In the spring of 1833, twenty young African American women trekked to the Canterbury Female Seminary located in the town of Canterbury, Connecticut. They were overjoyed to partake in this opportunity for advanced schooling. But white Canterbury residents were far from joyful; in fact, they sought to drive these young women out of the town. After seventeen months of continuous harassment, abuse, and even violence, white residents got their wish as the Canterbury Female Seminary closed in September 1834. This incident marked yet another unfortunate case of northern racist violence, but it was more than that too: it reveals a larger, more complex story of African American girls and women in pursuit of knowledge in nineteenth-century America.

The controversy surrounding the Canterbury Female Seminary galvanized African American women activists, who penned essays on the value of education, set their sights on building schools, and entered the teaching profession. Sarah Mapps Douglass, an African American teacher and school proprietor in Philadelphia, was certain that education opened a path to civil rights and economic betterment. In a public letter, she offered a powerful motto to guide African American girls and women: “Be courageous; put your trust in the God of the oppressed; and go forward!” In her estimation, educated and pious African American girls and women ought to live their lives with a sense of purpose.

*In Pursuit of Knowledge* examines the educational activism of Douglass and other African American women and girls living in the antebellum Northeast. “Activism” is broadly defined here to capture the forms
of mobilization and resistance sometimes overlooked in histories that rely on more formal definitions. Few of the African American girls and women discussed in this book have been heralded as educational activists, and yet, as the following chapters will show, they engaged in concerted efforts to procure advanced schooling (beyond the primary level) and teaching opportunities for themselves and their communities. African American girls and women from working- and middle-class families used their resources and networks to establish schools that welcomed all students, regardless of race and class. These brave young women did not and could not simply go to school or teach; they had to engage in conscious, vigorous, and sustained acts of defiance and protest in their quest for an education. An African American mother trying to enroll her children in school was performing an act of protest (Figure I.1); an African American girl daring to rise to the top of her class affirmed that black intelligence was real and material; and an African American female teacher guiding African American children flouted exclusionary school laws. Rather than reading these acts of protest as disparate and singular, I read them as continuous and dynamic, becoming more and more organized and formal by midcentury.

Students and teachers like Sarah Harris, Mary E. Miles, Serena deGrasse, Rosetta Morrison, Sarah Parker Remond, Susan Paul, Sarah Mapps Douglass, Charlotte Forten, and others were educational activists—each a pioneer and forerunner in her own way. Collectively they pushed for racial (and often gender) inclusion at a time when many white Americans considered the very idea of a multiracial democracy to be contrary to the good of the nation. Eschewing a strict division between public and private spheres, these African American women activists viewed the schoolhouse as both an extension of the home and a defining civic space. They framed their argument for educational inclusion as a matter of equality and rights—hence this book’s use of the phrase “equal school rights” to describe their efforts.

During the nineteenth century, schools became sites of production—to make Americans, to turn poor white boys into ministers, or to prepare white women for civic life. The historian Hilary Moss describes public schools of this period as “an Americanizing agent, an institution whose central purpose was to fuse children from all religions and ethnicities into a single American citizenry.” Yet African American children were routinely excluded from this nationalist pedagogical project because they were viewed as noncitizens. Similarly, proponents of women’s education endorsed female seminaries as places to train women to contribute to
"If the free colored people were generally taught to read, it might be an inducement to them to remain in this country. WE WOULD OFFER THEM NO SUCH INDUCEMENT."—Rev. Mr. Converse, a colonizationist, formerly of N. H., now editor of the Southern Religious Telegraph.

In those parts of the country where the persecuting spirit of colonization has been colonized, such exclusion has ceased.

in Congress, and in the state legislatures, and fill their places with those who will reverence it. Let liberty be justified of her children! Let churches that slaveholders out of their pulpits and away from their communion tables. Let ecclesiastical judicatures, instead of electing slaveholding moderators as the Presbyterian church delight to do, silence and excommunicate those who rob the poor,—let religious and benevolent societies no longer employ slaveholders as agents, nor elect them to offices, nor invite them to make speeches at their anniversaries, nor insult God in laying on his altar " robbery for burnt offering," by systematically gathering into his treasury the plunder of the poor.

