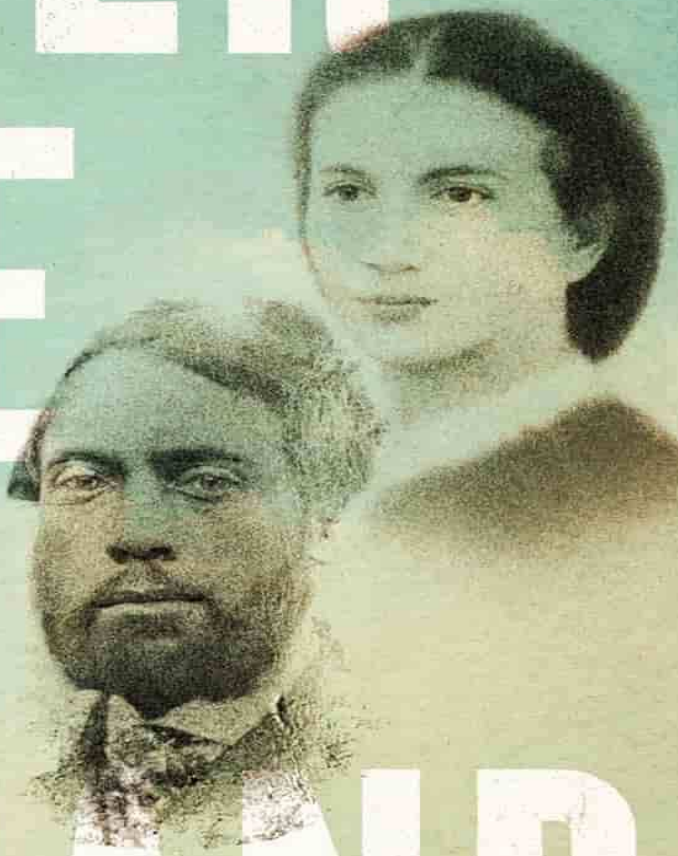
MASTER SLAVE HUSBAND WIFE

An Epic Journey from Slavery to Freedom



ILYON WOO

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An Epic Journey from Slavery to Freedom

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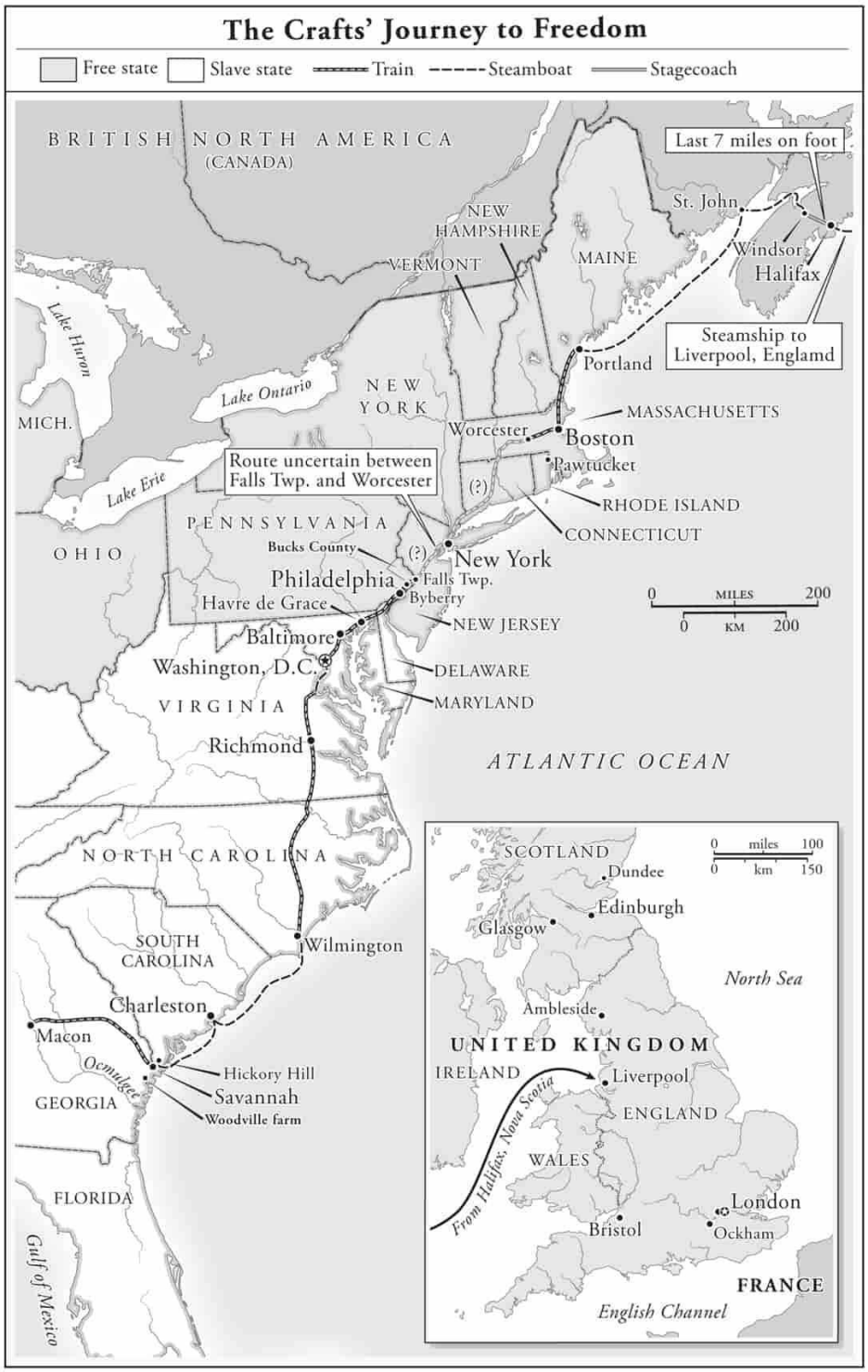
SIMON & SCHUSTER
New York London Sydney Toronto New Delhi


