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Date **24 July 1996**
Abstract

This essay reconstructs the unexplored history of a group of women who claimed a place for themselves in the male-dominated public sphere of Toronto in the early 1850s. The history of these women, who took a public stand on the issues of slavery, abolition and the fugitives escaping to Canada, does not fit seamlessly into the history of the struggle for women's rights nor the history of women's philanthropy. While the anti-slavery women engaged in some of the same activities as these better-known subjects of women's history, they brought a distinctive set of social and political concerns to their activism. Troubled by the influx of destitute fugitive slaves arriving in Canada from the United States, the potential extension of slavery on the North American continent, and the implications these developments could have for the free Christian nation they were building in Canada, these women took advantage of the public sphere to voice and act on their concerns about the moral progress of society, especially in their city. They constructed a distinctly feminine political culture that represented themselves and their activities as conforming to the canons of femininity and domesticity, while it enabled the women to secure access and influence for themselves - albeit limited access and influence - in the public sphere.

With aspirations to influence public opinion, but without formal positions of authority in the public sphere, these women called upon the moral authority that nineteenth-century society ascribed to women to underwrite their public activities. Feminine moral authority affirmed the righteousness of the values and beliefs that underlay their public activities, and it justified their attempts to persuade others to espouse similar beliefs. It was the foundation upon which these women tried to build a collective political culture and speak on behalf of all Canadian women in the public sphere. Construed as gender-specific, this
moral authority rested, however, not only on the distinction of gender, but also on a combination of social attributes and cultural distinctions that included the distinction of race.

While there is no doubt that positions of authority in the public sphere of mid-nineteenth-century Toronto were dominated by white men, the inroads the women achieved and the roadblocks they confronted suggest that the public sphere was undergoing considerable change in the early 1850s. To be sure, their attempts to influence the formation of public opinion were indicative of larger social and political changes underway in Canadian society -- changes that historians have only begun to consider.
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I am especially thankful to Paul Krause for encouraging me to pursue this intriguing, but unstudied, topic. He allowed me to meander through the literature, find my own questions and construct my own arguments. For his patience and his implicit faith that I would eventually finish writing and let him read this essay, I am very grateful. Once I finally let him read a draft, his insights clarified my thinking and improved the final version of this thesis immeasurably. That I appreciated his meticulous editing should go without saying.

Most of all, I am infinitely indebted to my husband, Bob, for patiently putting up with my peculiar work habits and respecting my work for what it means to me.
1. Introduction

In January of 1853, the Toronto Globe published an appeal to Americans imploring them to abolish the system of slavery in their nation. Remarkable about this particular attempt on the part of an independent group of Canadians to influence the social, economic and political order of the United States was the fact that women were the force behind it. They wrote their indictment of American progress with bold words drawn from their distinctively Canadian view of slavery:

Living so near to the scene of slavery and coming daily into contact with its bitter fruits, in the persons of those unhappy fugitives who have been compelled by law to seek an asylum in our country, we cannot but deeply deplore its continuance in the world, and especially in your mighty nation -- a nation whose influences for good might be coextensive with the civilized world, were it not for this foul blot, which mars its glory and paralizes [sic] its power. . . . We ask you to ponder seriously and dispassionately the fact that the system which generates such evils, is becoming daily more deeply rooted in your soil, and hence more difficult to be cured or eradicated.

The United States was a model of material progress to Canadians, but, to these women, the "evils" of American progress undermined something just as important to a nation: moral progress. Inspired and affirmed by their faith in evangelical Christianity and British liberty, they referred Americans to their scripture and their Constitution, to the laws of God and the "wishes of the immortal Washington", to persuade them to abolish the use of slave labor.

From north of the border, they organized consciously and exclusively as women to exert moral and political pressure which they and their supporters believed was well within "the legitimate province of women to carry out into practical action", even though they did not possess any political rights.¹

The Canadian anti-slavery women who established the Toronto Ladies’ Association for the Relief of Destitute Colored Fugitives managed to negotiate a path that mediated between

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their exclusion from formal politics and the prescriptions of nineteenth-century femininity. They carved a place for themselves in public life, creating a women’s political culture that did not seek or require formal rights or gender equality guaranteed by the state. Instead, this political culture arose from the moral authority these women exercised in private life -- the same authority they and their supporters thought needed to be exercised in mid-nineteenth-century public life.

Most historians trace women’s organized public activism in Canada as far back as the late-nineteenth century, generally to the founding in 1877 of the “discreetly-named” women’s suffrage group - the Toronto Women’s Literary Club - and related reform organizations of the 1880s. The preponderance of scholarship that focuses on the period surrounding the turn-of-the-century testifies to the enduring interest in first-wave feminism. Few historians, however, have looked to the preceding decades of the nineteenth century for earlier evidence of women’s participation in Canadian public life.²

Winning the right to vote is a logical, but limited, focus of study for historians of the disenfranchised. Suffrage, after all, promised women a voice in choosing legislators and leaders. The political voice embodied in the right to vote, however, is not synonymous with power or authority in society or politics. Indeed, the historian Jane Rendall argues that “the symbolic importance of the vote” has obscured the study of nineteenth-century women’s

political culture and history. Exclusion from parliamentary politics, she contends, did not prevent British women from asserting their authority and influencing public life in the nineteenth century. With a similar perspective on American women's political history, Paula Baker defines politics "in a relatively broad sense to include any action, formal or informal, taken to affect the course or behavior of government or the community." Baker and Rendall's use of the terms politics and political recognizes that political action can take place outside the formal apparatus of the state. The Canadian historian Gail Campbell put forward a similar argument in her study of women temperance advocates petitioning the New Brunswick legislature. Such a broad definition of politics enables these historians to locate women engaging in political activism and developing women's political cultures long before women won - or even organized to fight for - the equal right to participate in formal politics.³

Adopting a similar approach in this essay, I attempt to recover some of the political dimensions of nineteenth-century Canadian women's public activism. The Toronto anti-slavery women aspired to influence the beliefs and behavior of various groups within the North American community. While their anti-slavery activities represented benevolent, socially-oriented reforms, and while they construed them as extensions of their domestic and familial responsibilities, such descriptions fail to account for the authority they assumed and influence they exercised in their public activities. I assume that social and political activism are not mutually exclusive categories, but rather strongly interconnected and mutually reinforcing facets of public activism.⁴ To study activist women at the intersection of social


and political life, the concept of the public sphere articulated by the political theorist Jürgen Habermas offers a useful interpretive lens.

The term, public sphere, appears in many works of gender and women’s history, but it is seldom used in the sense Habermas described. Instead, many historians have adopted the nineteenth-century language of separate spheres in which woman’s sphere (or, the domestic sphere) is opposed to and separated from the public (and implicitly man’s) sphere. While useful for interpreting cultural prescriptions for woman’s sphere, the model provided by the notion of separate spheres offers a poor road map for understanding the vast, undifferentiated territory of the public sphere. Moreover, the implied gulf between the two spheres offers no way to interpret the overlap or interplay between them nor to understand how developments in one sphere may influence the other.\(^5\)

Habermas’ concept of the public sphere articulates a more complex, but decidedly unfeminist, model that has only recently begun to suggest new interpretations of women in public life to feminist historians. Habermas conceived of the public sphere as an exclusively bourgeois male domain arising from society and standing in opposition to the state. He described the public sphere as “a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed”, and he located it historically:

As a sphere between civil society and the state, in which critical public discussion of matters of general interest was institutionally guaranteed, the liberal public sphere took shape in the specific historical circumstances of a developing market economy. In its clash with the arcane and bureaucratic practices of the absolutist state, the emergent bourgeoisie gradually replaced a public sphere in which the ruler’s power was merely represented before the people with a sphere in which state authority was publicly monitored through informed and critical discourse by the people.

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With the achievement of responsible government and the growth of commercial, transportation and communication networks emanating from Toronto, something approximating Habermas’ public sphere emerged in that mid-nineteenth-century city. In this public sphere, middle-class men became the key arbiters of social and political authority, injecting their values and interests into public debates over the general interest of society as a whole. The public sphere in which their deliberations took place and public opinion took shape, however, was not constituted as a single forum where admission could be denied or granted, but rather as a diffuse network of communication. Using common pathways that started with informal personal, business and religious contacts, discussions that began privately among men became public and political in association meetings, public assemblies and on the pages of newspapers. While women were denied participation at critical points along these pathways, they were not excluded from all the arenas where discussion took place. In particular, the press and voluntary associations provided urban women of the middle class with unprecedented access to public debate. As the press and other means of public communication expanded the public sphere beyond its bourgeois male constituency, women used similar pathways, developing their own “counterpublics,” in the words of one political theorist, to access and influence the dominant arenas of public opinion formation.6

With aspirations to influence public opinion, but without formal positions of authority in the public sphere, these Toronto anti-slavery women marshaled the moral authority

conferred on the roles carried out by women in the family and the church to underwrite their collective interests and actions taken in the public sphere. Nineteenth-century society attributed moral authority to women, and thus enabled them to attack the problems of vice, corruption and immorality that threatened their families, communities, and even their nation. This moral authority offered women a means of publicly expressing their vision of Canadian society, complete with its problems and their solutions. It affirmed the righteousness of their values and beliefs, gave them confidence in the future of their society, and gave them confidence in themselves as participants in its creation and its direction. Feminine moral authority represented the foundation upon which these women tried to build a collective political culture and speak on behalf of all Canadian women in the public sphere.  

Using some of the relics of that public sphere - the newspapers, pamphlets and other publications that recorded women’s anti-slavery activities - this essay begins to reconstruct a narrative of mid-nineteenth-century women’s public activism. The historical record on which this research draws is markedly thin. None of the women’s publications appear to be extant; their own words are available to us only in reprinted, and often excerpted, form on the pages of contemporary newspapers. But by piecing together the fragments of information that remain about their activities, and public reactions to them, a promising, yet admittedly incomplete, narrative of women’s activism in the public sphere emerges. A central question posed by this research is two-fold: it asks not only how and to what extent these anti-slavery women gained access to the public sphere, but also how and to what extent the public sphere

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7 This development, “in which middle-class Anglo-Saxon women purported to speak for all Canada’s women,” is usually dated from the turn-of-the-century and was recently discussed in Lykke de la Cour, Cecelia Morgan and Mariana Valverde, “Gender Regulation and State Formation in Nineteenth-Century Canada,” Colonial Leviathan: State Formation in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Canada, eds. Allan Greer and Ian Radforth (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1992): 18.
granted or denied access to them. It seeks to shed light on the development of a gender-specific political culture within the context of public life in mid-nineteenth-century Canada.

Many historians studying women's public activism have looked to slavery and the popular movements to abolish it launched in Britain and the United States as moments in those national histories that illuminate the overlap between woman's sphere and the public sphere. Indeed, slavery and abolition are major themes in those national histories. The subject of anti-slavery activism, however, has never occupied the minds of many Canadian historians. Considering the volume of scholarship on anti-slavery activism in Canada alongside that of the United States and Britain, one might infer that the lack of historical interest stems from Canadians' lack of involvement in the large-scale use of slavery or the slave trade. This explanation assumes that Canadians were on the sidelines of the anti-slavery debate and had no interest in or control over its outcome. Some Canadian historians, however, deny the validity of such assumptions.⁸

Canadians witnessed a growing number of blacks crossing their borders to escape the misery of slavery in the American South and the threat of discrimination and reprisal in the North. Blacks migrated in small, but steady, numbers throughout the early part of the nineteenth century. As the conditions of life in the northern states became increasingly racist

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and hostile and as northern state and local governments passed laws limiting their rights to take up residence and hold jobs, increasingly large numbers of blacks sought refuge in Canada. Although small communities of blacks had settled in the Maritimes with the assistance of the British government after the American Revolution and the War of 1812, Upper Canada, known as Canada West after 1841, and now as Ontario, was the destination that attracted blacks seeking asylum on their own or with the help of the Underground Railroad. Blacks and whites established several organized black communities in rural sections of the province during the early part of the nineteenth century. Known as the Wilberforce, Dawn, Sandwich and Buxton settlements, these organized communities devoted themselves to helping blacks achieve self-reliance and economic independence. They strove to improve the circumstances of fugitives, but they did not seek to influence the system that created slaves and fugitives in the first place. Aside from one abortive attempt to organize the Upper Canada Anti-Slavery Society in 1837, Canadians did not organize themselves to join the international campaign to abolish slavery until 1851.  

The catalyst that ignited Canadian interest in an organization dedicated to philanthropy and political pressure arrived with the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850, after which black emigration to Canada increased dramatically. The statute, which formed part of a political compromise between the fractious divisions of the American North and South, denied any sense of blacks' personal liberty in the free North. The legislation supplied slave catchers with the assistance of local and federal officials in the North, and it required all able-bodied citizens to assist slave catchers at their demand. Aiding a fugitive slave became a federal

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9 Avoiding the cumbersome and changing terminology for the place and the people of Canada West at mid-century, I will use the terms Canada and Canadians throughout this essay, much like the local newspapers of the period did. On black settlements, see William H. Pease and Jane H. Pease, Black Utopia: Negro Communal Experiments in America (Madison: The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1963): 19.
offense, carrying heavy fines and prison terms for anyone helping fugitive slaves escape the authorities. The legislation also created an administrative hearing system which did not allow blacks to testify, did not give them the right to counsel and paid the hearing officers more money to find in favor of the slaveholder than in favor of the alleged fugitive. The North was no longer a sanctuary from slave catchers; free blacks were almost as much at risk as fugitive slaves. Subject to the harsh, arbitrary stipulations of the new law, large numbers of free blacks and fugitive slaves came to Canada seeking a home outside the purview of American justice.  

Canadians were well aware of the political debate underway in the United States and the social consequences arising from it in the northern states. The Toronto press featured regular reports and editorials on the events leading up to the Fugitive Slave Act. Editorials ranged from those taking a perverse pleasure in mocking American freedom and to those that reflected, sometimes quite soberly, on the impact the American controversy could have on Canada. Many Canadians who had recently immigrated from Britain also had previous experience with the anti-slavery issue in their home country. The long campaign to abolish

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10 Census of the Canadas, 1850-51 and 1860-61, cites the total Negro population of Upper Canada as 4,669 and 11,223 respectively. See Census of the Canadas, 1850-51. 2 vols. (Quebec: John Lovell, 1853); and Census of the Canadas, 1860-61. 2 vols. (Quebec: S.B. Foote, 1863); Winks, Blacks in Canada 233-240, 484-496. The number of blacks that emigrated to Canada - both fugitive slaves and free blacks - is, however, widely disputed. Winks outlines the most comprehensive published discussion of the issues under dispute. He estimates that by 1860, 40,000 blacks resided in Upper Canada, 30,000 of whom were fugitive slaves. Michael Wayne has conducted more recent research which estimates a black population in 1861 of about 23,000, one-third of whom were likely fugitives and their descendants. Wayne’s work is yet unpublished but cited in Adrienne Shadd, “‘The Lord Seemed to Say “Go”’: Women and the Underground Railroad Movement,” “We’re Rooted Here and They Can’t Pull Us Up”: Essays in African Canadian Women’s History, Peggy Bristow et al (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1994): 63-4 n4. As for the first wave of black migration, the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada estimated that between 4,000 and 5,000 blacks entered Upper Canada in 1850 and 1851 combined. See the Executive Committee of the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada, First Annual Report, Presented to the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada, by its Executive Committee, March 24th, 1852 (Toronto: Brown’s Printing Establishment, 1852): 15. The Toronto Globe estimated that 3,000 blacks migrated in the first 18 months after the Fugitive Slave Law was passed. See Toronto Globe 10 Jun. 1852. Regarding the Fugitive Slave Law, see Leon F. Litwack, North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1961): 248-249; and Wilbur H. Siebert, The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom (Gloucester MA: Peter Smith, 1898; Macmillan, 1968): 23-24.

