Unit 1
The Pro-Southern City of New York

Background

Far more than any other northern city, New York was tied to the economy of the South, and especially to cotton. New York did not grow cotton, or process it, or make it into goods, but the city inserted itself into the business of cotton, by far the world’s most important commodity in the nineteenth century. New York banks financed southern cotton merchants. New York insurers protected them from loss. New York ships carried their goods. New York was on the route of many cotton shipments to Europe, if only to take the cargo off one ship and load it on another. Even shipments that bypassed New York were linked to the city’s merchants and bankers. Shortly before the Civil War, one southern editor gloated that New York would be nothing without slavery and the cotton trade. “The ships would rot at her docks; grass would grow in Wall Street and Broadway, and the glory of New York, like that of Babylon and Rome, would be numbered with the things of the past.”

This quote was repeated frequently, but it was not accurate. New York did not owe its wealth to cotton, and would not have collapsed without it, as proved during the Civil War. But cotton did bring something critical to the city: a pro-southern, pro-slavery attitude that seeped into its cultural, political, and social life. Some New Yorkers moved to southern cities to oversee business operations, absorbing southern culture and ideas. Family ties were established whenever sons of New York merchants married daughters of southern plantation owners. To escape the heat, many wealthy southerners spent summers in New York, where they were greeted as kin. According to one estimate, 100,000 southerners visited New York City in the summer of 1860, when the entire population of Manhattan was 800,000. They shopped in the stores, bought imported silks, fine hats, elegant furniture they would not find in southern cities. When they traveled north, they could and frequently did bring their slaves. Slaves held in New York State longer than nine months were legally free, but many southern whites stayed much longer, and the law was often overlooked. As a result, until the nine-month law was overturned in 1841, the city of New York included many legally and illegally enslaved people.

Throughout the country, white people strongly and all but universally considered blacks naturally inferior to whites. This attitude grew more intense after the Panic of 1837 and the years of financial difficulty that followed this downturn in the economy. Race came to be seen as the organizing principle of humankind, with whites at the top, blacks at the bottom, and other groups on various rungs in between. This new interpretation of race, combined with the pro-southern leaning of New York City, had a profound effect on the city’s blacks. They were more and more confined to poor jobs and poor neighborhoods, with little hope of escape. Though a tiny portion of the overall population, free blacks were often blamed for New York’s problems. Some whites argued that they should all be “colonized” — sent to live in Africa.

At the same time, the abolition movement was gaining ground in the North. In 1833, the American Anti-Slavery Society was founded in Boston by William Lloyd Garrison. The Society’s goals included immediate emancipation and the “intellectual, moral, and religious improvement” of blacks. But increasing differences of opinion developed within the Society over direction and strategies. In 1840, after the election of a white woman to one of the Society’s committees, a group of abolitionists, led by Lewis Tappan, broke away from Garrison’s group and began to focus on using the political process to win rights for blacks. New York City, home to some of the
nation’s most powerful black visionaries and their white allies, became a center of the abolition movement. The abolitionists’ numbers were small, but their impact was not. They wrote and spoke on behalf of black rights and formed a black political structure to challenge New York’s pro-southern, pro-slavery ruling class.

Clashes over the slavery question were inevitable, frequent, and sometimes bloody.

The disturbances on Wednesday night.—It was with deep regret we yesterday found ourselves compelled to detail a series of riotous proceedings which took place in this city on Wednesday night, and which closed by ransacking the house of Mr. Tappan. Under ordinary circumstances such an occurrence would naturally excite surprise in a community like this, so organized, as that all have an interest in the preservation of good order, and that all are therefore impressed with a deep and abiding sense of the necessity of maintaining it, but in the present instance, no one who has had an opportunity to witness the impression made on the popular mind by the doctrines openly promulgated by the immediate abolitionists and amalgamators, can wonder that such an ebullition of feeling was the consequence, as that which has evinced itself.

It is time for the reputation of the city and perhaps for the welfare of themselves, that these abolitionists and amalgamators should know the ground on which they stand. They are, we learn, always clamorous with the police for protection, and demand it as a right inherent to their character of American citizens. Now we tell them, that when they openly and publicly promulgate doctrines which outrage public feeling, they have no right to demand protection from the people they thus insult.

When they endeavor to disseminate opinions, which if generally imbibed, must infallibly destroy our National Union, and produce scenes of blood and carnage horrid to think of; when they thus preach up treason and murder, the ergs of the law indignantly withdraws its shelter from them. When they vilify our relatives, by classing the redeemed of the world in the lowest grade of the human species, when they debase the noble race from which we spring,—that race which called civilization into existence, and from which have proceeded all the great, the brave, and good, that have ever lived—and place it in the same scale as the most stupid, ferocious and cowardly of the divisions into which the creator has divided mankind, then they place themselves beyond the pale of all law, for they violate every law divine and human. Ought not, we ask, our city authorities to make them understand this, to tell them that they prosecute their treasonable and beastly plans at their own peril? Haply they might then be led to confine themselves and their doctrines to the seclusion of their own dwellings, and not insult the world by handbills and advertisements of their intended mischievous meetings. There, amongst themselves and themselves only, they will be interfered with by no one. They may carry out their doctrine of amalgamation of races to any extent they like and meet with nothing but the silent abhorrence of every virtuous, reflecting mind.
Document 1

Many New Yorkers thought abolitionists’ ideas plain wrong, immoral, and extremely dangerous. They believed abolition would destroy the economy of the South and of New York City. It would rob white New Yorkers of work when free blacks flooded the city. It would mean that blacks and whites might marry and produce mixed-race children, a possibility seen as a violation of the God-given hierarchy of the races. James Watson Webb, editor of the *Morning Courier and New-York Enquirer*, was a powerful and outspoken enemy of abolition. This document is taken from his response to the anti-abolitionist riots that broke out in New York. The article refers to the first night of the rioting, Wednesday, July 9, 1834, and was probably written on July 11, though not published until a few days later.