The Crafts' Journey to Freedom
Free state
Slave state
Train
Steamboat
Stagecoach
BRITISH NORTH AMERICA
(CANADA)
Last 7 miles on foot
St. John
Windsor
Halifax
Steamship to
Liverpool, Englamd
NEW
HAMPSHIRE
VERMONT
MAINE
Portland
Lake Huron
Lake Ontario
NEW
YORK
MICH.
MASSACHUSETTS
Worcester
Boston
Pawtucket
Route uncertain between
Falls Twp. and Worcester
(?)
Lake Erie
RHODE ISLAND
PENNSYLVANIA
CONNECTICUT
OHIO
Bucks County
(?)
New York
Philadelphia
Falls Twp.
Byberry
Havre de Grace
0 MILES 200
0 KM 200
NEW JERSEY
Baltimore
Washington, D.C.
DELAWARE
MARYLAND
VIRGINIA
Richmond
ATLANTIC OCEAN
NORTH CAROLINA
SCOTLAND
0 miles 100
0 km 150
Dundee
Edinburgh
Glasgow
SOUTH
CAROLINA
Wilmington
North Sea
Charleston
Ambleside
Macon
UNITED KINGDOM
Ocmulgee
IRELAND
Liverpool
Hickory Hill
Savannah
GEORGIA
Woodville farm
From Halifax, Nova Scotia
ENGLAND
WALES
FLORIDA
London
Bristol
Ockham
Gulf of Mexico
FRANCE
English Channel

To Joon and to Kian, Oan, and Nari

OVERTURE

REVOLUTIONS OF 1848

In 1848 William and Ellen Craft, an enslaved couple in Georgia, embarked upon a five-thousand-mile journey of mutual self-emancipation across the world. Theirs is a love story that begins in a time of revolution—a revolution unfinished in the American War for Independence, a revolution that endures.

This story opens in that year of global democratic revolt, when, in wave upon wave—Sicily, Paris, Berlin, Vienna, and all across Europe—the people rose up against tyranny, monarchy, the powers that be. News of these uprisings ricocheted, carried across the seas by high-speed clipper ships, overland by rail, and in defiance of time and space by the marvelous Electro-Magnetic Telegraph. From New York down to New Orleans, Americans raised torches in celebration, sure that these revolutions rhymed with their own.