11 Toronto’s population at mid-century, estimated at just over 30,000 in the 1851 census, supported a large number of newspapers: among them the Globe, the British Colonist, the Examiner, the Mirror and the Patriot. In addition, there were also a number of church-related papers, such as the Churchman and the Echo and Protestant Episcopal Recorder.
British colonial slavery and the subsequent apprenticeship system reached its conclusion in 1838 and thus remained within the collective memory of this generation of immigrants to Canada. But in spite of Canadians’ familiarity with the anti-slavery cause in the early part of the nineteenth-century, it was only when the racial landscape of Canada West began to change that Canadians joined the movement.\textsuperscript{12}

Canadians who became involved with the anti-slavery movement generally agreed on two main propositions: that Canadians must help bring international pressure to bear on Americans to abolish slavery, and that fugitives arriving in Canada needed assistance to overcome the moral and physical degradation experienced in bondage and the destitution they faced in escaping slavery. Underlying their beliefs was an acute awareness among Canadians of the proximity of slavery to their homes and communities. Indeed, the historian Robin Winks has argued that “geographical proximity” was the major factor in motivating Canadian involvement in anti-slavery. But also underlying these beliefs were values, institutions and vested interests threatened by both the influx of fugitive slaves into their society and the potential extension of slavery on their continent. Most recently, Allen Stouffer attached more importance to religious and cultural influences, suggesting that Canadians’ British heritage and evangelical faith also shaped Canadians’ response to slavery and abolition.\textsuperscript{13}

More concerned with explaining Canadians’ involvement in the international anti-slavery movement, and men’s activities in particular, these previous studies overlook women’s activities in Canadian anti-slavery and how they illuminate some of the changing and gendered contours of public life in mid-nineteenth-century Canada. While both Stouffer and Winks cast Canadian female abolitionists as the mere helpmeets of their male counterparts, this essay

\textsuperscript{12} Stouffer 109.
\textsuperscript{13} Anti-Slavery Society of Canada, \textit{First Annual Report}; Winks, \textit{Blacks in Canada} 270; Stouffer 5, 47-48.
argues that the women in Canadian anti-slavery represented far more than "efficient support" for the male leadership. The women's carefully chosen program of activities reflected the construction of a distinctively female political culture within the male-dominated public sphere and demonstrated that women were determined to influence public life and public opinion in mid-nineteenth-century Canada, even though they evinced no interest in challenging male dominance in the public sphere.\footnote{Winks, \textit{Blacks in Canada} 256.}
2. Ambitious Reformers but Respectable Ladies

For the anti-slavery women who joined the Toronto Ladies' Association for the Relief of Destitute Colored Fugitives, a shared sense of gender identity, moral responsibility and public ambition mobilized their interest in a female association. Conceived within the evangelical tradition of ladies' church-associated auxiliaries, the Ladies' Association was formed to assist the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada, an exclusively male organization established two months before the Ladies' Association. The chosen name of the women's organization and the circumstances of its inception might suggest that the women of the Ladies' Association were merely the supportive, subordinate wives of the Anti-Slavery Society leaders or, as one historian once characterized a group of association women she studied, "the silent working partners in male associations as well as in male-headed households." What women shared in their roles and responsibilities as wives and mothers certainly influenced the formation of female societies, but gender identity was not the only factor in their foray into the public sphere. Other aspects of these women's identities and life experiences also shaped their interest in public activism and gave them the confidence to assume a public voice.

Although the evidence that remains of these anti-slavery women is spotty, taken together it creates a composite picture that defies this image of humble, obliging women carrying out their good works under the direction of their husbands and fathers.¹

Most significantly, about half of the women who joined the Ladies' Association did so independently of their husbands or fathers. Of the forty women I have identified as members, nineteen appear unrelated to any of the men of the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada, and three became members of the Ladies' Association before their husbands became members of the

Anti-Slavery Society. The remaining eighteen were married or otherwise related to men already involved in anti-slavery. Thus, slightly more than half of the women who joined the Ladies' Association appear to have initiated their participation in anti-slavery activism on their own. Among the eleven officers of the Ladies' Association, however, six were married to the founding members of the Anti-Slavery Society. These numbers suggest that while many of the women of Ladies' Association possessed the interest and initiative to join the anti-slavery cause on their own, those who assumed leadership roles were a bit more likely to have the support of husbands with some experience in anti-slavery activities.²

Most of the women who joined the Ladies' Association had previous experience themselves in a variety of other voluntary activities. Twelve of them were officers or committee members of the Toronto Ladies' Bible Association in the late 1840s until it suspended operations in 1850, “satisfied that the Protestant families . . . are so well supplied with Bibles, as to render their regular visitation unnecessary for the present.” The Bible Association reported that the women intended to “offer their services . . . to the support of a kindred object - the City Mission.” Finding yet another “kindred object” in the anti-slavery

² The information about the women of the Ladies' Association discussed throughout this chapter is summarized in Appendix A. A full list of Ladies' Association members for 1851-52 appeared in the Toronto Globe 29 Apr. 1851, and a list of members for 1853-4 was printed in the Toronto Globe 31 May 1853, though it is only partially legible. An article in the Frederick Douglass' Paper 30 Jun. 1854, adds a few names to these membership lists. These represent the major sources of information listing participants in the Ladies' Association. Information about the identities of the female participants draws mostly from Rowsell’s City of Toronto and County of York Directory, 1850-1, J. Armstrong, ed. (Toronto: Henry Rowsell, 1850); Brown’s Toronto City and Home District Directory, 1846-7 (Toronto: George Brown, 1846); and Brown’s Toronto General Directory, 1856 (Toronto: McLear & Co., 1856); Dictionary of Canadian Biography, as well as various articles and advertisements in the Toronto press. Note that there were effectively three levels of participation in both the Ladies' Association and the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada. Participants may have been office bearers, committee members or subscribers. Throughout this essay I use the generic terms “members” and “participants” to refer to office bearers and committee members. Subscribers were less active supporters who pledged an annual donation to one of the groups. The subscription lists of the organizations are no longer extant. Given the notices about overdue subscriptions routinely placed in the local papers, however, it appears that a significant portion of these organizations' revenues were contributed by subscribers. Consequently, the numbers of people who may have claimed membership were probably much greater than the annual reports' listings of committee members and office bearers suggest. In this essay, however, the terms “members” and “participants” refer only to committee members and office bearers.
cause, these evangelical women do not appear to have resumed the task of supplying bibles to the families of Toronto. Instead, their interest in new and different voluntary pursuits grew, and providing relief to destitute fugitives arriving in Toronto became one of the many social services they performed as part of their Christian service to the community.³

Evangelical religion supplied the women of the Ladies' Association with many of the beliefs and practices that sustained and gave urgency to their anti-slavery activities. "The fate of humanity," one of them wrote in connection with slavery, "lies in the hollow of God's hand, and his infinite love will not fail to justify to men and angels its terrible discipline." Their objections to slavery derived largely from their knowledge of scripture and their acute consciousness of slavery as a sin against God's teachings. Of those anti-slavery women whose religion I can identify, all were Protestant, and most were Presbyterian, although Methodists, Congregationalists, Anglicans and Unitarians were represented. At least twenty-one of the forty known members of the Ladies' Association belonged to religions influenced by the evangelical impulse that swept through British North America in the first half of the nineteenth century. Emphasizing the individual's personal experience of God, rather than one mediated by the hierarchy of the church, evangelicalism endowed believers with tremendous personal authority. Certain of God's truth, their own salvation and the roots of vice and sin, evangelicals had confidence in their ability to judge and their responsibility to redeem all aspects of social life. Such autonomy and authority held particular resonance for women.⁴

With the faith "that once converted, regenerated individuals could voluntarily create a

perfect society", evangelical women set out on their reforming mission with idealistic, yet conflicted, convictions that their judgments and actions represented God’s will. Numerous verses from the New Testament and recitations of the Golden Rule appeared in their annual reports in support of their anti-slavery contentions. But at the same time as they insisted that, “God has made all men of one and the same blood (Acts xvii.26), that all are redeemed by the same saviour, and are brethren (1 Tim. i.2; Philem.16),” and that, “‘there is no respect of persons with God,’ both master and slave being, as regards the interests of eternity, on a level,” they professed the opinion that the fugitives needed the help of whites to become capable, “of refinement, - of civilization, - of truth and honor.” Further, they wrote: “Remember what is implied in slavery, - the utter degradation of mind and body, the corruption of morals; the cultivation of every unrighteous and unholy appetite and passion.” Apparently, the women believed that God viewed all men as equals, but they did not believe fugitives could adapt from life in slavery to life in freedom without proper instruction and guidance to steer them on to the path of morality and lift them from a state of degradation to lead a civilized life in Canada.  

The evangelical crusade to build a perfect society benefited from Canadians' enduring belief in British superiority and the “imperial Christian mission.” Of those anti-slavery women whose heritage is known, most had roots in Britain. The majority were Scottish; the others were mostly English or Irish. Many arrived in Canada during the large wave of immigration that took place in the first decades of the nineteenth century, and some may have been involved in the British anti-slavery movement before migrating to Canada. When the British-born Julia Griffiths arrived from Rochester, New York, to work with the women of the

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Ladies' Association, she bragged to her Rochester abolitionist colleagues: "These Canadians are thoroughly British in their sentiments, tastes, manners, habits and customs. England, Scotland and Ireland are represented here in one nation. Of course I was at home." The Canadian women had joined together in response to the Anti-Slavery Society's call to help "the unhappy victims of the atrocious Fugitive Slave Law, who had been compelled to seek, on our shores, an asylum from the Man-hunters of what has been boastingly styled the 'Freest [sic] Country in the World!'" They believed Canada to be the more "favored land" in North America, and they seem to have identified to a greater extent with British culture and heritage than with any North American variant. When they called their society the Ladies' Association for the Relief of Destitute Colored Fugitives, they may have intended to emulate their British predecessors who named the first British women's anti-slavery association, the Ladies' Society for the Relief of Negro Slaves. American women's groups generally used the term anti-slavery in their organizations' names, as did the later British women's associations.6

Although the British influence on the Ladies' Association was greater, at least one woman participated in American abolitionist activities: Caroline Dall, the wife of Toronto's Unitarian minister. Dall did not hold an office in the Ladies' Association, but she became one of its most outspoken members, writing and speaking in public forums on abolition and women's rights later in her life. Dall arrived in Toronto in 1850 and left for Boston in 1854, where she resumed a close friendship with William Lloyd Garrison, the leader of the American Anti-Slavery Society. Evidence also shows that one black woman was a member of the Ladies' Association, Mrs. J. (Ethalinda) Lewis. Mrs. Lewis' name appears on the roster of committee members for both 1851-2 and 1853-4, but few personal details about her besides

6 Midgely 200. Griffiths wrote many letters that were consciously intended for publication; this one appeared in Frederick Douglass' Paper 30 Jun. 1854. Anti-Slavery Society of Canada, First Annual Report 9; Frederick Douglass' Paper 6 May 1852, Midgely 43-44.
her race and her husband's occupation as a barber have surfaced. She was likely the only black member of the Ladies' Association, and she and Mrs. Dall may have been the only members of the Ladies' Association with any direct knowledge of slavery or slave catching in the United States.  

While Mrs. Lewis and Mrs. Dall were unique among the membership in these respects, one social distinction that they shared with most of the women of the Ladies' Association was their marital status. Almost all the members were married; only six women went by the title "Miss." Of the six single women, four of them joined the Ladies' Association along with or following women who appear to be their mothers. The nineteenth-century practice of identifying women as Mrs. Henderson, Mrs. Short or Miss McNally, without any indication of their first or maiden names, makes the task of identifying the women troublesome and necessarily imprecise. Still, the membership does not appear comprised predominantly of women related to one another (or married to the men of the Anti-Slavery Society). It was, however, composed mainly of women who pursued anti-slavery activism in addition to, not instead of, the domestic responsibilities of being a wife and mother.

Although most of these women had the benefit of managing a home under comfortable financial circumstances, the majority could not be confused with blue blood elites. Only one member's husband was listed in *Rowsell's City Directory* as a gentleman; the others were married to men who worked to provide for their families, and some of the women worked themselves. Isabella Brown Henning was the wife of Thomas Henning, an instructor and later the principal of the Toronto Academy, a private school that attracted the children of the

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“Nonconformist elite,” who also served as the secretary and treasurer of the Toronto Globe at the same time. She was also the sister of George Brown, the Reform leader and editor of the Toronto Globe. Despite belonging to such a prominent family, Mrs. Henning ran a school for young ladies with Miss Brown, another Ladies’ Association member and presumably a relative as well. Catherine Hume Blake was the wife of William Hume Blake, another Reformer who played a part in achieving responsible government before becoming chancellor of the University of Toronto. Before her husband rose to social prominence, she also “operated a private girls’ school to supplement the family’s income,” according to her biographer. Yet another member of the Ladies’ Association, Mrs. J. Hurlburt, was the preceptress of the Adelaide Academy, where her husband was the principal. Two more women in the Ladies’ Association also taught school, and another operated a confectionery under her own name - Mrs. Dunlop’s - on King Street.  

Clearly, the women of the Ladies’ Association did not belong to the established Tory elite, but some of them were related to men who would emerge as a part of the new commercial elite of the 1850s. As the beneficiaries of the developing market economy and the transition to responsible government, some of these men and women took an interest in local reforms that would strengthen Toronto as the centre of influence in Canadian business, society and politics. Significantly, only Catherine Hume Blake’s husband could be found within the formal structures of government in the late 1840s. Instead, in the late 1840s and early 1850s, 

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these men were more likely to be found in societies supporting benevolent institutions like the City Mission, and advocating social and political reforms, such as temperance and the anti-clergy reserves movement, in addition to anti-slavery. While several belonged to the evangelical clergy, most were merchants, manufacturers and professionals whose interests in urban reforms and institutions probably reflected their own ambitions. While in no way denying the genuine evangelical idealism among nineteenth-century reformers, many historians have argued that anti-slavery and other urban reform movements helped to build a consensus around the aspirations and interests of the rising commercial class, by representing their interests as the prevailing interests of the nation as a whole.  

