

A Historical Margaret Garner

by Steven Weisenburger

On a snowy, bitter cold Monday morning in late-January, 1856, Margaret Garner and seven members of her family made a daring escape from their enslavement on two neighboring Kentucky plantations. After walking across the frozen Ohio River at Covington, Kentucky, the fugitives found temporary shelter on Cincinnati's west side, at the cabin of a free man of color named Joseph Kite. The Garner party sojourned no farther northward than that point. Pursuing federal Marshals and the slave master who claimed Margaret and her four children had surrounded Kite's cabin. The twenty-two year old mother of four made a fateful decision: rather than return to slavery she would take her children's lives, then her own. By the time deputies broke in and subdued her husband Robert, Margaret had killed her two-and-one-half year-old daughter Mary.

One month later the Garners were remanded to their Kentucky masters, but only after the most lengthy and divisive fugitive slave process of the pre-Civil War decades. Those days of crisis in Cincinnati involved a dramatic trial exposing deep contradictions in United States law and giving a human face to evils that "the peculiar institution" visited on enslaved African Americans. During that winter, northern newspapers gave wide coverage to the Garner case and until the late 1860s Margaret's story was widely told, memorialized, and depicted—then nearly forgotten. Until Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved*, based loosely on some of those nineteenth century sources, the Garners' freedom struggles had disappeared from American public memory.

Those seeking to recover historical meanings of the Garner tragedy might well begin at Maplewood, the plantation where Margaret was born on June 4, 1834. Located eighteen miles south of Cincinnati and a mile west of Richwood Station, Kentucky, Maplewood's 297 acres were purchased in 1996 from the estate of the last descendant of Archibald K. Gaines, the slaveowner who pursued Margaret's family into southern Ohio on that tragic winter morning. Even now, Maplewood's beautiful rolling fields extend below what remains of Gaines's former plantation house, beyond the ridgeline where scholars believe the plantations slave quarters might have stood, and out to the road fronting Richwood Presbyterian Church, whose main building dates from the time of Margaret's birth. Further eastward beyond the church crossroads lie the fields of a neighboring plantation where Robert and his parents labored. Other large landholdings that once surrounded Maplewood also remain intact, and a few of those estates still belong to descendants of men who were neighbors and friends of A. K. Gaines—slaveholders also, and among Boone County's wealthiest citizens.

During the antebellum decades seventeen percent of Boone County's population were enslaved. But residents living around Maplewood were rich in slaves. The 1850 census tells us that this neighborhood was almost evenly populated by white landowners and their enslaved black laborers who, from 1797 onward, cleared the fields, built the homes and outbuildings, ran the fences, planted the orchards, tended the livestock, ditched the roads—paved now with asphalt—and thus in their myriad daily labors amassed for elite white men like A.K. Gaines the property that was handed down through generations, wealth visible today in the area's lavish new estate homes. Today, African Americans generally do not work and certainly do not reside where Margaret Garner was born. Yet remnants of their toil remain and bridge concretely the world that enslaved persons made to the world that 21st century Americans inherit. This is one way that the Margaret Garner story—determined by themes of power, wealth, sex, and violence—may still tell us things about where and who we are.

During her short lifetime, Margaret Garner was owned by three different slave masters: two in Kentucky, one in Mississippi. The first, John Pollard Gaines, is commemorated on a Kentucky Historical Society plaque at the roadside entrance to Maplewood. His father Abner Gaines brought the family from Virginia to northern Kentucky in 1797. With them came four slaves, and Margaret descended from those unknown persons through a grandmother. Abner Gaines prospered as a farmer, tavern-keeper, and stage-line operator. By 1820 he owned a dozen slaves, and at his death in 1832 seven of those, including Margaret's mother Priscilla, became the property of J. P. Gaines, who had bought Maplewood in 1825 when he was thirty years old, then a young lawyer with political aspirations. We also know from surviving family papers that in his early years John Gaines speculated in real estate and did some slave-trading, but that his fortunes were amassed in raising hogs for the Cincinnati market, a principal focus of his slave-labor. Priscilla, whom the family called "Cilla," was the family's main household servant and had responsibility for John Gaines's rapidly growing brood of children as well as his invalided mother. They soon outgrew the first plantation house; in 1842, Gaines's male slaves worked with paid white laborers to build a spacious, ten-room clapboard-sided home, a remnant of which served as a rabbit and chicken coop in 1996.