Americans watched Europe, while the ground shifted beneath their own feet.

In 1848 the war with Mexico was over, and the United States laid claim to five hundred thousand square miles of new territory. More than six states would emerge from this gigantic stretch of land, including California, where the discovery of gold would bring a rush of “forty-niners” the next year. The spirit of Manifest Destiny ran high: that will “to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federated self-government.”

But cracks were forming along with this movement. A global pandemic, the cholera, was traveling fast. New immigrants joined the nation from Ireland, Germany, China, and other distant lands, challenging ideas of what an American could be. The two-party political system was breaking down, as voters became polarized over the engine that powered all that national growth: slavery. Politicians came to blows over the future of slavery in the territories, the rights of slavers, the question of who would inhabit the

nation’s expanded lands. Meanwhile, those who could not claim the rights of American citizenship demanded the rights denied them.

In July 1848, at the historic first Woman’s Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York, signers of a “Declaration of Sentiments” proclaimed, “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men *and women* are created equal.” A leader among them was Frederick Douglass, who connected the revolutions in Europe to America’s, and denounced the gulf between American aspirations and realities. As he would declare a few years later, one memorable July Fourth: “There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of the United States, at this very hour.”

Still, Douglass held out hope. Change was coming: “The arm of commerce has borne away the gates of the strong city. Intelligence is penetrating the darkest corners of the globe. It makes its pathway over and under the sea, as well as on the earth. Wind, steam, and lightning are its chartered agents. Oceans no longer divide, but link nations together. From Boston to London is now a holiday excursion.

“Space,” he said, “is comparatively annihilated.”

Across space and time, in Macon, Georgia, William and Ellen Craft would also find inspiration in the American Declaration of Independence, whose words they knew, even as they were forbidden to read them—words that were read aloud in celebration every year on the very courthouse steps where William had once been sold.

This line caught their attention: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that from these, are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” So, too, did this biblical verse, spoken by the apostle Paul: “God made of one blood all nations of men” (Acts 17:26). And in these words, William and Ellen Craft found fodder for a revolution of their own.

On their revolutionary travels, they did not swim, run, or hide, navigating by starlight. No Underground Railroad assisted them out of the South. Rather, they moved in full view of the world, harnessing the latest technologies of their day: steamboats, stagecoaches, and, above all, an actual

railroad, riding tracks laid by the enslaved, empowered by their disguise as master and slave, by the reality of their love as husband and wife.

They would ride these same technologies to become celebrities on the lecture circuit and then defy a merciless new Fugitive Slave Act that helped draw the nation toward Civil War. In their own time, the Crafts were hailed as emblems of a new American Revolution. One of the most famed orators of their day prophesied that "future historians and poets would tell this story as one of the most thrilling tales in the nation's annals, and millions would read it with admiration." Theirs is a story that now, more than ever, requires retelling and remembering.

The story they lived is not neatly told. It offers no easy dividing lines between North and South, Black and White—no single person or place to blame. It is a story that holds the entire United States accountable and resists the closure of a happily ever after.

The Crafts passed through Washington, DC, at a time when enslaved men, women, and children were marched in shackles past the Capitol; when US congressmen looked out onto the streets to see them, and some wished to avert their eyes. They lived in Boston at a time when not only Southern slavers but also Americans across the country would have sent them back into bondage.

But they also lived in a time when people stood together with them—men and women of many colors, thousands strong in Boston's Fanueil Hall, who put aside political and other differences, if only for a moment. And when Frederick Douglass thundered, "Will you protect, rescue, save these people from being re-enslaved?" the thousands roared, "Yes!" in resounding affirmation, determined to do what was right, even if it meant sacrifice.

This book tells the story of the Crafts' revolt during the combustive years of 1848 to 1852, when the trajectories of the couple and the nation collide most dramatically. Though propelled by narrative, this work is not fictionalized. Every description, quotation, and line of dialogue comes from historic sources, beginning with the Crafts' own 1860 account, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom.* The story is also informed by historical materials beyond the scope of the Crafts' presentation, all detailed at the end of this book.