In the beginning, rioters had aimed their rage at white abolitionists Lewis and Arthur Tappan, who sought and received police protection. By the second day, blacks had become the primary focus of the mob’s rage. Black churches and organizations were destroyed. The crowded Five Points district was hardest hit. White residents of this mixed neighborhood were warned in advance to put a lighted candle in their windows. Any unlit homes were broken into, black residents terrorized, furniture dragged into the street and torched. The mob was composed mostly young white men of the working class, incited by some local merchants. They targeted people who had begun to achieve some economic stability in the years since slavery ended in New York State. They did not hit the very poorest black neighborhoods.

*NOTE: The obscured text reads:*
“When they vilify our religion by classing the redeemer of the world in the lowest grade of the human species, when they debase...”
THE HERALD.

NEW YORK, THURSDAY, SEPT. 24, 1835.

LATER FROM THE SOUTH.—By the steam packet which arrived yesterday morning from Charleston, S. C., we have received a large number of papers from that city to the morning of last Saturday. There was a violent gale at Charleston on Friday last, which did some damage to the shipping and cotton crops.

The Southern journals are still busy discussing the question of slavery in all its phases. It seems they are actually serious in proposing a non-intercourse with New York, because Arthur Tappan and the abolitionists take up their residence in this city. It is now proposed to cut off all intercourse with New York, but to extend it with Philadelphia and Boston, because the resolutions passed at the public meetings in the latter cities were stronger in favor of southern interests.

It is also reported that all the residents of the South visiting the North, who apologize for their institutions or admit that “slavery is an evil” are denounced and pointed out as fit subjects of Judge Lynch on their return. The following is from the “Parish” in plain enough on this point:

“The worst consequences are produced to the rights of the South to those who, while they discuss the question of Slavery, set up the pretense of being not only fully convinced with the character of this institution, but who claim to have a pecuniary interest in Slavery. The testimony of such persons is held to be inadmissible; for they claim the advantage of personal experience. Their statements are deemed authentic and their arguments conclusive; for their views are conceived to be too disinterested to have been coloured by any bias or prepossession of social interest. We have noticed the effusions of a few such enervating spirits, who have joined the example of Abolition, as they occasionally figure in the New York papers. There should be a good look out kept for persons of this stamp on their return to the South, and public opinion should set in mark of approbation on them. Such philanthropists have no right to own slaves and derive a profit from slave labor. Another feature in the present South Carolina excitement (for Carolina now takes the lead) is the requisition made upon Congress or the State Legislatures, for the passage of penal laws against the persons, persons, and persons of the abolitionists. The following is to this point:

When the people of the Southern States claim the benefit of the guarantees in the rights of property under the Federal Constitution, the answer is that liberty of speech and the press in another guarantees equally binding force and obligation, to be found in the same instrument, and in the same State Constitutions. Here, say our opponents, are securities which appear to conflict, which is to prevail? The answer is at hand—The guarantee of the right of speech and the press is one general in its nature. It is to be construed and applied consistently with other provisions provided in the Federal Constitution. That instrument is the rule of action for the states equally with their own Constitutions.

THE POLICE.—Seymour.—Joseph Muller, a German, stopped at Mr. Wall, N. 103 Washington street, had about 240 five-cent pieces, which, without any warning, he thrown into paper money, in spite of the specific directions of the note. The five cent pieces were heavy and impossible paper was light and comfortable. Being acquittance with a Swiss by the name of John or Joseph Myer, he asked him—‘Joe, what are you taking in to get paper money for me?’ Myer had no objection, as they were both going to Trenton next morning together. Myer took the 240 pieces, went into a store, and paid them charged for paper, but never returned. Muller waited and waited and waited, but no Meyer ap- peared—no paper money—nothing.

Next morning Muller got up and looked about the where the Trenton boat was to start from, expecting probably there to get a sight of Myer. There he saw him just about going on board. ‘Come, let me have my money,’ said Muller. ‘No,’ said Myer, “another time will do as well.” Muller was not satisfied with this, so he caught hold of him and kept him from going aboard the boat. He also applied to the Police Office, and Boyer the officer brought up Muller, and had him committed for the theft. About 211 five pieces were recovered.

SOUTHERN PEOPLE IN THE CITY.—A very large number of Southern people are now in New York. They are received with great hospitality, particularly by the fashionable hotels, where one-twelfth was added to the old price of boarding, when they might have put up double with equal hospitality. Do they see in that any disposition in us, here generally to interfere with the peculiar institutions of the South? We admit a small interference with their pockets—that’s all.

WIT OF THE EVENING STAR.—Our old colleague, Major Noah, of the Evening Star, was esteemed the wit- est Editor in town, or indeed in the country. He is so, as we can see. Yet it is not known how cosmically his shade is affected, and with good cooking how far they go. The following bright lines have been in use sixteen years, and are yet as good as ever—A stitch in time saves nine,—‘Sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander.’—Birds of a feather flock together.—A tampet in a tea pot,—A starve, &c., &c.—A rose would smell as sweet, &c., &c.—Put out the light and then—“Going the whole hog,”—together with many admirable quotations from Shakespeare, and Mr. Joseph Miller, comedian.