As a girl, Margaret Garner worked in that house, helping Priscilla care for the Gaines children. Apparently she was something of a favorite, for when she was seven the Gaines family took Margaret along for a two-day shopping spree in Cincinnati, a sojourn on free-soil that would become a key point of legal contention at her 1856 fugitive slave trial. Local records also tell us that Margaret was baptized and that she worshipped regularly at Richwood Presbyterian Church, yet nothing in such facts should be taken as signifying her acceptance among neighboring whites as anything other than a slave. Indeed, shortly after the January 1856 tragedy one of Margaret's fellow congregants wrote a Cincinnati newspaper to explain that "Peggy," as they called her, had always been "common, cross-tempered" and, in his racist description, a "flat-nosed, thick-lipped Negro woman, whose father had a very bad character." He claimed her infanticide flowed biologically from this lineage.

But what—beyond their desire for liberty—had made Duke and Margaret so "bad" and "cross-tempered"? What were their familial and social conditions? Answering compels one to deal with the facts of interraciality. For antebellum census-takers were always precise about parsing a master's slave property as either "black" or "mulatto," depending on whether the person had one-eighth or more of white ancestry, and this is how we know that while Duke and Priscilla were always listed in census records as "black," Margaret was categorized as "mulatto." Who then was her father? We know from his own records that, in 1833, John Gaines was the only adult white male residing at Maplewood. Moreover, there is nothing in the record about Priscilla being "hired out" elsewhere, and her household duties made it unlikely that she ever would have been. That John Gaines was Margaret's father is therefore a reasonable supposition. It is equally reasonable to suppose that this paternity explains the resistance of Duke and Margaret to white authority.

John Gaines was a restless, extroverted man hungry for success and public honors; and a man who epitomizes the male chauvinism of his times. During most of the 1840s Gaines nested at Maplewood only long enough to (in his own word) "get" more children, finally numbering eleven, each of whom was handed over to Priscilla and Margaret while his wife's health declined, doubtless from all that childbearing. In 1846 John Gaines led a regiment in the Mexican War, was taken prisoner, and made a dramatic escape that Kentucky newspapers lionized. His daring got Gaines elected *in absentia* to a seat in the U. S. Congress, and when he finally returned from the war Gaines stopped at Maplewood for only a matter of days before proceeding on to Washington, where he resided for most of 1848 and 1849. During these years the management of

Maplewood fell mainly to John Gaines's eldest son Abner, who was by all accounts a very temperamental man, and often absent like his father. Worse, for Margaret, are indications in family letters that Abner considered selling Margaret, then thirteen, in order "to prevent her mother leaving the country"—which is to say, running away.

Why would Priscilla have been considering escape? About this time a Richwood planter named William Harper manumitted to Cincinnati one of his elderly slave couples named Joseph and Sarah Kite. The Kites were related to Priscilla through her marriage to Duke, and one may well suppose that Priscilla's yearning for freedom grew not only from the reality of her in-laws' liberty but also because she had the promise of a safe haven in Cincinnati should she decide to run.