These sources make it possible to tend to questions such as: Why did the Crafts escape when they did? What inspired them? Who were their enslavers? What were the sleights of hand behind the magic they pulled off? Behind

these questions, larger ones loom. Why is such an epic American story not better known? Or: What is it about this unforgettable story that makes it so difficult for us, as a nation, to remember?

Here is a picture of a couple and a nation in motion: a moving panorama, to reference a medium of the age. At heart, this is an American love story—not in the fairy-tale sense, but an enduring relationship between a man and a woman, a couple and a country. It begins in the earliest hours of a late-December morning.

MACON

Day 1, Morning: *Wednesday, December 20, 1848*

THE COTTAGE

It is predawn in Macon, Georgia, and at four o'clock, the city does not move. The air is windless, chill, barely stirring the high, dark pines. Cotton Avenue is quiet, too, the giant weighing scales suspended, for the moment, behind closed warehouse doors. But the Ocmulgee River flows along the eastern shore, and so too, an enslaved couple moves, ready to transform, in a cabin in the shadow of a tall, white mansion.

They have scarcely slept these past few nights, as they rehearsed the moves they now perform. Ellen removes her gown, forgoing a corset, for once, though she needs to reshape her body in other ways, flatten or bind the swell of her breasts. She pulls on a white shirt, with a long vest and loose coat, slim-legged pants, and handsome cloak to cover it all. She does up the buttons, breathing in the late-December cold. Christmas is coming soon.

She dresses by candlelight, which flickers through the cottage, "her" workshop, locked with a key, the least of which she'll lose if she is caught. All around are the tools of her trade—workbaskets stocked with needles and thread, pins, scissors, cloth. Her husband's handiwork is in evidence as well: wood furniture, including a chest of drawers, now unlocked.

Ellen slips her feet into gentleman's boots, thick soled and solid. Though she has practiced, they must feel strange, an inch of leaden weight pulling each sole to the ground, an extra inch she needs. Ellen may have inherited her father's pale complexion, but not his height. Even for a woman, she is small.

William towers beside her, casting long shadows as he moves. They must do something with her hair, which he has just cut—gather it up, pack it. To leave it behind would be to leave a clue for whoever eventually storms down the door.

There are the final touches: a silky black cravat, also the bandages. Ellen wears one around her chin, another around her hand, which she props in a sling. She has more protection for her face, green-tinted glasses and an extra-tall silk hat—a "double-story" hat, William calls it, befitting how high it

rises, and the fiction it covers. These additions hide her smoothness, her fear, her scars.

Ellen stands, now, at the center of the floor, transformed. To all appearances, she is a sick, rich, White young man—"a most respectable-looking gentleman," in her husband's words. He is ready too, in his usual pants and shirt, with only one new item, a white, secondhand beaver hat, nicer than anything he has worn before, the marker of a rich man's slave.

To think it had been a matter of days. Four days since they had first agreed to the idea, first called it possible. Four days of stuffing clothing into locked compartments, sewing, shopping, mapping the way. Four days, they would claim, to prepare for the run of a lifetime. Or, a lifetime of preparation, narrowed down to this.

William blows out the light.

They kneel and pray in the sudden dark.

They stand and wait, breath held.

Is that someone listening, watching outside? Just beyond their door is the back of the Collins house, where Master and Mistress should be asleep in bed.

The young couple, holding hands, step to the front of the cottage, as gently as they can. William unlocks the door, pushes it open, peers out. There is just the circle of trees, a whispering of leaves. Such stillness: he thinks of death. Nevertheless, he gives the sign to go.

Spooked, Ellen bursts into tears. They had borne witness to people torn by bloodhounds, beaten and branded, burned alive. They had seen the hunts, the frenzy around a slave chase. All this, they know, might be in store for them. They draw back in, holding each other one more time.