EATING HOUSES are multiplying tremendously—not where you are born but where you eat the best, drink the best, and pay the cheapest. There’s Tyroon in Broad-street, the Clinton Latch—the Clinton street Dining House, and many others too tedious to mention. At all these houses a hungry man—a traveller—a person can with a grateful appetite, be enticed to his heart’s content. Up town too, these houses are beginning to multiply. Remnant has opened a very nice eating and lodging house, on the corner of Wooster and Spring streets.

STROCHER SHELPS is exhibiting a Magician in Masonic Hall. The signature to the world’s certificate of the Duke of St. Albans as a demonstration of his ca
definition.

Unit 1 - The Pro-Southern City of New York

"The Southern journals are still busy..." and "Southern People in the City." The Herald, September 24, 1835.

Collection of the New-York Historical Society.
Document 2

The Herald was New York’s most prominent newspaper, widely read in the city and beyond. These two articles, featured side by side on a single page, bring out the contradictory position in which New York found itself. On the one hand, “southern people” visit the city, spend their money, and contribute to New York’s increasing wealth. On the other, the growing abolitionist movement has alienated southerners, who now threaten to strike back at the city that harbors anti-slavery activists. The prospect of New York losing out to Philadelphia or Boston was more than familiar regional rivalry, since New York depended on southern business much more than other northern cities. In their anxiety about southern retaliation, New Yorkers sometimes lost sight of the fact that the South needed New York City as much as the city needed the South.
SOUTHERN CONSPIRACY.—The Boston Gazette thinks that the account of the project to abduct Arthur Tappan and his family is true. We will not write, but we have too many grounds to believe its absolute truth. We now learn that $100,000 has been subscribed in Charleston, S.C., by four individuals as a reward to be given to any person who shall deliver Arthur Tappan to the authorities of that city or state. What we have already stated about rewards were publicly promulgated in the Southern newspapers. This sum is deposited in bank in wait of the completion of the capture.

Now with these inestimable facts before the Gazette cannot be for an instant supposed that persons in the South, in the North, cannot be supposed to be capable of being amiable in any way. We are persuaded that such is the state of feeling and sentiment in the North against the abolitionists, that there are thousands who would join and act in the attempt to carry off Tappan.

Let not the Gazette misunderstand us. We are among those who firmly believe that the institution of slavery in the South is an evil—i.e., that it is a positive good—yet it is the natural and proper condition of a black race. In the midst of a white race. We despise all miserable delusions and hair-splitting of the Courier and Enquirer and Star. We go for the institution of slavery as a practical good—as well as a theoretical and philosophical truth. It cannot and never will be otherwise while the two races do not amalgamate, and, in forming another and a yellow race, destroy both black and white. That as we are against all amalgamation of races—therefore we are in favor of Southern slavery. When the great mass of the white people in the North say “let us take black wives”—let us create a pure yellow race,—let us repudiate our sickly white wives,—let us do as the Jews did in Egypt,—then shall we be against slavery as an evil in the abstract as much as Col. Webb and Major Noah are in their several papers. Not till then.

But to the discussion of the above question—to the perfect immunity to secondary penalties, we are decidedly against the present position of the South. We utterly contumaciously and repudiate every attempt to tramme the press, or intercept the mail. If the institution of slavery cannot be supported on its practical merits in this enlightened age, let it fall to the ground. We are among those who believe that it can be defended—in theory, in practice,—in philosophy,—in religion,—in every phase it can present. We despise all cant or conceit on the subject,—we are ready to support them—against the whole abolition society, Arthur the great and all—but as to his abduction or delivering him up—or stopping his mouth—or breaking up his printing press—we would defend Arthur, fool and blackguard as he is, to the very last drop of blood that courses through our veins.

So Mr. Gazette go to supper and reflect on these views.

GOOD.—Several of the leading merchants of the South, and Honored Institutions of the West, as far as Cincinnati are, according to the Herald, to be sent by them by express and paid for it too. Yesterday, we received the following note from the Treasury Department, Washington:

Treasury Department, Sept. 26, 1835.

ORDERS OF NEW-YORK.—The following return of the census of this city, for four days, taken, and the estimates for nine weeks not taken, have been furnished us by a most accurate statistic and calculator.

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So the population of New York for 1835, will be 300,000,—including Brooklyn, probably about 350,000 persons.

THE FAR WEST.—A letter from Fort Gibson, under date of the 12th ult., which is published in the Arkansas Gazette, gives some details of interest, relative to the doings and position of the dragoons in the far West. It appears from this, that Major Mason had watched with the utmost vigilance at that post, on the 18th of May with a view of ascertaining the Comanches, Kiowas, and Tonkawas, Indians, in order that the U. S. Commissioners might meet them, with delegations from the friendly tribes, on the frontier, with a view to entering into treaties of peace with the former. Major Mason established his encampment near Elkhorn, 150 miles South of Fort Gibson; and ascertaining that the different bands of "sauk Indians" of that region were desirous of being on friendly terms with the U. S., although unwilling to send delegations to Fort Gibson, it was determined that the Commissioners should meet them at Mason's encampment. Meanwhile, to guard against surprise or surprise and feel play, it was deemed well to reinforce Major Mason, for which measure were taken; and the U. S. Commissioners left Fort Gibson, for Mason's encampment, which will be the Council ground, on the 20th ult. Delegates from the various friendly tribes were expected to be on the ground.