Undoubtedly, too, running made sense for reasons of maternal protectiveness, for Margaret had reached an age when enslaved girls became most vulnerable to white men's sexual demands—as Priscilla herself evidently had been. Margaret's work as a domestic servant made her especially vulnerable, the more so in a household whose patriarch had left it to the management of sons in their late-teens and twenties. Yet even beyond the dangers to Margaret of sexual assault, we know from family papers that during the late 1840s *all* the enslaved persons held at Maplewood were anxious because of Master Gaines's persistent absences and the ever-changing regime this entailed, for Gaines's son Abner was not only often absent, he also had made clear his desire to sell some of them. Then things turned still worse for the Maplewood slaves. After John Gaines lost a late-1849 reelection bid he took an appointment as Territorial Governor of Oregon (Abraham Lincoln having first declined the job). Thus in December 1849 Major Gaines abruptly sold Maplewood and all his property in slaves to a younger brother, Archibald, then an Arkansas cotton planter. A. K. Gaines would bring a still more problematic authority to Maplewood.

Amidst these troubled times, in 1849, Margaret took a husband. Probably she was also pregnant—a commonplace strategy for warding off white men's aggressions. It is likely that Robert (whom census records listed as "black") fathered this first child, a boy named Thomas, born in early 1850. But the paternity of Margaret's second boy, described as a "bright" (or light-skinned) "mulatto" named Samuel, born in 1852, is unclear, although we do know that his birth followed a period when, for the first of many periods leading up to January 1856, James Marshall had "hired out" Robert to distant masters in neighboring counties. Moreover, after the infanticide newspapermen who viewed the body of Margaret's third child, two year old Mary, described her as "almost white," and her fourth, Priscilla, just nine months old in January of 1856, as closely resembling her sister. Robert's racial designation and his long absences from Richwood Station rule him out as father to Margaret's children, who are clues to her story's deeper problems.

Certainly her husband's long, forced absences, in addition to the interracial sexual oppressions to which Margaret's nearly white children were visible testimonies, provided the Garners with reasons enough to run. But Maplewood's new owner, Archibald Gaines, had soon revealed himself as an unpredictable, oppressive, and violent master. The record tells us that the purchase of Maplewood came after his first wife, then pregnant, had fallen down the stairs of their Arkansas plantation house, developed an internal hemorrhage and died, by all accounts knocking Gaines into a deep depression. Taking over Maplewood evidently improved his mental attitude for a short while. By 1851 Gaines had remarried, and his second wife Margaret began having children: a girl in 1852, and a boy in late-1854. Yet family correspondence from these years also indicate that his "poor spirits" again got the better of A. K. Gaines and that his relations with the Maplewood slaves deteriorated: for example, that he had threatened often to sell them all away, that he did hire some of them away (a first, for the plantation), that he whipped some of them, that he struck Margaret, leaving a scar on her face, and that his slaves responded with calculated resistances.

Even more telling is how Margaret Garner's births fell into a pattern: excepting her first pregnancy, in 1849, each of her subsequent births followed within five to seven months of Mrs. Gaines's births. In fact Margaret was said to be several months into a fifth pregnancy in January 1856, once more about six months behind her plantation mistress. An additional humiliation, beyond her apparent sexual oppression at the hands of a white man, was that her births surely made Margaret the Gaines family wet-nurse, always an onerous duty for enslaved mothers.

Who fathered Margaret's children? Archibald Gaines, known as "the Colonel," was the only adult white male at Maplewood and suspicion falls heavily on his side. Indeed there is also an inner cultural logic to the pattern of master/slave births. For as historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown reminds us, Southern men commonly referred to their pregnant wives' last trimester or so when they were sexually unavailable as "the gander months" because it was supposedly natural, and to some extent informally countenanced, for them to seek intimate "comfort" with unmarried women. With enslaved women, if they owned any. During the Garner fugitive slave trial, as we will see, there were tantalizing suggestions that this is precisely what explained the paternity of Margaret's children. Additionally, immediately following the infanticide Archibald Gaines's behaviors—for example, his uncontrollable crying over Mary Garner's body and his refusal to release her remains to the Cincinnati coroner—indicate deep attachments to Margaret's children.