Each will have to begin the journey alone, on a separate path through Macon. William will take the shortest route available and hide aboard the train. It would be a danger for them both if he was recognized. The dangers may be even greater, though, for Ellen, who must travel a longer road. It would be bad enough for her to be caught trying to escape at all. How much worse for Master Collins to awake to learn that his wife's favored lady's maid dared to be a gentleman like him. Collins was a person of careful method, who believed that a punishment should fit a crime, and be instructive. What kind of instruction he would provide in such a case could only be imagined. William's thought: double vengeance.

As for the mistress, if she had ever interceded on behalf of her favorite slave—also her half sister—it is unlikely she would do so here, not if Ellen were found dressed in a man's pants, possibly from the master's own cloth. Ellen might have been spared at previous sales, but not this time. At the very least, she and William would be separated for good, likely after being made to witness one another's pain—if, that is, they remained alive.

Now silent, Ellen centers herself in prayer, in the faith that she will move by as she battles for mastery over every inch of the one thousand miles to come: faith in a power greater than any earthly Master, such as she will pretend to be. Stilled, she owns the moment.

"Come, William," she speaks.

Once more, the door opens. The two step out, their footfalls soft, like light on water. William turns the lock, pockets the key, a drop of metallic weight. They creep across the yard, to the street, near the house of the sleeping slavers. With a touch of hands, they part. When they next meet—or so they hope—they will take their places as master and slave, escaping to reunite as husband and wife.

WILLIAM

William knew he needed to move fast. The train to Savannah did not leave until seven o'clock, giving him three more hours of darkness. But Macon would have its eyes wide open.

Having worked both as a hotel waiter and, in the early-morning hours, as a cabinetmaker, William was familiar with the city's waking rhythms: the hotel breakfasts, served hot before sunrise; the movement of porters hauling luggage to the curb for an even earlier train to Atlanta; the shuttling of trunks and hatboxes, carpetbags and passengers onto hacks across town. The market would be abuzz before daybreak, while vendors and wagons would crowd the street by city hall. Where the Collins house stood on Mulberry Street was quieter, but one never knew. Opposite the house lived Eugenius Nisbet with his wife and twelve children, including babies who might cause wakings at any hour. William would have to take care not to be observed.

It was a fraction of a mile in total from the Collins mansion to the railroad: roughly fourteen hundred feet down Mulberry, another thousand feet to cross the bridge at Fifth Street, then a final short walk to the station to the eastern side of the city. But of the one thousand miles to come, this first half mile would be among the longest.

William was conspicuous, being more than six feet tall, broad shouldered, and handsome, by all accounts. Even in a crowd, he stood out, a head taller than the average American man. He moved past the mansion with his hat low, its fuzzy white brim casting a shadow over his deep-set eyes, his high cheekbones, the dark skin that marked him as a slave.

In Georgia, any Black person was legally presumed to be enslaved until proven otherwise. William could be questioned at any time, not only by slave patrols but also by any White person, who was authorized to "moderately correct" him if he did not respond. It would be illegal for William to fight back. For an enslaved person to maim or bruise a White person—unless under the command or in the defense of another White person—was a capital crime.

For these reasons and more, William was required to have the pass he carried. Only with this precious slip of paper, which approved travel to a specific destination for a set time, could he travel legally. By law, the punishment for being caught without a pass was “a whipping on the bare back, not exceeding twenty lashes.”

The pass had not come from William’s official owner (his third enslaver, a young man named Ira Hamilton Taylor, whom he scarcely saw), but from his main employer, the cabinetmaker who had trained him since boyhood. William had made arrangements with his owner to pay for the “privilege” of hiring himself out and wore a special badge that identified him as a skilled laborer. The cost of this arrangement was high, especially since William had to cover all his personal expenses, but it gave him space to earn wages, and some mobility.

William had asked for permission to accompany his wife on a journey about twelve miles away, to see a dying relative. The cabinetmaker had been reluctant, for the holidays were a busy time at the shop. As he issued the pass, he told William that he would have to return by Christmas. But William intended that he and Ellen would be in a free city, Philadelphia, by Christmas Day—even farther north, hopefully, by the time they were discovered missing. They planned three moves:

from Macon, a train to Savannah, Georgia;

from Savannah, a steamboat to Charleston, South Carolina; and

from Charleston, a final steamship to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and beyond.