With the conviction that the best interests of Canada would be served by material and moral progress, reforming women may have seen voluntary activities, including anti-slavery, as a means of checking the evils of unbridled progress and asserting the moral character of Canadian life. The example of the United States offered an easy scapegoat for those who feared a concentration of power among wealthy men who lacked their respect for individual liberty and Protestant morality. Commercial and industrial progress was the culprit behind many of the changes that threatened the moral identity of the city they knew as "Toronto the Good." Moreover, the high risks and sudden losses that were endemic to a fledgling economy made economic status among rising urban merchants and manufacturers an unstable source of social identity for men and women alike. That a number of the women of the Ladies' Association worked outside the home in exchange for wages at some point in their married lives and that so few of their families achieved any lasting social prominence suggests that

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status in the new urban economy and society was a precarious asset. For some, identifying with philanthropists and reformers may have given them a sense of stability and secure social position that the market denied them.\textsuperscript{10}

Whatever their individual motivations for engaging in anti-slavery activism may have been, the reforming women who joined the Ladies’ Association all had to reconcile this public activity with their prescribed roles in the family and the community. Although Mrs. Dunlop was a unique member of the Ladies’ Association, and had perhaps more roles to reconcile than most of the anti-slavery women, the circumstances of her public life offers some insight into the balancing act that all the women of the Ladies’ Association had to perform. The proprietor of a large wholesale and retail confectionery, Mrs. Dunlop’s business, and especially her confections, were well-known throughout Toronto. When she decided to pursue a new business venture, she was celebrated in the \textit{Globe} as:

a brave-hearted woman, compelled, by circumstances, to provide for her family --
entering the bustling world, grappling with the cares and difficulties of business, and
maintaining her position with credit and respect. . . . Our townswoman, Mrs. Dunlop,
we have long regarded as an honour to her sex. For many years now she has conducted
a large establishment with much spirit and efficiency -- she has maintained her position
in spite of all difficulties, and secured the respect and esteem of the whole community.
By her unaided exertions, she has not only provided the best education for her family,
but the death of a near relative . . . made a large addition to her circle and enabled her
generous spirit to show what a brave women can do. And with all this, Mrs. Dunlop
has done her duty nobly as a citizen. In every work of charity and benevolence, her
time and her mite have been ever ready . . . .

\textsuperscript{10} In his study of Canadian evangelicalism, Westfall observed evangelicals expressing anxieties about material progress at the same time as they engaged in reforms to support material progress. See Westfall 79-80, 196-205. Examples of the practice of scapegoating the United States appear in the Toronto \textit{Globe} 3 Nov. 1849, 19 Mar. 1850, 25 Feb. 1851, 12 Oct. 1853, 8 May 1855, 20 Oct. 1856 and in an article reprinted from the Toronto \textit{Globe} in the \textit{Frederick Douglass’ Paper} 21 Sep. 1855. Although Canadians boasted of Toronto’s high standards of morality in the 1850s, they were not the only ones. Barbara Bodichon, the British diarist, commented in her diary of a journey through North America in 1857-58, on arriving in Toronto after six months in the United States, that “the moral level is higher here than in the United States” and complained that “in consequence of the piety of these people, there are no boats, no trains going on Sunday, so we have been obliged to stay here and extremely stupid it has been. I went to five churches this morning!” See Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, \textit{An American Diary, 1857-1858}, ed. Joseph W. Reed Jr. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972): 147-150.
Despite Mrs. Dunlop's obvious ambition, her success in business was construed as the outcome of unfortunate circumstances that "compelled" her to work outside the home.

Respectable work for women outside the home had to be just that -- compelled. It was something that women did not choose to do to satisfy their own needs, but rather something that they did to meet the moral or physical needs of the members of their family or community. Respectable public activities were constantly referred to as women's "selfless" or "self-denying" labors, and the emphasis of this article points to the irony that respectable women secured their sense of self from roles and activities considered "self-denying". This excerpt from the newspaper glosses over the self-esteem and personal gratification that Mrs. Dunlop probably derived from participating in Toronto's commercial, philanthropic and social circles as one of the only female business proprietors in the city and one of the very few female stockholders in the Elgin Association's black settlement at Buxton. It struggles to avoid any hint of impropriety as it reconciles Mrs. Dunlop's unapologetically ambitious public life with her private responsibilities. While she embraced her role as a wife and mother, there can be no doubt that she coveted opportunities to take on more public roles.11

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11 The quotation is from Toronto Globe 12 Jun. 1852. "Self-denying" is used to describe women in the annual reports of numerous voluntary societies. For its use within anti-slavery circles, see Anti-Slavery Society of Canada, First Annual Report vi, 12; Sixth Annual Report of the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada (Toronto: Globe Book and Job Office, 1857): 5. For its use in other societies, see Fourth Report of the Toronto City Mission (Toronto: Brown's, 1851); Fifth Report of the Toronto City Mission (Toronto: Brown's, 1852). Two members of the Ladies' Association, Mrs. Dunlop and Mrs. Freeland, are listed among the otherwise all-male group of Toronto stockholders in the Elgin Association. Although Allen Stouffer asserts that women did not participate with men as stockholders in the Elgin Association, these women are listed in at least seven of the Elgin Association's annual reports. See Stouffer 189; Third Annual Report of the Directors of the Elgin Association (Toronto: John Carter, Printer, 1853); Fourth Annual Report of the Directors of the Elgin Association (Toronto: Globe Book and Job Office, 1853); Fifth Annual Report of the Directors of the Elgin Association (Toronto: Globe Book and Job Office, 1854); Sixth Annual Report of the Directors of the Elgin Association (Toronto: Globe Book and Job Office, 1855); Eighth Annual Report of the Directors of the Elgin Association (Toronto: Globe Book and Job Office, 1857); Ninth Annual Report of the Directors of the Elgin Association (Toronto: Globe Book and Job Office, 1858); Tenth and Eleventh Annual Reports of the Elgin Association for the years 1859 and 1860 (Toronto: Globe Book and Job Office, 1861). Advertisements for Mrs. Dunlop's appear in Rowsell's and Brown's City Directory and throughout the Toronto Globe.
Like Mrs. Dunlop, the women who joined the Ladies’ Association did not stop at coveting life in the public sphere. They knew a great deal about the opportunities it presented and the hazards it posed. They used their knowledge of the public sphere and their access to it when they assembled for the first time.

As they organized the first meeting of the Ladies’ Association, the women probably invited close family and friends, but they also publicized it in the city press. Their first meeting was advertised “to the Ladies of Toronto” in the Toronto Globe. Subsequent newspaper reports described the meeting as one “convened by advertisement”; presumably the organizers wanted to recruit a more diverse membership than their social contacts might secure. The Globe tracked current events in Europe and the United States, as well as covering local news in the British North American provinces. That the women organizers chose to advertise in the Globe suggests that they themselves read it, and perhaps wished to attract other women with interests in public, rather than strictly domestic, concerns.¹²

Newspapers offered these literate women in Toronto one point of entry into the public sphere. They may have read them at home, or perhaps at the Mechanics’ Institute, where the first meeting of the Ladies’ Association took place in the lecture room. The Mechanics’ Institute maintained a reading room where a large selection of local, British and American magazines and newspapers were available to the members and their families. Sponsoring well-attended lectures throughout the year, the Mechanics’ Institute was an important site of education, discussion and debate in mid-century Toronto. “A skilled workman,” the mechanic was, “concerned with the making and use of machines,” and he occupied an vital role in the development of manufacturing processes in the nineteenth century. One lecturer at the Toronto Mechanics’ Institute stressed the benefits of educating and improving mechanics and

¹² Toronto Globe 26 Apr. 1851; Voice of the Fugitive 21 May 1851.
their families, for the good of the city and its citizenry as a whole, to help them realize “how independent we really are, if we choose, of those external circumstances which seem to make so vast a difference between the situation of man and man.” The supporters of the Mechanics’ Institute championed the doctrines of industry and self-reliance and sincerely believed in the power of the disciplined and industrious individual to overcome the social inequalities emerging within Canadian society. Significantly, the women chose to hold their inaugural meeting at this important secular institute of self-culture and self-improvement, rather than at one of the numerous churches to which they belonged or at one of their homes.\footnote{13}

Fostering an open, public, and non-sectarian enthusiasm for reform, much as the men achieved at the first public meeting of the Anti-Slavery Society, may have been one of the women’s objectives for their first meeting. Some of the women who joined the Ladies’ Association probably attended the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada’s well-publicized inaugural meeting over which the mayor of Toronto presided. Local papers reported that some women could be found in the large, diverse audience that crowded the city hall, even though the society became an exclusively male preserve. Those present resolved “to aid in the extinction of Slavery all over the world, by means exclusively lawful and peaceable, moral and religious, such as the diffusing of useful information, by tracts, newspapers, lectures and correspondence, and by manifesting sympathy with the houseless and homeless victims of Slavery flying to our soil.” They viewed slavery and the “atrocious” Fugitive Slave Law as an “outrage on the laws of humanity, and of the Bible,” and considered themselves engaged in a struggle for true freedom and liberty that transcended geographic and political borders. A

higher form of liberty was at stake, and the society’s members aspired to bring their moral and religious influence to bear on the world community. Witnessing such an enthusiastic meeting that brought moral issues into public debate, women hitherto engaged in such benign good works as distributing Bibles may have found new inspiration for their efforts at social reform.14

The Anti-Slavery Society expected women to attend a lecture series held a few weeks later, headlining the popular British abolitionist, George Thompson, the eloquent speaker and escaped slave, Frederick Douglass, and the well-known New York Unitarian minister, the Rev. Samuel May. They ran an advertisement for George Thompson’s lecture in the Globe indicating a charge of one York shilling “for the admission of a lady and a gentleman.” With a mixed audience on the last night of the series, the Rev. May took the opportunity to address himself specifically to the women in the audience:

I wish earnestly, solemnly to call on the women of Canada to help us. They can give us most efficient aid. What women have done elsewhere, women may do here. They have often been the best soldiers in a moral warfare. Woman was the most fearless friend of the Captain of our salvation... The women of Britain did more even than the men to accomplish the overthrow of West India Slavery... Women of Canada, come now and do likewise. Pray for your and my fellow beings... Talk on this subject. Pour into the ear of every American, who comes within the reach of your voices, pour in entreaties, remonstrances, keep up a renewing fire of epistolary correspondence.

May appealed to the pride of these women of British heritage and evangelical sentiment, and he assured them that the path of moral suasion was already well traveled by respectable Christian and British women. The journalists at the Globe gave them further assurances, writing that May “closed his speech with an appeal to our women, which we hope they will

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14 The Ladies’ Association passed a resolution about the importance of not letting sectarian divisions influence their important work at their second annual meeting. See Toronto Globe May 31, 1853. On women attending the first Anti-Slavery Society meeting, see the Toronto Mirror 28 Feb. 1851 and British Colonist 28 Feb. 1851. Also on the success of the first Anti-Slavery Society meeting, see the Toronto Globe 1 Mar. 1851. St. Lawrence Hall was reported to have a seating capacity of 1,200. Quotes are from Anti-Slavery Society of Canada, First Annual Report 9.
never forget.” Receiving such encouragement to become involved in a politically-charged international reform movement would have been hard to resist for these ambitious women who aspired to make their mark on public life in Toronto and beyond.\textsuperscript{15}

Still, the women who joined the Ladies’ Association took calculated steps to conform to the dominant social mores that defined woman’s sphere. They knew their public status as respectable women of the middle classes, cultivated over years of selfless labors, was easily marred. But May called upon them to serve as the “soldiers”, not the captains, of this “moral warfare”, and it was in this capacity that the women joined the Canadian anti-slavery movement. They advertised that their association would “promote the objects of the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada” and that it sought “ladies taking an interest in the welfare of the slave.” They were careful to portray their ambitions as supportive rather than independent, as charitable rather than political. Instead of enumerating the objects of the society, one of which was the rather coercive intent to aid in the “extinction of slavery”, the women emphasized their benevolent concern for the fugitives, a notion that aligned itself with self-denying domesticity, not political maneuvering. All their public representations, including the name of their association, suggested kind philanthropy, not radical reform.\textsuperscript{16}

These concessions to feminine propriety notwithstanding, the women of the Ladies’ Association were not especially silent, subordinate or humble. They were for the most part, educated readers with an interest in current events, both locally and internationally. Living in Toronto, they had lectures, public assemblies and other voluntary society meetings to attend and a wide variety of newspapers available to read and discuss. Their evangelical faith no doubt guided their aspirations beyond immediate domestic concerns to those of their

\textsuperscript{15} Toronto Globe 27 Mar. 1851; The North Star 17 Apr. 1851; Toronto Globe 10 Apr. 1851.
community, and it empowered them to contribute toward the ultimate goal of perfecting society. We cannot know how the individual women involved interpreted their goals, but we know that collectively they agreed upon one social problem that they thought they could solve or at least ameliorate: the destitute and distressing condition of escaped slaves arriving in their city. They possessed a sense of moral and social responsibility to intervene on behalf of the citizens of Toronto and, just as important, the confidence to intervene in a compelling matter of public life. 17

17 My interpretation of the emergence of the Ladies' Association is indebted to Thomas L. Haskell, “Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility, Part 1” The Antislavery Debate: Capitalism and Abolitionism as a Problem in Historical Interpretation, ed. Thomas Bender (Berkeley: U of California P, 1992): 107-135, esp. 130ff. Haskell discusses the emergence of humanitarianism in the context of abolitionism, and describes it using a complex series of preconditions that include (although related here in much abbreviated form): a set of ethical beliefs about the suffering of others; a sense of moral responsibility for others; strategies, or in his words, “recipes”, for intervention, and the certitude that strategies for intervention are available and likely to produce beneficial effects.

The women of the Ladies' Association began their collective journey into public life by following the traditional path of feminine charities. They resolved that their immediate objectives were to aid the destitute fugitives and raise the necessary funds to do so, but their ambitions ran much deeper. On the surface, their fundraising and philanthropic activities emphasized the selfless act of helping the unfortunate fugitives, but the women who engaged in these selfless, public activities derived something from them too: a sense of group identity, authority and efficacy in the public sphere.¹

Feeling perhaps somewhat ambivalent about the propriety of the public activities in which they were soon to engage, the women proceeded cautiously yet quickly, staging their first fund raising event, a concert, on 6 June 1851, only six weeks after they held their first meeting. Sponsoring a concert was a prudent choice of fundraising possibilities for these anti-slavery women. The men of the Anti-Slavery Society had just organized a successful series of lectures, attracting and educating large audiences of potential members, subscribers and supporters. The women likely had similar objectives, hoping to increase awareness among the city's inhabitants of anti-slavery and the Ladies' Association and, of course, to raise the funds that would enable them to provide relief to fugitives in need. To organize a lecture, however, may have been considered inappropriate by these prudent women. A concert was an ideal alternative because it signified a social gathering, not an educational or political event.²

Representing themselves as the hostesses of a musical concert, the women of the Ladies' Association adhered to the prescriptions of middle-class femininity. Offering cultivated entertainment while serving refreshments at St. Lawrence Hall reflected a

² Toronto *Globe* 10 Jun. 1851.
communal version of middle-class domesticity that would appeal to an audience concerned with self-improvement and progress in a new city. As an editorial in the Toronto Globe noted, the concert would be performed "by several Professional Gentlemen, of the highest musical talent in our city, as well as by Amateurs of superior ability. The Programme . . . will . . . contain some pieces new to Canada. The lovers of music should not lose this opportunity of enjoying an evening's rational and refined amusement." Considered culturally and morally uplifting, music was one of the few subjects about which respectable middle-class women were supposed to be knowledgeable. Indeed, it was one of the subjects taught to young ladies by some of the Ladies' Association members.3

Although a concert was not a radical departure from woman's sphere, it was an undeniably public event that required its organizers to engage in tasks that could not be characterized as domestic. Decisions about advertising, publicity, and ticket sales brought the women firmly into the public sphere, and by entering the public under the feminized banner of charity and respectable amusement, they accessed the public sphere without reproach.