The whole force from Fort Gibson is in the Prarie and is about 1600 men, not including officers. It was stated that they would be able to return to that post by the 15th or 20th September. — Mason's encampment is represented Camp Holmes — is represented as a beautiful and healthy place, on the border of the Pecos, and with a level prairie stretching ten miles beyond the ford. — Springs and running water abound in the vicinity; and no doubt is entertained that it will become a place of much importance.

THE HEALTH OF NEW ORLEANS.—The New Orleans True American of the 13th inst. says,—"It has been remarked that the number of deaths last week amounted to one third more than has been the usual number. This is attributed to the unusualmultitude of last week, which are happy to stay, and has not continued." Yesterday we had a conversation with one of our best physicians, who is of opinion, that the health of the city this week will remain its usual tone, and will be of the greatest benefits, particularly if it is followed by others.

PHENOLOGY THREE HUNDRED YEARS AGO.—We have lately met with a Magazine containing the following passage:—"We pronounce we saw before us a Latin work still older than Horace's Epistles, entitled 'Margaret Philopatric,"" in twelve books of dialogues.
James Gordon Bennett, editor of the *Herald*, was a complex figure. In this passage, he criticizes the rumored plot to kidnap Arthur Tappan as southern fanaticism, and then declares himself solidly on the side of slavery. Newspapers of this period had no policies about fair coverage, or telling two sides of a story. The editors, who were often the newspaper’s owner as well, used the pages as a platform for their own opinions. Bennett’s positions were certainly well known. The *Herald* cost almost nothing, included gossip readers loved, and had the widest circulation of any newspaper in the nation.
Unit 1 - The Pro-Southern City of New York

Document #4

Document 4


At heart, New Yorkers had two great and quite distinct fears about abolition. One was economic: they would lose money and position if slavery were abolished. The other was racial: the “superior white race” itself was at risk. They feared that free blacks and whites would marry and produce mixed-race offspring, and eventually the lines between the races would vanish. Many white Americans believed blacks to be fundamentally inferior and viewed the prospect of mixed marriages as the end of the world as God had intended it. “The Fruits of Amalgamation” is one of four drawings produced by artist E. W. Clay to inflame northern whites about the evils of amalgamation, the term used to describe this much-feared racial mixing and the racial equality it would promote. Of course, there were many, many people of mixed race at the time, the offspring of white slave owners and their black female slaves. These unions were not considered a threat since they did not involve marriage, and the children did not become part of white society.
Theatrical and Musical.

Bowery Theatre.—The new piece styled the "Giant of Palestine," is announced as the commencing feature at this established theatre to-morrow evening. This will be followed by the excellent farce styled the "King's Gardener," and the amusements will terminate with the drama of the "Wandering Boys." The Bowery continues to do an extensive business, and the performances are greeted with much enthusiasm.

Broadway Theatre.—Mr. and Mrs. Barney Williams, the popular performers, are to appear in "Uncle Pat's Cabin" and "It's the Custom of the Country," to-morrow night. They will be supported by the entire strength of the company. The metropolis was very well attended during the past week, and we doubt not, from the attractiveness of the bill for to-morrow, that it will be crowded in every department.

Nirlo's Garden.—The fascinating and pleasing vocalist, Mme. Anna Thillon, is advertised to appear as Stella, in Belle's popular opera entitled the "Enchantress," to-morrow evening. She will be supported in the other leading characters by Mzzas. Hudson and Leach. The Favelas are to appear in the pantomimes of the "Soldier for Love" and "Raoul," on Tuesday.

National Theater.—Mr. J. R. Scott continues to draw large assemblages to the National. He is to personate the character of Caleb Reeswold, in the entertaining drama of "Harvest Home," and Looney McDougal, in the comic drama of "The Review," to-morrow night. The musical piece of the "Alpine Maid" will also be given.

American Museum.—Donetti's troupe of acting monkeys, dogs and goats are added to the already great attractions of the Museum, and will appear to-morrow evening in the lecture room, in their novel performances. White's Screamers are to give their negro delineations in the afternoon.

Franconi's Hippodrome.—The trained elephant, Tom Thumb, is to be introduced to-morrow afternoon and evening, in his peculiar feats, together with several new and attractive features by the talented company.

Christy's Opera House.—Christy's very popular Ethiopian Opera Company offer a very attractive amusement for to-morrow night, consisting of vocal and instrumental pieces, dancing, burlesques and witdanses.

Wood's Minstrels.—This band of negro delineators are as successful as ever, and manager Wood is putting money in his purse. The programme for to-morrow evening is one which cannot fail of drawing an overflowing house.

Buckley's New Orleans Serenaders.—Another attractive bill is provided by this talented band of negro performers for to-morrow evening. The solo on the Chinese fiddle, a very novel performance, will be repeated, together with solos on the violin, melophone, and banjo; also a new musical piece, styled "Matrimonial Blessings."

Banyard's Mississippi.—Banyard's original painting of the "Mississippi" will be put on exhibition to-morrow evening at the Georama.

