother and five full siblings after a lifetime of searching. He had been adopted at birth in 1957. His biological mother had been, at the time of conception, an unwed twenty-three-year-old Southern Irish Catholic. The perverted morality of the Catholic Church at the time and the corresponding community judgment of unwed mothers as “fallen women” was a cross she could not bear. She left for a year, ostensibly for a nursing training course in Wales, gave birth to a baby boy, and then made the huge sacrifice of giving him up for adoption. She returned to Dublin and shortly after married the father of this “lost” baby. She went on to build a family with him. Despite numerous barriers along the way, including legislation that infringed my father’s right to view his birth record and numerous false starts, the wonder of ancestry databases, active and relevant users on these sites, and DNA testing resulted in a strange and emotionally charged Zoom meeting with his youngest sibling and only sister in the middle of the global pandemic. Since then, full family reunions have taken place—with his biological mother and several siblings—accompanied by searching questions and solemn contemplation of how different life could have been. Yet, at the heart of all of this is the feeling of gratefulness and a certain sense of peace at having found each other again.

Turning the clock back over 120 years to 1901 and returning to the focus of this article, formerly enslaved people and their descendants were still seeking lost family members through the pages of the *Recorder*. This was over thirty-five years after the first notices began to appear in this Black print newspaper. The terms of the search had changed and the framing of the language perhaps, but the grief over the unknown and the trauma of lost generations remained, haunting the pages of this publication even after the turn of the century. Individuals such as Mary Delaney and Jerry Williams were still hopeful of securing news of “my people,” in 1901. In Mary’s case, her mother, Sicler Finlay, had been sold from her and Mary’s four siblings to Arkansas “when she could but crawl.” Mary was subsequently sold at the age of three years old and she “never saw any of my people [again].” Jerry Williams was sold in Richmond, Virginia and taken to Mississippi, separating him from his parents, Jerry and Sophia Thompson, his two sisters, Sally and Mary, and two brothers, Washington and Samuel.⁸⁶ Heather Andrea Williams argues that although these notices still detailed similar information to those published some three or four decades earlier this change of language to “my people” made a “broader possessive claim.” Williams contends that the use of this more collective term perhaps, “revealed a desire to connect to anyone with a common ancestry ... an assertion of a claim of having *had* people.”⁸⁷

Of course, my father’s search for his lost family is not comparable to those who endured the traumas of racial slavery in the nineteenth century, whose families were torn apart through sale. The Information Wanted notices from several newspapers of the era are now accessible, supported by navigable databases such as the “The Lost Friends: Advertisements from the Southwestern Christian Advocates,” at the Historic New Orleans Collection and “The Last Seen: Finding Family After Slavery” project.⁸⁸ Such resources are a valuable tool for scholars interested in

family histories of enslaved people and Freedpeople and for descendants of these families piecing together their own ancestral roots. Yet for those searching at the time, they did not have access to records of birth, databases, and DNA testing that might have successfully connected genealogies of origin and provided links to a familial past. And yet, my father's his birth mother was forced to give him up for adoption owing to deeply patriarchal religious and governmental structures that worked together to demonize certain sectors of its population when they did not *conform* to particular strict moral codes. When I offered to help my father search, as an academic interested in family history who was experienced in using databases of family records, although admittedly never my own, I named the folder on my PC, "Dad – Missing Piece of the Jigsaw." But what if this jigsaw piece did not fit neatly into place? What if the edges were rough and a little jagged or coarse? I often reminded him that his mother may not want to be found. I often worried (to myself, never vocally to my father) over whether he was conceived as a result of rape and if he found her, would this relive the trauma of this moment and its aftermath. But he persisted as he had to know where he came from, who his people were.

As Crystal Donker has highlighted in her "Songs of Reunion," discussed earlier in this piece, finding family is complex and fraught with emotion, yet this does not mean it is not worth doing. Knowing where you came from can help you in the journey moving forward, whatever the cost, both financially and emotionally. And so, it was with the formerly enslaved, whose notices ran for years after the Civil War, always with a persistent hope that someone might know something. And years later, their descendants, whose desire to know "my people" evidently still retained a deep emotional resonance long after slavery had passed. People and places not forgotten or never known, the psychic turmoil and painful traumas of the domestic slave trade, and the heartbreak it caused to African American families were evidenced through the notices placed in the *Recorder*. While this AME publication was grounded in ideals of morality, piety, and spiritual salvation, filtered through idealized representations of the family, it became a key facilitator in supporting formerly enslaved people and their descendants to meaningful construct narratives of eternal love, traumatic loss, heartfelt grief, and immense sorrow. In the process, they were contributing to a collective memory of slavery and the domestic slave trade articulated in their own words with their own truths.