Finally. Let all who buy of the slaveholder what he steals from the slave, and thus make him their agent and proxy to perpetrate robbery, to ply the whip and clutch for them the blood-smeared product,—cense to be "parakters of other men's sins," and no longer incur the curse of God's indignant charge, "When thou sawest a thief, thou consentedst with him."

Can any man in his senses ask what the north has to do with slavery, when a Virginia Senator, at the head of the southern bar, in habits of contact with the leading men of the north for 20 years, could say: "I have never conversed with a single northern gentleman whose sentiments on the subject of slavery gave me any dissatisfaction?"

Who does not know that every year our Saratogas, Ballstons, Niagara, Tren- tons, Catskills, Nahants, Long Branches, our hotels, public conveyances, promenades, theatres, and fashionable churches are thronged with slaveholders, men whose daily business it is to steal the labor of poor men and women and children, flogged by a "driver" up to the top of their strength,—men who kidnap babies from their mothers and breed them for the market,—men whose glossy broadcloths and glittering jewelry and burnished equipage were tortured out of the forced, whipped, blood-wet toil of the unpaid slave—and yet the wealthy, the fashionable, the literary, the professedly religious of the free states mingle with these plunderers of the poor, lavish on them their complacent smiles, and choicest courtesies, accompany them on pleasure excursions, laugh, sing, dance, attend races and drink toasts with them, make parties for them, regale them on their richest wines and viands, give them public dinners, make them the orators at political meetings, assign to them posts of honor on the platforms of religious anniversaries, and call them to speak and pray in religious assemblies?

What has the north to do with slavery? Just what the boon companion of thieves, reveling over their plunder, has to do with stealing,—what the accomplice in crime has to do with the principal—he who harbors traitors, and "gives aid and comfort" to rebels, with the enemies of his country.

Figure I.1. “Colored scholars excluded from schools.” This illustration from the American Anti-Slavery Almanac (1839) depicts a man apparently barring an African American mother from leading her children into a schoolhouse. Author’s collection.
civil society but rarely felt the need to specify “only white women,” so implicit was the understanding that African American women would be excluded. The education of white men, women, and children thus flourished as schooling became increasingly bound up with social, political, and cultural obligations. African Americans, however, were considered unworthy of such responsibilities. A process of racialization was embedded within the very notions of childhood, womanhood, manhood, education, and citizenship.

Despite—and, perhaps even more intensely, because of—this exclusion, African American girls and women had educational ambitions that framed their very sense of womanhood. The historian Erica Armstrong Dunbar finds that many middle-class African American women in Philadelphia and New York City proved their respectability by their appearance, conduct, and education. Respectability signified moral excellence and contributed to a larger activist strategy to uplift the race. In fact, the scholar Linda Perkins argues that African American women were encouraged to become educated to promote this ideology of racial uplift. My book seeks to expand upon these narratives of respectability and racial uplift by tracing their specific meaning and impact in the nineteenth-century fight for equal school rights and by locating African American girls and women as actors in their own stories. I argue for a framework that puts African American girls and women at the center by viewing their actions collectively, not just individually, and by analyzing their ideas, words, and experiences as the valuable historical records they are.

