

**“A FREE WOMAN... CARVED FROM LIFE”: UNCOVERING THE
EMBODIED LIVED, NETWORKS, AND IDENTITIES IN THE *BUST OF*
*NORA AUGUST***

by

Grace Ford-Dirks

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in American Material
Culture

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ABSTRACT

This thesis centers on the *Bust of Nora August* from St. Simons Island, Georgia. Carved in 1865 by an unknown maker, this large ivory bust is an unusual rendering of a young Black woman celebrating the moment of her emancipation. The *Bust of Nora August* is an archive within an object, offering clues about broad global connections and individual histories alike. The thesis unpacks this object's relationship to nineteenth-century artistic, material, and social exchange networks and places the object within historical racial discourses surrounding Black agency and emancipation.

This analysis draws on decades of historical, art historical, literary, and archival studies in order to offer a first step towards a holistic understanding of the object and its networks. The paper is divided into three sections that analyze the object as archive, as narrative, and as relic. The first section uses the bust as a window into the interconnected material and personal worlds of the coastal South during the post-emancipation period. It reflects on the bust as “archive within an object” and as a material repository for individual and collective memory of emancipation and enslavement. The second section argues that the *Bust of Nora August* is a material slave narrative that uses a potent combination of text and likeness to convey Nora's story. Blending the visual, haptic, and textual languages of the slave narrative and portrait bust genres, the bust acted as a material extension of Nora's being and offered a tool to seek connection and belonging amid a deeply uncertain political and social climate. Finally, the third section analyzes the role of the bust on present-day St. Simons Island. It assesses how the island's privatized objects and landscapes of historical memory have impacted the ways in which historical narratives are conveyed. Ultimately, the *Bust of Nora August* is an important artifact that

complicates scholarly assumptions about Civil War-era material and social networks. Its evocative appearance demands a deeper examination of the lasting impacts of transatlantic slavery on art, commerce, and global ecologies.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Amid the chaos of the Civil War and the exhilaration of emancipation, an unknown maker on St. Simon's Island, Georgia put tools to ivory to memorialize the likeness of a young Black woman (fig. 1). The maker (or makers) elegantly rendered her face and hair in careful detail and inscribed her name, Nora August, on her chest below. They carved more specific details around her neck and chest, permanently marking Nora August's personal history of enslavement and adding a modified Anti-Slavery seal onto her smooth ivory neck (figs. 2 and 3). Finally, the maker(s) transformed this personal likeness into a miniature monument by adding the date of creation (1865) and a dedication to the "Nurses of Darien Georgia," a group to which Nora August may have belonged (fig. 5). The *Bust of Nora August* is an archive within an object, offering clues about both global connections and individual histories, giving scholars a rich window into the interconnected material world of the coastal South during the post-emancipation period.

Standing at 9 ½ inches or 24.2 centimeters high, the *Bust of Nora August* is well under life size while simultaneously being monumental. As a physical statue, it is dwarfed by other famous representations of enslaved women like Hiram Powers' *Greek Slave* or even Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux's *Why Born Enslaved!* (figs. 6 & 7). However, through its words, images, and physical presence, the *Bust of Nora August* goes beyond its material size to become a monumental expression of a young woman's celebration in the moment of emancipation. Nora and the bust's sculptor

crafted an object that expressed her past, present, and hopes for the future in the languages of nineteenth-century art and literature.

In order to understand its complexities, this project explores the bust's relationship to artistic, material, and social exchange networks in the long nineteenth century. Current interpretation put forward by the Coastal Georgia Historical Society asserts that the carver was a Union soldier or sailor stationed at Retreat Plantation during the Civil War.¹ Comparing the inscriptions on this bust to other ivory objects decorated with widely studied New England scrimshaw carving technique would appear to support that hypothesis. However, aesthetic connections to West African carved busts and the choice of elephant ivory as a material complicate the story.² These contradictions raise questions about how much agency Nora August might have had in her own representation and what relationship she might have had with the maker. The combination of distinct representational styles within the bust also invites speculation about the possibility of multiple makers from at least one different cultural and artistic background. The bust may have been made by a single person educated in multiple craft traditions or it may have been the product of several hands and multiple distinct cultural influences. A Union soldier might have simply added an inscription to

¹ See also: Jingle Davis, *Island Time: An Illustrated History of St. Simons Island* (Athens: University of Georgia, 2013) 121-123.

² I make this preliminary judgment by eye rather than through scientific testing. The scale of the bust, the coloring, and the presence of clearly visible Schreger lines on the cheeks and along the rough edge of the base strongly suggest that this is elephant ivory. During conversations with conservation scientists Rosie Grayburn, Lara Kaplan, and Lauren Fair; curator Ann Wagner; and scholars Ken Cohen, Marina Wells, Lea Lane, and Catharine Roeber; each agreed with that assessment. However, without analytical testing to officially confirm, I must stipulate that this is a judgment by eye subject to possible error.

an existing African-made bust in order to memorialize a woman he encountered with the resources he had. A Black Union soldier might have blended several familiar techniques in the process of making a unique memorial object. These uncertainties contribute to the sculpture's unmistakable allure, but also make it difficult to pursue traditional scholarly inquiries.

Many experts on Civil War-era material culture are aware of the bust, but it has not received the attention it deserves in recent years for many reasons. Questions of access to information, access to the statue itself, and lack of corroborating source material have made scholars wary of engaging with it, despite its tantalizing inscriptions. After it was purchased by the Sea Island Company in 1979, *The Bust of Nora August* largely stayed close to home on display in the golf performance center and clubhouse.³ Museum Studies' scholar Kym Rice was the first scholar to closely engage with the object, but a 1990 MA thesis by Juliette Bowles (citing Rice's unpublished work) was the first completed manuscript to approach the object from an academic perspective. Bowles analyzed the significance of Nora August's hairstyle from both gendered and anthropological perspectives. She argued that *Nora August* is, "a striking representation of African feminine beauty created out of the fusion of a dual inspiration: the inspiration of the black female hair stylist(s) to articulate a black woman's distinctive charm through an intricately-detailed hair form, and the

³ Sold at Christie, Manson, & Woods International. Sale of "Fine Americana and Chinese Export Porcelain," May 5, 1979. Lot 242. For comments about late 20th century display, see: Kym Snyder Rice, "Slavery on Exhibition: Display Practices in Selected Modern American Museums," Dissertation: George Washington University, 2015. p. 103.

inspiration of the sculptor to work a piece of ivory.”⁴ Her study is the only cultural and anthropological analysis of the bust’s aesthetic meanings thus far. I build on Bowles’ critical visual analysis throughout this thesis.

Rice’s 1992 exhibition at the Museum of the Confederacy in Richmond, “Before Freedom Came: African American Life in the Antebellum South, 1790-1865,” put the bust on display outside of St. Simons for the first and only time, though its presence was frequently overlooked within the exhibition. Gregg D. Kimball wrote in his largely critical review that he, “walked past it several times before it caught my eye in the gallery” due to its size and the large number of objects in the overall exhibition.⁵ A dramatic photograph of the bust emphasizing its monumental presence was used on the cover of the published catalog and essay collection, *Before Freedom Came*, though it was never analyzed within.⁶ This exhibition generated a lasting interest in the object, though the subsequent studies were also unable to find explicit historical confirmation of the sculpture’s inscriptions. Both Meghan Theresa Naile’s 2009 MA thesis and Rice’s 2015 dissertation addressed the sculpture in the process of

⁴ Juliette Bowles, “Natural Hair Styling: A Symbol and Function of African-American Women's Self-Creation,” MA Thesis: College of William & Mary, 1990, 31.

⁵ Gregg Kimball. “Exhibit Review: Before Freedom Came”, *Perspectives* 30 (1992), 14-15.

⁶ Edward D. Campbell, Kym S. Rice, Drew Gilpin Faust, Museum of the Confederacy (Richmond, Va.), McKissick Museum, and National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center (U.S.), eds. *Before Freedom Came: African-American Life in the Antebellum South: To Accompany an Exhibition Organized by the Museum of the Confederacy*. 1st ed. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991).

analyzing the ways in which slavery has been exhibited in American museums.⁷ Each scholar briefly summarized the object's known history before discussing its role within the exhibition. In a footnote, Rice writes that she has tried and failed to produce a comprehensive history of the object but asserted confidence in its authenticity and its historical significance.

Before Freedom Came was not the only book that included photographs of the sculpture. Historian Natalie Zemon Davis' *Slaves on Screen* also featured the sculpture prominently on the cover.⁸ However, Davis did not address or analyze the bust within her text. A 2013 history of St. Simons Island by Atlanta-based reporter Jingle Davis is the most recent monograph to address *The Bust of Nora August*. Davis included the sculpture in her chapter on the Civil War as a vehicle to discuss the impact of emancipation on St. Simons and the surrounding area.⁹ While Rice and Bowles were hesitant to make arguments about the extended historical context for the bust's creation, Davis made several claims about the object's creation. First, she argued that "the nurses of Darien, GA" actually referred to nurses at Fitch's Home for Soldiers and their Children in Darien, Connecticut.¹⁰ She claimed that since Darien,

⁷ Kym Snyder Rice, "Slavery on Exhibition: Display Practices in Selected Modern American Museums," Dissertation: George Washington University, 2015.; Meghan Theresa Naile, "Like Nixon to China: The Exhibition of Slavery in the Valentine Museum and the Museum of the Confederacy," MA Thesis: Virginia Commonwealth University, 2009.

⁸ Natalie Zemon Davis. *Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

⁹ Davis, *Island Time*, 121-123.

¹⁰ Davis, *Island Time*, 122.

Georgia had burned by 1865, Darien, Connecticut was a more likely option for the scrimshander's place of residence despite the literal words of the inscription. Local scholars like Amy Roberts of the St. Simons African American Heritage Coalition have expressed skepticism at Davis' assertions, but there has been no published rebuttal.¹¹

Davis' chapter is also the only work thus far to contextualize the bust within St. Simons' local history, as it closely traces the bust's presence on the island from its creation in 1865 to its return in 1979. Davis writes that the bust was found in a retirement home in England in 1975 before being purchased by a California businessman who kept it until 1979 when it was auctioned.¹² She writes that the bust was prominently displayed in the Sea Island Club clubhouse as of 2013, offering the most modern commentary on its overall trajectory.

Each of these scholars brought unique perspectives on the *Bust of Nora August*'s history and utility in the present. However, none of these scholars approached the bust holistically. Each examined a segment of its aesthetic qualities or its history in the service of another narrative, but thus far, there has been no comprehensive study of the bust as both art object and archive. Additionally, there has been no consideration of the bust's role within St. Simons' present-day public historical landscape. This thesis combines art historical, historical, literary, and speculative methodologies to create a dynamic view of the bust as representation, object, and monument. The lack of confirmed historical documentation has been a

¹¹ Amy Roberts, Personal Conversation with Author, June 9, 2022.

¹² Davis, *Island Time*, 122.

large force in shaping the final forms of these previous studies. Scholars are either so hesitant to approach the absence that they balk at a more critical analysis, or they are so tempted by the chance to forcefully fill in the existing gaps in the historical record that they create a structurally complete but ill-formed historical picture of the object.