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Notes

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31. Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves*, 147.
32. Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Vintage Press, 1976), 147–48.
33. CR, 5 May 1866, accessed via *Accessible Archives*, <https://www.accessible.com/> (3 July 2017), emphasis added.
34. CR, 31 March 1866, accessed via *Accessible Archives*, <https://www.accessible.com/> (5 July 2017).
35. Williams, *Help Me to Find My People*, 160, 164.
36. Burns, “She Died from Grief,” 111.
37. CR, 14 July 1866, accessed via *Accessible Archives*, <https://www.accessible.com/> (5 July 2017).
38. CR, 14 April and 7 July 1866, accessed via *Accessible Archives*, <https://www.accessible.com/> (3 July 2017).
39. CR, 5 January 1867, accessed via *Accessible Archives*, <https://www.accessible.com/> (10 July 2017); also see Johnson, “Looking for Lost Kin,” 19.
40. CR, 18 June 1870, accessed via *Accessible Archives*, <https://www.accessible.com/> (10 July 2017).
41. The notion of paternalism is used here to define a supposed relationship of reciprocity between enslaved people and their enslaver. First applied by Eugene Genovese in his 1974 book, *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), he argued that paternalism was an ideology developed by enslavers during the early 1830s to challenge a growing anti-slavery movement in the North and across Europe. The aim was to present slavery as a humane institution where enslaved people and enslavers both benefitted from being part of a “single family black and white,” where enslavers would care for enslaved people, feeding and clothing them as a duty of care and as part of their extended family. Using paternalism as an ideological framework, enslaved people, in return, would labor for them. In reality, however they had few alternative options, knowing the violent realities of this pernicious system.
42. CR, 29 August 1868, accessed via *Accessible Archives*, <https://www.accessible.com/> (10 July 2017).
43. CR, 7 November 1868, accessed via *Accessible Archives*, <https://www.accessible.com/> (3 July 2017).
44. CR, 8 May 1869, accessed via *Accessible Archives*, <https://www.accessible.com/> (11 July 2017).
45. CR, 2 July 1870, accessed via *Accessible Archives*, <https://www.accessible.com/> (11 July 2017).
46. Bailey, *Around the Family Altar*, 24.
47. Johnson, “Looking for Lost Kin,” 19.
48. Baptist, “‘Stol’ and Fetched Here,” 245.
49. CR, 14 April 1866, accessed via *Accessible Archives*, <https://www.accessible.com/> (5 July 2017).
50. CR, 22 September 1866, accessed via *Accessible Archives*, <https://www.accessible.com/> (5 July 2017).
51. Baptist, “‘Stol’ and Fetched Here,” 263.
52. CR, 5 August 1865 and 17 March 1866, accessed via *Accessible Archives* <https://www.accessible.com/> (5 July 2017), emphasis added.
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57. “Mrs F. E. W. Harper,” CR, 26 January 1867, accessed via *Accessible Archives*, <https://www.accessible.com/> (20 July 2017).
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61. Ibid., 60, 72.
62. Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Boston: Harvard University Press 2001), 118.
63. Foster, *Minnie's Sacrifice*, 50.
64. Crystal S. Donker, "Songs of Reunion: 'Information Wanted' Advertisements, *Minnie's Sacrifice*, and the Call-and-Response Tradition," *African American Review* 56, nos. 1–2 (Spring/Summer 2023): 65.
65. Ibid.
66. Ibid., 61, 59.
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68. Foster, *Minnie's Sacrifice*, 90.
69. Fraser, *Black Female Intellectuals*.
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71. William L. Andrews and Mitch Kachun, eds., *The Curse of Caste; or The Slave Bride. A Rediscovered African American Novel by Julia C. Collins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), xi–liii.
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74. Andrews and Kachun, *Curse of Caste*, xx.
75. Cole, "Information Wanted," 737.
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