What emerges is the significance of another idea shaping African American women’s actions—not just the well-documented demand for respectability but also the related yet distinct call for purpose. Purpose held different meanings for different people; for some, it meant proselytizing, pursuing meaningful work, expanding the mind, and leading a respectable life. Both men and women used the term, as did whites and African Americans. In fact, some white women teachers in the antebellum era linked their Christian faith to a notion of usefulness. To the historian Thomas Woody, “social usefulness” rationalized white women’s education, particularly at female seminaries. But the racial and gender oppression under which African American women struggled gave purpose—and purposeful womanhood more specifically—a different meaning. African American women talked about leading a purposeful life not simply to rationalize their access to advanced schooling but to motivate more young women to value themselves and to do something of value in a world that failed to recognize them as valuable.
A purposeful woman was resilient, enterprising, and active—a proud seeker of knowledge. Though the ideology of purposeful womanhood came with some restrictions, it still offered a more capacious definition of domesticity, piety, and activism since it was specific to the experiences, actions, words, and thoughts of African American girls and women in a way that the ideology of the cult of domesticity, with its racial entanglements, never could be. Purposeful womanhood afforded African American girls and women the opportunity to study, to write, and to pursue knowledge—as activists, educators, community members, leaders, and, most of all, human beings.

African American women activists articulated this idea of the purposeful woman at literary societies, where members talked about being models to their families and communities; at female seminaries, where students learned to be resilient and to ignore racial abuse; and even on the lecture circuit, where lecturers stressed intellectual vitality. In a speech on women’s intellectual improvement, Elizabeth Jennings Sr., an African American homemaker, declared that women had a duty to “make ourselves useful,” to persevere in their quest for knowledge, and to engage in civic life. Hence embodying purposefulness was a way to resist white supremacy and to challenge racialized myths that denied African American girls and women virtue, will, and intellect. More important, it was a way to navigate and be in the world. Purposefulness was a proud articulation of self and community, an assertion of humanity, and a statement of African American girls’ and women’s raison d’être. African American girls and women worked to become what they wanted to be, despite the oppressive and hostile conditions of the antebellum North.

Any pretense that the antebellum North shone like a beacon of liberty for free blacks has been shattered by historians writing about northern black activism. In particular, the Northeast, which includes six New England states plus New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, counted a little over 122,000 free blacks in 1830. By then, slavery was all but extinct in the region, but white supremacy thrived nationwide, leaving free blacks in a precarious position, to say the least. If not by law, then by custom, African American women, men, and children experienced disenfranchisement, racial discrimination in public accommodations, and economic insecurity. Facing this reality, free blacks established their own institutions, formed activist networks, and participated in reform movements from temperance and abolition to education.

The subject of African American women’s education in the United States often focuses on a single institution, Oberlin College, which adopted
a policy to admit students, regardless of sex and race, in 1835. That same year James Bradley became the first African American man to attend Oberlin, and a year later Elizabeth Latta was probably the first African American woman to do so. Oberlin was indeed an important educational destination, so much so that some African American families moved to the area. For instance, Blanche V. Harris received her early education at public schools in Monroe, Michigan, before her family relocated to the town of Oberlin so that she and her siblings could attend the college. This college, as the historian Carol Lasser rightfully points out, was the “only institution of higher education in the [antebellum] United States to offer collegiate-level training to African American women.”

But all roads did not lead to Oberlin College. In fact, the African American student population at Oberlin remained small, hovering around 4 to 5 percent of the total between 1840 and 1860. And most African American women students enrolled there hailed from the South and Midwest, not the Northeast. No doubt distance and, relatedly, cost were overriding factors. Maritcha Lyons, an African American teacher in New York, later reflected that she might have attended Oberlin, but for several reasons she changed her mind, including the “long distance—for so it was then—between myself and home [in New York].” An exclusive focus on Oberlin ignores the African American girls and women in the Northeast who were educational activists before Oberlin College even began accepting African Americans as students.

In addition to studies on Oberlin College, historians have explored the development of African American schools and literary societies, probed the rise of white opposition to African American education, and examined the struggle over racial segregation in public education, but none of this scholarship, with few exceptions, engages women or gender. Yet scholars of African American women’s history have shown that the everyday work of African American women influenced family, community life, and public culture in the nineteenth century. In Pursuit of Knowledge writes African American girls and women back into the history of early American education while also enlarging the scholarship on northern black activism. Exploring the dimensions of African American women’s educational experiences demonstrates that both race and gender shaped the struggle for equal school rights in the Northeast.

