Searching for Caroline: "Disciplined Imagination" and the Limits of the Archive

By Carole Emberton

Historians have been called lots of things, not all of them nice. "Broad-gauge gossips," according to Ambrose Bierce. "Unsuccessful novelists," in the eyes of H. L. Mencken. Tolstoy dismissed historians as being "like deaf people who go on answering questions that no one has asked them," while Guy de Maupassant quipped history was an "excitable and lying old lady." In turn, historians have been characterized as mere propagandists, fawning sycophants, and jingoists, out of touch with reality and interested only in arguing with each other. Whether pedantic and ponderous or maladroit and melodramatic, historians have received the ire of, well, *history*.[1]

At the heart of this criticism lies a problem with imagination. Either writers of history have too much of it or not enough. Most criticisms (at least the wittiest ones) lean toward the former. The historian-as-gossip/novelist/old lady deals in rumor and supposition, if not outright lies, writing fictions that pass as fact, too often on behalf of the powerful, the brave, and the beautiful. For others, however, good history requires some artistic license so that someone (other than the historian herself) might want to read it. In his novel about

[1] Ambrose Bierce, David E. Schultz, S. T. Joshi, *The Unabridged Devil's Dictionary* (Athens, Ga., 2000), 110 (first quotation); H. L. Mencken, "Historian–An unsuccessful novelist," in *A Mencken Chrestomathy* (New York, 1956), 619 (second quotation); Guy de Maupassant, *Sur L'eau* (1876) (third quotation).

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a historian on an ill-fated quest to find a rare historical document, Anatole France put it plainly: "All historical books which contain no lies are extremely tedious."[2]

But it's not simply a question of whether or not we wish our work to be "readable." The problem is particularly thorny if the one is interested in the history of people who left little documentary record of their lives. If historians wish to know the answers to questions about these seemingly unknowable folk, then we must train our imaginations to read the scant documentation we have in different ways, using what Paula Fass calls "disciplined imagination."[3] A hybrid of old school social history's focus on the details of everyday life, and cultural history's attention to narrative form and the importance of silences, gaps, and evasions in the archives, "disciplined imagination" reflects the best of both worlds. A disciplined imagination offers potential ways around or under or through the impenetrable thickets of time that separate historians from their subjects. Requiring us to dig deep into a wide variety of archives to find every scrap of evidentiary material that might shed light on the lost worlds of the past, this methodology is anything but unfettered or fanciful. And to be clear: this is not simply a search for more and more sources. In fact, as Marisa Fuentes points out, "the very call to 'find more sources' about people who left few if any of their own reproduces the same erasures and silences they experienced" in their own lives.[4] In most cases, more sources simply do not exist. Instead, we must learn to view familiar sources with fresh eyes, new questions, and healthy dose of imagination if we are to write the history of subjugated people without replicating the ways that written records produced by those who subjugated them or were complicit in their subjugation presented them to history.

In this essay, I employ a disciplined imagination to begin to recreate the world of Caroline, a fugitive slave from Tennessee, who was

[2] Anatole France, *The Crime of Sylvestre Bonnard* (New York, 1890), 6.

[3] Paula Fass, "Cultural History/Social History: Some Reflections on a Continuing Dialogue," *Journal of Social History* 37 (Autumn 2003): 39–46; 45 (quotation).

[4] Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia, 2016), 6.

found guilty and then subsequently pardoned, of poisoning a white child in a Louisville household where she was living and working in 1863. Patrick Lewis and Matt Hulbert have outlined the details of Caroline's case—her arrest, conviction, and the campaign for her release—on the *Civil War Governors of Kentucky* (CWGK) blog, providing important context for understanding how Caroline came to be in Kentucky, existing in a kind of legal limbo between slavery and freedom, which played an important role in why she found herself accused of such a heinous crime.[5] This essay takes up where Lewis and Hulbert leave off, attempting to follow Caroline the day she was released from the Jefferson County jail, the point where her already meager paper trail abruptly ends. Where does she go? What does she do? What opportunities and obstacles lie in her path? Our search begins by placing Caroline in both place and time to reconstruct the spatial context of wartime Louisville.