The Ladies' Association's concerts were not merely amusements, however. They were gatherings where people might discuss the music and also converse about the cause the concert was intended to benefit. They probably afforded an opportunity for some of the men who supported the Ladies' Association to set the tone of conversation by delivering some opening and closing remarks about anti-slavery. No record exists of the women of the Ladies' Association ever speaking at their concerts, but the men of the Anti-Slavery Society often spoke on their behalf. At the concert held in 1852, the popular black orator, the Rev. Samuel R. Ward, delivered an address to the audience, as did Rev. Dr. Michael Willis and Thomas Henning, the president and secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society. Similar addresses, or at least

3 Toronto Globe 3 Jun. 1851.
a few carefully chosen words, opened and closed the other concerts as well. For example, an otherwise favorable newspaper review appearing in 1853 complained that "there was, perhaps, a shade too much talking for a really pleasurable evening." Presumably, some preaching had taken place during the musicians' breaks. But by emphasizing the social aspects of their concerts and downplaying the politics of their cause, the Ladies' Association managed to deliver a public message and make financial gains for their cause without incurring public rebuke.4

The success of their first concert may have liberated the women from some of the fears they harbored about stepping out of their sphere. A careful examination of the advertisements they placed suggests that the women became bolder in their approach to publicizing the concerts over the four years in which they were held. The first advertisements placed in the local newspapers had the simple headline "CONCERT." In the body of the advertisement's text, the sponsors and the beneficiaries of the event were identified, but only an interested reader would notice that it was anything more than a musical event open to the public. Compared to future advertisements, it reflects a timid attempt at publicity. In later years, the women became progressively more forthright about proclaiming their organizational identity and anti-slavery purpose. Within the body of the text of the 1852 advertisements, the words, "COLORED FUGITIVES" appeared capitalized. "COLORED REFUGEES" became one of the headlines in the 1853 advertisements, and a large-sized typeface was used to highlight "Destitute Colored Fugitives" in the headlines of the 1854 version of the advertisements. The success commanded by their first concert probably gave the women enough confidence to advertise their cause and not just their concert. They received favorable endorsements and

4 Portions of Ward and Willis's addresses appear in Toronto Globe 10 Jan. 1852; a portion of Henning's address appears in Frederick Douglass' Paper 29 Jan. 1852. See also North American 29 Apr. 1853.
reviews from the Toronto newspapers, even from the *Mirror*, which had previously denounced the Anti-Slavery Society for meddling "with the internal institutions of a government with which we are on the most friendly terms." The guise of charitable benevolence may have distinguished the women's objectives from those of their male counterparts.\(^5\)

The seemingly apolitical nature of the women's concerts reinforced their seemingly apolitical ambition to relieve the suffering of the fugitives. The women had likely witnessed "the Colored Refugees who are daily arriving on our shores, in a helpless and destitute condition," or learned of the fugitives' plight as they noticed the black population of their city grow. To relieve their destitution and suffering, the Ladies' Association adopted a visiting program which reflected the traditional expectation for women to be neighborly and care for others in need, as well as the expectation for the Christian and the affluent to help those less fortunate than themselves. The women professed their motherly intent to "minister to the[ir] wants, physical and moral." In material terms, this consisted of providing food, clothing, shelter or money to the needy fugitives and furnishing information about employment possibilities. In spiritual terms, ministering to their moral wants meant "instructing and encouraging" them in the ways of the Protestant evangelical faith, and helping them secure God's salvation. Pointing to the moral influence that religion, domesticity and motherhood granted them, the women of the Ladies' Association justified their ambition to help the

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fugitives start their lives in Canada and simultaneously shape the values and behavior of their city's newest immigrants.⁶

As the caretakers of their own families and as believers deputized by the evangelical faith, the women authorized themselves to judge the fugitives' suffering and determine their physical and moral needs. Concert-goers and other Torontonians who made donations to the Ladies Association tacitly confirmed the women's authority in this murky intersection of private yet public life. Entrusted with funds, food and clothing provided by the benevolent people of Toronto, the women took pride in distributing the city's charity to the fugitives they deemed worthy. Each month, they met to appoint four members to be the following month's visitors. The appointed women would then visit all the cases of need reported to them, "enquire into the particulars of the case," and determine on their own the appropriate amount and type of relief that the Ladies' Association would provide. In their first year, they assisted the families of more than 100 fugitives this way. They never established a public office or a central location where fugitives could present themselves and apply for relief. Apparently, the women went out in search of fugitives in the city, much like itinerant preachers traveled in search of converts in the countryside.⁷

By constructing the visitation so that the women sought out the fugitives, the women also authorized themselves to travel into public spaces far beyond the protected boundaries of middle-class domesticity. From the written accounts that remain, we can surmise that

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sometimes they received information of new arrivals by word-of-mouth, and, in pairs, traveled to the transient lodgings and the vacant lots near the docks where fugitives found, or created, temporary shelter. They probably also attended the arrival of steamships crossing Lake Ontario from the United States. Bringing the hope of spiritual salvation and the distribution of needed resources to the destitute, the women and their supporters interpreted their excursions to the port and into the slums of Toronto as supremely benevolent, self-sacrificing acts of kindness: what they called “self-denying labors” and “labors of love.” They and their supporters claimed that the women endured these unpleasant visits because Christian love compelled them to persevere. Undoubtedly, the visitors experienced some sad and disconcerting moments while on these excursions, but at the same time, the authority with which they entered the unsavory parts of the city probably felt exhilarating and empowering for these ambitious women.  

This sense of public authority fueled their self-initiated relief efforts from 1851 until about 1858. Although they may have done so privately or through the agency of their sole black member, Mrs. Lewis, the women do not appear to have engaged in any sort of public consultation with the black community about the kind of relief its members needed. When a “convention of colored people” was held in Toronto in late 1851, the Ladies’ Association does not appear to have initiated any contact with its organizers nor shown any interest in the proceedings. And while they advertised their events widely, using not only the Globe, but also the North American, the Mirror, the British Colonist and the Examiner to carry their messages to the reading public, the women never advertised their concerts or their meetings in the Voice.

8 Frederick Douglass’ Paper 6 May 1852; Toronto Globe 8 May 1855; Anti-Slavery Society of Canada, Sixth Annual Report 5; Anti-Slavery Society of Canada, First Annual Report vi, 12.
of the Fugitive or the Provincial Freeman, the papers most likely to reach the black community and invite them into their circles.⁹

If the women had consulted the black community, they might have altered their course. Before the Ladies' Association had even held their first meeting, the Voice of the Fugitive had begun a series of editorials entitled “What do the Fugitives in Canada stand mostly in need of?” The editor of the Voice, Henry Bibb, graciously acknowledged the innumerable contributions of food and clothing distributed to fugitives, but he emphasized the fugitives’ greater need for education and especially land. Education and land, he argued, would sustain them over time, whereas the temporary benefits of receiving food and clothing would make them “dependent, stupid and degraded.” Moreover, receiving handouts of food and clothing was probably too reminiscent of receiving rations from slavemasters. Bibb insisted that abolitionists’ money should be more wisely allocated: “if one half the money which has been spent to pay freightage on old clothing &c., . . . had been judiciously laid out for land here,” he declared, “thousands who are now without houses and out of employ, might be at work on their own land.” Despite Bibb’s public exhortations, the Toronto ladies continued to distribute donations of food and clothing for years to come.¹⁰

The authority and integrity of the Ladies’ Association’s self-designed mission to distribute charity to fugitives came up for question in late 1852 when a group of blacks in Windsor convened a meeting and sent a report of the proceedings to the Toronto Globe. The

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⁹ Voice of the Fugitive 8 Oct. 1851. Although the Ladies’ Association did not use the black papers to advertise, a few predominantly white, middle-class groups occasionally advertised for the patronage of the black community. For example, see the Mechanics’ Institute advertisement for their lecture series in the Provincial Freeman 23 Dec. 1854 and an advertisement for a church bazaar held by the Ladies of St. Andrew’s Congregation in the Provincial Freeman 3 Jun. 1854.

¹⁰ Voice of the Fugitive 26 Mar., 9 Apr., 23 Apr., 7 May 1851. Agnes Willis, and probably other officers of the Ladies’ Association, had likely read some of Bibb’s editorials. Bibb was a member of the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada in Toronto, and Rev. Dr. Willis subscribed to the Voice of the Fugitive (renewal receipt listed in 3 Dec. 1851 issue).
report spit out the resentment they felt being offered charity and handouts and being held “up before the world as a class of improvident, thriftless and imbecile paupers.” It denounced purportedly benevolent organizations, naming the Refugee Home Society at Sandwich, and implicating all others, as corrupt and injurious to fugitives and the anti-slavery cause. They resolved:

That though we sincerely thank those who have, from time to time, sent money and clothes to help the escaped fugitive from American Slavery and support him till he can get work, we would advise them to discontinue such aid in our behalf as we can seldom get clothes or money from many of those with whom they are deposited.

Appearing in the pages of the major Toronto newspaper, the Windsor group’s message jeopardized public support for the continuing mission of the Ladies’ Association. Although the Ladies’ Association was not directly accused of any wrong doing, the Windsor group raised a question about the integrity of all private benevolent organizations entrusted with public donations. In response to this call for charity to cease, the Ladies’ Association’s most consistent supporter, Thomas Henning, wrote an article on the women’s behalf. Henning, an obvious spokesman for the Ladies’ Association, was the Secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada, the husband of the Ladies’ Association Secretary and the Secretary and Treasurer of the Globe himself. In these capacities, he insisted that fugitives’ destitution and suffering was not necessarily evidence that they were “improvident”, “thriftless” or unable to become self-reliant once their circumstances were improved. Further, he wrote:

While, finally, I admit that evils may arise from the mode of distributing such charities, the experience I have had of the beneficial effects of such gifts wisely administered by the “Ladies’ Association” in Toronto, warrants me in urging upon the friends of the colored race . . . to increase, rather than diminish the amount of their contributions during the present winter.

Henning sought to raise the Ladies’ Association above accusation and emphasize their efficient and prudent administration so that they could continue their benevolent work. Even though members of the black community tried repeatedly to persuade abolitionists that their
charity might be misdirected, the women of the Ladies’ Association continued on their self-directed path. That the women disregarded such criticism might suggest that their “self-denying” labors were more self-serving than they might otherwise seem.\footnote{Toronto Globe 26 Oct. and 2 Nov. 1852. See also Voice of the Fugitive 18 Nov. 1852 and Toronto Globe 27 Nov. 1852.}

The women’s wise administration and authority to judge relief applicants came under further, and more direct, attack in 1853 when a dissatisfied applicant brought his complaints to a newspaper that competed with the \textit{Globe}. The report described a poor black man who supported himself when he arrived in Canada by sawing wood, but upon contracting a disease, he became unable to work. Encouraged to apply to the Ladies’ Association for relief, he called on one of the female members but was turned away. The newspaper condemned the “boastful, hollow-hearted” Ladies’ Association, citing “the unfeeling barbarity that reigns in the bosoms of some of those who make the loudest professions of benevolence.” The Anti-Slavery Society again rushed to defend the Ladies’ Association in the \textit{Globe}. The unidentified correspondent, probably Henning, explained that the applicant had not followed the proper procedure to request relief, and even if this man had been turned away, the association could not be condemned just because one of its members “had not acted as feelingly as the circumstances required.” Perhaps calling on one of the members directly was this poor black man’s gaffe; maybe he stepped over the lines of social propriety when he called on a white woman at home. Possibly, the woman he called on thought his long residence in Canada made him a candidate for the Toronto City Mission, not fugitive slave assistance, and turned him away without a second thought. Perhaps the member offered him only spiritual
encouragement, when he sought relief from more immediate physical discomforts. In any event, Henning’s response did not clarify the situation.\textsuperscript{12}

Although Henning’s hasty defense of the Ladies’ Association left the circumstances of the encounter unclear, it presented a clear image of the women as the wise, privileged judges of the fugitives’ needs. In a rambling, awkward attempt to justify the Ladies’ Association, Henning wrote: “perhaps parties who have represented themselves as needy, have on examination, been dismissed without receiving the attention to which they deemed themselves entitled.” He continued, “it is quite necessary that such strictness should be observed in order to prevent the undeserving individuals from imposing upon the public and thus counteracting the beneficial objects of the society. Such scrutiny, however unpalatable to some, is wise and necessary.” While the society and the Ladies’ Association may have seen such scrutiny as necessary, destitute fugitive slaves may have found the Ladies’ visitations as degrading and controlling as having their quarters searched by their former slavemaster. However morally upright the women’s intentions may have been, one of the objects of their visitations was to investigate and question whether black applicants for relief were deserving of aid. In effect, they sat in private judgment of the fugitives at the same time as they publicly proclaimed themselves sympathetic to their plight.\textsuperscript{13}

Determining how to distribute charity, however, was only one part of the visitation process. By structuring the visitation to require an initial encounter to determine the fugitives’ needs and subsequent visits to provide the aid deemed appropriate, the visitors ensured they


had ample opportunity to observe the fugitives' "habits and dispositions" and to preach their British Protestant theology, beliefs and values. Encouraging the fugitives "to be diligent, frugal, faithful, upright, honest, truthful, temperate" seems to have been as much a standard part of visitation procedure as delivering warm clothes in winter. Providing charitable relief to the fugitives was not an end in itself, but an opportunity for the women of the Ladies' Association to evaluate the fugitives' moral character and to impress upon them values that the women considered necessary for them to adapt to freedom and begin productive new lives in Canada.\(^\text{14}\)

Nonetheless, resources for relief remained an ongoing concern for the visitors, perhaps because the provision of goods reinforced their authority and because the "gift" of food and clothing made the fugitives feel indebted to them and consequently more open to their advice and instruction. Donations of food and clothing, however, seem to have been passing concerns for the fugitives. The *Provincial Freeman* published numerous articles in 1854 and 1855 insisting that the fugitives' need for assistance was strictly to overcome the temporary sickness and fatigue sometimes experienced after the hardships of escape. An article that appeared in every issue of the Provincial Freeman for more than nine months claimed: "In no instance in the last year and a half has the [Ladies' Association of Toronto] been called upon to extend relief for more than six days, except in cases of sickness." Yet in 1855, those attending the anniversary meeting of the Anti-Slavery Society were told that desperately needy fugitives arrived in Toronto every week and that the Ladies' Association distributed most of the aid they received. The Ladies' Association continued to conduct visitations until at least 1857, when the last known annual report of the Anti-Slavery Society revealed that the

women's visitations constituted the chief function of the organization. Given that the treasurer reported a balance that would have covered the expenses of providing fugitive relief for at least another year, the visitations probably continued until mid to late 1858. But all this emphasis on the physical needs of the fugitives and the funds to relieve their suffering only tells part of the story. The women's visitations were just as much about inculcating appropriate social behavior and religious beliefs, as they were about relieving physical suffering.15

As new members of Canadian society, the fugitives were inundated with paternalistic exhortations professed to help them adapt to the responsibilities of freedom and life in Canada. The women of the Ladies' Association emphasized "the necessity of avoiding, as far as possible, the lanes and cellars of our cities" and encouraged the fugitives to "seek employment at once, in the country if possible, but at all events employment of some kind." In particular, they recommended the Buxton Settlement, where the organizer and leader of the settlement, the white Presbyterian minister, the Rev. William King, offered blacks "not merely the means of acquiring an honest livelihood, but good moral and spiritual instruction" far from the temptations and vices of the city. The fugitives' progress in adapting to life in Canada was, no doubt, important to the women. That their prospects for the future would be good, however, required more than just clean living, sobriety and industry. From the perspective of these women, it also required faith.16

15 Provincial Freeman 25 Mar. 1854 - 6 Jan. 1855 and 13 Oct. 1855. Italics appear in the original. Toronto Globe 8 May 1855. Murray suggested that the Ladies' Association probably continued visitations until the Anti-Slavery Society's funds were depleted; Murray 400. Anti-Slavery Society of Canada, Sixth Annual Report 5. The Ladies' Association had likely ceased operations by 3 March 1859 when the Globe published an appeal on behalf of a female former slave who had bought her own freedom and was trying to raise money to buy her sister's freedom as well. The article makes no mention of the Anti-Slavery Society or the Ladies' Association assisting her. Given that the Globe's editor was the brother of one of the Ladies, it seems unlikely that the Ladies' Association could have still been assisting fugitives yet receive no mention in the article.

