

What Happened When Anna Jumped from the Window: The Domestic Slave Trade in Antebellum Washington, D.C.

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Fig. 1. Alexander Rider, "But I did not want to go..." from Torrey, *A Portraiture of Domestic Slavery* (43). Stanford Special Collections.

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The woman known as Anna awakened at daybreak in November 1815 and jumped from a third floor window of a Washington, D.C. tavern. Anna's facial features in this inexpert yet arresting engraving are shadowy. However, her dark, tightly curled hair and the contrast of her skin against the simple white cotton muslin dress make her racial identity unmistakable (Fig. 1). Her anguished leap put Anna's picture and story in one of the earliest anti-slavery writings of the new United States. Indirectly, she launched court cases, started the American Colonization Society, inspired Congressional speeches, permitted her tavern-prison to burn to the ground, and put her jailer out of business. No one ever knew if Anna had wanted to take her own life or to escape; her only explanation was that she "did not want to go" (see caption, Fig. 1).

Anna was born into slavery in Maryland. She married an enslaved man at a nearby plantation, had two daughters, and was subsequently sold with her children, by her "old master" to her husband's owner as a payment for debts. Anna was "treated unkindly" in the new setting, and as before, the master had debts. After arranging for Anna's husband to work at a distant point in the plantation, the planter sold Anna and her daughters to "men from Georgia," who took them to Washington, D.C. to await further transportation (Andrews 129). It was here, warehoused in the garret of George Miller's tavern on F Street, that Anna jumped from the window. Miraculously, she survived, although she broke both her arms and shattered her spine.

Within days, Anna's story came to the attention of Jesse Torrey, a Pennsylvania doctor on a young man's tour of Washington, D.C. As he stood facing the Capitol a few days before, Torrey observed a slow and sorrowful slave coffle making its way to southern markets. The irony of humans in bondage being paraded in full view of the proudest structures of the new republic was not lost on Torrey. After his road-to-Damascus epiphany, he canceled his Congressional visit and determined instead to create a "faithful copy of the impressions...which involuntarily pervaded my full heart and agitated my mind" (40). Anna's story is the first of several accounts of Torrey's interviews with enslaved persons, slaveholders, slave traders, and kidnapped free African-Americans in *A Portraiture of Domestic Slavery*, a slim, 84-page leather-bound volume Torrey published within two years of Anna's leap from the window (Figs. 2a, 2b, 2c).