In sum, Margaret and Robert Garner had motives aplenty for running, right down to her most recent pregnancy. Every one of these reasons circulated around their self-integrity and the integrity of their family. Moreover, remember that Margaret had the extraordinary bonus of a free black uncle and his family, the Kites, living in Cincinnati—the glittering city she had visited fourteen years earlier. And Robert Garner had visited with Joe Kite's family just after Thanksgiving, 1855, when he had taken a drove of hogs to the Queen City. Thus Margaret's husband knew the roads. Knew the city. And knew he would soon be hired away again, or sold outright, if he did not flee.

The Garners therefore had motives aplenty, and bad weather gave them a rare opportunity. A heavy snow blanketed the Ohio Valley around Thanksgiving and never melted. By New Year's Day the Ohio River was "choked with floating ice"; four days later, frozen solid. Then a still more punishing cold front roared down off the northern plains. City newspapers proclaimed it the coldest winter "known in sixty years" as overnight temperatures plunged into the minus-twenties. By mid-January, with the ferryboats locked in ice, residents freely crossed "the ice-bridge" on foot. By January 22nd it was so thick that steel mills on the Kentucky side began hauling their product over to Ohio on mule-drawn drays. Rumors of the ice bridge spread rapidly among northern Kentucky slaves, and by mid-January abolitionists were boasting that record numbers of fugitives were passing through Cincinnati "stations."

At Richwood, on Sunday, January 27th, masters Marshall and Gaines were watchful but had nonetheless given their bondservants the customary Sabbath-day respite from labor. That Sunday, Margaret would have been anxiously saying goodbye to her parents and reckoning with Robert their chances of success.

Sometime after ten o'clock that Sunday night Robert hitched two of his master's best horses to a sleigh, pocketed a stolen six-shooter pistol, and bundled up his parents, Margaret and the children for a journey through a steady, light snowfall. With so many travelers taxing the horses' strength, Robert had to be patient as he guided the sleigh along back-roads, and eventually along the well-used turnpike, all along risking discovery by slave patrols. Reaching Covington around four or five Monday morning, they abandoned the sleigh and the exhausted horses and set out afoot over

the frozen Ohio River: literally walking on water to their freedom. By early morning they had reached the Kite cabin, where they intended to await an Underground Railroad “conductor” who would forward them on to the next northern “station.” They had successfully traversed the most dangerous stretch of their road to freedom, but were still in great danger of being taken by slave-catchers. Too, Robert’s stealing his master’s pistol tells us that even from the outset the Garners had meant to go down fighting, if it came to that.

And so it did. When the U.S. Marshals burst into Kite’s cabin with A.K. Gaines on their heels Robert emptied the six-shooter, severely wounding one deputy. Then they discovered the “scene of horror”: in her determined resistance, Margaret had almost decapitated Mary with a butcher knife, and using the knife as well as a coal shovel she had wounded slightly each of her surviving children, who had clearly resisted their mother’s plan to kill them all, and to do it practically in their master’s face. U.S. Marshals subdued the Garners and took them into custody under authority of a federal warrant issued that morning according to terms of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, while Hamilton County sheriff’s deputies and a Cincinnati coroner gathered evidence at the scene for a pending murder charge under Ohio statutory authority. Here, even at the scene, were the beginnings of a legal struggle with far-reaching consequences.

One of the profound ironies of the Garner case is that Margaret and Robert had run for freedom *as persons in a family*, determined to live free together or to die trying, but at all events never again to be treated *as chattels, things*; yet following their capture the Garners became prizes in a great legal and political and media-induced struggle over their status, as *property* or *persons*, hence over the very meanings of American slavery, and American freedom.