Indeed the quest for educational inclusion and equal school rights was one strand within the broader movement among African Americans for genuine freedom and equality. Sarah Mapps Douglass rejected repeated attempts by many whites to exclude African Americans from
the body politic. She vowed to help build a truly democratic and multi-racial republic, one child at a time. “Our enemies know that education will elevate us to an equality with themselves. We also know, that it is of more importance to us than gold,” she declared. Her sentiments echoed those of David Walker, an African American activist who accused many whites of being deathly afraid of black elevation. No matter the enemy, African Americans would battle for equality, rights, and inclusion, with education as their weapon.

Three major tenets characterized African American women’s educational activism: eradicating prejudice and promoting Christian love, training African American women and men to be educator-activists who would fight for civil rights, and cultivating moral and intellectual character in children and youth. Instilling moral and intellectual character in children and youth meant abiding by a biblical version of morality that stressed care, kindness, and God’s love. This perspective shaped what children and youth studied in the classroom, whether it was English grammar, botany, geography, or French. It was thought that pursuing knowledge could dramatically augment the effectiveness of African American claims for freedom, civil rights, and human dignity. In other words, education was more than just a path to literacy; it was a force multiplier allowing African American men, women, and children to live their purpose.

Examining African American women’s education makes it clear that racial and gender discrimination in public and private schools was not just local but hyperlocal. Local customs and rules determined how public, and sometimes private, schools were built, constituted, and maintained. Moreover local customs might actually be temporary. In Salem, Massachusetts, for example, the school committee initiated a policy of racial school discrimination in 1834, but at least one public grammar school did not enforce that policy, and African American students were schooled alongside white students. Salem was not an outlier, as other towns and cities, including Providence, Rhode Island, operated in like manner. Policies that shaped private and public schools in the Northeast were not fixed, and gradual changes to the composition of the student body could occur within the system of public education.

Public education was in its early stages of systematization at the turn of the century. Many towns and cities in the region had a common, or public, primary school, which offered a basic education in reading, writing, and arithmetic; some grammar schools, which provided more advanced study; and occasionally a public high school, which some educational
reformers referred to as “democracy’s college” for its egalitarian ethos and advanced curriculum.\textsuperscript{26} Educational divisions, however—like primary school and high school—did not exist in the same way as in today’s schools. Hence I examine private seminaries along with public high schools for three reasons: First, young African American women and their families did not confine their educational quest to one town but actually crisscrossed urban areas and rural communities to attend various types of schools. Second, only during the nineteenth century did the public high school gradually begin to overtake the private seminary as the preferred institution for advanced study.\textsuperscript{27} Third, this gradual shift coincided with a discursive turn among African American activists, wherein the fight for educational opportunity at private seminaries gave way to a demand for equal school rights at public high schools.

The stories that we can tell about African American women are definitely shaped by the archive. This book draws from a rich set of records that concern African American women’s experiences but are not always written by African American women themselves. Like other historians faced with the fragmented nature of the archive, I have carefully read into and interpreted archival silences and absences to provide a glimpse into the lives of African American women in the distant and not-so-distant past.\textsuperscript{28} I highlight sources such as diaries, letters, and essays produced by young African American women that offer insights into their learning, schooling, and teaching. Untapped archival and digital collections at repositories in Ohio, Connecticut, and Massachusetts and genealogical records document the family history of some of these women (appendix C).\textsuperscript{29} And I have mined other archival materials, such as school catalogues, annual reports from antislavery organizations, court records, and petitions to reconstruct broader debates about race, gender, and education and to make African American girls and women—and their desire to learn—visible and palpable.\textsuperscript{30}

Building on Bettina Aptheker’s concept of “pivoting the center,” this study also considers the meaning of solidarity and alliance within the larger struggle for African American education in the early nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{31} To that end, I pull in the observations of African American and white male abolitionists who supported young women, including Theodore S. Wright, William Cooper Nell, and William Lloyd Garrison; white school founders such as Prudence Crandall and Hiram Huntington Kellogg; and white teachers at private female seminaries and public high schools such as Elizabeth Everett and William Dodge, among others. By accepting African American girls as students, by treating them as
equals in the classroom, and by empowering them to raise their voices, these abolitionists, school founders, and teachers powerfully contributed to African American women’s schooling and learning.