They aimed for Canada, a land without slavery. Not only did William’s latest enslaver have roots in the North, but Ellen was held captive by one of the most enterprising middlemen in Macon, with friends and business partners all along the eastern coast. It would be safer to set their sights beyond the nation. But first, there was Macon to cross.

William was intimately acquainted with the city’s downtown, where he worked and slept most nights, all except for the one night a week he was allowed to spend with Ellen, sometimes more, if they could sneak in extra meetings, as they had the past several nights. Mulberry led straight down to Fifth Street, by the bridge. But William might have chosen a different route this morning, one that would avoid his usual places, and Court-house square.

It was here that he had seen fugitives handcuffed, bloodied, limping along, their bodies so ravaged from battles with slave hunters and bloodhounds that

they could barely make their way to the jailhouse on the southwest corner. Then there was the courthouse. High on the steps of the distinguished edifice where some went for justice, others were sold. Public slave auctions were held on the first Tuesday of every month, with notices posted on the courthouse door, and in the newspapers, where human beings were listed for sale beside furniture, house lots, and livestock. William had once stood here, alongside his younger sister. Now he vowed not to be taken alive.

William moved swiftly in the darkness, venturing toward the light cast by the Fifth Street Bridge, the only place to cross the river for miles around. Directly over the Ocmulgee, along the road pointed toward the state capital, Milledgeville, lay more hotels and stores, including that of a self-emancipated man named Solomon Humphrey, known as “Free Sol,” who had purchased freedom himself and his family members, and now bought and sold cotton. It was said that Humphrey hired all White clerks in his shop, and that he had White guests to dinner, though it was also said he was careful to serve his guests himself. For William, Humphrey’s rare path to freedom was a road not taken, or denied. Whatever hopes William might once have harbored of pursuing such a path—of buying himself and Ellen, of having some kind of freedom where he now stood—disappeared, he knew, as soon as he defied the law by escaping.

Having successfully crossed the river, William crept past the stores and the hotel by the depot, not knowing what sleepless guest might be up already. He ventured past the lone ticket booth, the warehouses behind it, and toward the sleeping train. He slipped into the designated Negro car.

It was the first successful step in the plan, his passage to the east side of the river—a return. His parents, whose memory he kept, once lived in that direction. As he waited for Ellen, he could only pray that he would not lose her, as he had lost them.

ELLEN

Ellen had nearly three hours to spend in the city she had known since she was eleven years old. Macon must have seemed bewildering, outsized, then, when she had been first separated from her mother and disposed of as a wedding present for her half-sister-turned-enslaver. The city was scarcely older than Ellen, carved up from ancient lands once marked as Muscogee or Creek. (Ellen's father, who counted land surveying among his many trades, had helped draw the city lines himself.) But Macon had grown up fast and would grow even faster, fueled by cotton money from the surrounding country and its prime spot on the river.

The gambling and lawlessness that once plagued the town had settled down by the time of Ellen's arrival. Shade trees were planted to block the heat, and houses went up in orderly lines, though cattle, hogs, and other beasts still roamed wild. Among all the grand new homes studding the city grid, there had been none finer than the mansion built for Ellen's young mistress. Three stories high, bright white, with six front pillars and ample wings, the mansion promised empire, if superficially. (The brick house was plastered and painted to evoke marble.)

From the shadow of this building, Ellen emerged, dressed like a man who might inherit such a home—a man for whom Macon was a playground. There were excellent hotels with day rates, hung with sensuous paintings in the style of Titian and Correggio. Eating houses served venison and oysters, imported nightly by railroad. Entertainment included bowling saloons and a theater, scandalously converted from a church. Macon offered most anything that might appeal to a rich young man with a freely spending hand.

Soon the stores would open, and a gentleman of Ellen's appearance might get a shave or have his hair washed and oiled at the Macon Shaving Saloon. Amid debates over the virtues of facial hair, the *Georgia Telegraph* recently quoted one young lady declaring her preference for the clean shaven. In a few years, the popularity of the sweet, boyish look would fully give way to a

chunkier, bearded, paternal style. Fortunately for Ellen, this was not yet the case.