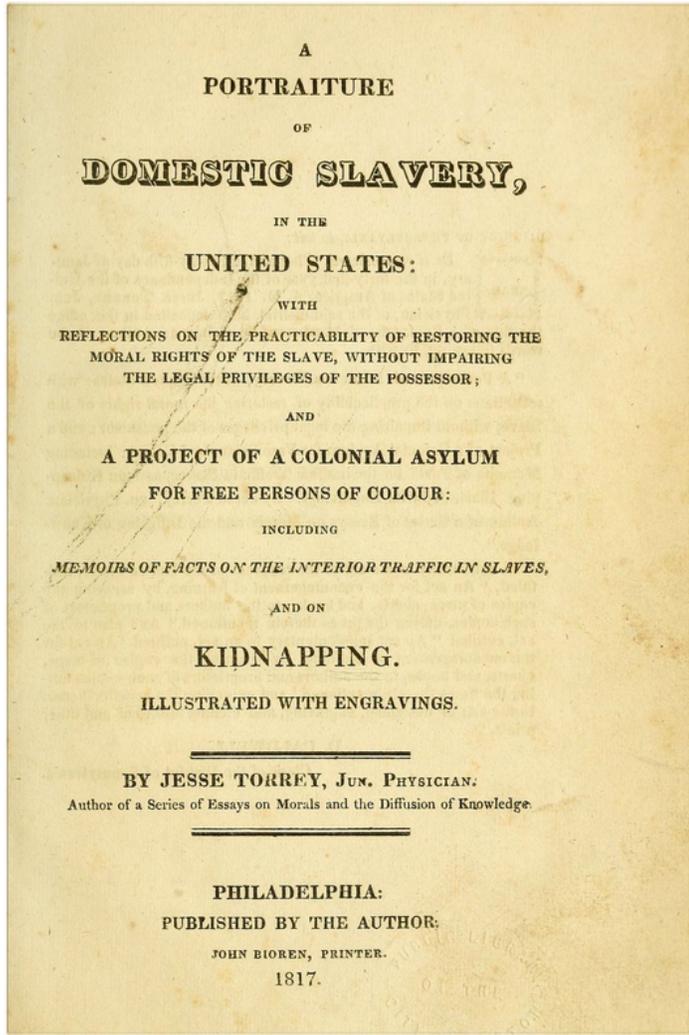
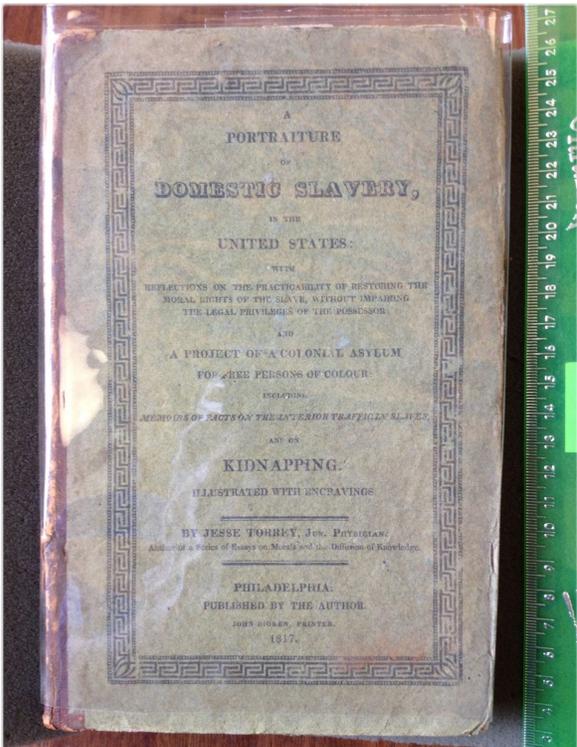
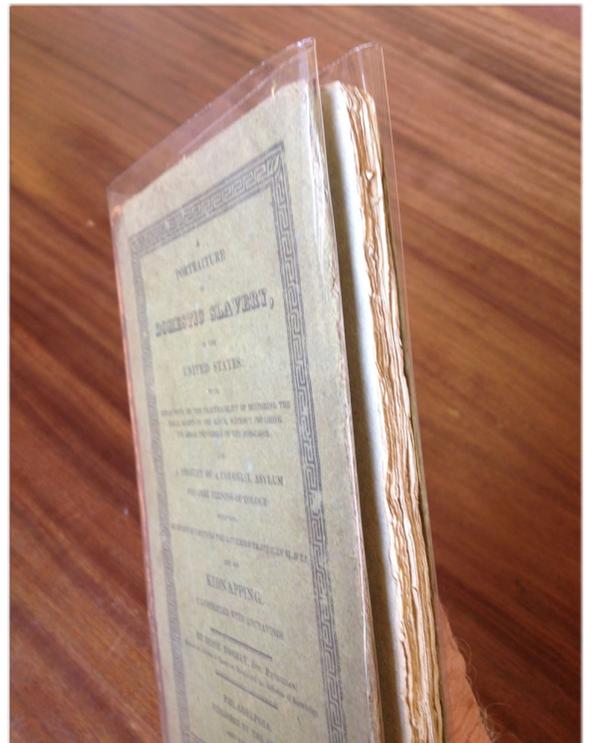


Fig. 2a. Frontispiece, *A Portraiture of Domestic Slavery in the United States* (Torrey). Author's photo. Stanford University Special Collections.