In contrast to these prior studies, this thesis works with absences rather than around them. Absences are omnipresent: absence of written historical records to corroborate the inscriptions, absence of fully comparable examples, absence of named maker, absence of Nora August herself in any other source material, absence of clear provenance, absence of collaboration between myself and the Sea Island Company, absence of comparative examples, and absence of confirmation of authenticity, to name a few. However, I have tried to approach these absences not as final limitations, but as a chance to reconsider methodologies. I apply several compatible methodologies to account for absence without concealing them, particularly with regards to writing the story of Nora's life and personal narrative. I follow Steffi Dippold and Lauren Coats' logic that the, "critical understanding that absence as such is constitutive of any archive... makes all the more acute the need to foster strategies to respond to absence" and I draw directly from Carolyn Steedman's discussions of memory, power, and the archive.¹³

Saidiya Hartman's theoretical scholarship occupies this liminal space between imaginative and historical most directly. I rely significantly on Hartman's framework of "critical fabulation" which embraces liberatory imagined narratives and counter-

¹³ Lauren Coats, and Steffi Dippold, "Beyond Recovery: Introduction." *Early American Literature* 55, no. 2 (2020): 299.; Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History*, (Rutgers: Rutgers University Press, 2002).

histories, “by advancing a series of speculative arguments and exploiting the capacities of the subjunctive (a grammatical mood that expresses doubts, wishes, and possibilities).” Critical fabulation allows for “fashioning a narrative, which is based upon archival research, and by that I mean a critical reading of the archive that mimes the figurative dimensions of history.” It asserts the necessity of “trying to represent what we cannot” and acknowledging the “impossibility that conditions our knowledge of the past and animates our desire for a liberated future.”¹⁴ In the *Bust of Nora August*’s case, where nearly all aspects of expected technical analysis and connoisseurship are unknown or unknowable and where personal narrative and object history blend with one another, critical fabulation becomes a crucial tool to understand and thoughtfully express the complexity of Nora August’s life. I thus build on her work and contribute to the scholarship by offering a way to meld critical fabulation with object research and biography.

Another absence to work with and through is the absence of firmly authenticating material. While this thesis argues that thoughtful speculation and critical fabulation can address omissions and silences in human and object histories, I still recognize the implications of absent authenticating material. At present, the bust’s maker is unknown, its sitter cannot be located within the archive, and the identity of “the nurses of Darien, GA” is also uncertain. Details of its sale at Christie’s are confidential, and details of how it arrived at the Sea Island Company are kept as

¹⁴ Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts.” *Small Axe* 1 June 2008; 12 (2): 11-13.

proprietary information.¹⁵ The style and composition of the scrimshaw carvings are unusual, and the combination of sculptural bust and scrimshaw is unique thus far.

This uniqueness has also led some to question the bust's authenticity. In the course of my research more than one museum professional raised the possibility that the sculpture was inauthentic and might even have been produced from illegally acquired elephant ivory in the late 20th century.¹⁶ To some the bust bears aesthetic similarities to so-called "fakeshaw" objects produced in the 1980s, suggesting that the object might be fraudulent and created specifically to for a market in objects significant to African American history.¹⁷ The Sea Island Company purchased the object from Christie's New York in 1979, before which time the object has been untraceable, an absence of provenance which cannot then bolster or refute claims of authenticity or fraudulence.¹⁸ Without the Sea Island Company's cooperation I have been unable to conclusively determine the object's material authenticity.¹⁹ Because I

¹⁵ Email correspondence with Cara Zimmerman of Christie's Americana and Outsider Art Department (New York) confirmed that seller information for the 1979 auction is both confidential in principle and possibly no longer extant in practice. Cara Zimmerman, email message to author, March 10, 2023.

¹⁶ Mimi Rogers, phone conversation with author, February 2022.; Michael Dyer, email to author, September 26, 2022.

¹⁷ Michael Dyer, phone conversation with author, September 26, 2022. See also: "Plastic Scrimshaw Tooth [Fakeshaw]," National Museum of American History and Culture. Accessed December 15, 2022.
https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_1386776.

¹⁸ Sold at Christie, Manson, & Woods International. Sale of "Fine Americana and Chinese Export Porcelain," May 5, 1979. Lot 242.

¹⁹ While I appreciate the Coastal George Historical Society's generosity in allowing me to study the bust and curator Mimi Rogers for taking the time to speak with me about it, my research was limited by the Sea Island Company. They rejected my

cannot verify that the bust is inauthentic, I have chosen to follow the Coastal Georgia Historical Society's assertion that it is legitimate.

Despite these absences, and in some cases because of them, this thesis takes a holistic approach to understanding the object and its history. It analyzes the words, symbols, and physical presences of the bust both independently and as a unified collective. In doing so, it treats the bust as a unique product of its time and place, as a blending of individual and global narratives and perspectives, and as a material trace of human existence long subject to the obliterating power of written archives. The images inscribed on the bust draw from decades of iconographic convention and place the object into visual conversations about emancipation, while the words themselves anchor a transnational object in a single moment in space and time. This is a powerful monument to a young Black woman, celebrating her moment of her rebirth as a free woman, but the object's story does not stop with hers. In recent years, it has become a tool used by those in control of the present-day leisure landscape of St. Simons. Their possession of the bust and other "relics" of the island's history of plantation slavery serve as tokens to legitimize their exploitation of the land, its people, and its history.

Throughout this thesis, I approach the object in three ways: as an archive, as a narrative, and as a relic. In the first section, I treat the object as an archive in its own right, one that reveals the movements and entanglements of people and their environments. Overall, I push against the notion of "the Archive" as a solitary source

request to perform analytical testing on the ivory material, to handle the object outside of its case, and to view any provenance information. Repeated email petitions to Sea Island Company historian Wheeler Bryan were unsuccessful in securing any more information or even a phone conversation.

for historical investigation and rather argue for plurality and an expanded definition of archives. Historians including Michel-Rolph Trouillot and Marisa Fuentes have powerfully interrogated the harmful silences of the Archive.²⁰ Their work, and that of others like Ana Lucia Araujo and Saidiya Hartman, have demonstrated the efficacy of more activist historical inquiries that consciously work around missing material in order to communicate the agency of those marginalized by traditional historical narratives.²¹ Often working on a parallel track to activist historians, scholars of material culture have long asserted the power of things to fill archival silences and to offer physical evidence of individual lives lost to institutionalized History.

This paper builds on their example by asserting that objects can serve as more than substitutes for documents; rather, objects like the *Bust of Nora August* can also serve as whole archives in a material form, offering rich and varied evidence for a range of material and social lives. Historian Tiya Miles thoughtfully unpacked the rich human layers of history, family, and love embedded in “Ashley’s Sack” in her recent book.²² I borrow significantly from her methodology, which breaks down the object’s

²⁰ Michel-Rolph Trouillot and Hazel V. Carby, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2015); Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive*, 1st edition, Early American Studies (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

²¹ Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjugation: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008); Ana Lucia Araujo, *Slavery in the Age of Memory: Engaging the Past* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).

²² Tiya Miles, *All That She Carried: The Journey of Ashley’s Sack, A Black Family Keepsake* (New York: Random House, 2021).

biography into discrete facets before ultimately combining them into a compassionate and deeply researched family narrative contextualized within larger historical trends. Historians like Miles argue that using objects for historical research reaches beyond the Archive itself, and while that can be viewed as a radical act, I assert that placing objects outside the purview of the archive tacitly accepts the limitations therein.

I argue that objects like the *Bust of Nora August* should be interrogated as archives in their own right, not in the institutional sense, but in the sense of a constructed repository of history and memory. Approaching object study with the critical consideration we give archival study can allow us to better understand the depth of layered human and material networks that constitute object biographies. As Coats and Dippold note, “working through such layers of relative absence and presence often requires a corresponding layering of analytical responses to explore the insides and outsides of absence,” analytical responses that many accepted methodologies of object research are not always equipped to address.²³ Blending archival interrogation and object analysis allows us to give shape to absences within object histories, and expanding the definition of archives beyond the confines of institutions to include a plurality of object-archives serves to further democratize the potential of historical inquiry.²⁴

²³ Coats and Dippold, “Beyond Recovery: Introduction,” 306.

²⁴ Further material culture scholarship that shaped this paper includes: Christine DeLucia, “Recovering Material Archives in the Native Northeast: Converging Approaches to Traces, Indigeneity, and Settler Colonialism,” *Early American Literature* 55, no. 2 (2020): 355–94.; Rachel Grace Newman, “The *Cemí* and the Museum,” *American Art* 36, no. 2 (Summer 2022): 13-19.; Jennifer Van Horn, “‘The Dark Iconoclast’: African Americans’ Artistic Resistance in the Civil War South,” *The Art Bulletin* 99, no. 4 (2017): 133–67. Glenn Adamson, “The Case of the Missing Footstool: Reading the Absent Object,” in *History and Material Culture*, vol. 2 (London: Routledge, 2017.;

In the second section, I approach the *Bust of Nora August* as a material slave narrative that engages with two well-known cultural forms in the mid nineteenth century: the slave narrative genre and the portrait bust genre. By applying a combination of literary theory and art historical visual analysis, I argue that the *Bust of Nora August* is a material slave narrative that uses a potent combination of text and likeness to convey Nora's story. While its manifestation in bust form is unique, the narrative follows recognized textual and thematic conventions of the slave narrative. The *Bust* therefore opens a dialogue between these two different mid-nineteenth century schools of thought. As a material, it enables a type of haptic reading of facial features, individual expression, and cultural individuality. As a text, its narrative signposts enable readers to draw connections between Nora's story and those of other formerly enslaved writers. If narrative is the solution to the problem of how to translate knowing into telling, then the *Bust* is an attempt to express the traumatic experience of enslavement and the liberatory vision of emancipation in sculptural form. The mediated narrative enabled Nora to publicly assert herself a free woman and negotiate her place within Sea Island society. It acted as a material extension of her personal subjectivity and offered a tool to seek connection and belonging amid a deeply uncertain political and social climate.

Finally, I conclude this thesis by arguing that in its present state, the bust acts as a "relic" that engages with the ongoing conversations about the relationship between leisure and labor in the island's tourist economies. When the *Bust of Nora August* was acquired by the Sea Island Company in 1979, it was returned to the

Martin Brückner and Sandy Isenstadt, eds., *Elusive Archives: Material Culture in Formation*, (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2021).;

plantation on which it supposedly originated. In the early twentieth century, the Sea Island Company bought and developed large tracts of land on St. Simons Island including the former Retreat Plantation. They converted the plantation's landscape of labor into a resort landscape of leisure, using the "ruins" of the former plantation house and outbuildings to anchor wealthy white visitors in a carefully crafted nostalgic vision of Southern prosperity. When introduced into this landscape of privatized historical memory, *Nora August* became a "ruin" as potent as the crumbling walls of the Retreat mansion. On display in the Sea Island Clubhouse, or the former antebellum cotton barn, the bust helped to manufacture cohesion between past and present that validated the Sea Island Company's exploitative presence within the island's culture, history, and economy.