The women of the Ladies’ Association considered it their duty to help the fugitives find God’s salvation, and deprived of formal spiritual instruction in slavery, some fugitives may have welcomed their instruction. The *Provincial Freeman* printed a revealing admonition to missionaries and abolitionists, entitled “The way to do Colored Canadians Good,” and written by the black Baptist minister, the Rev. William P. Newman. It made a number of requests of the white population, including: to “convert the people to Christ”; instruct them “on the duties growing out of the relations we sustain to God, our families, to the church and state”; and to teach them “about heaven, while on earth, and how to use the latter to obtain the former.” Emphasizing the fugitives’ desire for proper religious and moral instruction, the black paper proclaimed that they wanted to be “laborers . . . of the right sort.” In this sense, the fugitives may have opened the door to evangelical abolitionists hoping to lead them toward the path to salvation. Depending on how and when spiritual instruction was delivered, however, fugitives may have been overwhelmed or offended by the anti-slavery women’s spiritual instruction. While we have no record of how fugitives felt about the women’s religious guidance, but we do have one detailed account of how the women interpreted their intervention.17

As part of their visitation procedure, the Ladies’ Association had a regular practice of recording their visiting experiences and fugitives’ stories of their escape from slavery into a shared diary which they called their visitor’s book. Part of each monthly meeting must have involved listening to the visitors relate some of the sad and the cheering visits they had experienced, offering consolation and support to the visitors given the suffering they had witnessed, and passing the visitor’s book on to the women appointed for the upcoming month.

In a passage reproduced in the Ladies’ Association’s first annual report, they wrote of the typical encounter they experienced when conducting visitations:

Among the various scenes witnessed when visiting the poor refugees, landed on our shore, bereft of all that can endear life, or render it supportable, nothing is more striking than the air of cheerfulness which, generally speaking, beams in the countenance of all. One hallowed thought sheds its lustre, though the body and mind have been steeped in misery. We ask the cause. The ready answer springs instantaneously to the lips. —The consciousness that, after suffering of mind and body which none but the enslaved can feel, “they are now free.” . . . Deep is their gratitude to God who has strengthened their arm to free themselves, and has led them, thro’ a wilderness of woe, to the shores of Canada.

Idealizing the fugitive’s blissful state in the moment of finally knowing freedom, the narrative resembles a personal conversion experience. Escaping the nation where slavery was legal and arriving on free soil were necessary steps to freedom, but they could not automatically bestow liberty on the slave. The fugitive recognized liberty only when he could feel it replace the misery he had experienced in his mind and body.18

That the women produced such a sentimental story of salvation is not surprising. Like Uncle Tom’s Cabin, a work of sentimental fiction that inspired abolitionists throughout the Anglo-American world in the 1850s, the women’s visitation narratives told affecting stories of the power of faith and salvation. In revival-style meetings each month, the women probably read aloud narratives such as this one from the visitor’s book:

After wading through the water that enclosed the wretched cellar where they had found their first shelter, we looked around in the almost dark abode — the countenance of all assumed an appearance half timid, half suspicious; this was particularly observable in the older female, who moved restlessly around while we spoke. We were attracted by her manner, and on our assuring her of our power and will to raise them from their present wretchedness, she whispered timidly, what was her state. The husband who returned from seeking employment stood opposite to us, his hands crossed, his eyes bent to the ground, as if awaiting his doom from some unfeeling tyrant . . . . We had never before witnessed the settled yet despairing countenance of one who feared that, although blessed by the Almighty with the mind to snap the fetters that degraded him beneath his fellow-men, he must still remain the slave.

18 The quotation is from the Ladies’ Association First Annual Report in Frederick Douglass' Paper 6 May 1852. Although the visitor’s book probably no longer exists, references and quotes from it appear in two articles: one reprinted from the Liberator in the Frederick Douglass’ Paper 3 Jun. 1852 and another appearing in the Frederick Douglass’ Paper 6 May 1852.
For this family of fugitives, the visitation appears to have begun as a rather threatening experience. Merely standing on free soil did not assure these fugitives of their freedom. Confronted by white women, they may have doubted their individual liberty. Conversion, however, was not far off:

We looked with a sickening feeling on his unchanging countenance and unbending form; words of comfort and commiseration [sic] were spoken, and all was changed. -- We had the privilege to know that despair had fled the hearts of the afflicted, and that the freed anticipated the blessings of equal rights to live, to toil, and enjoy the fruits of their own industry in this favored land.

The significance of the narrative lies not in the veracity of the women’s description of the encounter, but in the way it reveals the beliefs and assumptions that framed the women’s perception of the encounter. From the women’s perspective, their agency had enabled the fugitives to realize their personal liberty. Their story of salvation is not only about the formerly degraded slaves. It is also, and perhaps more accurately, a story of salvation and empowerment for the women who helped the fugitives. By conducting the visitation, the women became God’s conduit. Elevated to carry out God’s work, to a position of religious and moral authority, they believed they could help save the fugitives, themselves, and perhaps even their nation. In concert, through the agency of the women, God and Canada bestowed liberty on the fugitives and the collective potential for material and moral progress on all Canadians.¹⁹

The women of the Ladies’ Association constructed a public role for themselves in the collective pursuit of material and moral progress. Through their visitations and fundraising activities, they achieved a measure of collective authority and efficacy in the public sphere.

Although their concerts and visitations conformed outwardly to many of the prescriptions of feminine propriety, they represented a more ambitious level of reform activity. Aiming to sympathize and comfort the fugitives, while at the same time making unfeeling, rational judgments about the distribution of resources, the women's philanthropy was characterized by conflicting objectives that reflected their location at an uneasy intersection of public and private life. Operating in the margins of the public sphere, but deriving their authority from the private institutions of church and family, these women constructed an agenda for reform that represented them as respectable, "self-denying" women while enabling them to experiment with the authority to influence others. Their authority was contingent on a common code of morality, a set of unwritten cultural values and beliefs. In a changing society, such authority was inherently unstable, but for the first couple of years, it operated smoothly enough for the women to establish themselves in the public sphere. And after experiencing some success in influencing the people of Toronto to support their relief efforts and in trying to shape the way fugitives adapted to life in Canada, the women of the Ladies Association embarked on even more ambitious public projects.
4. "The Legitimate Province of Women": Influencing Public Opinion

Sponsoring concerts, conducting visitations and advertising organizational meetings drew public attention to the Ladies’ Association and the anti-slavery issue, securing access for its members, albeit restricted access, to the public sphere as the guardians of generally agreed-upon values in Canadian society. In effect, these activities preached to the choir of Canadians - white and black - who already believed in the evils of slavery and instinctively favored British liberty over the race prejudice and hypocrisy they perceived in American freedom. But after the women gained admittance to the margins of the public sphere on the merits of their benevolent works, their ongoing public presence and their ambitious reform agenda expanded their access and their influence. Soon the women of the Ladies’ Association took advantage of the practices of the public sphere to address and involve more women in the creation of public opinion and to influence, rather than just reinforce, dominant values and beliefs.

By looking to the examples set by their British and American colleagues in anti-slavery, the Toronto women developed a greater sense of the opportunities and limitations they faced in the public sphere. While they charted their course as one of fundraising and philanthropy, they did not limit themselves to these primarily charitable endeavors for long. Like their male counterparts, they initiated correspondence with foreign anti-slavery organizations in Britain and the United States, and they began publishing their own annual reports for distribution at home and abroad. The Anti-Slavery Society of Canada always included a page or two in their annual reports highlighting the Ladies’ Association’s activities, but by publishing their own reports, the women claimed an organizational identity and mission of their own. International correspondence, and especially published reports, documented their achievements and gave them an international profile among the women’s anti-slavery societies of the United States and Britain. The exchange of ideas and resources that followed
was a major factor enabling the women to engage in more persuasive forms of public activism.¹

One of the major organizing efforts that the Ladies' Association supported was a British women's anti-slavery initiative, which the British historian Clare Midgley called, "the single most impressive attempt to exert moral pressure on Americans." An aristocratic group of British women who regularly met at Stafford House, the home of the Duchess of Sutherland, launched a petitioning campaign on 26 November 1852. Petitioners obtained women's signatures to an address entitled the "Affectionate and Christian Address of Many Thousands of the Women of England to Their Sisters, the Women of the United States," but historians have referred to it as either the Stafford House address or, in honor of the original author, the Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury, the Shaftesbury address. The original address called for the gradual emancipation of American slaves and offered relatively conservative remonstrances. The more radical women of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society amended the address, calling for immediate emancipation. After four months of petitioning, the British women obtained over one-half million signatures to the original address and over 200,000 signatures to the amended one. At a celebrated public assembly in England, they presented the petitions to Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose popular novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, they credited for much of their success, and they entrusted Stowe with their delivery to the

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¹ Contemporary observer and author Benjamin Drew refers to the Ladies' Association annual reports, as do a number of newspapers. Recent historians have not referred to them though, and to date, I have not found any extant copies. See Drew, *A North-Side View of Slavery. The Refugee: Or the Narrative of Fugitive Slaves in Canada. Related by Themselves, with an Account of the History and Condition of the Colored Population of Upper Canada* (Boston: John Jewett and Company, 1856): 238; Toronto Examiner 28 Apr. 1852; Frederick Douglass' Paper 6 May 1852; Voice of the Fugitive 20 May 1852; Toronto Globe 31 May 1853. On the exchange of resources, see, for example, Toronto Globe 25 Dec. 1851 and 29 Apr. 1852.
women of the United States. Among the signatures to the original address were “nearly 14,000” Canadian signatures obtained by the women of the Ladies’ Association.²

While at first glance, “nearly 14,000” Canadian signatures pales in comparison with the hundreds of thousands of signatures collected in Britain, that number actually represented an overwhelming majority of Toronto’s female population in 1853. The total population of the city, men and women combined, was reported by the 1851 census as just over 30,000. To obtain 14,000 women’s signatures, the members of the Ladies’ Association must have traveled widely -- and probably well beyond the city -- canvassing every neighborhood thoroughly and systematically. Although few sources of information provide an account of the women’s petitioning campaign in Canada, it is difficult to doubt the determination and devotion of the female canvassers, especially since the campaign in Toronto took place during the inclement months of December and January. Collecting such a large number of signatures attests to the truly “untiring zeal” of the members of the Ladies’ Association.³

Seeking signatures, the women of the Ladies’ Association traveled the streets of Toronto, entered into neighborhoods that they otherwise would not frequent, and thus attempted to build their petitioning campaign into a wide-ranging public awareness and education campaign. Simply the curiosity of seeing respectable women going door-to-door and speaking with the people they met on the street probably attracted local attention and increased awareness of the anti-slavery cause. And just as offering food and clothing to fugitives gave the women an opportunity to impart their social and religious values and

² Midgley 132, 148-149; The Times (London) 29 Nov. 1852: 8; Anti-Slavery Society of Canada, Second Annual Report 11; Toronto Globe 29 Mar. 1853. While the text of the petition can be found in The Times and other newspapers, the actual petitions with signatures affixed do not appear to have been preserved. The number of Canadian signatures cited here was reported by the Ladies’ Association to the Anti-Slavery Society and the Toronto Globe.
³ Anti-Slavery Society of Canada, Second Annual Report 11; First Annual Report 12; Census of Canada 1851.
beliefs, collecting signatures enabled the women to disseminate their distinctive message about the evils of slavery to the women of Toronto. The petition focused on the ways slavery was “peculiarly distressing” to women, using sentimental language to condemn the myriad ways slavery deprived blacks of family life and religious instruction. Rather than denouncing the slavemasters though, the petition conceded that blame for the existence of slavery rested with British subjects as well as Americans. The petition was phrased, in part, as a confession of collective guilt:

We acknowledge, with grief and shame, our heavy share in this great sin. We acknowledge that our forefathers introduced, nay, compelled, the adoption of slavery in those mighty colonies. We humbly confess it before Almighty God, and it is because we so deeply feel, and so unfeignedly avow, our own complicity, that we now venture to implore your aid to wipe away our common crime and our common dishonour.

Asking women to sign such an admission of responsibility for what was considered by Canadians as one of the greatest afflictions of the Christian world was not a request that the petitioners could have made casually. Stimulating some soul searching and moral discussion had been the Ladies' Association’s intent. The Anti-Slavery Society described the outcome achieved by the women’s petitioning campaign as, “a free and full discussion of the question of Slavery in circles where it had been little agitated.” Petitioning not only demonstrated the level of Canadian women’s support for abolition; it also served as a public education process that reached far beyond the 14,000 women who signed.  