When Caroline stepped out of the door of the jail onto Jefferson Street in downtown Louisville, she was anything but free. Still a fugitive slave, Kentucky law required that Caroline be hired out until her rightful owner claimed her. The Emancipation Proclamation, effective on January 1, 1863, did not alter her status; Kentucky had been exempted because it had never seceded from the Union. In the slaveholding Border States, slavery remained the law of the land for another two years, until December 6, 1865, when the United States ratified the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution. Just four blocks away at the corner of Market and Second Streets, one of the city's largest (but not its only) slave pen held other fugitives waiting to be claimed by their owner or sold to a willing buyer. If anything, the war and emancipation had increased the traffic in slaves that made Louisville one of the upper South's busiest slave markets since the 1830s. Fretful owners sought to liquidate their assets, and opportunistic traders like Matthew Garrison, who owned the pen at Market and Second, obliged by feeding the stream of chattel ever

[5] Hulbert & Lewis's entire blog series can be found at "The Caroline Chronicles," *Civil War Governors of Kentucky Digital Documentary Edition* (hereinafter CWGK), available online via, civilwargovernors.org/the-caroline-chronicles/ (accessed May 5, 2017).

southward. The influx of countless fugitives like Caroline, following Union troops who they believed blazed the trail to freedom, further swelled the city's "market of souls."[6] In 1863, at the time of Caroline's release, Louisville was still a slave city and despite her valiant efforts at self-emancipation, Caroline was still a slave.

Caroline and the nearly 5,000 enslaved people who called Louisville home stood only a few miles from freedom across the Ohio River that bordered the city on the north. Like other fugitive slaves who had made their way to Louisville over the years, she may have stood on the bluffs overlooking its banks, watching the steamboats, barges, and other vessels gliding by, only to realize that it might have well as been 1,000 miles wide. Henry Bibb, who fled slavery in Shelby County, recalled the desperate futility that struck him when he finally reached the river. "I had fled to the highest hills of the forest, pressing my way to the North for refuge," he recalled. "[B]ut the Ohio River was my limit. To me it was an impassable gulf."[7] Swimming was out of the question, although some tried. The *Christian Recorder* reported in the spring and summer of 1863 "numbers were found drowned, and floated to shore, below the falls," while one couple successfully used their trunk as a buoy as they floated across to Indiana.[8] For most, however, passage across meant stowing away or trying to pass as a free person of color, a risky venture for someone without free papers. Passing also required new clothes and a new demeanor. One had to act free as well as look the part. Not all fugitives, footsore, hungry, and scared, were up to the challenge. Was Caroline, fresh out of jail and no doubt traumatized by the ordeal, ready to attempt such an endeavor? Passing required nerves of steel and a deep reserve of confidence, and if she did not possess either of those at that moment, we can hardly fault her.

The river was also a reminder of the consequences of being

[6] *The Liberator*, November 7, 1851 (quotation). On slave trading in Kentucky, see J. Winston Coleman, *Slavery Times in Kentucky* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1940); and Frederic Bancroft, *Slave Trading in the Old South* (1931; repr., Columbia, S.C., 1996).

[7] Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave* (New York, 1849), 29.

[8] *Christian Recorder*, January 31, 1863.

caught—the threat of sale. All enslaved people, fugitive or not, feared being "sold down the river," where unknown terrors waited in Mississippi, Louisiana, or Texas. If the Ohio marked slavery's edge, it did so almost mockingly.[9]

For a penniless Caroline, leaving Louisville was mostly likely out of the question. The city police, now reinforced by Union soldiers garrisoned in town, patrolled the streets looking for fugitives and free blacks alike. Louisville was home to a sizeable free black community—the largest west of Baltimore. In 1860, just over 2,000 free blacks called Louisville home, and across the Ohio River in southern Indiana, there were hundreds more. In the antebellum period, the city's free blacks had become property owners and proprietors, building churches, schools, and other civic institutions and creating a strong community that flourished in slavery's midst.

But the war had changed the relative security of free black life in Louisville. Not only did local whites persecute their free black neighbors to assuage their own anxiety or express their political opposition to the Republican Party's policies, namely emancipation, the Union Army's crack down on black mobility within the city upended the way of life that the city's free black community had come to expect. "Our churches are closed," wrote a correspondent for the *Christian Recorder*, "and a free man cannot walk after dark though he has his free papers, with the great seal of the state and county, and owns thousands of dollars' worth of property . . . and pay taxes, and support the war, and be also loyal to the government," because the Provost Marshall had ordered his guards to "flog all colored persons out after dark" and break up all assemblages, such as the regular meeting of the black Masonic order.[10] There was nowhere to go to avoid the police and soldiers. The city's main business and residential district were crammed into the downtown districts between Jefferson Street and Broadway on the north and south, respectively, with First Street on the east and Twelfth Street on the west. Approximately one mile

[9] Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb,* 72.
[10] *Christian Recorder*, April 5, 1862; January 31, 1863.

long and one and a quarter mile wide, the majority of Louisvillians, slave and free, black and white, lived in this area together.[11] Even out of jail, Caroline would still have been under surveillance along with the thousands of other slaves and free blacks in the city.