Because this thesis straddles different disciplines with different terminologies, I would like to clarify my use of a few terms here. First, I exclusively use the term "enslaved" or "enslaved people" to refer to African Americans held in bondage in the American South prior to the Civil War.²⁵ I also use the word "enslaver" to refer to the white men and women who claimed legal ownership over enslaved Black men and women.²⁶ Such terminology is widely accepted within the historical discipline, and signals the agency of enslaved people, the forced condition of enslavement, and the active participation of enslavers in the American economy of slavery. However, I use the phrase "slave narrative" to refer to literature written by formerly enslaved authors

²⁵ Vanessa M. Holden, "'I was born a slave': Language, Sources, and Considering Descendant Communities." *Journal of the Early Republic* 43, no. 1 (2023): 75-83.

²⁶ Whitney Nell Stewart, "White/white and/or the Absence of the Modifier." *Journal of the Early Republic* 43, no. 1 (2023): 101-108.

about their experiences under slavery or about their efforts to self-emancipate. Because “slave narrative” refers to a recognized genre and because that phrasing is most common in the historiography on the subject, I have elected to use that phrase throughout the thesis.

Finally, I use “Nora,” “Nora August,” and *Nora August* variably throughout the thesis to refer to the individual, historical figure, and object. *Nora August* always refers to the physical bust, while I use Nora to refer to the individual at the heart of the story. Her words, experiences, and personal statements shape the character and materiality of the bust. I use Nora August to refer to the historical presences of the person who may have lived in and around St. Simons Island in the final years of the Civil War. Whether or not Nora August actually lived, Nora’s story still lives on through the words and images of the *Bust of Nora August*.

Nora August’s life has many phases, some clearer than others. This thesis attempts to speak to each of the visible layers within the object’s past, stressing the way that physical and narrative presences blend past, present, and even future in order to create a unique material identity and temporality. Because this is ultimately a profoundly local story, this paper begins and ends with the landscape and people of St. Simons Island, Georgia. It addresses global connections while maintaining a foothold in local ecosystems. The *Bust of Nora August* is both a product and extension of the place in which it was produced, making a clear understanding of the environment essential to understanding the object. The following chapter thus begins with the place itself and the ways in which it shaped the lives of those who inhabited it.

Chapter 2

OBJECT AS ARCHIVE

St. Simons Island, Georgia, is one of a series of Sea Islands that protect the coastline of Georgia and South Carolina from the ravages of the Atlantic. For a modern traveler, getting to St. Simons Island requires about a two-hour drive south from Savannah, straight down I-95. A series of long bridges span the picturesque marshland, connecting the island to others around it and to towns like Darien and Brunswick on mainland Georgia. Sometime in the twentieth century, the string of barrier islands earned the name “Golden Isles” for their striking natural beauty. Like the neighboring Jekyll Island, St. Simons is now a resort town that plays host to accomplished golfers and casual tourists seeking soft winds and sandy shores.

To nineteenth-century visitors, St. Simons Island was far more remote. Frances Butler Leigh, daughter of Pierce Butler of Hampton Point Plantation, described a frustrating journey to the island in a letter to a friend in 1866.²⁷ Her party left in the early morning, but quickly encountered natural resistance. “Half-way down we stuck fast on a sand-bar in the river, where we remained for six hours,” she complained.²⁸

²⁷ Frances Butler Leigh was the daughter of Pierce Butler of South Carolina and Fanny Kemble. She lived most of her life in Philadelphia, but returned with her father to St. Simons and Butler Islands after the Civil War to oversee the re-development of the family plantations.

²⁸ Frances Butler Leigh, *Ten Years on a Georgia Plantation Since the War* (London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1883) 17-18.

Despite her sense of urgency, Leigh's party was forced to wait until the tides rose again, at which time they were "rowed across to the island by four of our old negroes" in the light of the moon.²⁹ The extensive knowledge and physical labor of enslaved and later free Black boatmen was essential for white planters seeking to overcome the naturally imposed limitations of island life.

Just as the natural landscape shaped transportation and accessibility, it also shaped human interactions and community formation. Historian Anne C. Bailey writes that "these islands were worlds to themselves," surrounded by rivers that acted, "like a prison wall," trapping white and Black residents alike within a fortress-like natural landscape.³⁰ While the remote island landscapes acted as, "confined spaces in the larger carceral landscape of slavery," they also afforded enslaved men and women separate, isolated spaces for retreat and negotiated resistance.³¹ Enslaved residents of St. Simons and nearby Butler Island formed strong intra-island communities and created a cohesive local culture with its own linguistic and cultural traditions. The relative isolation was noticeable to outsiders. Reporting for the *New York Tribune* in 1859, Mortimer Thompson wrote that the mainland residents of nearby Darien, Georgia referred to the enslaved residents of Butler and St. Simons Island as, "a race

²⁹ Leigh, *Ten Years on a Georgia Plantation Since the War*, 18.

³⁰ Anne C. Bailey, *The Weeping Time: Memory and the Largest Slave Auction in American History* (New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 2017) 6.

³¹ Paul Sutter and Paul M. Pressly, eds., *Coastal Nature, Coastal Culture: Environmental Histories of the Georgia Coast* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2018) 34.

apart.” “Many noted they had their own dialect that only they could understand,” Thompson observed.³²

Enslaved individuals worked with and against the land they occupied, and their negotiations were profoundly distinct from those of their enslavers. The oppressively remote landscapes of the Georgia Sea Islands allowed enslaved residents to form strong connections not just among themselves, but also to the environmental spaces they inhabited.³³ The whims of the island currents afforded enslaved boatmen “a semblance of freedom” as they navigated the twisting rivers around St. Simons, away from the watchful eyes of enslavers and overseers.³⁴ Marshy warrens and creeks around the island provided spaces to gather covertly and offered some measure of separation from white surveillance networks.³⁵

In order to better understand how the character of the land impacted the character of slavery on the island, I visited the former Cannon’s Point Plantation on the north end of the island (fig. 8). While the island’s core has since been terraformed

³² Thompson was likely hearing a local dialect of the Gullah language developed within African American communities in the colonial and Antebellum American South, particularly in the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia. Mortimer Thompson quoted on Bailey, *The Weeping Time*, 6.

³³ Sutter and Pressly, *Coastal Nature, Coastal Culture: Environmental Histories of the Georgia Coast*, 31.

³⁴ Bailey, *The Weeping Time*, 6.

³⁵ Tiya Miles demonstrates the central role of St. Simons’ natural landscape in her analysis of the 1803 uprising of Ibo slaves against their captors at Dunbar Creek. The creek, which once acted as a staging ground for powerful acts of resistance, now serves as a dumping ground for treated effluent from the island’s high-end residential developments. Sutter and Pressly, *Coastal Nature, Coastal Culture: Environmental Histories of the Georgia Coast*, 15-16.

to accommodate world-class golf courses, the edges of the island that are carefully preserved by the St. Simons Land Trust retain their former character. The combination of boggy ground, low scrubby marsh brush, and a thick tangle of roots and branches create the impression of absolute impenetrability. To me, it was clear that for those who were accustomed to regularized overland travel, this would have appeared to be impassable. It was also clear that this environment would be borderline uninhabitable in the summer, requiring an incredibly resourceful mindset to survive in bondage in such a climate. However, for those familiar enough with the environment to read the understated pathways through the brush, the perception of impassability would be a utility.³⁶ Compounded with the proximity to navigable waterways, it was clear that there was a real possibility for subversive movement.

Just as present-day St. Simons is almost exclusively composed of a few large-scale residential and resort developments, the island was dominated by a few large, profitable plantations in the Antebellum period. Hampton Point and Retreat Plantations, the latter where the bust was created, were among the largest and most well-known (fig. 14). Their profitability depended on exploiting the labor of hundreds of enslaved men and women throughout the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries.³⁷ Pierce Butler Sr. enslaved more than 500 people on Hampton Point's 800

³⁶ See: Rebecca Ginsburg and Clifton Ellis, eds., *Cabin, Quarter, Plantation: Architecture and Landscapes of North American Slavery* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

³⁷ John Solomon Otto, *Cannon's Point Plantation, 1794-1860: Living Conditions and Status Patterns in the Old South*, Studies in Historical Archaeology (New York: Academic Press, 1984) is an excellent published report on archaeological investigations of Cannon's Point on St. Simons. Cannon's Point is a comparable

acres by the end of the eighteenth century and members of the King family enslaved 355 people at Retreat by 1835.³⁸ Hampton Point, Retreat, and other plantations on the island almost exclusively produced valuable long-staple “Sea Island” cotton, but the island also exported a tremendous amount of lumber during the early republic.

Enslaved laborers cleared acres of Live Oak trees to ready the land for cotton cultivation: the durable hardwood became another profitable source of income for St. Simons’ planters.³⁹ Such deforestation fundamentally changed the character of the landscape, irrevocably diminishing its capacity as an ecosystem and as a place of human refuge in order to enable the short-term exploitative production of Sea Island

analogy to Retreat and can therefore offer insights into the material world of both enslaved and enslaver on St. Simons prior to the war.

³⁸ Bailey, *The Weeping Time*, 8 and Henry C. King, *1860 U.S. Federal Census - Slave Schedules* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2010. The Butler and King families were some of the largest slaveholding families in Georgia in the nineteenth centuries. Members intermarried and exchanged enslaved individuals with some degree of regularity, creating firm economic and social ties between families. Because of the Butlers’ political connections, high-profile marriages, and the Savannah auction, much more has been written on them and their plantations. The Butler family papers are at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. Because of similarities between the families, I will use the Butlers and Hampton Point to create context for antebellum St. Simons whenever I cannot find the same information for the Kings and Retreat.

³⁹ Mary Koon, “St. Simons Island,” *New Georgia Encyclopedia*, February 22, 2019, <https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/geography-environment/st-simons-island/>.

cotton.⁴⁰ As historian David Silkenat argues, slavery, “existed within an environmental context that provided the contours of the enslaved experience and was remade by the work of enslaved hands.”⁴¹

By the beginning of the Civil War, the variably symbiotic and parasitic relationships between human and natural world were firmly entrenched. The *Bust of Nora August*’s simple dedication ties the object and the person it depicts to this specific landscape, its specificity gesturing to the importance of hyperlocality to the narratives it expresses. The dedication partially reads: “Nora August/ St. Simons Island, Ga./ Carved from life, Retreat Plantation.” It is adorned with a row of tiny stars in between Nora’s name and the dedicatory phrase, the latter of which is written in small, neat cursive letters. Archival confirmation of Nora August’s connection to Retreat Plantation is nonexistent, but that does not negate the fact that this bust is responding closely to human events. It expresses the narrative of a person, their life, and their liberation, its presence thus creating an outline of a life that may exist totally beyond the confines of the archive. The bust’s snapshot of Nora’s life, then, is equally rich whether directly historical or imaginative. The following section addresses the questions surrounding Nora August as a historical person and works through several possibilities for her path before and after the moment of the bust’s creation. Each of

⁴⁰ David Silkenat, *Scars on the Land: An Environmental History of Slavery in the American South*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022) 61.

⁴¹ Silkenat, *Scars on the Land*, 5.

these circumstances are equally likely possibilities, and their sum total begins to fill out the speculative presence of Nora herself.