Yet by asking only women to sign their petition, the Ladies' Association carried on the European tradition of petitioning as the political instrument of the disenfranchised and the powerless. A vestige of the pre-democratic era, petitions represented a means for otherwise

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4 Anti-Slavery Society of Canada, Second Annual Report 11. The Times (London) 29 Nov. 1852: 8. The Son of Temperance and Canadian Literary Gem 24 Jun. 1854, identified “The Three Great Evils of Our Age: Roman Catholic Priestcraft! Negro Slavery! Drunkenness!” With a similar strategy to build public support, temperance advocates of the period asked individuals to sign a pledge of temperance, an act which was taken very seriously by contemporaries. See Noel 101.
powerless individuals to influence state authorities. Typically, petitioners sought to persuade authorities to change the law, by demonstrating the degree of support for the proposed change. Deferential in their requests, petitioners appealed, entreated and even begged authorities to consider their proposal, especially in view of their lack of recourse. Like many petitioners in the pre-democratic state, anti-slavery women throughout the Anglo-American world were deprived of the right to vote, and beginning in the 1830s, female anti-slavery activists began mass petitioning campaigns in Britain and the United States to persuade those governments to abolish slavery. For these women, petitioning represented a political act, similar but not equivalent to the act of voting. Consequently, when women took up their pens in appeals to the British Parliament and United States Congress to add their names and make their opinions count, they incurred threats and reproaches. That the women received such criticism for petitioning in Britain and the United States attests to the transformation of petitioning as a part of the political process and the act of signing one's name as a deed akin to voting.5

In mounting their own petitioning campaign, the Toronto women were able to avoid much of the criticism their female anti-slavery colleagues endured. For although the act of petitioning was politically charged, the circumstances under which the Ladies' Association canvassed for signatures opened them up to far less public censure than their British and American predecessors. Instead of appealing to a government to change a law, the women who signed the Stafford House address appealed to the women of the United States to use their influence to change a law. By appealing to women, rather than to a government, the women construed their commitment to abolishing slavery as a fundamentally moral one. In organizing

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5 Petitioning can be traced, and often was during the nineteenth century, back to the Bible. Historian Deborah Bingham Van Broekhoven cites from Luke 18: 1-8, "the biblical story of the importunate woman who, because she made a pest of herself, was eventually granted her request" in "Let Your Names Be Enrolled: Method and Ideology in Women's Antislavery Petitioning," Yellin and Van Horne 183-190; Midgely 62-63.
the petitioning campaign and crafting its text, the Duchess of Sutherland and the Earl of Shaftesbury had intended that their petition, couched in the feminized language of Christian morality, would be seen not as a political ploy, but as a “humble prayer” on behalf of women, slave and free:

We appeal to you, then, as sisters, as wives, and as mothers, to raise your voices to your fellow citizens and your prayers to God, for the removal of this affliction from the Christian world. . . . There are many reasons why this address should be presented rather by the women than by the men of England. We shall not be suspected of any political motives; all will readily admit that the state of things to which we allude is one peculiarly distressing to our sex; and thus our friendly and earnest interposition will be ascribed altogether to domestic, and in no respect to national, feeling.

One American woman who responded to the Stafford House address saw through the disguise and chastised the British women for their blatantly political posturing and for acting outside of their proper sphere. While this contemporary accused the petitioners of engaging in consciously political behavior, a recent historian of American women’s anti-slavery petitioning efforts suggested that, “by the very act of petitioning, [women] were in fact unconsciously broadening the notion of female citizenship.” The rather calculated denial of political motivations in the Stafford House address suggests, however, that the petitioners may well have been quite conscious of the essentially political nature of their actions, even though the petition was signed by women and addressed to women.⁶

While the tactic of appealing to American women, rather than the American government, helped the women to represent their petition as apolitical, the text of the petition, nonetheless, had a political message. It attempted to persuade American women to use their influence to help to secure the abolition of slavery. It also sought to convince potential signatories in Canada that, as British subjects, they were partially responsible for the existence

⁶ Van Broekhoven 186-187; The Times (London) 29 Nov. 1852: 8 and 15 Feb. 1853: 8. The woman who responded to the Stafford House Address was Mrs. Juliet Gardiner Tyler, wife of the former U.S. president, John Tyler.
of slavery in the North American colonies, and as right-thinking Christian women, they were obliged to support the abolition of slavery. As a strategy for influencing the formation of public opinion in Canada, it was a successful one. By addressing women, and not the general public, the Ladies' Association was able to tailor their message to the concerns of women and win their support, thereby attracting local attention to their cause and yet evading any local criticism for taking politics into their own hands.

With their tremendous success in petitioning and building a base of public support for anti-slavery among the women of Toronto, the Ladies' Association developed the political confidence to draft their own, far less conservative, "Affectionate Address of Thousands of the Women of Canada to Their Sisters, the Women of the United States of America." Having just petitioned widely, the women chose to forego canvassing for signatures and instead decided that they could speak for all Canadian women themselves. Such a sweeping assumption about their political and moral authority suggests just how much their confidence had increased. Among women, they found a political constituency that offered the strength of numbers, and in morality, they found a strong political language they could use to influence public opinion.7

The Canadian women crafted their own appeal from the same foundation of feminine moral authority as the British-written petition, but their appeal offered up a much stronger critique of slavery and its implications for national strength and honor. As in the Stafford House address, the women condemned slavery for the way it deprived slaves, and especially women and children, of a proper family life as well as Christian education and moral development. The first point upon which the Canadian women faulted slavery, however, was the way it "deprives its victims of the fruits of their labour." They wrote:

7 Toronto Globe 11 Jan. 1853; Anti-Slavery Society of Canada, Second Annual Report 11; de la Cour, Morgan and Valverde 18.
We would then ask you, in the spirit of Christian love, to use that influence which, as sisters, as daughters and as mothers, you possess, for the abolition of a system which deprives its victims of the fruits of their labour; which substitutes concubinage for the sacred institution of marriage; which abrogates the relation of parent and child, tearing children from the arms of their parents and parents from each other; which shrouds the intellect of rational beings in the dark gloom of ignorance, and forbids the souls of immortal beings from holding communion with their Maker; and which degrades men, created in the Divine image, to the level of a beast.

While most of their address, like the British-written petition, concerned slavery’s contravention of domestic values, the bold placement of such a republican value expressed the Canadian women’s growing political consciousness. Keenly aware of the centrality of American free labor ideology to the controversy brewing in the United States, the Canadian women thrust the hypocrisy of American slavery to the forefront of their message. They asserted that the United States had not yet achieved the status of “a land in which ‘all men are equal, and have a right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.’” And they chided Americans with the words and images of their leaders, invoking George Washington’s dying wish to free his slaves, quoting the First Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court John Jay’s description of slavery as “the sin of crimson dye”, and referring to the declaration made by “your celebrated Pinckney . . . ‘that by the eternal principles of natural justice, no master in the state has a right to hold his slave in bondage a single hour.’” Yet even though they invoked political documents and the words of political men, the women’s argument rested on the moral principles, natural rights and sins that these political men raised and debated in connection with slavery.8

Once again, the women invoked the language of feminine morality and guardianship to justify their participation in the public debate over slavery. Their appeal, however, did not belabor their collective responsibility for slavery, their “grief and shame”, the way the British-Toronto Globe 11 Jan. 1853; the Ladies’ Association also celebrated the virtues of free labor and liberally quoted from the American Declaration of Independence in their First Annual Report, reprinted in Frederick Douglass’ Paper 6 May 1852 and the Voice of the Fugitive 20 May 1852.
written petition had. With the confidence of moral authority that verged on superiority, they presented a "dark catalogue of crimes" to American women. They used the imagery of a foul disease "becoming daily more deeply rooted" in the nation's soil and proving "difficult to be cured" to emphasize the urgency with which American women needed to act to save their nation. Describing slavery metaphorically as an infection in the soil that needed to be cured, the Canadian women implied that women's agency could save the nation from dishonor and permit free labor and free soil to flourish.\(^9\)

In petitioning and writing their appeal to American women, the members of the Ladies' Association appropriated the political language of morality and adopted some of the persuasive, political tactics of the public sphere to speak on behalf of Canadian women and involve more women in the formation of public opinion. While their British counterparts incurred some criticism from the British and international presses, the Canadian women appear to have fared much better. They won the support of the vast majority of Toronto women in their petitioning campaign, and appear to have obtained, at the very least, the benign support of the Toronto press. The press was peculiarly silent on the women's petition and appeal. Only the Toronto Globe, which published the appeal, offered any comment on the women's endeavors. The Globe declared that their appeal "contains suggestions which it is the legitimate province of women to carry out into practical action" and asserted that "much may be effected by female influence." In the absence of any public criticism, this commanding voice of confidence in the propriety of the women's activism and their attempts to influence public opinion would have only served to strengthen the women's sense of their authority in the public sphere.\(^10\)

\(^9\) The Times (London) 29 Nov. 1852: 8; Toronto Globe 11 Jan. 1853.

\(^10\) Toronto Globe 11 Jan. 1853.
5. Resignation and Retreat

The Ladies' Association celebrated their second anniversary in the spring of 1853. In just two short years, they had instituted a regular program of visiting fugitives and hosting fundraising concerts. They had established themselves as a part of the international anti-slavery movement, publishing annual reports and corresponding with women’s anti-slavery groups abroad. In support of their British allies, they had petitioned extensively throughout the Toronto area, and inspired by their success, the women composed their own, more ambitious appeal, claiming to speak on behalf of all Canadian women. With all these accomplishments behind them, their second anniversary might have marked the women’s attainment of a new level of influence within the public sphere. Instead, it marked the beginning of their withdrawal from the public sphere.

The women’s retreat from public life is difficult to explain. The historical record is meager and grows increasingly difficult to decipher between 1853 and 1854, during which time the members of the Ladies’ Association became involved in a few projects with the Rochester (New York) Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society. One of these projects was highly successful, while the other drew criticism, again from the black community in Canada. Afterwards, the women seem to have walked away from the public stage. Their activities disappear from the pages of the newspapers, and the shreds of evidence become so sparse that I can only speculate on the events that contributed to the Ladies’ Association’s receding activism and diminished public profile.

The unraveling of their authority in the public sphere seems to have begun with their ambition to become involved with the Rochester Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society. The Toronto women had built their public profile, in part, by supporting the British women’s petitioning campaign, and subsequently, when the Rochester Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society asked for the
Toronto women’s assistance, the members of the Ladies’ Association were eager to cooperate. Establishing a relationship with the highly reputable and financially successful Rochester Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society could have enhanced to the Canadian women’s sense of confidence and authority.¹

The first opportunity that one of the Toronto women had to participate in a Rochester anti-slavery project was an exceptional success. Julia Griffiths of the Rochester Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society asked one of the Toronto Ladies’ Association members to write an article for a gift book she compiled and published just in time for their annual Christmas bazaar in 1852. The two-hundred-and-sixty-page book, given the title Autographs for Freedom by contributor Harriet Beecher Stowe, contained “forty-one original articles from sundry distinguished persons, residing on both sides of the Atlantic,” each signed with a “fax similie autograph of the writer.” Caroline W. Healey Dall authored one of these articles, and hers was the only article contributed from Canada.²

Dall’s contribution to Autographs for Freedom demonstrated the same political confidence the Ladies’ Association had exercised in composing their appeal to American women. Her article reflected an outsider’s perspective, but one that was extremely well informed of the American controversy over slavery. She acknowledged that, living in Canada, she was “absent from the scene of action, and ignorant of the passing moment,” but she did not spare her criticism of the American law and the Constitution:

I wish to convey to you . . . my conviction that the Constitution of the United States, in so far as it is not in harmony with the law of God, can be no sure foundation for the law of man; that until it gives place to a higher ground of union, or until the nation consent to give it a higher interpretation, it will depress the national industry, corrupt the national morals, and palsy the national strength.

This was a member of the Ladies’ Association who thought about national issues that some might deem political, but Dall considered these issues to more generally affect “the fate of humanity.” Her bold article reflected the evangelical roots of anti-slavery activism among women reformers and their outward-looking application of moral and spiritual values on the public sphere. Today, it stands out as what appears to be the only public statement on abolition made by an individual member of the Ladies’ Association. How her contemporaries reacted to the article we do not know, but appearing alongside contributions written by anti-slavery luminaries like Frederick Douglass, Samuel May, Gerrit Smith, Charles Sumner, and of course Harriet Beecher Stowe, her article probably rose in her colleagues’ estimation by its association with the work of such celebrated anti-slavery figures.3

The publication and sale of Autographs for Freedom attracted a great deal of favorable publicity for the Rochester Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society, in Canada as well as the Northern United States and Britain. In the following year, they published a second volume of Autographs for Freedom, again with the editorial guidance of Julia Griffiths. Frederick Douglass’ Paper, also edited by Griffiths, published letters of congratulations “from friends of ‘the cause’ far and near” including one from Toronto that commended the women’s efforts, stating, “as a whole, the publication does you credit, and is fitted, with God’s blessing, to do much good.” The Toronto Globe deemed it an “elegant volume [and] a valuable addition to anti-slavery literature.” The second volume did not include a contribution from Dall or any of the women of the Toronto Ladies’ Association, but it did include two contributions from Canada: one from Rev. Dr. Michael Willis, the president of the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada, and one from Thomas Henning, the society’s Secretary. Even though the women of

the Ladies' Association did not contribute to the second volume, communication between the Toronto and Rochester women's groups increased after its publication, and the Rochester women soon proposed holding a fundraising bazaar on behalf of *Frederick Douglass' Paper* in Toronto.\(^4\)

Willing to help and eager to become more closely allied with the Rochester women, the Toronto women agreed to make the arrangements for a fundraising bazaar to take place at St. Lawrence Hall. Although the Canadian anti-slavery women had not held any such sales to raise money, anti-slavery bazaars had a long history among American women as one of the most significant ways they could contribute to the cause of abolition. Fundraising bazaars were not unusual in Canada either. Advertisements for bazaars organized by women's church groups appeared frequently in the Toronto papers. Typically, bazaars sold ornamental and handmade items, and this was no exception. The Rochester women had an oversupply of English- and Irish-made goods and ornaments, donated by British anti-slavery women for the Rochester Ladies' annual Christmas bazaar. Griffiths offered to transport the goods to Toronto for the occasion and asked the Toronto women for their assistance organizing an appropriate venue for their display and sales. Frederick Douglass was scheduled to speak at St. Lawrence Hall on the evenings of 21 and 22 June 1854, as the highlight of the Anti-Slavery Society's annual meeting, and a daytime bazaar at St. Lawrence Hall in support of his newspaper probably seemed like a natural pairing of events to the women. With Douglass' lectures also scheduled to take place on the same days as the annual meeting of the Synod of

the Presbyterian Church of Canada convened in Toronto, the women calculated to take advantage of such a large group of anti-slavery sympathizers present in Toronto all at once.\(^5\)

The women realized a substantial profit, but instead of bolstering the Toronto women’s reputation as fundraisers, the bazaar may have harmed their reputation as philanthropists. The bazaar itself did not attract the attention of the Toronto press the way the Ladies’ Association’s concerts had in previous years. Of far more interest to the local papers was the controversy stirred up by a fellow female anti-slavery activist, the black founder and editor of the *Provincial Freeman*, Mary Ann Shadd, who accused the Toronto Ladies’ Association of being unsympathetic to the needs of blacks in Canada and questioned the sincerity of their support for the settlement of fugitives in Canada. From Shadd’s perspective, the Ladies’ Association’s willingness to help the Rochester women and *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* evinced a deliberate disregard of her paper and an affront to the black community in Canada. Convinced that her paper and the blacks in Canada were in greater need of financial support, she complained that Canadian anti-slavery advocates had “the shadow, but not the substance of anti-slavery.” Shadd’s editorial called into doubt the sincerity and integrity of the white Canadian abolitionists and “friends of the fugitives”, and it initiated a series of articles discrediting the Ladies’ Association and the Anti-Slavery Society.\(^6\)

If Shadd’s accusation had been an isolated incident, it might not have affected the women’s sense of public authority. This, however, was the first of a barrage of critiques that shot from the pages of the *Provincial Freeman*, and it was the second such direct attack the women had experienced. It was indeed only eight months earlier that the women had been


\(^6\) *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* 30 Jun. 1854; *Provincial Freeman* 3, 10, 17, 24 Jun. and 1 Jul. 1854
charged with “unfeeling barbarity” for turning away a black man professing to be a fugitive in need.