Still a slave, Caroline most likely would have been released to a white person who promised her employment. A number of influential white citizens led her pardon campaign, including Reverend John L. McKee, pastor of Chestnut Street Presbyterian Church. An alumnus and trustee of Centre College in Danville, McKee, along with two attorneys who took up Caroline's case after her conviction for poisoning the child, persuaded a number of other whites, including the "turn key" at the jail and several city policemen, to sign petitions on her behalf, pleading not just for mercy but proclaiming the condemned woman's innocence. Even more astounding, both the prosecuting attorney and the jurors who found Caroline guilty just a few months before also signed petitions asking Governor Thomas E. Bramlette to pardon her. They denounced "the flimseyest of circumstantial evidence" that had led to her conviction and brought forth new evidence indicating that the child's father may have inadvertently caused her death by putting out strychnine to poison stray dogs. Moreover, they were touched by what they viewed as Caroline's pitiful condition—destitute, "ignorant," steadfast in her claims of innocence, and vehement in her declarations of love for the child she was accused of murdering.[12] Echoing the familiar refrains of slaveholding paternalism, this narrative cast Caroline as mentally and emotionally stunted, incapable of planning and carrying out such a diabolical act.

In so many ways, Caroline typified what was at stake in the war for a growing number of Unionists in the state. By 1863, the

[11] Mary Lawrence O'Brien, "Slavery in Louisville During the Antebellum Period, 1820–1860." (MA thesis, University of Louisville, 1979), 17.

[12] John G. Barrett to Thomas E. Bramlette, September 2, 1863, Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives (hereinafter KDLA), Frankfort, Ky., available online via CWGK, discovery.civilwargovernors.org/document/kyr-0001-004-0129 (accessed April 17, 2017) (first quotation); R. F. Baird and J. H. Price to James F. Robinson, August 12, 1863, KDLA, available online via CWGK, discovery.civilwargovernors.org/document/KYR-0001-029-0503 (accessed April 17, 2017) (second quotation).

"new birth of freedom" was underway, and the narrative Caroline's supporters constructed portrayed her as the pitiable product of chattel bondage for whom the government now bore responsibility. A "'contraband' negro," the war had loosened her chains but not struck them off completely. Although they were careful not to argue that she had been railroaded, McKee and the others insisted that her unique vulnerability as a fugitive from slavery led directly to her conviction. "No one cared any thing about her," McKee wrote, "and she had a strong prejudice to meet in the mere fact of being a contraband." Similarly, J. G. Barrett, an officer at the Southern Bank of Kentucky, reasoned, "[S]he is ignorant and unable to procure the means of a proper defense." Only an illiterate fugitive slave would have been convicted so quickly on such little evidence.[13]

On one level, this narrative is accurate. Caroline was vulnerable and without financial or social support. As Matthew Hulbert explains, slaveholders' "chronic fear" of being poisoned made the enslaved women who fed them easy targets son which to pin a tragic death.[14] Emancipation only heightened those fears for white Louisvillians faced with a new influx of black refugees. Yet her advocates presented Caroline as not merely vulnerable but as intellectually inferior. They infantilized her by referring to her as a "negro girl," while estimating her age to be 21 or 22. They stressed that in her employment she had been obedient and cheerful despite the fact that her employer, the father of the child who died, was by all accounts an irritable, impatient man who chastised her frequently for any little matter. According to McKee, who had questioned her repeatedly about the child's death, she exhibited no characteristics of the cunning liar that the prosecution made her out to be. "I may be mistaken but I do not believe any one, as ignorant as she is, could tell me such a lie as she

[13] John L. McKee to Thomas E. Bramlette, September 3, 1863, KDLA, available online via CWGK, discovery.civilwargovernors.org/document/KYR-0001-004-0127 (accessed April 17, 2017).