Nora August might have arrived at Retreat Plantation as an enslaved laborer between 1860 and her emancipation. If Nora was enslaved by the King family on Retreat in 1860 and remained on the island until 1865, as the bust suggests, she lived outside the fragmentary extant King family ledgers and papers, or what historian Tiya Miles calls the “blood documents” of slavery.⁴² According to the information inscribed on the bust, Nora August was born in either 1837 or 1842 depending on whether the “age 23” referred to Nora’s age when she was sold or her age at the time of carving. The 1860 Slave Schedules for Glynn County, Georgia do not list the names of the enslaved, but they do note age and gender. Henry King (either Henry Lord Page King, son of Thomas B. King, or Henry King, brother of Thomas B. King) of Retreat Plantation enslaved three women listed aged 18 and two aged 23 at the time of recording in 1860.⁴³ The census was taken in June, or two months after the sale in St. Augustine, allowing more than enough time to bring Nora from St. Augustine to St. Simons (fig 19).⁴⁴ If she were enslaved on Retreat before the war, Nora might have been one of the nameless women registered under King’s legal ownership. Exploration

⁴² Miles, *All That She Carried*, 302.

⁴³ Henry C. King, *1860 U.S. Federal Census - Slave Schedules* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2010.

⁴⁴ By modern road, the distance between the two is 106 miles.

of the fragmentary King family ledgers, wills, and inventories in Glynn and Ware Counties in Georgia as well as a close search of deeds of sale in St. John County, Florida was unable to either confirm or disprove this speculation, so it remains a possibility.

The 1870 census, or the first census in which formerly enslaved individuals were recorded as citizens with full legal names, offers some clarification but invites even more questions. Because many formerly enslaved men and women initially stayed close to the plantations on which they were enslaved, whether out of necessity or by choice, the 1870 census can offer vital clues about the names, ages, and family connections of newly freed people. The name “Nora August” does not appear anywhere in Georgia, South Carolina, or Florida in the 1870 census. Discussions with historians at the St. Simons African American Heritage Coalition confirms that the surname “August” is not associated with any family lines within the island’s large descendant communities.⁴⁵ This does not negate her existence: the name “Nora August” may be a self-chosen name. Declaring that name on the bust may have been a way for Nora to claim total liberation from her enslaver and state her newly achieved self-determination.

However, a Nora Small was recorded in Glynn County, Georgia (near Brunswick) in 1870. Her father, Neptune Small, had been enslaved on Retreat

⁴⁵ Amy Roberts, Personal conversation with author, June 9, 2022.

Plantation.⁴⁶ If Neptune's daughter Nora Small were Nora August, the bust's story would become a lot clearer, and would firmly link her to the history and landscape of

⁴⁶ Neptune Small traveled with Henry Lord Page King during King's service in the Confederate Army. After King was killed in battle, Neptune risked his own life to bring his enslaver's body home for burial. For this lifetime of service, the Kings deeded Neptune a small plot of land adjacent to Retreat. He lived there with his family, including his daughter Nora, until his death in 1907. After his death, his farmland was turned into a city park named in his honor. Neptune Small returned to St. Simons after remaining with Lord King's brother for the rest of the war, and local white histories proudly note that he faithfully served the Kings on Retreat for the rest of his life. Neptune's remarkable life and history is clouded by Lost Cause notions of the "faithful slave," which were pervasive in the decades after the Civil War and served as a retroactive justification for slavery. For a simple definition of "faithful slave" narrative, see: Karen Cox, *Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003) 44-45. The "faithful slave" narrative was the ideological heir to the Antebellum paternalist defense, and permeated fictional narratives and institutional histories alike. In order to perpetuate the idea of a benevolent slave society, white Southerners elevated the examples of enslaved individuals like Neptune. Some Southern municipalities even went so far as to erect monuments in honor of individuals or the larger idea of the faithful slave, like in Fort Mill, South Carolina. For different perspectives on the "Mammy" figure in popular culture, commodities, and memorials, see: Manring, Maurice M. "Aunt Jemima Explained: The Old South, the Absent Mistress, and the Slave in a Box." *Southern Cultures* 2, no. 1 (1995): 19-44., Micki, McElya, *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007)., Johnson, Joan Marie. "'Ye Gave Them a Stone': African American Women's Clubs, the Frederick Douglass Home, and the Black Mammy Monument." *Journal of Women's History* 17, no. 1 (2005): 62-86., and Tara McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003). The myth of the Black Confederate would later follow a similar tack in the late 20th century, again serving as a veiled but nevertheless potent retroactive defense of slavery and the racial hegemonies of the Antebellum South. See: Kevin M. Levin, *Searching for Black Confederates: The Civil War's Most Persistent Myth*, Civil War America (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

Retreat Plantation.⁴⁷ However, Nora Small was born in 1858, making her 12 years old at the time of the census and just 7 years old in 1865.⁴⁸ Nora August would have been either 28 or 33 in 1870, so Nora Small was simply too young to be the “real” Nora. However, this does not mean that the two parties did not interact. Nora August could have known of the Small family, given the close networks of families and freedom seeking individuals that occupied Retreat Plantation and St. Simons at large during the war. The number of formerly enslaved refugees at Retreat Plantation dropped precipitously throughout the war, so Nora August and the Small family were among a small number of remaining inhabitants by 1865. If both Nora August’s first and last names were self-chosen, she may have been honoring a relationship with the Small family.

The other circumstances that might have brought Nora August to Retreat Plantation in 1865 were integrally linked to the ways in which the Civil War affected life on St. Simons Island. Between 1861 and 1862, Union Admiral Samuel F. Du Pont

⁴⁷ Neptune’s life was worthy of remembrance, but not within narratives that emphasize the dutiful and contented service of enslaved individuals without question. The “Golden Isles” promotional website calls Neptune a “faithful servant,” for instance, never once mentioning the words slave, slavery, enslaved, or emancipation. “Neptune Small,” Golden Isles, Georgia, accessed April 25, 2022, <https://www.goldenisles.com/discover/golden-isles/african-american-heritage/neptune-small/>.

⁴⁸ Nora Small, *1870 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2009.

commanded a Union blockade of the South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida coastline.⁴⁹ White residents feared the effects of Union occupation: Hamilton Couper of St. Simons Island wrote anxiously to his sister that “the Vandals” and “the Wretches” were making their way down the coastline and that “we may look for them on St. Simons & at Brunswick” soon.⁵⁰ Samuel Du Pont astutely recognized the primary reason for white Georgians’ concern, writing that, “a fear of slaves is no doubt one of the chief troubles and lies much deeper than even any apprehension of ourselves.”⁵¹ Du Pont was likely responding to dual fears of insurrection and the implications of emancipation, both of which would have brought sharp changes to the planters’ economic and personal lives.⁵²

As a result, by the end of 1861, Confederate garrisons were stationed on the island to guard the valuable Brunswick Harbor against Union attack.⁵³ Thomas Butler King of Retreat Plantation forced his enslaved laborers to build earthworks and

⁴⁹ For Du Pont’s own commentary on the blockade, see Samuel Du Pont, Letter to AC Rhind, February 10, 1862. Hagley Library, Samuel Du Pont Papers, WMSS-IX, Box 7, W9 2470.

⁵⁰ Bell, *Major Butler’s Legacy*, 352.

⁵¹ Bell, *Major Butler’s Legacy*, 354.

⁵² For Du Pont’s further opinions on how to handle the issue of emancipation from a military perspective, see Samuel Du Pont, Letter to G. Fox, February 10, 1862. Hagley Library, Samuel Du Pont Papers, WMSS-IX, Box 7, W9 2469.

⁵³ Mary Koon, “St. Simons Island.” 2019.

batteries to assist the Confederate defense. Ultimately, these efforts proved fruitless. After detonating the island's lighthouse in 1862, Confederate soldiers fled St. Simons.⁵⁴ While they never returned to the island itself, several hundred Confederate cavalry stayed close by on the Georgia mainland for months to come.⁵⁵ Soon afterward, Union forces began to occupy the island, where they would stay for the next year. Retreat Plantation, which had once served as the primary point of Confederate defense on the island, was now a safe haven for formerly enslaved families.⁵⁶ By August 1862, more than 500 freed men and women lived on St. Simons.

A few surviving first-hand accounts offer a crucial glimpse into the lived experience of St. Simons' Black inhabitants during the war. These accounts begin to fill out the possible contours of Nora August's life at the moment of emancipation. Susie King Taylor, who was born into slavery in coastal Georgia, recalled the experience of escaping to the island during this period of Union occupation in her 1902 memoir. Upon learning she could read and write proficiently, the Union

⁵⁴ Samuel Du Pont asserts that Confederate troops fled because he moved his fleet from Port Royal, SC to St. Catharine's Island, FL. See: S.F. Du Pont, Letter to L.W. Gordon, March 5, 1862. Hagley Library, Samuel Du Pont Papers, WMSS-IX, Box 7, W9 2503.

⁵⁵ James Gordon Bennett, "Our Fortress Monroe Correspondence," *The New York Herald* (New York, NY) July 8, 1862.

⁵⁶ Bell, *Major Butler's Legacy*, 352.

commander enlisted her to teach formerly enslaved children. Taylor remembered that she “had about forty children to teach, beside a number of adults that came to me nights, all of them so eager to learn how to read.”⁵⁷ Well over a year before the Emancipation Proclamation, St. Simons Island became a home for formerly enslaved refugees who “sought and won their freedom by the deceptively simple act of abandoning their estates.”⁵⁸ Formerly enslaved men and women continued to plant cotton and trade agricultural products, but with one key difference: they were acting amongst themselves, for themselves. They took their livelihoods into their own hands during a tumultuous period and were able to reap the rewards of freedom, even without a formal proclamation.

Despite these optimistic acts of community and identity formation, Taylor also described the fear among enslaved residents and freed refugees on the island as misinformation and terrifying reports of “rebels” swirled between the disparate settlements on St. Simons. “We were afraid to go far from our own quarters in the daytime, and at night to even go out of the house for a long time,” Taylor wrote, even though Union marines guarded the island.⁵⁹ Taylor remained on St. Simons until the

⁵⁷ Susie King Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp with the 33d United States Colored Troops, Late 1st S. C. Volunteers* (Boston, 1902) 11.

⁵⁸ Bailey, *The Weeping Time*, 102.

⁵⁹ Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 14.

end of 1862 when she and hundreds of other freed men and women were transported to Beaufort, South Carolina under the protection of the Union Army.⁶⁰

Even after this first exodus of troops and freed people, Union regiments continued to move between the Sea Islands throughout the following year, frequently stopping on St. Simons. The Massachusetts 54th, under the command of Robert Gould Shaw, stopped at the Butlers' Hampton Plantation and the Kings' Retreat, the latter of which was still a recognized military and refugee encampment at that point.⁶¹ A June 1863 Union Army report, published in the *New York Herald*, observed that "the brigade [the Massachusetts 54th] is still at St. Simons Island, panting for more expeditions."⁶² Black Union soldiers, from a regiment formed earlier that year on St. Helena Island, South Carolina, destroyed the Confederate earthworks at Retreat. Poignantly, they dismantled the battery that some of them had been forced to construct just over a year earlier.⁶³

The Massachusetts 54th and the South Carolina 2nd would stay near St. Simons until late 1863, when they executed one of the most controversial military actions of the war. Darien, Georgia on the nearby mainland was a strategically significant

⁶⁰ Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 15-16.