But of all the sites where Ellen might have lingered, the one that would have drawn her most powerfully, in spirit if not in body, was the house where her mother remained enslaved by the man who was Ellen's enslaver—and her father.

James Smith was over six feet tall and big bodied, with a ruddy complexion and voice "like a bassoon" when he let it roar. As described by his son Bob's friend, the "old major" was a "rich cotton planter who… had high notions of personal honor, who took his 'drams' when he felt like it, used profane language except in the company of women."

Recalled as hot tempered but generous, Smith had been known to dispense a mighty hospitality from his mansion in Clinton, Georgia, where he had lived before moving across the river to Macon. There, from behind the shade of double piazzas that kept his loved ones cool, it was said he "sold his crop and occasionally a negro, thought himself a good citizen, and felt sure that he was sound on politics and fox hunting." There, as further recalled, he "worked many negroes, to whom he was kind in his own imperious way."

More than Smith's voice and personality were outsized. When Ellen was growing up, Smith was one of the most powerful men in Clinton, then the seat of Jones County. Famous for its hospitality and practical jokesters, Clinton was where ladies ventured for dress fabrics, and the devout came to worship. Plantations spread wide, and Samuel Griswold, a Connecticut Yankee, made a fortune in cotton gins—the invention associated with another New Englander, Eli Whitney. But darker profits also flourished. One day, an infamous slave trader, Hope Hull Slatter, would announce his business in Baltimore with a sign reading: "From Clinton, Georgia." No other words were needed to advertise his credentials or what his business was about.

A child of the republic, Smith had arrived in this area as a young man, with his nineteen-year-old bride and little more. He had inherited from his father—a South Carolinian Revolutionary War veteran—not so much money or property as a taste for movement and independence, borne of rebellion, which he would pass on. But the man who would become Ellen Craft's father was a restless spirit who used his imagination, gumption, and geographic

sense to shape his world. He became a city planner, merchant, attorney, justice, and elected official. Early on, he laid claim to a little land, his wife, one baby, and one slave. By midcentury, he had more land, houses, and carriages than he could occupy at once. He was also a major enslaver, with 116 souls named among his possessions, among them, Ellen's mother.

Two stories about her father would have been familiar to Ellen from the days of her childhood and just before. The first testified to his extreme wealth. When the Marquis de Lafayette swung through the region, looking younger with his fake hair than his bald-headed son (named Georges Washington de Lafayette), James Smith was among those invited to a feast. He had a seat in Lafayette's orbit, near enough to be noticed when he fainted upon discovering that a thief had emptied his pocketbook of as much as $5,000 in notes.

Smith's second claim to fame came when he served as the defense attorney in a sensational case of identity theft involving the impersonation of a prodigal rich man's son who stood to inherit one of the largest fortunes in the county. The scion in question, Jesse Bunkley (nephew to Clinton's infamous slave trader Hope Hull Slatter), was called "a wild, bad boy." He had been kicked out of college and stolen a horse before being presumed dead in New Orleans. Then, years later, James Smith received mail from a young man claiming to be Bunkley.

There were many reasons for Smith to be skeptical. Jesse was sandy haired and snub nosed, with hazel eyes and a chewed-up middle finger, while this man had dark hair, a hooked nose, blue eyes, and all his fingers intact. When handed a pen, the young man—supposedly trained in the Classics—had trouble writing his own name. But Smith summoned more than one hundred witnesses, transforming the courthouse into a veritable Georgian circus, especially when the testimony turned to the delicate matter of whether the unusual markings on the accused's private parts—mismatched testicles, and a strange "ring of hair"—matched Bunkley's.

In the end, the young man, Elijah Barber, was convicted as a swindler, but some remained adamant that a mistake had been made. The trial was widely debated and no doubt known to every level of Smith's household. It may well have come to the attention of his children—one of whom, Ellen, may have absorbed both the dangers and possibilities of impersonation. Here, after all, was an enterprising, dark-haired nobody who could scarcely hold a pen, but