*In Pursuit of Knowledge* unfolds in two overlapping parts, each comprising three chapters. Part I traces educational opportunity at private female seminaries. Chapter 1 follows the young African American women at the Canterbury Female Seminary. Nineteen-year-old Sarah Harris and others were met with hostility from white residents but responded by adopting and practicing an ethic of Christian love, a distinct form of social protest. Sarah and her peers named prejudice and other forms of wrongdoing anti-Christian, while also advocating for peaceful and loving communities inclusive of African Americans. Chapter 2 opens with fifteen-year-old Mary E. Miles fleeing the Canterbury Female Seminary and arriving at the Young Ladies’ Domestic Seminary in Clinton, New York. Founded in 1833 by Hiram Huntington Kellogg, a white Presbyterian minister and abolitionist, this seminary linked academic study in physics and botany with manual labor such as washing and cooking. Unlike the Canterbury Female Seminary, Kellogg’s seminary thrived as African American and white women students lived, worked, studied, and prayed together. These young women learned that prosocial behavior actually informed social reform initiatives. Chapter 3 offers a glimpse into the life of Rosetta Morrison, who attended the Young Ladies’ Domestic Seminary before embarking upon a short-lived teaching career in New York City. Rosetta benefited from an emerging local network of African American women teacher-activists who worked alongside African American men. Teaching and mothering not only constituted service to the race but also offered one way to lead a purposeful life. Telling Rosetta’s story enlarges the archive on African American women’s educational activism in New York City.

Part II explores the pursuit of educational justice in Massachusetts public schools. Though some African American families in the Northeast availed themselves of private schools, these institutions were capricious and undependable. Hence African American families took advantage of the expansion of public school systems in the Northeast, especially in Massachusetts, a leader in antebellum educational movements. Chapter 4 recognizes young African American women who turned Massachusetts public high schools into a battleground for equal school rights. Sarah Parker Remond and Eunice Ross were denied access to the public high schools in Salem and Nantucket, respectively, despite their strong qualifications. They both worked with allies to launch a campaign to end
racial exclusion in public schools. Chapter 5 chronicles the twenty-year struggle for equal school rights in the city of Boston. African American activists and their allies engaged in a range of protest strategies, from boycotts to lawsuits, in order to abolish racially exclusive public schools. In the process, the African American girl became an icon for educational justice. Chapter 6 examines the pedagogy of African American women teachers in Boston and Philadelphia, such as Susan Paul, Sarah Mapps Douglass, and Charlotte Forten. Analyzing didactic fiction alongside newspaper advertisements and antislavery correspondence, the chapter imagines the antebellum classroom with an African American woman teacher. Faith, activism, and commitment to character education united these teachers and their practices.

To overlook African American girls and women as educational activists in early America is to ignore their insights and perspectives, especially concerning race and gender. Fully aware that education was far from a panacea, African American women insisted nonetheless on its centrality for black achievement, opportunity, and civil rights. They, along with their allies, wished to blaze a path for themselves and the next generation. Chronicling their struggles, In Pursuit of Knowledge addresses an essential human question: What does it mean to live a purposeful life? To seek learning and to grow, some African American women might respond. But would they be welcomed into the classroom, or would they be debarred? Would they be harassed by adversaries, or could they learn in peace? These purposeful young women never knew what awaited them. But they went forward anyway.