⁶¹ Bell, *Major Butler's Legacy*, 365-366.

⁶² James Gordon Bennett, "Interesting from South Carolina: Our Hilton Head Correspondence," *The New York Herald* (New York, NY) June 23, 1863.

⁶³ Bell, *Major Butler's Legacy*, 366-367

landing for Union and Confederate forces seeking to control the marine arteries of the Georgia coast. Because of its military importance, Darien was bombarded repeatedly by Union blockaders throughout 1862 though these efforts inflicted limited damage.⁶⁴ In June 1863, however, the regiments burned the town and wharves of Darien.⁶⁵ Southern newspapers quickly sensationalized the destruction inflicted by the “negro regiment[s] officered by white men,” while northern correspondents praised the Black soldiers for their bravery and fortitude.⁶⁶ Union soldiers reported that the town was nearly empty before the burning, but their actions were nevertheless heavily scrutinized. Many contemporary writers argued that the burning was unnecessarily destructive, and Southern supporters even used it to advocate for the destruction of Pennsylvania towns after the battle of Gettysburg.⁶⁷ The burning remained a point of contention for white Georgians well into the twentieth century.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ James Gordon Bennett, “The Bombardment of Darien, Georgia,” *The New York Herald* (New York: NY) May 29, 1862.

⁶⁵ "THE MASSACHUSETTS FIFTY-FOURTH REGIMENT took a prominent part in Montgomery's raid on Darien, Ga." *Lowell Daily Citizen* (Lowell MA), 1 July 1863.

⁶⁶ "The Destruction of Darien." *Daily News and Herald* (Savannah, GA), 16 June 1863.; "THE MASSACHUSETTS FIFTY-FOURTH REGIMENT took a prominent part in Montgomery's raid on Darien, Ga." *Lowell Daily Citizen* (Lowell, MA), 1 July 1863.

⁶⁷ H.L. Pinckney, “The Advance into Pennsylvania,” *The Charleston Mercury* (Charleston, SC) June 23, 1863.

⁶⁸ Bessie Lewis, “Notes on Retreat Plantation,” Georgia Historical Society 2138 Series 3, Box 15, Folder 3.

The *Bust of Nora August* gestures at the potential human fallout from the burning of Darien. It is dedicated to the “Nurses of Darien,” a group that may have been created in response to the destruction. Its creation in 1865 gestures at the lingering significance, and perhaps resilience, of the town just two years after the burning itself. Many white inhabitants had evacuated the region, but several Union correspondents report conversations with formerly enslaved individuals still living in the area between St. Simons and Darien.⁶⁹ Perhaps the “Nurses of Darien” included formerly enslaved women from the surrounding area like Nora August. It’s also possible that a group of nurses from Darien and the region moved to nearby St. Simons with the Union army and stayed to care for soldiers and emancipated people in need. The bust gestures at the depth of human networks and connections that remained intact throughout the tumultuous Civil War.

Despite lingering uncertainties surrounding its creation, the *Bust of Nora August* is a crucial source that enriches our understanding of the island and its inhabitants during the final years of the Civil War. Few first-hand accounts from the war survive and those that do, like Susie King Taylor’s, rarely address the latter years in depth. The *Bust of Nora August* demonstrates that formerly enslaved people continued to live on or near plantations on St. Simons Island through the end of the war and that they engaged with visitors to their settlements on the island. It is an

⁶⁹ Letter from Hamilton Couper to Maggie Couper, August 28, 1861. Georgia Historical Society MS 1872 Box 1 Folder 5.

archive within an object, replete with the individual and collective memory of a rich community.

The bust's presence also raises questions about what maker might have interacted with Nora August, as well as when, how, and why. The bust's scrimshaw-style inscriptions demonstrate that one or more skilled craftspeople likely involved with the Northeastern maritime trade also occupied the island alongside Nora August.⁷⁰ The style of this dedicatory inscription closely resembles writing and imagery on carved ivory, bone, and horn objects produced on ships or near maritime centers in New England in the late eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth century generally known as scrimshaw (fig. 9). Scrimshaw typically refers to the “practical, utilitarian, and purely decorative” art objects created by whalers aboard ships during their leisure hours from the “byproducts of the hunt” itself, including ivory teeth and bones, and baleen. Occasionally, scrimshanders used ivory walrus tusks, obtained through trade with native peoples in the Arctic.⁷¹

⁷⁰ The styling of this dedicatory inscription closely resembles writing and imagery on carved ivory, bone, and horn objects produced on ships or near maritime centers in New England in the late eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth century. Objects with this style of decoration, known as scrimshaw, survive in great quantities today in museums like Winterthur, the Peabody Essex Museum, the New Bedford Whaling Museum, and the Mystic Seaport Museum. For example, see: Stuart M. Frank, *Ingenious Contrivances, Curiously Carved: Scrimshaw in the New Bedford Whaling Museum*, 1st ed (Boston: David R. Godine, Publisher, 2012).

⁷¹ Stuart M. Frank, *Scrimshaw on Nantucket: The Collection of the Nantucket Historical Association*, (Nantucket, Massachusetts: Nantucket Historical Association, 2019) 2.

Scrimshaw scenes often focused on important parts of shipboard life, particularly the acts of hunting a whale and processing its materials. A sperm whale tooth in the Winterthur Museum collection is a representative example of the ways in which sailors self-referentially used the byproducts of whaling to memorialize significant elements of their trade (fig. 10). In other cases, scrimshanders based their elaborate designs on popular printed ephemera and visual culture of the nineteenth-century. While scrimshaw is often associated with traditional folk crafts of the early American period, art historian Maggie Cao argues that scrimshaw technique actually reflected whaling's modernity. She writes that scrimshaw engraving techniques were, "reminiscent of printing processes though its makers likely had little experience with the mechanics of graphic reproduction."⁷²

Crucially, elephant ivory as used in the *Bust of Nora August*, was not typically a material available to or used by scrimshanders. However, beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, New England was central to the large-scale American importation and processing of elephant ivory from East Africa and India.⁷³ Salem, Boston, and

⁷² Maggie M. Cao, "Maritime Media and the Long Eighteenth Century," *Journal 18* 12, (Fall 2021).

⁷³ Alexandra Celia Kelly, *Consuming Ivory: Mercantile Legacies of East Africa and New England*, Culture, Place, and Nature Studies in Anthropology and Environment (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2021), 58. As Madelyn Shaw and Amy J. Anderson demonstrate, though, the commodities and traders of the American South also played a crucial role in the global ivory trade throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, the scale of ivory importation and production in New England was unequalled. See: Shaw and Anderson, "Ivory for Cotton – Textile Trade

towns along the Connecticut River Valley (like the straightforwardly named Ivoryton, Connecticut) flourished throughout the nineteenth century as the demand for ivory products grew.⁷⁴ Unlike scrimshaw objects produced by whaling, the ivory objects produced across New England were finely finished domestic luxuries. They were not byproducts of a different type of extractive labor but were rather the finished products of purpose-driven extractive labor and commerce.

Based on present research, it appears unlikely that the *Bust of Nora August* was produced in a shipboard context. Contributing to this is its size which is larger than the hand-held scrimshaw completed aboard vessels. Even if it were, that context would be entirely unrelated to the whaling trade. One might therefore question whether the *Bust of Nora August*, likely made of solid elephant ivory and only superficially decorated with engraved lettering and images can be called a scrimshaw object. I acknowledge the semantic discrepancies but assert that while the bust falls outside the traditional craft qualifiers, it still responds heavily to the visual vocabulary and aesthetic trends in mid-nineteenth century scrimshaw carving. The close similarities suggest that carver of the bust either had scrimshaw carving experience themselves or were intimately familiar with others who did.

Documents at the National Museum of American History,” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 61, no. 1 (2018): 147–60.

⁷⁴ Kelly, *Consuming Ivory* 98.

Retreat Plantation sits at the far southern end of the island, immediately adjacent to the East River and St. Simons Sound. It is therefore entirely possible that the engraver was a sailor passing through one of Retreat's several cotton docks and landings or a Union soldier stationed at Retreat after 1862. The detail of the inscribed carvings suggest that the craftsman or people lived on or had access to Retreat Plantation for the extended period required to complete their craft. The intimate knowledge of personal history imparted on the bust attests to a degree of personal connection between maker and subject, again suggesting a closely connected network of soldiers, travelers, and freedpeople occupying St. Simons Island at the end of the war.

The intersection between the Massachusetts 54th and Retreat Plantation introduces a new possibility. The 54th was organized out of New Bedford, Massachusetts, which had just reached the zenith of its success as a whaling town a few years before the start of the Civil War.⁷⁵ On the company enlistment roll, six men are registered as sailors, three as boatmen, and two as stevedores.⁷⁶ These eleven men would have been intimately familiar with maritime culture and maritime arts like

⁷⁵ New Bedford Whaling Museum, "The Golden Age of Yankee Whaling." <https://www.whalingmuseum.org/learn/research-topics/whaling-history/yankee-whaling/#:~:text=Through%20intense%20competition%2C%20industrial%20infrastructure,employed%20more%20than%2010%2C000%20men.>

⁷⁶ "Enlistment roll of Company A, 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment, 1863" Massachusetts Historical Society. https://www.masshist.org/database/viewer.php?item_id=1148

scrimshaw. While every one of these eleven was recorded as a free resident of the United States, some may have also been familiar with African artistic representational styles. That unusual confluence could explain the unexpected aesthetic. Not all men on this original roll were mustered into the company and not all who were mustered made it down to coastal Georgia, but Massachusetts 54th's brief stop in the Sea Islands offers a clearer possibility for the maker's identity.

While its materiality elucidates certain possible human interactions towards the end of the Civil War, the bust's presence also challenges other assumptions gleaned from written accounts like those of Frances Butler Leigh, whose father owned one of the largest plantations on the island. Upon returning to St. Simons after the war, Leigh describes seeing "former slaves all returned to the island," in her opinion ready to work as they had before emancipation. Leigh asserts that their return was recent and that even those who had been sold away or who had otherwise earned their freedom returned to their former plantation to serve Leigh and her father.⁷⁷ While Leigh's account is obviously fraught with biases and laden with the rhetoric of early Lost Cause tenets about "faithful slaves," it is still worth analyzing how she saw the island and its inhabitants. Leigh's repeated use of "return" suggests that she and her father

⁷⁷ Leigh, *Ten Years on a Georgia Plantation Since the War*, 14.

believed the island to be largely uninhabited by enslaved and freed Black residents after the Union occupation.⁷⁸

Many planters, including Pierce Butler, moved their enslaved laborers to the Georgia mainland at the beginning of the war.⁷⁹ Thomas Butler King died in Waycross, Georgia, about 70 miles to the west, after fleeing midway through the conflict.⁸⁰ Susie King Taylor's accounts demonstrate that there was a large migration between St. Simons and Beaufort at the end of 1862. Robert Gould Shaw appeared to corroborate Leigh when he wrote that there were hardly more than ten enslaved people on the Hampton Point estate in 1863.⁸¹ However, Hampton Point was just one smaller locality on a larger island, and Taylor's accounts clearly demonstrate that freedpeople formed communities both within and outside of former plantation boundaries.⁸² The

⁷⁸ Given that Black settlements on the island did not always follow established plantation boundaries, Butler and Butler Leigh were likely ignoring a significant population of freedpeople living outside delineated property lines. The "return" they noted could well have been intra-island movement in search of work rather than inter-island movement.