Throughout the 1850s Cincinnati was divided profoundly over slavery. This division was manifest institutionally: the United States Marshal’s office was in the hands of proslavery Democrats, the Sheriff’s department held by antislavery Republicans; the Mayor, James Farran, was a Democrat but Ohio governor Salmon Chase, a long-time abolitionist, was a Cincinnati with powerful local connections; also, while the Queen City’s two great newspapers, the *Enquirer* and the *Gazette*, were solidly Democratic and Republican, respectively. Word of the Garners’ resistance, infanticide, and arrest spread electrically through the city streets on that Monday morning, galvanizing local militias such as the Sarsefield Guards, a proslavery Irish outfit whose members would clash repeatedly with men from other ethnically defined militia groups like Cincinnati’s German emigrants who had long opposed slavery. That afternoon and evening the U.S. Marshal and the Hamilton County Sheriff fought over whose custody claim had precedence, a debate that wound up shuttling the Garners about through city streets thronged with angry, gun-carrying partisans until finally, because it was a better facility than the Marshal’s office, they were taken to the county jail. Before this agreement was struck the two sides came perilously close to a full-scale downtown gun battle over the fugitives. Dangerous scenes like these continued through much of February, as the Garners became objects in the longest and most complicated trial of its kind.

The 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, part of a larger Compromise that succeeded (for a decade) in holding the Union together, sought to close loopholes in the prior, 1793 federal statute. The new law imposed stiff fines and possible prison sentences on anyone abetting, or even refusing to help recapture, runaway slaves. The 1850 law silenced defendants in all court processes, denied their attorneys any access to *habeas corpus* motions, and sought (inadequately, until the 1857 Dred Scott case) to address questions about whether enslaved persons who had sojourned on free soil, even as briefly as Margaret had done when she was seven years old, were entitled to their freedom. In the Garner case, this was crucial because if her claim to freedom stemming from that

1841 trip were granted, then so were her children also free because under the law they would “follow the condition of the mother.”

In general the 1850 law’s effect was to streamline fugitive slave processes. During the 1850s, the interval from a slave’s recapture to his or her being remanded to a master was cut down to just a day’s length, typically following a thirty to sixty minute court proceeding in which a claimant had only to document ownership and the bare facts of an escape to be awarded custody. The Garner Trial, however, consumed *two weeks* of motions, testimony, and arguments; after which the U.S. Commissioner who tried the case, John Pendery, took another two weeks before deciding, as everyone knew he would decide, to remand the Garners back to Archibald Gaines and James Marshall. By contrast, the other longest-running fugitive slave process took just four days.

Neither was there ever a more spectacular trial than this one. Each day, despite the continuing record cold and snows, upwards of a thousand to two thousand Cincinnatians (from a city of 90 thousand) thronged the streets, formed a gauntlet as the Marshal’s omnibus transported the Garners to the federal courthouse, and demonstrated on the courthouse steps both for and against the court process, the Fugitive Slave Law, and slavery itself. To control them, Mayor James Farran deputized 500 rifle-carrying special deputies, most of them drawn from the Sarsefield Guards.

The courtroom atmosphere was equally volatile, as attorneys traded insults and veiled invitations to a duel, as drunken proslavery protestors disrupted the proceedings, and as legendary Quaker Abolitionist Levi Coffin refused Federal Commissioner Pendery’s order to remove his hat, Coffin politely declining because, as he explained, Quakers give obedience only to God. When a deputy marshal knocked the plain black hat off Coffin’s head, courtroom spectators loosed a long chorus of hisses and boos until the deputy politely handed the offending hat back to a Coffin who then trumped the fellow by declining to take it, and thereby refusing again not only the officer’s federal authority but this time also the man’s status as gentleman. Little skirmishes like this erupted throughout the trial.

Thus with their arrest and trial, with newspapermen’s insistent questions, with mobs crowding to see and touch and encourage them on the one hand or on the other to curse and spit upon them, and with the daily tedium of a court process that moved them about as pawns and rendered them silent figurines for attorneys and witnesses and spectators to point at and talk about, Margaret’s family had become objects in ways both strange and outrageous.