Figs. 2b and 2c. *A Portraiture of Domestic Slavery in the United States* (Torrey), book cover and pages. Author's photos. Stanford University Special Collections.



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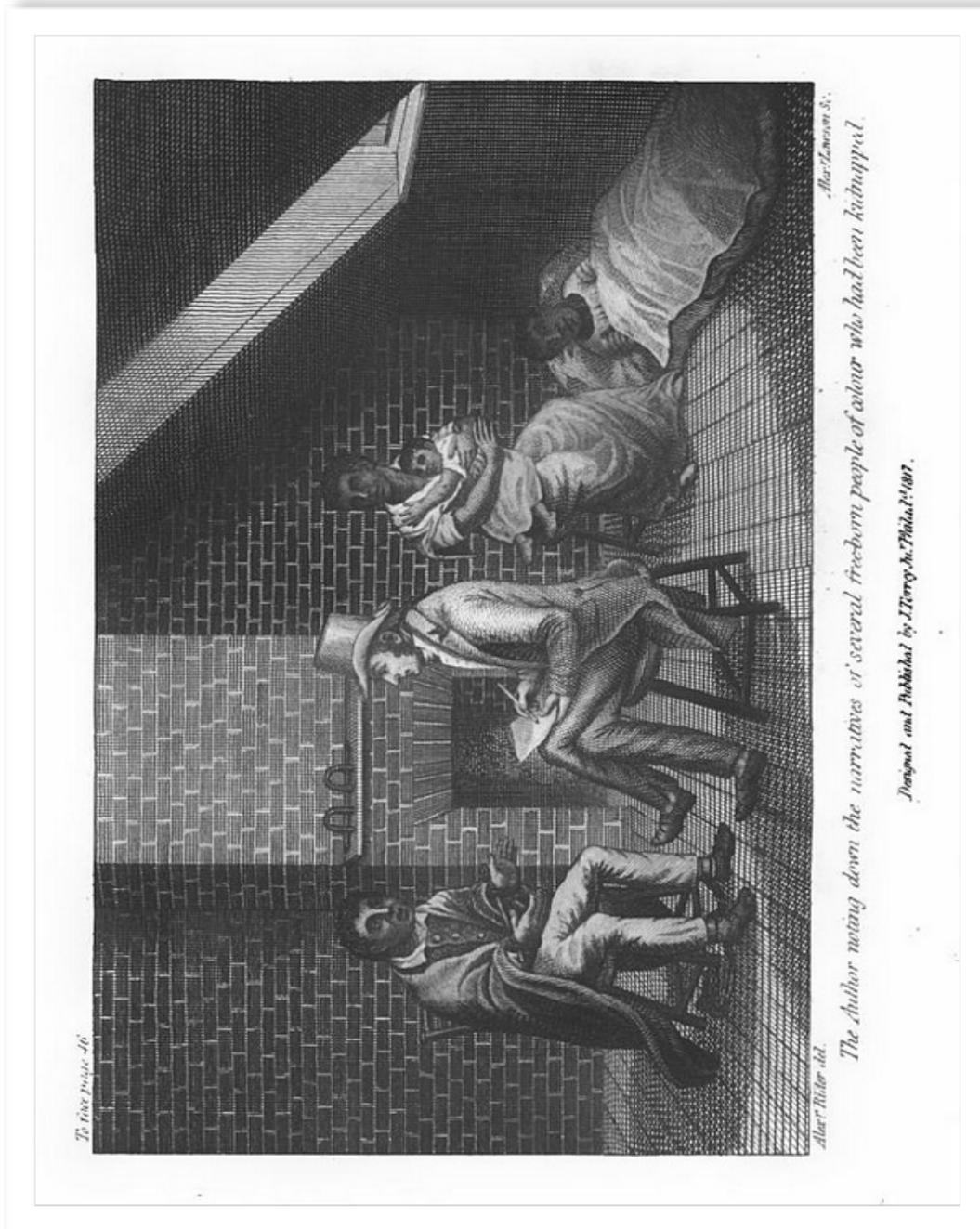


Neither Torrey, nor his artist Alexander Rider witnessed Anna leap from the window. The illustration is instead based on details Torrey noted about the tavern structure when he interviewed Anna in the same room from which she had jumped. She was lucid, but bedridden. The reason that Anna “did not want to go” echoes through slave narratives and literature even today with messages about the domestic slave trade and the casual dissolution of the families of enslaved people.