⁷⁹ Bailey, *The Weeping Time*, 100.

⁸⁰ King's will and estate inventory could not be found at the Ware County Records office. The office experienced several fires in the late nineteenth century, meaning that little survives from before the 1890s.

⁸¹ Robert Gould Shaw quoted on Bailey, *The Weeping Time*, 105.

⁸² Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 15.

Bust of Nora August, then, demonstrates that there were some freedpeople living on the south end of the island on or near the former boundaries of Retreat Plantation.

However useful the bust might be in offering material evidence of the island's inhabitants in 1865, it still offers no indication of how Nora August came to live on Retreat. Nora August may have been enslaved on Retreat before the war, or she may have been just one of thousands of freedom-seeking refugees who passed through St. Simons Island during the Civil War. Another possible lead to her identity appears in Sheldon (near Yemassee) in Beaufort County, South Carolina. Nora Pettibone, born in 1842, appears in the 1870 census in Sheldon along with her husband, July, and four children between the ages of 2 and 14.⁸³ The large number of freedom-seeking people traveling from St. Simons to Beaufort under the protection of the Union army and navy between 1862 and 1865 means that it is not unreasonable to suggest Nora Pettibone could be the "real" Nora August.⁸⁴ She could have remained at Retreat until the end of the war before following a network of friends and family members to Beaufort, enticed by rumors about communities of freed people forming in the Port Royal Sound area. While this is just one more speculation, there are enough connective links between St. Simons and Beaufort to make this a legitimate possibility.

⁸³ Nora Pettibone, *1870 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2009.

⁸⁴ Bell, *Major Butler's Legacy*, 352

The *Bust of Nora August*, then, offers a tantalizing glimpse into local and regional politics and relationships during the final years of the Civil War. It acts as a material archive, capturing human presences and intersections in a fluid environment around the moment of its creation. From the detailed inscribed information gesturing at Nora August's movement across time and space as an enslaved woman to the material hints at the carver's identity, it invokes complex interactions between peoples and their environments in a deeply uncertain time. It is a product of its localized time and place as much as it reflects global trends in visual culture. However, merely using the bust as an expository tool ignores the real affective impacts of its physical and narrative presences. The following chapter tries to understand the bust as an art object conveying an embodied narrative, thus expanding the conversation beyond the immediate limits of historical analysis.

Chapter 3

OBJECT AS NARRATIVE

In order to understand the bust in its own artistic terms and understand its wider global connections, we must break down its distinct visual components, including two unique inscriptions that supplement the dedication. This chapter begins by addressing the historical significance of each element in the bust's inscriptions before approaching its physical and narrative presences holistically. Reading the layered historical meanings carved into the object can offer a clearer picture about maker, origin, and purpose, while a visual reading of the bust's internal narrative offers a profound statement about a young woman at the moment of liberation.

On the left side of the figure's neck, the maker inscribed an oval-shaped medallion containing two figures, one kneeling and one standing (fig. 2). The kneeling Black man wears a sleeveless white shirt and white pants that end in tatters at the knee. His head is bowed slightly and he stretches his bent arms out towards the woman in front of him. Thick chains hang from his wrists. The woman before him wears a large, wide-brimmed bonnet that almost obscures her entire face.⁸⁵ Her striped

⁸⁵ This bonnet is reminiscent of mid-nineteenth century quaker bonnets like Winterthur's 2002.0018.027. See also label text in: "Bonnet," Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed April 11, 2022,

skirts brush the ground. Her outstretched hands gesture towards the kneeling man in front of her: she offers him water from a jug.⁸⁶ The two figures stand on a clearly articulated grass ground surrounded by water. A sailing ship occupies the background to the right of the standing woman.⁸⁷ The medallion is bounded by two banners on the top and bottom; the top reads “Sold East of PLAZA - 1860” and the bottom bears the familiar anti-slavery phrase “Am I not a man & brother.”

At first glance, this object seems to simply mimic common anti-slavery phrasing and iconography. Indeed, the object’s current label text straightforwardly calls it a copy of Wedgwood’s design. However, many details about this particular representation raise questions about how the maker adapted the source material and existing visual vocabularies of anti-slavery activism. These adaptations both reflected Nora’s individual experience and responded to decades of iconographic convention, firmly situating this object within cultural and political discourses on abolition in the Atlantic world.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/156819>. This woman’s race is hard to ascertain with certainty, but she is almost certainly intended to be white.

⁸⁶ For a discussion of the combination of white woman and enslaved Black man in art and printed media in the 18th and early 19th centuries, see: Marcus Wood, *The Horrible Gift of Freedom: Atlantic Slavery and the Representation of Emancipation*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010) 33-75.

⁸⁷ Cheryl Finley, *Committed to Memory: The Art of the Slave Ship Icon* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2018) 19.

In 1787, the manufacturer Josiah Wedgwood famously produced ceramic medallions based on a seal commissioned earlier that year by the British Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade (fig. 10).⁸⁸ Wedgwood's medallion became a fashion statement among an upper-class, white, morally inclined social set.⁸⁹ It adorned buckles, necklaces, brooches, and with a dark irony, even tobacco boxes.⁹⁰ Wearing one of Wedgwood's medallions was a way for consumers to signal their political stance within anti-slavery debates as well as their own perceived ethical consciousness.⁹¹ Of course, Wedgwood, and many people who wore his medallion, benefited directly from the institutionalized slave economy. Wedgwood's company depended on the patronage of slaveholding consumers in the Americas and the

⁸⁸ *An Abstract of The Evidence Delivered Before a Select Committee of The House of Commons for The Abolition of The Slave Trade*, 1790 – 91. V&A Wedgwood Collection archives, E32-24747.

⁸⁹ For the definition of the abolitionist consumer, see: Bronwen Everill, *Not Made by Slaves: Ethical Capitalism in the Age of Abolition* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2020) 7.

⁹⁰ "The Wedgwood Anti-Slavery Medallion," Victoria and Albert Museum, accessed March 30, 2022, <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/the-wedgwood-anti-slavery-medallion>. Thomas Clarkson, a noted British anti-slavery speaker, observed, "A fashion... was seen for once in the honourable office of promoting the cause of justice, humanity and freedom."

⁹¹ Everill, *Not Made by Slaves*, 55. The medallion once again found favor during prominent abolitionist boycotts of sugar and other refined products of enslaved labor in the late- eighteenth and early- nineteenth centuries. Men and women used the symbol to demonstrate their standing as ethical consumers opposed to both the products of slavery and the moral effects of the institution itself.

Caribbean, and it was impossible to extricate the broader Atlantic luxury market from its dependence on products exchanged for enslaved lives and labor.

The medallion's design therefore embodied the contradictions of the abolitionist movement from the moment of its creation. From that point on, the kneeling Black man in chains became the representative and ubiquitous anti-slavery symbol reproduced across media, from needlework to ceramic jugs. Indeed, Benjamin Franklin famously told Wedgwood that his design, "may have an Effect equal to that of the best written Pamphlet in procuring favour to those oppressed people."⁹² The medallion boldly celebrated human liberty in the eyes of its creators, but the execution demonstrated the limitations of an abolitionist movement led by elite white individuals. The Black figure on the Wedgwood medallion formed an aestheticized representation of bondage that celebrated the idea of emancipation without acknowledging Black agency or the challenges of achieving real equality. Although his chains were broken, the kneeling man was firmly bound within the confines of the seal itself as his image continued to serve the needs of anti-slavery advocates. As Jasmine Nichole Cobb notes, "Black freedom... directly confronted White ways of seeing race and seeing the self."⁹³ While white abolitionists were legitimately

⁹² Zoe Trodd, "Am I Still Not a Man and a Brother? Protest Memory in Contemporary Antislavery Visual Culture," *Slavery & Abolition* 34, no. 2 (June 2013): 340.

⁹³ Jasmine Nichole Cobb, *Picture Freedom: Remaking Black Visuality in the Early Nineteenth Century*, (New York: New York University Press, 2015) 112.

interested in advocating for some form of emancipation, they still had a vested interest in maintaining their own authority and the racial hegemony that afforded them privilege. Ultimately, Wedgwood's representation of an enslaved subject firmly entrenched racial hierarchies even as it proclaimed ideals of universal brotherhood.⁹⁴

The basic argument of abolition and pathos-heavy appeals for the humanity of enslaved individuals was essentialized in the simple silhouette of the man in chains. By repeating the symbol on different objects, makers also easily repeated the same implied argument, which consumers endorsed through their purchase. In the early nineteenth century, though, the symbol of the kneeling Black figure took on a life of its own. The popularity of printed imagery on textiles and ceramics alike in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries ensured that cross-medium transmission was not only possible, but common.⁹⁵ Aesthetic similarities between *Nora August's* ivory neck and the body of a creamware vessel may have encouraged such an exchange in this case.

Importantly, this style of representing enslavement or the embodied anti-slavery argument was predominately English. French depictions of emancipated figures took a different form, particularly in the late eighteenth century. Symbols of

⁹⁴ Wood, *The Horrible Gift of Freedom*, 33-50.

⁹⁵ See Winterthur Museum collection objects [2003.0024](#), [2007.31.8](#), and [2011.4.1](#). Many of the widely circulating products bore slight variations of the original medallion, but the precise visual nuances mattered less than the basic recognizable form of the kneeling man.

liberty and equality associated with the French Revolution, in particular a Phrygian cap, predominated on French anti-slavery imagery. Engravings and a corresponding porcelain group designed by Louis Simon Boizot in 1794 particularly embody this French imagery of emancipation.⁹⁶ These figures and others demonstrate that there was a codified French anti-slavery visual vocabulary that differed markedly from the Anglo-American visual shorthand. The maker's choice to use the Anglo-American visual language of emancipation therefore confirms that they had strong cultural connections to American and British anti-slavery advocacy movements and ephemera.⁹⁷ They were accustomed to seeing and representing themes of liberty and emancipation through the Wedgwood-style dichotomy of benevolence and

⁹⁶ Just as the physical subservience of the kneeling Wedgwood figure represented the continuation of racial hierarchy beyond the timeline of enslavement, the grammatically incorrect phrases spoken by the freed Black figures on Boizot's prints ("Moi égale à toi. Moi libre aussi./ Me equal to you. Me also free.) indicated a similar expectation of lingering inequality despite adorning the figures in French symbols of liberty. *Prints of a Free Man and Woman*, 1794. Bibliothèque Nationale de France. EF-155-FOL. AND *Porcelain Group of a Free Man and Woman*, 1794. Musée de Nouveau Monde, La Rochelle, France. On loan to the Metropolitan Museum of Art for temporary exhibition "Fictions of Emancipation: Carpeaux Recast."