[14] Matthew Hulbert, "The Caroline Chronicles: A Story of Race, Urban Slavery, and Infanticide in the Border South–Part VI," available online via CWGK, civilwargovernors.org/the-caroline-chronicles-a-story-of-race-urban-slavery-and-infanticide-in-the-border-south-part-vi/ (accessed April 17, 2017).

did, if guilty, and not be caught," he wrote. In other words, she was too stupid to lie.[15]

By presenting Caroline in this way, her advocates played to the expectations of their audience, namely the governor, but also whites in general, who feared and despised enslaved women and wanted reassurance that she was no threat. Her intellectual inferiority became a condition of her innocence. McKee and the others flattened her personality and obscured her perspective in order to recreate her as a worthy recipient of the governor's intervention—and it worked. But as a result, this archive reproduces the violence committed upon Caroline in her own lifetime. Stripped of her own subjectivity, she is knowable only as an ignorant contraband.[16]

And yet we may catch glimpses of another Caroline if we flip the archive and try to read it from her perspective. Although the documents do not reveal the impetus for her flight to Kentucky, they do contain fragmentary clues to her journey. She is identified as Caroline Dement several times in the pardon documents, following from her master, who is identified as "Mr. Dement."[17] But in a newspaper report on the murder, she is identified as Caroline Deman, "slave of James Deman."[18] Although "Mr. Dement" is reported to have gone into the Confederate service, leaving his slaves, including Caroline, to follow General Buell's army back to Kentucky from Tennessee, there are no Dements listed as slaveholders in Tennessee in 1850 or 1860; nor are there any Confederate service records for any Dements. There is one slaveholder named J. C. Denman living in Jefferson County, Tennessee, who owns one female "mulatto" slave, age 28. This is older

[15] John L. McKee to Thomas E. Bramlette, September 3, 1863, KDLA, available online via CWGK, discovery.civilwargovernors.org/document/KYR-0001-004-0127, (accessed April 17, 2017).

[16] On the image of the contraband, see Kate Masur, "'A Rare Phenomon of Philological Vegetation': The Word "Contraband" and the Meanings of Emancipation in the United States," *Journal of American History* 93 (March 2007): 1050–084.

[17] Caroline Dement to Thomas E. Bramlette, n.d., KDLA, available online via CWGK, discovery.civilwargovernors.org/document/kyr-0001-004-0134 (accessed April 17, 2017).

[18] *Louisville Daily Journal*, May 4, 1863.

than Caroline's estimated age of twenty or twenty-one, but neither number is more reliable than the other. Without detailed registries of their births or baptisms, enslaved people's ages were often a matter of speculation, and it would not be unusual for those estimations to be off by a number of years. The pardon narrative stresses Caroline's child-like demeanor as a way to buttress their claims of her innocence, but she may have been older than either she or McKee and her white supporters let on. Jefferson County, north of Knoxville, is also somewhat off the trail of Buell's army, which fought at the Battle of Shiloh in April 1862, before heading across southern Tennessee and then dipping down into northern Alabama. There are Denman slaveholders in Calhoun County, Alabama, in the northeastern part of the state with female slaves about the right age. It's possible that Caroline fled her owner in either location and made for the nearby Union army under Buell's command.[19]

It would have been an arduous journey. For decades, fugitive slaves had made their way towards Louisville and the Ohio River, a murky boundary between slavery and freedom. Caroline's predecessors made the perilous trip one-by-one, or by twos and threes, not in the great train of refugees that latched on to Buell's wing of the Union army and hung on across the three-hundred- or four-hundred-mile journey (depending on where they started from). During the war, entire families set out following northern troops. In fact, a great many of these refugees were women and children, crowding into makeshift "contraband" camps like the one established in 1864 at Camp Nelson.[20] Like those who fled before them, Caroline and her husband, if he traveled with her, probably had more northern destinations in mind when they were apprehended in Louisville.

The documents suggest that Caroline may have travelled with a husband, who was mentioned briefly as living with her where she

[19] *Eighth Manuscript Census of the United States* (1860), National Archives Records Administration (Washington, D.C., 1860), M653.