Likewise, Shadd’s accusations might not have harmed the women’s sense of authority if they had remained her accusations alone. But the charges Shadd leveled against the Ladies’ Association did not remain confined to the pages of the Provincial Freeman nor did they remain within the black community. The Toronto Leader picked up on the scandal and issued its own critique, “Philanthropy at War with Itself.” The Leader placed the blame squarely at the hands of the Ladies’ Association and concluded that the women’s philanthropy, “which seems to expend itself in fostering jealousies among those for whose benefit it is ostensibly exerted, might be exchanged for benevolence of a different sort.” Issuing from a mainstream Toronto publication and confirming the Provincial Freeman’s critique, such a rebuke probably discouraged the hitherto headstrong and self-righteous women of the Ladies’ Association.7

Such public criticism may have contributed to the women’s declining activism. Almost eighteen months had passed since the women had concluded their petitioning campaign and written their appeal, and those experiences of success in the public sphere probably seemed like a distant memory when confronted with these attacks on their good will and integrity. They may have inclined the women to reconsider whether the white community in Canada and the women on whose behalf they purported to speak really appreciated their “self-denying” efforts.8

Although contributing factors in the women’s retreat from public activism, these accusations were probably not the sole reason for the women’s withdrawal. Such public

7 Frederick Douglass’ Paper alluded to the controversy 30 Jun. 1854. Leader article reprinted with editorial in Provincial Freeman 24 Jun. 1854.

defamation may have been discouraging to the women, but so were the events taking place in the United States and reported by the Canadian press. At about the same time as Shadd published her first criticism of the Ladies’ Association, the women would have also learned that the U.S. Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act. A piece of legislation that allowed for the expansion of slavery into the unorganized territories of the United States, the Kansas-Nebraska Act offered solid evidence to Canadians that the anti-slavery forces of the Union were no match for the slavepower of the South. The men of the Anti-Slavery Society had previously suspected that “the American government has been plotting,” for years, they declared, “to extend the area of Slavery.” By overturning previous legislation that prohibited slavery in the northern part of the territories, the Kansas-Nebraska Act confirmed their suspicions. With steady coverage by the Canadian press of the ensuing violent struggle for Kansas and presidential support thrown behind the proslavery forces, the news became increasingly discouraging for the abolitionists. The Globe soberly concluded that, “by union of action and devotion to one great object, the minority of slaveholders manage to control Congress and the Executive, and to cause legislation to retrograde towards despotism and barbarism, rather than progress to freedom and civilization.” The outcome of the subsequent election of 1856, a victory for the Democrats and their base of support in the southern slave states, offered corroborating evidence that “revealed the designs of a slave-power in a light more convincing than ever.” The women of the Ladies’ Association probably shared in this bleak outlook and became resigned to react to events in the United States rather than influence them.9

After the summer of 1854, the women of the Ladies' Association did just that -- they abandoned their strategies to speak for Canadian women and influence public opinion at home and abroad. They continued to provide temporary relief to fugitive slaves, but petitions, addresses, fundraising and worldwide correspondence were all projects relegated to their past. They did not issue an annual report in the summer of 1854, instead distributing one last annual report in the summer of 1855 that summarized their activities for the previous two years. They stopped engaging in projects that involved women from the United States or Britain; they cooperated only with the men of the Anti-Slavery Society. The men even became involved in the administration of the visitations, forming a “sub-committee” in 1855 to the Ladies’ Association to “test cases of application, and to fix the amount which may seem adapted to meet the reasonable claims of the fugitive.” The women, probably in an attempt to avoid any possible criticism, no longer wished to make even these public decisions on behalf of the benevolent people of Toronto.10

After 1854, the women of the Ladies’ Association seem to have preferred to operate more privately. They continued to conduct their visitations in Toronto, but they did so without holding concerts to raise money, advertising their meetings or drawing much attention to themselves. The only publicity they received came from the Anti-Slavery Society. At the fourth annual meeting, Henning credited the women with discharging most of the Society’s activities that year, and in their Sixth Annual Report, he again credited the operations of the society to “have been carried on chiefly through the agency of the Ladies’ Association.” Visitations, numbering between four and five hundred in their fifth and sixth years combined, became the central activity of the Ladies’ Association and, by extension, the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada. Their visitations did not resonate with the same overtly political

10 Drew 238; Anti-Slavery Society of Canada, Sixth Annual Report 5; Toronto Globe 8 May 1855.
aspirations as their petitioning campaign, but they still embodied a covertly political and paternalistic desire to influence the values and behavior of the immigrant fugitives. Although the women of the Ladies’ Association had stepped away from the firing lines of public life, they continued to contribute much more than “efficient support” to the cause of fugitive slaves and anti-slavery in Canada.\footnote{Stouffer 128; Toronto \textit{Globe} 8 May 1855; Anti-Slavery Society of Canada, \textit{Sixth Annual Report} 5; Winks, \textit{Blacks in Canada} 256.}
6. Conclusion

Although nineteenth-century structures of government excluded women from participating in formal politics, the practices of the nineteenth-century public sphere did not prevent women from participating in public life. The activities undertaken by the Toronto anti-slavery women demonstrated the development of a publicly and politically-oriented female culture. These mid-nineteenth-century women worked collectively to influence the beliefs and behavior of fugitives in Canada, members of Toronto society, women in Canada and the United States, and, indirectly, the government of the United States. They enjoyed access and influence within certain parts of the public sphere, but both their access and influence was regulated and restricted because of their gender. In effect, the values and institutions of the male-dominated public sphere both empowered and limited the women’s active participation in public life and their development of a women’s political culture.  

The public sphere in mid-nineteenth century Toronto encouraged women’s participation in public life under certain conditions. When problems arose that threatened the prevailing values, beliefs and institutions of life in Canada and were understood by the general public to represent a deficiency of morality, piety or virtue among certain members of society, the public seems to have accepted, approved of, and even welcomed women’s attempts to solve, or at least ameliorate, the problem. Women could participate in the anti-slavery cause because they and their supporters interpreted their involvement as women devoting themselves to others and helping them to adopt the “right” beliefs and behaviors, not as women attempting to influence or change systems of government, labor or production. When the *Globe* published the women’s anti-slavery appeal and deemed it to represent the “legitimate

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1 In her study of British and American women abolitionists, Sklar makes the point that “it is not enough simply to look at women’s motivations or institutions; we must also investigate how the male dominated political environment encouraged or discouraged women’s participation.”, Sklar 302.
province of women”, it affirmed the view that slavery was a problem that originated with people and that women’s agency could address the problem by encouraging, instructing and guiding people, especially other women, to adopt correct beliefs and appropriate behaviors. It assisted in the nineteenth-century process that the historian Denise Riley described as legitimating and defining the realm of “the social” as a feminized realm of action located in the uncharted territory that lay between the old conceptions of separate domestic and public spheres. Modeled on domestic ideals, feminine influence in social matters was understood as nurturing and guiding, sympathetic and “self-denying.” Women’s influence or authority over social matters was not commonly interpreted as political, coercive or self-interested, even though, in the case of the anti-slavery women, it clearly had disciplining dimensions and offered women greater confidence in their ability to affect and direct the creation of public opinion. Feminine moral authority was not devoid of coercive features or political intent, but moral authority was not overt power over others, and women who exercised moral authority were careful to express their authority only in terms that were generally accepted as feminine, respectable and “self-denying”.2

Although the public sphere rewarded women with moral authority in exchange for carrying out public work that reflected women’s domestic roles and responsibilities, it also placed limits on women’s participation in public life in the name of feminine propriety. The familiar injunction against women speaking in public posed one of the most formidable obstacles the anti-slavery women encountered in their attempt to influence public life. It denied them the ability to participate fully and actively in assemblies where men were present, but it did not preclude their involvement entirely. The anti-slavery women in Toronto attended public assemblies, read newspapers, and thought over issues of public concern, and

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2 Toronto Globe 11 Jan. 1853; Riley 49-51.
they expressed their opinions publicly by sponsoring concerts, circulating petitions, and conducting visitations. The public sphere obliged women to devise creative avenues and persuasive arguments to exercise their authority. It offered them a wider realm of action, but one that was characterized neither by equality nor neutrality. While the public sphere accommodated some women under certain conditions, the Toronto anti-slavery women recognized that public life took place on male-dominated terrain and that, in most cases, they had to accommodate to participate. They accommodated by devising strategies to influence others through channels considered proper for women and to construe their public activism as extensions of their domestic roles and responsibilities.

Most significantly, the anti-slavery women demonstrated that some nineteenth-century women with ambitions to influence public life were able to overcome the popular belief that women's responsibilities rest with the family and domestic concerns. By conscientiously attending to contemporary doctrines of femininity, the anti-slavery women accommodated the values of the public sphere, portraying themselves publicly as respectable wives and mothers, compelled by their Christian sensibilities and their feminine compassion to relieve the distressing circumstances of the fugitives and to offer their support to the anti-slavery cause. Devotion to their responsibilities as wives and mothers never became a public issue.

Public criticism of the Toronto anti-slavery women did not arise from any perceived neglect of domestic responsibilities, but it did arise from the women's failure to fulfill the ideals of true womanhood. In 1853, the *North American* criticized the women for espousing "boastful, hollow-hearted" philanthropy, and in 1854, the *Leader* accused them of "fostering jealously" between the potential recipients of their philanthropy. Both newspapers' criticisms arose from the women's failure to live up to the pedestal of virtue upon which they were placed. Women's "naturally" nurturing, guiding and sympathetic temperament failed in these
cases. Their judgments and actions were not universally beneficial, and their status as benevolent, "self-denying" women was called into question. They became criticized as "unfeeling" and "self-righteous ‘friends’" of the fugitives.  

The moral authority of the Ladies’ Association did not stand up well to public criticism. Previously uncontested, the women did not have to defend their motivations or their reform decisions; they were presumed to be naturally good and inherently beneficial because they were the motivations and decisions of respectable, Christian women. When doubts about the women’s effectiveness were raised and their authority was contested, the Ladies’ Association faltered in its attempts to defend itself. They continued to rely on their moral authority, as women, to justify their attempts to impose their values on the public, but as a defense, this argument was no longer persuasive. While the women claimed their collective authority on the basis of their gender, the attacks on their authority point to the possibility that their authority was not solely the effect of their gender.

Although much research remains to be done on nineteenth-century women’s authority and participation in Canadian public life, the story of the Toronto anti-slavery women suggests that these women’s moral authority was at least partially contingent on prevailing beliefs in Canadian society of their cultural or racial superiority. Race and culture represented major social and political differences between the fugitives and the majority of women of the Ladies’ Association. That the women did not advertise concerts or meetings in the black papers, did not actively recruit black members, did not get involved with black abolitionist groups or build ongoing relationships with the fugitives they relieved tends to suggest that their vision of respectable public life in Toronto did not include blacks. That they encouraged blacks to leave the city and move to the country also points to their reservations about the fugitives.

morality and the impact of a formerly slave population on their urban society. Did the women's moral authority have a racial, or perhaps cultural, component? As free British subjects, did they believe themselves superior to the dark, heathen fugitives?4

Shadd would have argued that they did. In perhaps her most vituperative article, she made her opinion of the Anti-Slavery Society, the Ladies' Association and the British empire clear: "No phase that caste assumes in India can be, to swarthy Hindoo more debasing than is this disgusting repulsive surveillance, this despotic, dictatorial, snobbish air of superiority of white people over the fugitives, by Canadian anti-slavery people." Indeed, the women of the Ladies' Association saw themselves, or wanted to see themselves, as virtuous and morally superior. They were not a part of the Toronto elite, probably presumed by these pious women to be corrupted by self-interest, but in the women's zeal to help lift the fugitives to lead a virtuous life in Canada, they were probably perceived, by blacks like Shadd, to be corrupt and self-interested themselves. Their story leads me to suggest that female moral authority in mid-nineteenth-century Canadian public life incorporated both cultural and racial elements. To some extent, female moral authority, bathed in maternal virtue, seems to have masked behavior that smacked of paternalism and racial superiority on the part of white Canadians.5

While racial and cultural differences represented significant axes on which female moral authority rested, the evidence also indicates that other social distinctions must have also granted legitimacy to women's authority in the public sphere. The recurring concern for respectability points to a more nuanced, and historically specific, understanding of women's authority in the nineteenth-century public sphere. The set of social attributes that

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4 Bristow asserts that white women were concerned "about the presence of too many Black people in the cities," Bristow 108. The one country settlement the women specifically advocated was Buxton, the colored settlement run by the Elgin Association, a predominantly white association. 
5 Provincial Freeman 17 and 24 May 1856.
distinguished a respectable woman in Toronto society does not appear to have hinged on the single distinction of race. The women of the Ladies’ Association qualified as respectable women, and their numbers included at least one black woman. Privileged economic status does not appear to have determined respectability either, as the Ladies’ Association included some women of modest family circumstances and some who worked in exchange for wages to support themselves and their families. We know that one black woman, Mrs. Lewis, the wife of a barber, was a member from 1851 until at least 1854. Her ongoing association with the predominantly white woman’s organization tends to suggest that the membership welcomed her involvement. While one black woman’s participation should not be overstated, and cannot be claimed evidence of race-blindness, it may indicate some degree of openness to work and associate with some blacks who were considered respectable. If we assume that those members of the Ladies’ Association who were women of color or of modest means were regarded as respectable women and that they shared, to some extent, in the collective sense of female moral authority that the members of the Ladies’ Association drew upon to underwrite their public activities, we need to look to other social distinctions and qualities, in addition to race and class, which may have determined respectability in the early 1850s and laid a foundation for female moral authority and the development of women’s political cultures. The evidence discussed here makes these questions possible to raise, but difficult to answer without further research investigating other groups of nineteenth-century Canadian women who ventured to influence the creation of public opinion.

In their attempts to influence public opinion, the Toronto anti-slavery women encountered problems and criticisms that also raise the possibility that the public sphere itself was undergoing rapid change in the early 1850s, which in turn, influenced women’s access and influence within it. When the anti-slavery women began to participate in the public
sphere, blacks also began to develop their own strategies to access Toronto's public sphere. In 1851, blacks established the *Voice of the Fugitive* and began to organize themselves collectively, holding conventions and meetings to improve their circumstances in Canada. Two years later the *Provincial Freeman* entered public discussion. As blacks began to carve a place for themselves in the public sphere, their presence, just like the presence of women, would have altered the terms of public debate. With two groups, women and blacks, developing alternative strategies to influence the formation of public opinion, and to varying extents, challenging the authority of white middle-class men as the sole arbiters of public life, the 1850s may have witnessed one of the crucial transformative, though troubled, steps in the process of widening the public sphere in Canada.

With the widening of the public sphere, the realms of social and political action began to grow apart, the former becoming a feminized arena in which the agents of reform strove to produce generally beneficial effects for common good and the latter remaining masculine, exclusive and operating on the basis of competing interests vying for power and authority. While this dichotomy helped increase women's access to certain parts of the public sphere, it also had the effect of marginalizing their authority and trivializing their impact on the public sphere. Employing Habermas' lens of the public sphere to restore the activities of the Toronto anti-slavery women to history, however, enables us to focus on the indissoluble ties between social and political action and to move beyond this dichotomy of the social and the political arenas.