⁹⁷ This choice helps narrow the range of possibilities of the maker's identity and place of origin. The choice of which visual shorthand to use indicates the maker's cultural frame of reference as well as that of their expected audience. Given the level of textual detail on other areas of the bust, the maker would have likely elaborated further about the significance of their anti-slavery medallion had they known the bust would be viewed by those unfamiliar with the visually implied messages. Because they left comparatively little explication in this area, one can hypothesize that both the maker and intended audience had predominant connections to Anglo-American visual culture and anti-slavery activism.

submission, and likely saw this style of imagery as the simplest way to express complex ideas of emancipation to any audience who viewed the object.

By adding inscriptions that drew almost directly from printed material, the carver also actively participated in trends in scrimshaw production. The so-called “golden age” of American scrimshaw came in the second quarter of the nineteenth century.⁹⁸ In this period, the number of scrimshanders, amount of art objects produced, and complexity of image increased exponentially.⁹⁹ Scrimshaw engravings were frequently derived from printed images in this period, and many artists chose to engrave portraits (both bust and full body) on busks and teeth alike.¹⁰⁰ Nationally circulating print sources like *Godey’s Magazine* and later *Harper’s Weekly* likely offered continual inspiration for mariners seeking to both demonstrate their carving acumen and participate in popular visual trends. An illustration of the “Battle Between the Monitor & Merrimack” carved on a sperm whale tooth almost certainly borrows its scene from a Currier & Ives lithograph, and even imitates the publishers’ practice of describing or naming the scene in capital letters beneath the image.¹⁰¹ In this way,

⁹⁸ New Bedford Whaling Museum, “Yankee Whaling,” March 1, 2021, <https://www.whalingmuseum.org/learn/research-topics/whaling-history/yankee-whaling/>.

⁹⁹ Frank, *Scrimshaw on Nantucket*, 27.

¹⁰⁰ Frank, *Scrimshaw on Nantucket*, 25.

¹⁰¹ Flayderman, *Scrimshaw and Scrimshanders*, 64. ; Currier & Ives. *Terrific combat between the "Monitor" 2 guns & "Merrimac" 10 guns The first fight between iron clad ships of war, in Hampton Roads, March 9th , in which the little "Monitor" whipped the*

scrimshanders were responding to and participating in the larger proliferation of printed materials, including textiles, ceramics, and works on paper, across the Atlantic world.

A pair of objects carved from porpoise jawbone depicting President Lincoln and General Grant suggest the willingness of mariners to engage with issues beyond the confines of their vessel and assert their support for contemporary political actors.¹⁰² These full length portraits have the character of copperplate engravings and indeed likely were derived from print sources with some adaptation; the choice to carve “president” and “general” beneath each man’s image indicate that the maker was likely working during the final years of the Civil War.

The engraved anti-slavery seal on the *Bust of Nora August*, which draws from but does not wholly imitate established visual source material, participates in this midcentury trend of transposing widely circulated printed images onto organic material. The seal on Nora August’s neck adapts the source material more than most, and it lacks the careful attention to detail that many scrimshanders afforded to their ivory engravings. However, these adaptations both reflected Nora’s individual

"Merrimac" and the whole "school" of Rebel steamers. United States, Virginia, Hampton Roads, ca. 1862. New York: Published by Currier & Ives. Chromolithograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/90710608/>.

¹⁰² Norm Flayderman, *Scrimshaw and Scrimshanders: Whales and Whalemen* (New Milford, Conn: N. Flayderman, 1972) 38.

experience and responded to decades of iconographic convention, firmly situating this object within cultural and political discourses on abolition in the Atlantic world.

Most scrimshaw objects combined circulated imagery with unique designs, creating a blend of personal and popular motifs that represented the experiences and preferences of the maker.¹⁰³ Indeed, personal variability is a firmly established tenet of scrimshaw craft and a core part of the romanticism of later scrimshaw scholarship. While the whole *Bust of Nora August* might appear out of the ordinary in comparison to the collective archive of scrimshaw objects, it still participates in the visual discourse of the scrimshaw craft by working within conventions of adaptation, amalgamation, and originality.

The inclusion of the kneeling figure in chains on Nora August's neck helps us understand the maker's intentions and the object's relationship to the political discourses of the period within the context of the Civil War. Almost any viewer who saw that symbol and the words that accompanied it would understand its connection to the powerful American and British anti-slavery movements. The maker's subtle modifications to the original design are revealing. Comparing the medallion engraved on Nora August's neck to other versions of the anti-slavery figure could indicate which media the maker was broadly familiar with and what messages they were trying to convey by creating their version.

¹⁰³ Michael McManus, *A Treasury of American Scrimshaw: A Collection of the Useful and Decorative* (New York: Penguin Studio, 1997) 132-135.

A medallion printed in the frontispiece of *Authentic Anecdotes of American Slavery* by Lydia Child is very similar to bust's version (fig. 11).¹⁰⁴ Both feature an additional standing woman facing the kneeling figure, though there are a few revealing differences.¹⁰⁵ The Child frontispiece's woman is a Neoclassical allegory, embodying justice and peace, and likely represented the abolitionist movement as a whole.¹⁰⁶ In contrast, the bust's version wears mid nineteenth-century women's clothing. She is a human actor, reaching out to him directly as a firmly personified intercessor. In doing so, she replaces the audience as the unseen object of the kneeling figure's petition.¹⁰⁷

The Child frontispiece does include an important modification that sheds light on the seal's other shortcomings. In that version, the kneeling figure is female and the banner proclaims, "Am I not a woman and a sister?" thereby demonstrating the implicit gendered limitations of the original seal's supposedly universal plea. This variation gained traction and can be seen in other media, like a coin in the collection of

¹⁰⁴ "Am I not a Woman and a Sister?" front piece from, Lydia Maria Child, *Authentic Anecdotes of American Slavery* (Newburyport, Mass., 1838).
<https://www.loc.gov/item/92838862/>

¹⁰⁵ See also: Winterthur Museum, [1965.0500 a](#) *Africa America* mezzotint on glass.

¹⁰⁶ "Am I not a Woman and a Sister?" front piece from, Lydia Maria Child, *Authentic Anecdotes of American Slavery* (Newburyport, Mass., 1838).
<https://www.loc.gov/item/92838862/>

¹⁰⁷ Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton (N. J.): Princeton University Press, 2018) 73.

the American Civil War Museum.¹⁰⁸ Other print versions of the female version circulated widely during the period and appealed to the large body of women who supported the anti-slavery movements.¹⁰⁹ Given the popularity of both the male and female versions of the medallion, the maker likely made a conscious choice to inscribe the masculine version on Nora August's neck. Perhaps they chose the version they thought was more universally recognizable, or perhaps they saw no meaningful difference between the two. Either way, the bust's seal illuminates both the gendered limitations of the anti-slavery movements and the maker's possible biases.

Finally, the unidentified maker also included a sailing ship prominently in the background behind the standing woman, again deviating from the original Wedgwood design and adding additional layers of meaning to the inscribed medallion. This ship was likely intended to represent a slave ship and built on a tradition of slave ship iconography in anti-slavery literature and ephemera.¹¹⁰ Slave ships were depicted in

¹⁰⁸ American Civil War Museum. Coin, [TRE2006.2.1404](#).

¹⁰⁹ The two kneeling figures appear on a unique quillwork and ivory tea caddy from the late eighteenth century; the written message ("O Lord Set Us Free") differs slightly, but the visual connection between this object and the Wedgwood medallion is obvious and would have been recognized by a viewer in the period. The Mariner's Museum, [1998.0008.000001](#).

¹¹⁰ A very similar ship appears in a ceramic jug adorned with pink luster and a transfer-printed Wedgwood-esque figural group. (Metropolitan Museum of Art [2020.106](#) Jug). Unlike on the *Bust of Nora August*, the figure has already broken his chains and faces the viewer. He gestures to his left at the ship behind him, and the viewer is clearly meant to draw a metaphorical line between his shackles and the ship in the distance. A nineteenth-century viewer accustomed to such imagery would have

cross section the late eighteenth-century onward to emphasize the crowded, economically profitable brutality of the Middle Passage voyage.¹¹¹ The cross-section ship was printed alongside an early version of the Wedgwood design, placing the supplicating figure and brutalized bodies confined within the ship in conversation with one another.¹¹² Art historian Cheryl Finley argues that “the kneeling slave is also proportionally larger,” in relation to those on the ship, “as if one of the hundreds of small figures was brought forward and allowed to speak.”¹¹³ On the *Bust of Nora August*, the kneeling figure takes the foreground and faces the ship in the background, appearing to look towards it as further justification for his plea for emancipation. Its size in relation to the two figures in the foreground reminds the viewer of the outsize importance of the transatlantic slave trade within a global abolitionist discourse. The slave ship’s presence firmly situates this bust within another transatlantic iconographic debate and broadens the stakes of emancipation. Given her age, it is unlikely that

likely made the same connection when viewing the *Bust of Nora August*, despite the more subtle connection between figures and ship.

¹¹¹ That evocative image of enslaved bodies crammed into the hold of a small ship was first printed as *Plan of an African Ship’s Lower Deck with Negroes in the Proportion of Only One to a Ton* (1788), and was commissioned by the Plymouth Committee of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade in England. Cheryl Finley, *Committed to Memory: The Art of the Slave Ship Icon* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2018) 5.

¹¹² Finley, *Committed to Memory*, final pages of chapter 1. (Referencing online version without page numbers)

¹¹³ Finley, *Committed to Memory*, final pages of chapter 1.

Nora August herself endured the transatlantic slave trade, making it clear that the inclusion of the slave ship was intended as a general gesture towards the longer history of slavery.

Ultimately, the inclusion of the modified antislavery seal transforms the bust from a localized memorial to a specific individual on one Georgia plantation to a broader political statement about the agency and humanity of formerly enslaved people. It universalizes Nora's story by filtering it through the visual vocabulary of the Anglo-American anti-slavery movements. While anti-slavery advocacy would not have been necessary by the time the bust was created in 1865, the seal nevertheless asserts the basic humanity of millions of emancipated people by falling back on the familiar "Am I Not A Man And A Brother" plea under new circumstances. It encourages the viewer to consider the long history of abolitionist activism that ultimately culminated with American emancipation. Its presence also places the bust, and its celebration of Nora August's status as "a free woman," at the climax of those transnational efforts.

On one side of the figure's neck, the Wedgwood-esque seal reaches towards internationally-recognized iconography to make an ideological statement. However, another inscription on the bust returns the viewer's focus to the subject's individual story. Opposite the anti-slavery medallion, the maker inscribed a brief paragraph that reads: "Nora August (Slave)/ Age 23 yrs. Purchased/ from The Market, / St. Augustine Florida/ April 17th 1860./ Now a Free Woman." (fig. 3) It connects the arguments and ideas of emancipation to a real woman's lived experience, thereby making the

kneeling figure's plea personal. Indeed, a large part of the bust's evocative power rests in the juxtapositions between global associations and personal narratives by placing the individual in conversation with larger ideology by virtue of proximity. While this short biography tells Nora August's personal story, it does not necessarily reflect her own voice.

Rather, it is a brief summary of major life events mediated through both the material itself and the lens of the maker's voice and agenda: it is Nora's life written through another's words and hands. Nora August's short biography is cyclical. It begins with attaching the blunt epithet "slave" to her name on the first line and concludes with the statement, "Now a Free Woman" on the final line. In just five years, it points out, Nora's status had irrevocably changed. The maker honored that transformation by including a small bough of laurels beneath her biography, celebrating her personal victory and liberation from bondage.