Anna was one of thousands of American slaves who were forcibly separated from their families to be sold “down the river.” The narrative accompanying the illustration quotes Anna directly: “They brought me away with two of my children, and wouldn’t let me see my husband—they didn’t sell my husband, and I didn’t want to go. I was so confused and ‘istracted that I didn’t know hardly what I was about...they have carried my children with ‘em to Carolina” (46). Torrey commented, “Thus her family was dispersed from north to south... without the shadow of a hope of ever seeing or hearing from her children again” (47).

Anna appears again in the next illustration in the book, which reveals how she unintentionally led Torrey to uncover another dark practice in Washington D.C.’s slave trade. During his interview with Anna, Torrey met three more prisoners held in the same room. The image of the conversation that followed shows Torrey interviewing these cellmates as Anna lies under the dormer (Fig. 3). One of the companions is a 21-year-old “mulatto” man who is “thoroughly

Fig. 3. Alexander Rider, "The author noting down the narratives..." from Torrey, *A Portraiture of Domestic Slavery* (46). Stanford Special Collections.



secured in irons...". The other two people are a "widow woman with an infant at her breast" (unrelated to the mulatto man) who had been "seized and dragged" out of bed in her home (48). Torrey is outraged to learn that—unlike Anna, who was a "legal" slave (42)—the man, woman, and child are all free-born citizens kidnapped from Delaware homes. As Torrey discovered, any person of color, regardless of status, was vulnerable.

Anna's story and that of her fellow prisoners forged unusual alliances. With the help of "Star Spangled Banner" lyricist and attorney Francis Scott Key, Torrey obtained a court injunction to forestall the enslavement of the man and the woman and her infant being held with Anna. The three kidnapped persons of color held with Anna were eventually returned to their free status in Delaware (Holland 83). Key's name appears frequently over the years as attorney for African-American plaintiffs petitioning for free status. Later, Anna herself would benefit from Key's advocacy. However, hundreds if not thousands of free people of color were less fortunate.

Torrey gained another ally in John Randolph, a slave owner himself, who realized that the image of a desperate woman jumping out of a building made a mockery of his earlier public claims that slavery was benevolent. The Congressman tried in vain to convince colleagues to honor Washington's "federal" nature by banning the slave trade within the capital's jurisdiction. Randolph also joined Torrey as one of the earliest proponents of what became the American Colonization Society. As historian Nicholas Wood explains in his

biographical study of the legislator, Torrey's book—and Anna's act in particular—exposed the depravity of the slave trade in the capital city in ways that even a slavery apologist like Randolph could not ignore (119).

Despite Randolph's efforts, the selling, trading, kidnapping, and forced movement of enslaved or kidnapped African-Americans continued in Washington, D.C. Half of the 750,000 people in bondage in America in the early nineteenth century lived in the Potomac region. Sandwiched between Maryland and Virginia with easy access to seaports and rivers, Washington, D.C. was the ideal depot for warehousing slaves en route to plantations to the south and west. Citizens like the tavern owner George Miller profited from holding enslaved people captive; they also served as brokers for traders, as intermediaries for owners looking for escapees, and as bankers for anyone wishing to purchase slaves. The slave trade was big business in the capital city until the eve of the Civil War.