Re-interpreting reform activism as public activism, rather than strictly as political or social activism, restores the issues of power and authority to the study of social activism, and conversely, reinstates the ideals of representing the interests and needs of a constituency to political activism. The Toronto anti-slavery women began to construct their agenda for
political and social reform when they held their first meeting and resolved “to advise and assist the unfortunate refugees who take shelter in Canada,” and they elaborated upon that agenda as they established their fundraising concerts and visitation programs, published and distributed annual reports and their appeal, and circulated petitions. All these activities resonated with the genuinely benevolent intentions of the women to help fugitives in need and aid in the cause of anti-slavery, while at the same time, they reflected the women’s ambitions to build public support for their opinions about slavery, abolition, and the fugitives escaping to Canada, and their ambition to speak on behalf of all Canadian women.

For the study of women’s activism in the era preceding the campaigns for suffrage, this dual focus on social and political activism enables historians to explore the development of political cultures among women trying to influence social change by employing the historically specific practices of the public sphere. And by affirming that women’s activism took place in the public sphere, the story of the Toronto anti-slavery women helps us move beyond the old conceptualization of women’s activism taking place on presumed-to-be-neutral territory that lay between the separate spheres of public and private. Their activities demonstrate that nineteenth-century women’s activism was not prosecuted on neutral territory; it took place on the politically-charged and male-dominated terrain of the public sphere.\(^6\)

\(^6\) Riley 51.
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Appendix A

Members of the Toronto Ladies' Association for the Relief of Destitute Colored Fugitives*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Office bearer and committee members</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Ethnicity/race</th>
<th>Occupation (outside the home) and other voluntary activities</th>
<th>Husband or male relative's occupation</th>
<th>Husband or male relative's voluntary activities</th>
<th>Involved in Anti-Slavery Society†</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Mrs. Arnold (president)</td>
<td>Anglican</td>
<td></td>
<td>Female Emigration Society/Magdalen Asylum</td>
<td>Gentleman</td>
<td>Anti-Slavery/Magdalen Asylum</td>
<td>husband afterwards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Mrs. Badenach</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>City Mission</td>
<td>Deceased (Grocer)</td>
<td></td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Mrs. Beekman</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Bible Association</td>
<td>Auctioneer/Insurance Agent/Notary</td>
<td>Elgin Association</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Mrs. Blake (vice-president)</td>
<td>Anglican</td>
<td>Irish</td>
<td>Educator/Female Emigration Society/Toronto General Dispensary and Lying-In Hospital/Magdalen Asylum</td>
<td>Attorney/Politician/Professor/Chancellor, University of Toronto</td>
<td></td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Mrs. Brett (vice-president)</td>
<td>Methodist</td>
<td></td>
<td>Bible Association/Magdalen Asylum</td>
<td>Wholesale and Retail Merchant</td>
<td>Anti-Slavery/Anti-Clergy Reserves/City Mission/Elgin Association/Magdalen Asylum/Temperance</td>
<td>husband afterwards</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Names of members are drawn from reports in the Toronto Globe, 29 April 1851, 31 May 1853; and the Frederick Douglass' Paper, 30 June 1854. None of these sources are complete, and therefore, this listing is only a partial one and subject to omissions. Information about the members draws mostly from Rowell's City of Toronto and County of York Directory, 1850-1, J. Armstrong, ed. (Toronto: Henry Rowell, 1850); Brown's Toronto City and Home District Directory, 1846-7 (Toronto: George Brown, 1846); and Brown's Toronto General Directory, 1856 (Toronto: McLear & Co., 1856); Dictionary of Canadian Biography, voluntary association reports listed in the bibliography, as well as various articles and advertisements in the Toronto press.

† I have found evidence of only one non-white member of the Ladies’ Association, Mrs. Lewis. Brown's Directory of 1846 and Rowell's Directory of 1850 indicated “coloured” or “col.” in their entries for black inhabitants of Toronto, however, the accuracy of the directories' notations about inhabitants’ race is questionable. See Frederick H. Armstrong, “Evolving Multiculturalism: Toronto’s Black Community in the Late 1840s,” A City in the Making: Progress, People and Perils in Victorian Toronto (Toronto and Oxford: Dundurn Press, 1988), pp. 192-201.

‡ In this column, “husband (or relative) before” means that the woman’s husband appears to have become involved in anti-slavery activism before she did; “husband afterwards” means that the woman appears to have become involved before her husband did. “-” means that the woman’s husband does not appear to have participated in the anti-slavery movement.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Office bearers and committee members</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Ethnicity/race</th>
<th>Occupation (outside the home) and other voluntary activities</th>
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<th>Husband or male relative’s voluntary activities</th>
<th>Involved in Anti-Slavery Society</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6. Mrs. Brown (vice-president)</td>
<td>Presbyterian</td>
<td>Scottish</td>
<td>Bible Association</td>
<td>Publisher of the <em>Globe</em>/Politician</td>
<td>Anti-Slavery/Anti-Clergy Reserves/City Mission/Elgin Association</td>
<td>husband before</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Miss Brown</td>
<td>Presbyterian</td>
<td>Scottish</td>
<td>Educator (Ladies’ School)/Bible Association/City Mission</td>
<td>Publisher of the <em>Globe</em>/Politician</td>
<td>Anti-Slavery/Anti-Clergy Reserves/City Mission/Elgin Association</td>
<td>male relatives before</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Mrs. Dr. Burns (vice-president)</td>
<td>Presbyterian</td>
<td>Scottish</td>
<td>Bible Association/Magdalen Asylum</td>
<td>Professor, Knox College/Minister/Organizer</td>
<td>Anti-Slavery/Anti-Clergy Reserves/City Mission/Elgin Association/Magdalen Asylum/Mechanics Institute/Temperance</td>
<td>husband before</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Mrs. Cheney</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Provincial Lying-In Hospital and Vaccine Institution</td>
<td>Manufacturer of Stoves and Tinware</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Mrs. Dall</td>
<td>Unitarian</td>
<td></td>
<td>Educator/Author</td>
<td>Minister</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Mrs. Capt. Dick</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Maternity Lying-In Hospital and General Dispensary/Magdalen Asylum</td>
<td>Captain of “City of Toronto” Steamboat</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>12. Mrs. Dunlop</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Wholesale and Retail Confectioner/Provincial Lying-In Hospital and Vaccine Institution/Magdalen Asylum</td>
<td>Deceased</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Mrs. Esson (secretary)</td>
<td>Presbyterian</td>
<td>Scottish</td>
<td>Bible Association</td>
<td>Professor, Knox College/Minister/Author</td>
<td>Anti-Slavery/Anti-Clergy Reserves</td>
<td>husband before</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Mrs. Fiksen</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Wholesale Dry Goods (Ross, Mitchell &amp; Co.)</td>
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<td>15. Mrs. Freeland</td>
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<td>Barrister/Notary</td>
<td>Anti-Slavery/Anti-Clergy Reserves/City Mission/ Mechanics Institute</td>
<td>husband before</td>
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<tr>
<td>Office bearers and committee members</td>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>Ethnicity/race</td>
<td>Occupation (outside the home) and other voluntary activities</td>
<td>Husband or male relative's occupation</td>
<td>Husband or male relative's voluntary activities</td>
<td>Involved in Anti-Slavery Society</td>
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<td>16. Mrs. Hamilton</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Anti-Slavery/ City Mission/ Elgin Association</td>
<td>husband before</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Mrs. Hay</td>
<td>Presbyterian</td>
<td>Scottish</td>
<td>Manufacturer (Jacques &amp; Hay Cabinet and Furniture Warehouse) /Politician</td>
<td>Mechanics Institute</td>
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<tr>
<td>18. Mrs. Henderson</td>
<td>Presbyterian</td>
<td>Scottish</td>
<td>Educator (Ladies' School)/ Bible Association/City Mission</td>
<td>Educator (Toronto Academy)/ Globe Secretary and Treasurer</td>
<td>Anti-Slavery/ Elgin Association/ Mechanics Institute/ Temperance</td>
<td>husband before</td>
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<tr>
<td>19. Mrs. Henning (secretary)</td>
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<td>20. Mrs. Hewlett</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Educator (Hebrew at Knox College)</td>
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<td>21. Mrs. Hirschfelder</td>
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<td>22. Mrs. Hurlburt</td>
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<td>Principal (Adelaide Academy)</td>
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<td>23. Mrs. Jacques</td>
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<td>English</td>
<td>Provincial Lying-In Hospital and Vaccine Institution</td>
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<td>Mechanics Institute</td>
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<td>24. Mrs. Johnston</td>
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<td>Publisher of the Examiner/Druggist</td>
<td>Anti-Slavery/ Anti-Clergy Reserves/ Mechanics' Institute</td>
<td>husband before</td>
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<tr>
<td>25. Mrs. Lesslie</td>
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<tr>
<td>26. Mrs. Lewis</td>
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<td>Black</td>
<td>Barber</td>
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<td>27. Miss Lillie</td>
<td>Congregationalist</td>
<td>Scottish</td>
<td>Bible Association</td>
<td>Minister</td>
<td>Anti-Slavery/ Anti-Clergy Reserves/ Mechanics' Institute</td>
<td>male relative before</td>
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<td>28. Mrs. McClure</td>
<td>Methodist</td>
<td>Irish</td>
<td>Bible Association</td>
<td>Minister/Organizer</td>
<td>Anti-Slavery/ Temperance</td>
<td>husband before</td>
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<td>29. Mrs. McDonald</td>
<td>Methodist</td>
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<td>Magdalen Asylum</td>
<td>Dry Goods Store</td>
<td>Anti-Slavery/ Temperance</td>
<td>husband afterwards</td>
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<td>30. Miss McDonald</td>
<td>Methodist</td>
<td>Scottish</td>
<td>Dry Goods Store</td>
<td>Anti-Slavery/ Temperance</td>
<td>f/m relatives before</td>
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<td>Office bearers and committee members</td>
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<td>Ethnicity/race</td>
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<td>Husband or male relative's occupation</td>
<td>Husband or male relative's voluntary activities</td>
<td>Involved in Anti-Slavery Society†</td>
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<tr>
<td>31. Miss McNally (secretary)</td>
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<td>Irish</td>
<td>Educator (Ladies' School)</td>
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<td>32. Mrs. Reford</td>
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<td>33. Mrs. Roaf (vice-president)</td>
<td>Congregationalist</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Bible Association</td>
<td>Minister/Organizer</td>
<td>Anti-Slavery/Anti-Clergy Reserves/ City Mission/ Mechanics Institute/ Temperance</td>
<td>husband before</td>
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<tr>
<td>34. Mrs. Rose (vice-president)</td>
<td>Congregationalist</td>
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<td>Bible Association/City Mission/Magdalen Asylum</td>
<td>Minister/Politician</td>
<td>Anti-Slavery</td>
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<tr>
<td>35. Mrs. Scoble</td>
<td>Congregationalist</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Bible Association/Magdalen Asylum</td>
<td>Minister/Politician</td>
<td>Anti-Slavery/Anti-Slavery</td>
<td>husband before</td>
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<tr>
<td>36-37. the Misses Scoble†</td>
<td>Congregationalist</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Bible Association/Magdalen Asylum</td>
<td>Wholesale Dry Goods</td>
<td>Anti-Slavery/Elgin Association</td>
<td>husband before</td>
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<tr>
<td>38. Mrs. Shaw</td>
<td>Congregationalist</td>
<td>English</td>
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<tr>
<td>39. Mrs. Short</td>
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<td>40. Mrs. Willis (treasurer)</td>
<td>Presbyterian</td>
<td>Scottish</td>
<td>Bible Association/Female Emigration Society/Toronto General Dispensary and Lying-In Hospital</td>
<td>Principal and Professor of Divinity, Knox College/</td>
<td>Anti-Slavery/Elgin Association</td>
<td>husband before</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

§ "The Misses Scoble" refers to an unknown number of women, but for the purpose of counting members, I have assumed it refers to two women.
## Appendix B

Advertisements placed by the Toronto Ladies’ Association for the Relief of Destitute Colored Fugitives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advertisement</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| **CONCERT.** | A CONCERT in aid of the Funds of the “Ladies' Association” for the relief of Destitute Fugitives, was given on Friday Evening, 6th June, in the St. Lawrence Hall. The well-known abilities of those entrusted with the management, warrant us in saying that the Programme will be of a superior character. Through the kindness of the Messrs. Bonthrop and the Officers of the Garrison, the Band of the 71st Regiment will be present. Tickets of Admission, 2s. Ed. each, can be procured at any of the Book or Music Dealers, or from any member of the Ladies’ Association. Concert to commence at Eight o’clock P.M. E. Arnold, President. Isabella Herriott, Esma Macnally, Secretaries. Toronto, May 3rd, 1851. | **PROMENADE CONCERT!** | The Annual Concert in Aid of the Colored Refugees from American Slavery, will be given on Friday Evening, the 29th Instant, in the St. Lawrence Hall. Mr. Paige has kindly undertaken the charge of the musical department, in which he will be assisted by members of his own family, and by other musical professionals of the city. The Refreshment Room, under the charge of the Ladies of the Association, will be open from 7 to 9 o’clock, in the apartment adjoining the Hall. Tickets 2s. Ed. to be had from the Ladies of the Committee, and of Messrs. A. & B. Nordheimer. Toronto, 1st April, 1853. | **A PROMENADE CONCERT!** | Will be given in aid of the colored fugitives, on Thursday, on January 29th, in the St. Lawrence Hall. Coffee and other refreshments will be served from seven to eight o’clock in the supper-room. During this time the Military Band of the 71st Regiment, (which has been kindly put at the service of the Ladies, by the gallant officers of that regiment,) will play in the Hall. The principal professors of music will then contribute to the evening’s entertainment. Several entertainments, amongst others the eloquent speaker, Rev. B. B. Ward, (colored) will deliver, during the evening, short addresses suited to the occasion. Tickets, Rs. 6d. each, can be procured at Nordheimer’s Music Store, or from MRS. ARNOLD, President. MRS. HENNING, MISS MACNALLY, Secretaries. Toronto, 26th Dec., 1851. | **Grand Promenade Concert.** | The Annual Promenade Concert, in aid of the Fund for the Relief of Destitute Colored Fugitives, will be given on Friday evening, the 20th Instant, in the St. Lawrence Hall. Messrs. Herriott and Rattray have kindly undertaken to arrange for the musical department. In addition to the professional musicians, some distinguished amateur amateurs are expected to assist on the occasion. The refreshment room will, as usual, be under the care of the Ladies of the Committee of the Association. The Military Band, through the kindness of Major McNicol, will be present. Tickets may be procured at the Music Stores of Messrs. Nordheimer, and Paige & Small; or from any member of the Committee. Toronto, Jan. 9th, 1854. |}

*Advertisements are reprinted from the Toronto Globe, 3 June 1851 (top left), 1 January 1852 (top right), 21 April 1853 (bottom left), 16 January 1854 (bottom right).*