Castle Garden.—The Dodworths are to give their ninth Sunday concert this evening, at Castle Garden. The programme comprises many of the most popular musical pieces.
Document 5

Southern visitors arrived in New York with money to spend and an eagerness to sample the city’s famed cultural life. Theaters went out of the way to appeal to them, and newspapers promoted the shows with listings and enthusiastic comments. This list shows what was available in New York’s theaters in July 1853. “Negro delineations” were minstrel shows, in which white, and sometimes black, performers blackened their faces with burnt cork makeup to imitate and ridicule what were seen as black traits. They also drew on the work of talented black artists to energize mainstream white culture, a practice that continues to this day.
Unit 1, Document #6

Document 6

Christy’s Minstrels was one of the earliest and most popular minstrel troupes of the mid-nineteenth century. In 1847, one New York newspaper commented that “Christy’s Minstrels are drawing crowded houses at the Society Library. Many of the most fashionable families attend, as the performances are a pleasing relief to the high toned excitement of the Italian Opera. Negro melodies are the very democracy of music.” (Daily Tribune, March 12, 1847.) Minstrel shows were widely advertised in the newspapers and on posters pasted around the city. Ordinary black New Yorkers – children, bootblacks, laundresses, whitewashers – would have known about minstrel shows, even if they never saw one.
Document 7

White audiences flocked to minstrel shows in the mid-nineteenth century, and Christy’s Minstrels were among the favorites. This image shows the kind of artwork used to advertise minstrel shows, as well as the titles of songs considered “gems.” It was printed as the cover to a collection of sheet music, which enabled fans of minstrelsy to play and sing the music in their homes.
Slavery ended in New York State in 1827, but the freedom it brought was imperfect at best. Blacks could not ride inside the horse-drawn omnibuses that carried white New Yorkers around the growing city. If they took a steamer up the Hudson River, they had to remain on the uncovered deck even in bad weather; they were banned from the comfortable cabin. New York’s black residents could not attend some of the city’s theaters or, far worse, its new public schools. Some churches allowed black people only in designated pews, others not at all.

It is not surprising, then, that when James McCune Smith applied to the medical school at Columbia College, the answer was no. An upstate college also said no. Smith was a superior student, turned down solely for his race. He had graduated with honors from the African Free School and then studied with the Rev. Peter Williams, Jr., pastor of the all-black St. Philip’s African Episcopal Church. Rev. Williams recognized Smith’s promise and boldly recommended a career in medicine. After the American schools refused to admit his brilliant young student, Rev. Williams suggested that Smith attend the University of Glasgow, in Scotland, and raised the money to make this possible. Smith left for medical school in 1832, perhaps on an English ship, since some American vessels would not board a black passenger. He returned five years later as America’s first accredited black doctor. This former slave had earned a bachelor’s degree, master’s degree, and medical degree, and graduated first in his class each time.

In New York, Dr. Smith opened a pharmacy and a medical practice in which he treated patients, whether black or white. A handsome man who dressed well, spoke well, and wrote in powerful prose, he was widely respected for his integrity and intelligence. He was a living challenge to white New Yorkers’ assumptions about black people, but those assumptions remained unshaken. Dr. Smith believed that white people would not see blacks as equals until southern slavery was abolished, and he devoted much of his life to this cause. He became a member of the American Anti-Slavery Society, which used nonviolence and persuasion to convince slave holders that slavery was immoral and should end. In New York City, abolitionists were relatively few in number, but their goals terrified the local merchants and publishers who saw cotton, the South, and slavery as essential to the city’s economy. The riot of 1834 had shown how dangerous it was to fight for abolition in New York.

Dr. Smith was active in every arena that affected the lives of black New Yorkers. Around 1840, he volunteered as the physician of the Colored Orphan Asylum, and later was hired as the only black person on the staff. At a well-attended debate, he debunked the false “science” of phrenology, which held that the shape of black people’s skulls proved their inferior intelligence. In 1850, he helped organize New Yorkers’ resistance to the Fugitive Slave Act. He ran for Secretary of State in New York in 1857, the first black in the country to run for public office.

When Dr. Smith became convinced that the moral argument would not end slavery, he left William Lloyd Garrison’s American Anti-Slavery Society. With Frederick Douglass, Lewis Tappan, Gerrit Smith, and others, he helped focus anti-slavery efforts on radical political action, arguing that the U.S. Constitution itself demanded
that slavery be abolished. He worked with whites in abolitionist efforts and treated some white patients, but Dr. Smith’s greatest allegiance was to black-led organizations like St. Philip’s African Episcopal Church.

Dr. Smith was legendary among blacks of his generation. Differences of opinion among black leaders were not uncommon, however. These were fierce, committed men searching for ways to undo the great wrongs done to their people. They might not always agree, but they remained loyal to one another. Dr. Smith and Henry Highland Garnet differed on many issues, culminating in a bitter argument over colonization (emigration to Africa) in 1859-60. Nevertheless, Dr. Smith wrote a long introduction to Garnet’s *A Memorial Discourse*, praising Garnet’s lifetime of zealous work on behalf of black people. When his friend Frederick Douglass and others argued that blacks were demeaned as a race by the menial jobs they were forced to take, Dr. Smith wrote a series of sympathetic profiles of black New Yorkers who made their living in the only ways they could, by taking in laundry, polishing shoes, whitewashing fences. Douglass published the articles in his newspaper and a few years later wrote of Dr. Smith: “No man in this country more thoroughly understands the whole struggle between freedom and slavery, than does Dr. Smith, and his heart is as broad as his understanding.”

