

Abolishing Slavery in Motion: Foreign Captivity and International Abolitionism in the Early United States

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During the late eighteenth century, servants, apprentices, and free people of African descent were taken into captivity in one nation and enslaved in another. Abolishing this kind of international slavery in motion comprised an element of the antislavery agenda for abolitionists in the United States. Existing work on the early antislavery movement has focused largely within national contexts and on abolitionists' dogged attempts to abolish the institution of slavery. Yet abolitionists had to create cosmopolitan antislavery strategies to dismantle the kinds of coerced mobility that rendered people enslaved in foreign realms. Captives and their abolitionist allies worked to make freedom papers a key part of antislavery law. Scholars have ably shown that freedom papers could be protectors of liberty, and examining attempts to eradicate slavery in motion helps to unpack why and how documents acquired important power. Crafting antislavery law and politics to end the coerced mobility of servants, apprentices, and free people in the wider Atlantic world fit within a broad antislavery agenda in the early United States.