[20] See also Amy Murell Taylor, *Embattled Freedom: Journeys through the Civil War's Slave Refugee Camps* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2018).

had worked before her arrest, but he remained nameless.[21] If Caroline had any children, the documents do not mention them either, but in her petition to the governor, she proclaims that "[s]he is alive to the feelings of a woman and a Mother," suggesting that she did have children at some time.[22] If so, what happened to them? To entertain this question, we must once again call upon our disciplined imaginations. The 1860 slave schedule shows that along with the twenty-eight-year-old woman living on J. C. Denman's Tennessee farm were three children ages six, three, and two, most likely her children since no other women lived on the place. If this woman decided steal away to the Union lines, would she take her them with her and risk exposing them to the myriad dangers that might claim them in the hope of reaching freedom as a family? The majority of antebellum runaways were men, many of whom left wives and children behind. Likewise, the majority of women who chose to run away, although smaller in number than male runaways, did so without children. Some may have been childless, but others chose to leave their children to increase their chances of a successful escape.[23] During the war, it was much more likely for women to make their way to freedom with their children in tow, but it was not without considerable risk.

Whether Caroline left her children behind in Tennessee, or they succumbed to exposure or disease on the road, they were not with her in Louisville. She had faced a wrenching decision before she stepped foot off the Tennessee farm, a decision faced a thousand times over by enslaved women across the war-torn South. Here, another digital humanities project aids the cultivation of disciplined imagination. *Last Seen: Finding Family after Slavery* project archives "information

[21] Although Patrick Lewis believes his name may have been John Wesley. See Lewis, "The Husband," in *The Caroline Chronicles,* available online at CWGK, civilwargovernors.org/the-caroline-chronicles-a-story-of-race-urban-slavery-and-infanticide-in-the-border-south-part-v/ (accessed May 5, 2017).

[22] Caroline Dement to Thomas E. Bramlette, n.d., KDLA, available online via CWGK, discovery.civilwargovernors.org/document/kyr-0001-004-0134 (accessed April 17, 2017).

[23] On women runaways, see Barbara Krauthamer, "Kinship and Freedom: Fugitive Slave Women's Incorporation into Creek Society," in Edward E. Baptist and Stephanie M. H. Camp, eds. *New Studies in the History of American Slavery* (Athens, Ga., 2006), 148–67.

wanted" ads placed by former slaves searching for lost family members. In October 1870, a woman named Lucy Anderson placed an ad in the *Christian Recorder*, a national publication with a wide circulation, searching for the five children she had left with her former mistress near Russellville, Kentucky, in 1856.[24] Did Lucy Anderson run away and willingly leave her children? Her wording—"I left them with Sallie Anderson"—might suggest such a scenario. It is more likely that Lucy Anderson was sold or transferred to another member of the Anderson family. The narratives of separation constructed in these ads often use a form of "leave" to describe the parting. Phrases like "they left home" or "I left her" seem to mask the sometimes violent, always heart-wrenching event of being sold away or acquiring a new master or mistress in the slaveholder's extended family.

However, Lucy Anderson parted from her children, and she wanted nothing more than to be reunited with them. This guiding desire led freedmen and women to place such ads week in and week out, sometimes over decades, in the hope of finding their lost loved ones. Over time, these ads became memorials to those who had been lost and the love that endured.[25] The agony of separation united Lucy Anderson and Caroline in the shared experience of enslaved black motherhood.

We will never know with absolute certainty what became of Caroline. A series of extraordinary events—the Civil War, a little girl's tragic death, and a vigorous pardon campaign—created a paper trail that makes her visible to us, but that visibility is far from clear. Most of these sources construct a Caroline to suit their particular function. In the court documents and newspaper accounts, she is a dangerous, deceitful criminal, representative of the threat fugitive slaves pose to Kentucky's presumed neutrality as well as the threat enslaved women pose to the white families they are bound to serve. The pardon papers present a Caroline diametrically opposed to the trial documents—an

[24] "Lucy Anderson," *Last Seen: Finding Family After Slavery*, available online via, http://informationwanted.org/items/show/372 (accessed May 1, 2017).

[25] See Heather Andrea Williams, *Help Me to Find My People: The African American Search for Family Lost in Slavery* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2012).

ignorant, dependent young girl incapable of committing the heinous crime of which she is charged as well as incapable of being a full and equal citizen. Both of these depictions reveal how a "mutilated historicity" governs not only the archive of slavery but also the archive of freedom. Women like Caroline appear to us only as "disfigured and violated" products of other people's imaginings. By questioning the power that creates archival knowledge, and our reliance on the empirical certainty it presumes to produce, we can begin to recreate the lost worlds of those who, like Caroline, were denied a voice in their own history.[26]

[26] Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*, 16–17.