James McCune Smith was still the physician at the Colored Orphan Asylum in 1863, when New York City erupted in the Draft Riots. He was ill on the day the asylum was attacked by the mob, and thus not with the terrified children as they were led out the back entrance to a police station for safety. All the children survived, but the building was burned to the ground. Like many blacks, Dr. Smith moved away from New York City after the riots. He died in 1865, just months after the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution ended slavery in the United States.

Most white New Yorkers were afraid of what abolition could bring. Wealthy people often believed the southern economy – and New York City’s – would collapse without slavery. And they feared that the abolitionist argument would confirm southern worries that the North was bent on destroying the South. They saw abolition as a profound danger to the United States, the sword that might slice it in two. Poor whites had their own reasons to resist abolition. They thought that freed southern slaves would flock to New York, take work away from white laborers, and make whites a minority in their own city. They were frightened by what they saw as a logical progression from emancipation to black equality.

Most whites, rich and poor, firmly believed whites were superior to blacks: capable of clearer thinking, more restrained in their behavior, and more reliable. They feared that if abolitionists had their way, blacks and whites would marry and have children – the term they used was “amalgamation” – and the white race would no longer be pure. Even whites who agreed that slavery should end some day were alarmed by calls for immediate emancipation, since it would cause all these problems to erupt at once. All around the city, people were desperate to get rid of abolitionists and their dangerous talk.

Black abolitionists led the way in the effort to end slavery in the United States. They set the tone, mapped out the strategies, and inspired anti-slavery whites. But it was white abolitionists, especially the brothers Arthur and Lewis Tappan, who were particularly hated in New York. The Tappans provided the money for abolitionist groups in which blacks and whites worked together, as if the races were equal. They were silk importers, and among the wealthiest merchants in the city. They were also devout Christians who saw slavery as the nation’s greatest sin. Merchants, newspaper editors, and many politicians viewed them as traitors, people just whipping up trouble.

One day in June 1834, Arthur Tappan was walking toward the Laight Street Presbyterian Church, where he worshipped, when he saw Samuel Cornish and invited him inside. Cornish was a prominent black editor and minister who knew Tappan well and joined him, somewhat nervously, in his church. No integrated churches existed at the time, and some of the white parishioners were horrified. The pastor, Dr. Samuel Cox, spoke from the pulpit about the need for tolerance. He pointed out that Jesus himself might have been dark-skinned.

This episode inflamed white fears. The Courier and Enquirer attacked abolitionists and singled out Arthur Tappan, fanning the emotions of its readers. Over the next two weeks, frequent clashes occurred between abolitionists and those who opposed them. Finally, after a misunderstanding over the rental of a lecture hall, violence broke out. On Wednesday, July 9, 1834, some 2,000 to 3,000 whites took to the streets, yelling Arthur Tappan’s name. The mob consisted not of young white clerks and workers spurred on by some men of the merchant class.
They went to Lewis Tappan’s house at 40 Rose Street, where Connecticut resident Arthur Tappan stayed when working in the city.

The Tappans were not at home as the crowd stood outside, screaming and throwing bricks toward the windows. Through the night, the angry whites roamed menacingly around lower Manhattan, returning several times to Rose Street. They eventually forced their way inside, ripped down the blinds, smashed the china, dragged all the furniture outside and set it on fire. Two days later, the crowd tried to attack Arthur Tappan’s store. Police and Tappan’s armed supporters defended the store, and held off the crowd. Over four days of rioting, the mob assaulted Dr. Cox’s house and church, irate that he had suggested that the Savior might have been dark-skinned, and targeted blacks as well. They also damaged St. Philip’s African Episcopal Church and the home of its pastor, Rev. Peter Williams, Jr., but they did not focus only on prominent people. They attacked the homes of many ordinary blacks in the Five Points, burning all their possessions in a bonfire on the street. Eventually, when a rumor spread that the mob was headed for Wall Street, the mayor deployed the militia that had been standing by since the start of the riot, and calm was restored. The next day, Arthur Tappan opened his store as usual.

A wave of anti-abolitionist violence shook the North through this time, as white fears about black freedom erupted in city after city. In New York, the rioters did not alter the landscape much, however. The Tappan brothers remained committed activists who used their fortunes to support the cause, and Arthur Tappan remained a primary target of pro-slavery forces in New York and the South.

For almost ten years, William A. Smith and his family had lived in London, Ontario, probably in the Wilberforce Settlement, a community of former American slaves supported by free blacks, Quakers, and other white abolitionists. The Settlement was successful at first, but the leaders had started to disagree, money was tight, and people began moving away. Late in the summer of 1840, Smith’s wife, Hester, died. Needing a new start, Smith brought his four children to New York City.

Smith had lived in New York before, in the first years after slavery ended in the state. But in 1840, New York City may have seemed different, more hostile. The newspapers printed insulting comments about black people and threatened whites who wanted to end slavery. Visiting southerners brought their slaves to the city and were welcomed by the hotels and shops as if nothing was wrong. There were the kidnappers roaming the streets looking for black people, especially young children, to take south and sell into slavery. Black New Yorkers had to find ways to stay strong and safe in the face of these difficult realities — to earn a living, make a home, and take care of their children. At all these challenging tasks, William A. Smith was both committed and resourceful.