Indeed, whether the Garners were persons, or property, remained the core issue of the legal dilemma that their actions, in both escaping and murdering, had posed. *As persons* under free state Ohio law, Margaret, Robert and his mother Mary and father Simon were liable to trial for murder or as accessories to murder in the death of Mary Garner and the attempted murders of the other three children. As persons, in short, they should answer to the sovereignty of Ohio law. In fact, attorneys argued, the Garners deeds had made them subject to that most sacrosanct of any state’s laws: those involving homicide. Nonetheless, *as property* under slavery-friendly federal statutes, the Garners were subject first to the accelerated and matter-of-fact processes of a fugitive slave hearing. In this case plaintiffs’ attorneys argued and the federal commissioner ruled that federal law had supervening authority even over Ohio homicide statutes. In reply, defense attorneys and Ohio attorneys general argued that any state that willing to defer on cases involving the killing of its own citizens would concede the nullification of all its statutory, constitutional and moral authority to govern. So this case unfolded as an episode in era’s states rights debate, but with a striking reversal. For here were the Southern, proslavery advocates claiming the

overriding authority of the federal government while Northern antislavery advocates were standing up for state sovereignty. It remains one of history's telling inversions.

These issues also explain why Federal Commissioner Pendery went out of his way to accommodate both sides. For example, despite how the 1850 law denied accused fugitives any right to testify, hence their rights as persons before the bar, Commissioner Pendery decided to allow Margaret Garner's testimony about her sojourn in Ohio. This signaled that he was, like other federal jurists, anxious about the kinds of questions soon to be decided in the Dred Scott case. Pendery's doubt cast virtually the only ray of hope for a favorable verdict on behalf of Margaret and her children, as well as for Robert, because he too had sojourned on free soil during those occasions when he had driven hogs into Cincinnati for different masters. In any event, the upshot was that Margaret testified from the witness stand while newspaper reporters dutifully transcribed her matter-of-fact relation of the 1841 trip, testimony that give us her only unmediated words in the historical record.

The Garner's fugitive slave trial also transformed a brilliant yet retiring Quaker attorney into an abolitionist hero. John Jolliffe had already achieved a reputation in Cincinnati as a "friend of the slave" who took their cases *pro bono*, but the Garner case catapulted him into national prominence. Jolliffe used the opportunity to pursue a complicated defense strategy unique in the annals of antislavery work. First he needed to fend off the Kentucky masters' attempt to reclaim the fugitives, thus to keep them on Ohio soil so that state's attorneys could charge the adults with homicide, then see those attorneys get a conviction on a lesser homicide charge and sentenced to the state penitentiary, and finally to prevail upon Ohio's abolitionist Governor Chase to secretly pardon the Garners, who could then be spirited away to Canada. The record indicates that Chase both knew about and consented to this plan, the adult slaves' only real hope of attaining their freedom. As for the children, activists were coordinating fund-raising efforts to purchase them from Gaines. Yet for these efforts to succeed, Jolliffe had to win *habeas corpus* motions that, in effect, would take his clients from federal authorities and surrender them to the Hamilton County Sheriff on murder warrants. In sum, this strategy put Jolliffe in the utterly paradoxical position of defending his clients by working to secure their conviction.

At all events, the strategy failed when Pendery ruled that Federal fugitive warrants had supervening authority. Jolliffe then fell back on a more quixotic and unique strategy, arguing that the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law violated the guarantee of religious freedom enshrined in the Bill of Rights. Specifically, Jolliffe argued that if the federal government could compel citizens to participate in returning fugitive slaves to bondage, even when those citizens (Quakers, for example) objected to slavery as an "evil" according the religious authority, then that government was compelling them to *do evil* and thus to deny their god. He charged that the government might as well order Christian abolitionists "to carry coals into Hell." Pendery allowed Jolliffe to pursue this argument, which produced some of the trial's most impassioned, energized oratory, but finally rejected it.