Other interrelated factors in the ambitious, yet debt-ridden, new republic intensified the rapid growth of the domestic slave trade. Although the overseas slave trade to the U.S had ended in 1808, the number of enslaved people had begun to grow at a natural rate of increase. The Louisiana purchase of 1803 opened up vast areas to the south and west for cultivation and diversification of crops—cotton, cane, and indigo, in particular. Cotton cultivation in these regions suddenly became a profitable enterprise with the invention of the cotton gin, and slave populations were dispersed over a wider area to pick cotton to send

to market. The financial value of enslaved people also fueled the domestic slave trade. A plantation owner's slaves were his or her greatest financial asset. Planters were permitted to use slaves as collateral to expand holdings, increase wealth and pay off debts. Anna's narrative reflects this practice. Both of her masters settled their accounts by selling her and her children. The fear of being separated from family members, or sold into harsher slave conditions, was a form of physical and social control. Historians speculate that the relatively low number of slave revolts in the United States—in comparison to other slave-holding regions such as Haiti and Brazil—is due to the threat of being sold “down the river.” Anna was a victim of all of these factors.

Although Washington, D.C. continued as an active hub for the domestic slave trade, the stories of Anna and her jailer, George Miller, provide a satisfying conclusion to an already tragic story. Torrey's book and the unsettling illustration of her jump from the garret window secured Anna's place in neighborhood lore. The illiterate and then disabled African-American woman thus became a local legend. Local historian Wilhelmus Bryan describes what happened when, two years after the publication of Torrey's book, a fire engulfed the outbuildings of Miller's Tavern. As the tavern burned, neighbors in local fire brigades arrived with buckets to douse the blaze. As they assembled, they talked about Anna and other involuntary tavern “guests.” Many, like post office clerk William Gardner, announced loudly that they would do nothing to help the “Slave Bastille.” They

turned their attention to nearby properties and allowed the tavern to burn to the ground (198-201).

Miller did not prosper after the fire. Articles in Washington D.C. newspapers from 1819 on carry frequent notices of property seizures for payment of his debts and back taxes. By 1824, a front page *National Intelligencer* notice announced that a new owner has restored and re-named the tavern as Lafayette House, although it continued as a slave-holding site (Holland 28). An article in the May 30, 1829 issue of the *National Intelligencer* identifies Miller as one of three individuals indicted by the Grand Jury of Savannah for false imprisonment of Rowland Stephenson (3). Stephenson was, interestingly, not enslaved nor even an American. He was a disreputable English banker on the lam whom Miller and fellow slave trader William Williams abducted in hopes of receiving reward money for Stephenson's return to angry investors. Miller and Williams both pled guilty and were fined and imprisoned.

Twenty years after Anna jumped from the window, Professor E. A. Andrews of Boston published *Slavery and the Domestic Slave Trade in the United States*. Andrews gives an account of "old Anna" that fills in what happened to her in the intervening years since she was the subject of a sensationalized escape, or suicide, attempt. According to Andrews, Miller claimed Anna as his slave after her jump from the window. Her husband, although he "[continued] as a slave," was able to join her in Washington (132). Anna and her husband had more children, two of whom were still alive at the time Andrews interviewed her.

During this interim and perhaps because of Miller's legal and financial troubles, Anna lived "at liberty" in Washington, D.C. with her family. Court documents and Andrews's account show that in 1828, Miller and his son George Miller, Jr., attempted to claim Anna's surviving children as slaves. Again, Francis Scott Key appears as an attorney when Anna petitioned for manumission for herself and her children. The court found in their favor, and Anna and her children were awarded free status.

Anna's story and the unsettling engraving of her "frantic act" unknowingly set many wheels in motion. Her leap from the window turned Washington D.C.'s slave taverns and prisons inside out. Her actions challenged the beliefs of slavery's defenders, like John Randolph, and galvanized a young Philadelphia doctor to expose the domestic slave trade in print. Her white neighbors remembered and avenged her when they let George Miller's tavern burn to the ground. From *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to *Huck Finn* to *Beloved*, both white and African-American authors draw on Anna's story, making the family separation trope a common thread in American literature. Like the oversized silhouette on the wall of the tavern in the engraving, Anna casts a long shadow.

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