When he arrived in New York, Smith found work as a seaman, one of the best occupations available to black men. He signed on for a voyage that would take him to New Orleans, Liverpool, and Havre, the great Atlantic cotton route. Working as a seaman meant fairly good wages, fairly good treatment, and usually the company of other black crew members. It also meant that William A. Smith needed a place for his children to receive the proper care, and he had few choices. He could pay a woman to board his children, or he could take them to the Colored Orphan Asylum. He may have known that some blacks viewed the asylum with suspicion. The managers were all white and did not expect much of the children in their care, training them for little more than life as servants.

On the other hand, at the orphanage his children would have warm clothing, other children and toys to play with, beds and blankets. Most important, they would be safe from kidnappers. The tuition was expensive for single parents, but Smith’s wages would cover the cost. On January 27, 1841, he took Judy Ann, Jane, William, and Thomas to the orphanage. He paid $10 on the spot and agreed to the rate of $12 per month. He signed the agreement with a steady hand: “W. Smith.”

In the asylum’s admission records it was noted that three-year-old Thomas had not quite recovered from smallpox and measles, and was in “delicate health.” It was not Thomas but William, however, who died of a lung affliction in May 1842, at the age of six. He was probably tended by Dr. James McCune Smith, the black physician who volunteered his services to the orphanage. The boy’s father may not have known of his death for months, until returning to port. But Smith’s response can be read in the records of the asylum. In 1843, Judy Ann was permitted to leave and spend the winter with her aunt in Boston; there is no indication that she ever returned. Around the same time, Smith took Thomas, the youngest child, out of the asylum. Perhaps he was worried about the boy’s delicate health in the close quarters. After a year, however, he returned the seven-year-old boy to the orphanage. His reasons are unknown, but when he signed the readmission note, his hand trembled and the ink clotted around his name.

William A. Smith may have wanted to do much more for his children than he could, but he provided each one with an important escape and a lesson in how to get what they needed. He gave Thomas his year away from the asylum and Judy Ann her move to Boston. He also made special arrangements for Jane to remain at the orphanage until she turned eighteen and receive training as a teacher. It would save her from life as a servant.
In the late 1840s, Smith saw a way for them all to escape from New York. White abolitionist Gerrit Smith was giving rural land to poor blacks, part of his plan to increase the number of black land owners in New York State, where voting was tied to owning property. In April 1848, Smith went to the orphanage for the last time, paid his bill in full, and reclaimed 14-year-old Jane and Thomas, who was ten. Within two years, he was married again, to a woman named Sarah, and they were all living on a farm in the Adirondacks, 300 miles from New York City.

The Bootblack

Note: This life story is drawn from James McCune Smith’s series of profiles of black New Yorkers, written to emphasize the dignity of even the most menial labor. Dr. Smith apparently knew the people he wrote about and visited their homes, but he did not identify them by name.

His African great-grandfather had been brought as a slave to Livingston Manor, the huge upstate farm where the bootblack was born into slavery around 1800. On July 4, 1827 – Emancipation Day in New York State – he walked away from Livingston Manor for good and headed to New York City. Within a short time he was married, living with his wife in a front basement apartment south of Canal Street. Outside their window, they put a long pole with a highly polished shoe hanging from one end, which anyone passing would know as a bootblack’s advertisement. Then they took a small piece of tin and made a sign announcing that the bootblack’s wife was taking in laundry. They were young, free, and in business. The bootblack’s wife had more work at first, supporting them both as a washerwoman, but his customers came soon enough.

The long wooden pole was both the symbol and tool of the bootblack’s work. When he left home in the morning, he strapped on the shoes he had polished the day before and either carried the pole or balanced it on his shoulder as he walked. He went to each customer’s house, leaving the shined shoes and picking up the pair that needed polishing. In New York, highly polished shoes had become a sign of status and wealth and every important white man had at least two pair so he could wear freshly shined shoes every day.

Some people said polishing shoes required no skill and looked down on the work he did, but this bootblack was known as one of the best in the city. His customers said none of the other boot-blacks could put such a bright shine to leather, and he always delivered on time. His reputation brought him some of the best-known white men in New York, and they gave his name to their friends. The quality of his work brought him more customers and maybe a little more money. When he had been in business awhile, he was able to rent a workshop room so that his home would not be full of other men’s shoes and the smell of blacking wax.

The bootblack may have begun with a sense of optimism, with hope that he and his wife would be able to get ahead in the now free city of New York. Much as his customers praised his work, though, most were probably white bankers and merchants who believed him capable of nothing more than shining shoes. For them, the well-being of the city depended on blacks remaining in lowly roles on the outskirts of the city’s economy. So many New Yorkers felt this way that the bootblack never could move on to better paying work. Twenty-five years after he first advertised his business, he was still blacking shoes for a living. He had, however, stopped using the long pole that signaled his work. He was collecting and delivering his customers’ shoes in a basket, and no one could tell he was a bootblack.

When he first married, before all his daughters were born, the bootblack had daydreamed about the son he expected to have one day. He had thought about the good life the boy would lead. His son would be a shopkeeper at least. He would be able to read all the newspapers and have handwriting like a lawyer’s. He would be smart with numbers and keep all the accounts for his father’s business. He might even, some day, stand in the pulpit at St. Philip’s African Episcopal Church, a man as honored as Rev. Williams.
The bootblack recounted this daydream as a joke on himself, since he and his wife never had a son. But if one had arrived, it is unlikely that he would have enjoyed the life his father imagined for him. He might not even have found work as a bootblack. Throughout the 1800s, and especially beginning in the 1840s, poor immigrants began arriving from Europe by the shipload. They were willing to do any menial work for almost any wages, and they pushed into the occupations once dominated by blacks. There were only so many rich men in the city, so many shoes that needed attention, and the immigrants took most of the business. By the time the Civil War ended, polishing shoes was no longer considered black men’s work.