One last extraordinary scene marked this remarkable trial's close. During the trial's next-to-last day, antislavery activist Lucy Stone had managed to speak confidentially with Margaret for some time, and the following day Gaines complained vigorously about this intrusion through his attorneys. The next day opened with an angry, drawn out argument over Lucy Stone's conversation with Margaret, and at day's end, after Pendery had gaveled the entire hearing closed, Lucy Stone quite literally supplanted him at the bench. She was even wearing "a black silk gown" that mimicked Commissioner Pendery's judicial robes. In this role Lucy Stone addressed the packed courtroom, defending her right to speak to Margaret "as a sister and a person," then condemning the bondage that had made Margaret's "toil-hardened hand" which she

had clasped, and then—in the trial’s most amazing moment—articulating precisely the charge of interracial concubinage that had haunted the entire case and its news coverage. Recalling to everyone’s memory the faces of Margaret’s children, and of A. K. Gaines, Stone told the packed courtroom:

The faded faces of the Negro children tell too plainly to what degradation the female slaves submit. Rather than give her daughter to that life, she killed it. If in her deep maternal love she felt the impulse to send her child back to God, to save it from coming woe, who shall say she had no right not to do so? That desire had its root in the deepest and holiest feelings of our nature—implanted in black and white alike by our common father.

Lucy Stone had stunned everyone by speaking truth to power. For if Margaret Garner could not put her story before the bar of justice and thus claim her humanity, at least others’ efforts might enable her to secure a measure of justice before the bar of public opinion. Lucy Stone thus seized her chance to indict Archibald Gaines to his face—shaming him before northern Kentucky peers packing the courtroom, all but naming their neighbor an adulterer and miscegenator. She had broken through the Southern code of honor commanding silence about all such matters.

Two weeks later Pendery ordered that federal marshals remand the Garners to their respective masters. Thus on the afternoon of February 28th the special guard of 500 deputies flanked an omnibus that drove Margaret’s family from the jail down to the city wharf. There the deputies again formed a gauntlet, and the Garners were marched in chains to a ferryboat that crossed an Ohio River still clotted with occasional ice floes. On the Covington side, Gaines’s Kentucky neighbors staged a massive rally with speeches and considerable drinking. The crowd called Archibald K. Gaines to the balcony of the Magnolia House hotel for a speech, and he cynically invited them to go find Jolliffe, so they could buy the Quaker gentleman a drink of whiskey. Instead the crowd found a newspaperman for the antislavery *Cincinnati Gazette*, and beat him severely.

What now of Margaret? In the final chapter of her great novel, Toni Morrison says of *Beloved* that the people of Cincinnati “forgot her like a bad dream.” In the Garner’s case, soon after deputies returned them to Kentucky, those newspapermen who had covered every nuance of the trial began to forget the re-enslaved family, though their story had reached another critical juncture.

Before departing Cincinnati, Archibald K. Gaines had promised the Cincinnati Sheriff, the District Attorney, as well as John Jolliffe and Lucy Stone that he would return Margaret to Ohio if they made a requisition for her return on murder charges. We also know from archived letters and documents that even on the day before deputy marshals remanded Gaines’s “property” to him, Hamilton county prosecutors were scurrying to handle the requisition process. They were seeking to finalize the grand jury’s charges and to secure warrants from a Hamilton county judge; anticipating the Garner’s return to Kentucky, they had written to Governor Chase by express mail in order to have him at the ready. They knew that this process, requiring that Chase make a formal requisition to Kentucky Governor Morehead, would take a week to ten days.

Gaines, aware of both these strategies and the likely time-frame, began moving the Garners, and then just Margaret, all around northern Kentucky, first holding them in a Covington jail, then taking the family back to Maplewood, then taking Margaret to Frankfort before moving her once again to Covington. When Ohio officers finally had the requisition in hand, they missed a chance to arrest Margaret at the Covington jailhouse by a matter of hours. There they were told that Gaines had taken her to rejoin the Garner family to Frankfort, seventy miles distant; but at

Frankfort they found he had just departed with the Garners for Louisville, another sixty miles off. By the time Ohio deputies and attorneys caught up with Gaines in Louisville, he had already packed the family aboard a steamboat, the *Henry Lewis*, which was making its way down the Ohio River. Gaines had instructed the deputy hired to escort his chattels that they were to be offloaded at Gaines Landing, Arkansas, on the Mississippi River. He had sent the whole family to work for his brother Benjamin, at the plantation he had owned before buying Maplewood.