The Washerwoman

Note: This life story is drawn from James McCune Smith’s series of profiles of black New Yorkers, written to emphasize the dignity of even the most menial labor. Dr. Smith apparently knew the people he wrote about and visited their homes, but he did not identify them by name.

On Saturday nights, she finished the ironing. One by one, she laid the shirts on a table covered with a thick cloth and flattened the cotton or linen fabric with her hands. Then she picked up the hot pressing iron from its spot near the fire and replaced it with a cool iron that would heat up while she worked. Ironing was the last big step in laundering and took the longest. She had to stand the whole time. The iron weighed several pounds. The many dozens of shirts that she had hung and draped around her apartment meant two or three days of exhausting work in a hot apartment where the fire always burned, even in the summer.

Since slavery times, most white New Yorkers’ laundry was washed by black women. It was one of the few ways a black woman could earn money. If she were not doing laundry in her apartment, this washerwoman would have been cleaning white people’s houses or working in their kitchens. By taking in laundry, she could be at home with her son, a smart boy who had some schooling. She watched him read while she ironed — religious books, stories about Aladdin, novels from the library. She may not have been able to read herself, but she put a picture of the editor and minister Samuel Cornish on the wall as a reminder of what a black man could accomplish for himself and his people.

Saturday mornings, her son went around to the back doors of white people’s houses and collected baskets of dirty laundry. There were always shirts, which white men wore with business coats, but there might also be bed sheets, tablecloths, underwear, diapers. Most items were worn several times before they were sent for laundering, so the basket was likely to have a ripe smell when it arrived in the washerwoman’s rooms, and the clothes were badly soiled. The first thing she did was put everything in tubs of water for a long soak to loosen the dirt.

She always finished the ironing by midnight on Saturday, and she never worked on Sunday. Instead, she and her son dressed in their best clothes and spent the Sabbath in church. For a woman who worked alone in her apartment, this was her time to be with family and friends, listen to the ringing words coming from the pulpit, and raise her own voice in praise and prayer. As a girl, she had prayed for her freedom. She and her sisters had been born to slavery in the South. When she was a young woman, their owners had visited the North and brought the enslaved sisters to tend to their needs. The washerwoman saw her chance and ran away, but her sisters had left children behind and returned to slavery because of them. Now she prayed for their freedom, and sometimes she boxed up a few things she could spare and sent them to her sisters by packet boat, imagining the smiles on their faces.

Monday mornings, she began working on the soaking clothes. She put the wash water on to boil and poured it into a tub, as hot as she could bear to put her hands in. She added soft homemade soap, stirred the laundry with a wooden paddle, and scrubbed the dirtiest items against the washboard. She applied everything she knew about removing ink, wine, grease, tobacco, and blood, a different trick for every stain. She would wash and rinse, over and over, adding bleach to the water for the white items. She gave the shirt collars and cuffs a good starching, to
keep them stiff so they would stay clean longer. Then she wrung out each piece by hand, hung or spread every-
ting to dry. By Wednesday or Thursday of each week, she was ready to begin the ironing. When all was done,
she folded each item, laid it carefully in a basket, and sent her son off to make deliveries.

She made a few pennies a week. If the work was not to the white woman’s liking – if there was a scorch mark
from the hot iron, or the smallest tear in a shirt – she was paid less, or nothing. Some women took their baskets
of clean clothes and asked her son to come back some other day for the money. Some sent food instead of cash:
cold meat, leftover toast, the carcass of a turkey. Sometimes, she had neither food nor money in the house. She
could earn more if she worked more, but she worked every hour she could as it was. She could raise her prices,
but white families were already turning to Irish washerwomen who would work for very little pay. She might
eventually have no choice but to ask her son to put down his books and look for work sweeping chimneys or
clearing mud from street corners so people could pass without dirtying their shoes.

Postscript

• New York’s businessmen remained largely pro-southern and pro-slavery as the country edged closer to war. In the months before the attack on Fort Sumter, a large group of merchants drafted a resolution designed to convince southerners that New Yorkers were still on their side. They begged President Lincoln to compromise with the South in order to maintain peace.

• Merchants lost fortunes when the war broke out and they were unable to collect on debts owed by southern planters. Their worst fears of financial ruin were not realized, however. Two years after the outbreak of the Civil War, wealthy merchant William E. Dodge wrote that the North was prospering and that every business except cotton was booming. A few months later, Congress permitted northern merchants to resume the cotton trade with the South, even as the war continued.

• As divided as the country was over slavery, individual people sometimes straddled the two positions in ways that are surprising today. James Watson Webb was one such person. He remained editor and owner of the Courier and Enquirer until he retired in 1861. Despite his attitudes on slavery and other issues, he was a Whig, and then a Republican. He was also a long-time friend of William H. Seward, the anti-slavery governor of New York who was later Abraham Lincoln’s secretary of state. Webb believed profoundly in preserving the Union and was appointed by President Lincoln to serve as the minister to Brazil during the Civil War.

• New York never lost its central role in the cotton industry. In 1870, the New York Cotton Exchange was formed by merchants who had dominated the cotton market before the war. The Cotton Exchange still exists today, as part of the New York Board of Trade, and New York City remains essential to the global business of cotton.