Again fate intervened. Seventeen hours west of Louisville, at four in the morning of Saturday, March 8th, the *Henry Lewis* rounded a wide bend in the Ohio and collided with an eastbound steamboat, the *Edward Howard*. This impact broke the *Henry Lewis* in two and spread a fire from its boilers. The bow section went down almost immediately, taking 16 people with it. The Garners had been huddled in the boat's aft portion that miraculously stayed afloat, and, as the damaged but still navigable *Edward Howard* came about to save passengers, witnesses observed a black woman standing atop the gunnels cradling a child in her arms. This was Margaret with Priscilla. Witness accounts conflict at this point but most agree that as the *Edward Howard* came abreast of the wreckage Margaret jumped into the river and, some said, threw Priscilla ahead of her. Was it a leap to safety aboard the *Edward Howard*, or was it a suicide leap? After an African American man who worked as cook aboard the *Henry Lewis* jumped in and brought Margaret to rescuers aboard the *Edward Howard*, she is said to "have displayed frantic joy when told that her child was drowned, and said she would never reach alive Gaines Landing, in Arkansas, the point for which she was shipped, thus intimating a desire to drown herself." This report is consistent with all of Margaret's known words and deeds.

And here the records almost entirely lose sight of the Garners. Back in Cincinnati, in mid-March, a judge announced from the bench that he considered the work of U.S. Marshals and Archibald Gaines in removing Margaret from Ohio authority "a bold attempt to usurp the powers of this Court and a wanton disobedience of its process." It hardly mattered. The Garners had apparently disappeared into what Jolliffe had called "the seething hell" of Deep South bondage.

Still, we are able to close this story, though only in the most fragmentary way, because in 1870 Robert Garner, having just moved back to Cincinnati, gave an interview to a *Gazette* reporter who recalled his family's case. To this man Robert related just enough detail for one to sketch Margaret's final years.

We know that their stay at Benjamin Gaines's Arkansas plantation was brief—just another trick in A. K. Gaines's shell game. By April, one of the Gaines brothers had taken the Garners to New Orleans, where they were hired out as household servants to a family acquaintance. There they remained until early 1857, when A. K. Gaines finally sold them to a Mississippian, DeWitt Clinton Bonham, who ran a sizable cotton plantation worked by over one hundred and sixty slaves, at a location on the opposite Mississippi River shore from and some miles just south of Benjamin Gaines's Arkansas plantation. For all the Garners knew, here was their lot until death.

For Margaret, the end came in late-Summer 1858, as a typhoid epidemic roared up the Mississippi Basin. It was a hard way to die: typically, weeks of roller-coaster fevers, massive skin boils, ending with a lung infection and death. In 1870 Robert Garner told the newsman that, before she died, Margaret urged to "never marry again in slavery, but to live in hope of freedom."

After 1870 Margaret Garner was remembered in some literary texts, abolitionist memoirs, and an 1867 painting by Lexington, Kentucky artist Thomas Satterwhite Noble. He was a teenager when the Garner case unfolded, and one sees even from a brief study of his painting that Noble altered key details: he has the boy children rather than little Mary dead below Margaret's defiant

form. He had to, in order to make history fit the Medea myth. In this way Noble's painting well represents a wide range of representations—dating from before and after the Civil War, in poems and novels, by antislavery as well as proslavery writers—that each strove more or less willingly to translate the difficult, contingent facts of Margaret Garner's struggles into the stuff of myth. These texts therefore set before us one final, ironic paradox: writers' and artists' efforts to memorialize Margaret Garner probably succeeded mainly in setting the terms for a long amnesia about her.

That was Margaret Garner's legacy for a hundred and thirty years following her death, decades when she was, in Toni Morrison's words, historically "disremembered and unaccounted for."

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