In essence, this brief inscription is a kind of reverse tombstone, celebrating rebirth rather than death. It even mirrors a tombstone's rote recitation of a life through dates and major events, but culminates by uplifting Nora rather than mourning her. Despite the label "slave," this brief inscription centers Nora August in her own narrative. There is no reference to any specific enslaver, meaning that while she might be listed as a slave, her name and identity are not subsumed within another's at any point. They are still her own even within the carceral confines of enslavement, further emphasizing her agency as an individual.

While its manifestation in bust form is unique, the narrative itself follows the recognized textual and thematic conventions of the slave narrative. The *Bust of Nora August* therefore opens a dialogue between two different mid-nineteenth century cultural expressions: the slave narrative and the sculptural portrait. As a material, it enables a type of haptic reading of facial features, individual expression, and cultural individuality.¹¹⁴ As a text, its narrative signposts enable readers to draw connections between Nora August's story and those of other formerly enslaved authors. If narrative is the solution to, "the problem of how to translate knowing into telling," then the *Bust of Nora August* is an attempt to express the traumatic experience of enslavement and the liberatory vision of emancipation in sculptural form.¹¹⁵ Understanding how the bust communicated with both widely recognized genre types allows for a deeper engagement with the object's socio-cultural context. Finally, by engaging with midcentury conventions of sculpture-art viewership, it is possible to get a better

¹¹⁴ Here, I embrace an expansive definition of haptic, one that both incorporates traditional understandings of the haptic as perception through touch and attempts to engage with Tina Campt's ideas of "haptic visuality" (which she partially draws from Laura Marks). Haptic visuality, Campt argues, "emphasizes the relationship between what we see and the material presence of what we view." It is a, "practice of embodied viewing where the eyes function as organs of touch engaging interiority and exteriority alike." She posits "a productive tension" between tactile and haptic experiences- haptic visuality does not exclude touch, but neither are the terms synonymous. Campt applies her theory of haptic visuality to the analysis of photographs, but her ideas offer a possible narrative and visual bridge between reading textual elements and reading sculptural elements fluidly and inclusively. See: Tina Campt, *Image Matters* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012) 31-34.

¹¹⁵ Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," 5.

understanding of the maker's intent and even to speculatively recreate an audience response.

Before exploring the ways that the Bust of Nora August functions as material manifestation of the slave narrative genre, it is important to first consider how the bust structurally operates as a narrative. Viewing the *Bust of Nora August* as a subjective narrative is crucial to understanding the nuanced role its both sitter and maker play in its construction. As Hayden White explains, "the subjectivity of the discourse is given by the presence, explicit or implicit, of an 'ego' who can be defined 'only as the person who maintains the discourse'."¹¹⁶ By contrast, "the objectivity of narrative is defined by the absence of all reference to the narrator."¹¹⁷ The bust's narrative presents itself as objective, or without explicit presence of narrator. However, upon closer examination, it is clear that the bust is a subjective work: the information is limited by the implicit interests and purpose of the maker. Our only knowledge of Nora herself is given by the person who "maintains the discourse," and is defined within their parameters.

The bust elucidates an implied narrative discourse between sitter and sculptor. Both impose their thoughts, experiences, and purposes; they each take a hand in shaping the final character of the narrative produced, though ultimately the maker's

¹¹⁶ White, "The Value of Narrativity," 7.

¹¹⁷ White, "The Value of Narrativity," 7.

hand is the only one explicitly visible. The life events expressed on the bust are not passively arranged, but rather are shaped through the implied and integral negotiation between active subject and active maker.¹¹⁸

For both parties, the bust is a self-conscious act of fashioning, and the final product is clearly shaped by two co-equal conclusions or terminations of narrative. For Nora, the narrative concludes gracefully with the empowering line, “Now a Free Woman.” Her liberated state is the final emphasis of her story. The period at the end of the sentence emphasizes the finality of her emancipation (never can there be a return to a previous state of bondage), but the thought is nevertheless inherently open-ended. Her life is not bookended by a final date to round out her biographic chronology, but rather, it concludes with a poignant gesture towards an indeterminate end point. Only Nora herself can know precisely where her story moves next. Her narrative emphasizes what art historian Joy Kasson has described as the “persistence of woman’s transformability,” celebrated widely in the sculptural art and literary works of the mid-nineteenth century.¹¹⁹

For the maker, the narrative terminates by necessity of memorial convention with the date of creation and the dedication, “To the Nurses of Darien, Ga.” (fig. 5)

¹¹⁸ Throughout this chapter, I speculate extensively about Nora’s motivations for creating her narrative and the interactions between maker and subject, again relying closely on Hartman’s frameworks of critical fabulation.

¹¹⁹ Joy S. Kasson, *Marble Queens and Captives*, 243.

The maker's purpose is prescribed by the need to include expected details of memorial composition, thereby implicating the expectations of the reader-audience in the construction of its design and text.¹²⁰ Arguably, they are also hindered by a distinctly Euro-American expectation of "labeling;" their creative expression within genre comes in the way they tell Nora's story, not in the manner they dedicate the bust. That tension between the types of memorialization and self-fashioning informs the complexity of the bust's narrative construction.

In nineteenth-century sculpture, the employment of narrative was crucial to both creation and reception. However, the medium of sculpture often required artists to represent single subjects without context, environment, and condition.¹²¹ Manufacturing a narrative to accompany the detached figure became a key element of sculpture creation, exhibition, and viewership. According to Henry James, mid-century sculpture offered viewers a, "sense of the romantic, anecdotic, the supposedly historic, the explicitly pathetic."¹²² Most importantly, James wrote, "it was still the

¹²⁰ Thomas J. Brown, W. Fitzhugh Brundage, Kirk Savage, Caroline Janney, and William Blair all address conventions of memorialization around the time of the Civil War through analyses of public monuments and graves. Matthew Costello addresses the politics of memorialization throughout the nineteenth century through an analysis of George Washington's tomb.

¹²¹ Charmaine Nelson, *The Color of Stone*, xiii. See also: Benedict Read, *Victorian Sculpture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982) and Aileen Dawson, *Portrait Sculpture: A catalogue of the British Museum collection* (London: British Museum Press, 1999).

¹²² Henry James quoted on Kasson, *Marble Queens and Captives*, 2.

age in which an image had, before anything else, to tell a story.”¹²³ Nineteenth-century art viewers and consumers valued complexity to stories, and reveled in their own ability to uncover layer after visual meanings.¹²⁴ In some circumstances, artists embedded symbols in their work to guide the viewer to appropriate conclusions. In others, printed guides accompanied art exhibitions so that an interested viewer might have references by which to interpret the art on display. Joy Kasson argues that these pamphlets were a part of the proliferation of prescriptive literature in the Victorian era, emerging alongside advice books of all kinds.

For those able to travel to artists’ studios, the need for textual mediation disappeared. Touristic visits to artists studios enabled viewers to commune with the maker and their works directly, and “encouraged the notion that the work of art represented an act of communication between artist and audience.”¹²⁵ Both the pamphlets available at exhibitions and studio tours reinforced the idea that there was a specific, erudite way to view and interpret art, and that applying those interpretive methods to an art work should result in a precise understanding of the artist’s vision. Narrative, both implied and explicated, was the crucial act of transmitting that vision between maker and appreciator. Literature about that essential element of narrative

¹²³ Henry James quoted on Kasson, *Marble Queens and Captives*, 2.

¹²⁴ Kasson, *Marble Queens and Captives*, 23.

¹²⁵ Kasson, *Marble Queens and Captives*, 30.

transmission celebrated its democratic potential, but as historian Charmaine Nelson points out, the real inequalities of viewership ensured that a person's ability to access original works of art was limited, "within the rituals of European cultural tourism, was absolutely determined by financial means" as well as racial and gendered positionalities.¹²⁶

Unlike many nineteenth-century sculptors, the creator of the *Bust of Nora August* removed many of the exigencies of narrative transmission by adding its context in explicit text to the detached subject above, thereby embedding the verbal narrative into the material itself. This explicit enumeration of purpose is crucial, because the maker is conspicuously absent from their own work. They left no signature on the bust, and their individual voice is lost to Nora's own presence in the biographical detail and boundaries of tradition in the formulaic dedication to the Nurses of Darien. Though we understand that Nora was not self-created or self-authored, nevertheless the presentation of her life story and specific image together erase or elide the artist's presence.

In the absence of an author or authorial voice to offer an artist's grand interpretation of the piece, the maker's dedicatory text at the base of the bust text takes

¹²⁶ Nelson, *The Color of Stone*, XIV. See also: Kirsten Pai Buick, *Child of the Fire: Mary Edmonia Lewis and the Problem of Art History's Black and Indian Subject* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) and Elyse Nelson and Wendy S. Walters, eds. *Fictions of Emancipation: Carpeaux's Why Born Enslaved! Reconsidered* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2022).

a crucial role in clarifying the story that the statue was created to tell. That text both excludes the personal voice of the maker and acts as their stand-in, thereby maintaining the widely accepted practice of a mediated art-viewing experience. However, lingering difficulties in effectively interpreting the implied networks and actors swirling around the bust and its maker at the moment of creation demonstrates the limitations of excluding the authorial voice completely.

While the bust does not specifically enumerate its creator's voice and intent, the combined words and material presence of its sitter firmly entrench it in another powerful nineteenth-century convention. The *Bust of Nora August* is a negotiated narrative that specifically embraces the form and mandate of the slave narrative. Historians and literary scholars have defined the slave narrative broadly to include all of, "the written and dictated testimonies of the enslavement of black human beings," though scholars analytically delineate between those published before 1865 and those published after.¹²⁷ Literary scholar Janet Neary even goes so far as to push the slave narrative beyond the confines of a genre by calling it a "form" that includes the genre's literary conventions but "makes visible certain structural elements" underlying

¹²⁷ Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds. *The Slave's Narrative*. (Cary: Oxford University Press, 1991) xii. Many scholars also address a new genre, the "neo-slave narrative," which includes contemporary narratives published after the mid-twentieth century addressing many of the same themes as earlier slave narratives from a modern perspective.

the variable application of conventions.¹²⁸ Importantly, the slave narrative's "heterogeneity of form [was] echoed by a heterogeneity of purpose;" some texts were explicitly abolitionist while others spoke more widely to other personal aspects of enslaved life.¹²⁹ Slave narratives could be self-published and autobiographical, dictated, reflective memoirs, or one of many other methods of telling about the self through the published word.¹³⁰

While a diverse range of works published by formerly enslaved authors proliferated throughout the eighteenth-century, the group of narrative texts testifying to the enslaved experience had solidified into a recognizable category by the nineteenth century.¹³¹ Works within that category borrowed regularly from tropes popularized by sentimental fiction, captive narratives, travel literature, and spiritual

¹²⁸ Janet Neary, *Fugitive Testimony: On the Visual Logic of Slave Narratives*, (Fordham University Press, 2017) 13.

¹²⁹ Nicole N. Aljoe and Ian Finseth, eds. *Journeys of the Slave Narrative in the Early Americas*, (University of Virginia Press, 2014) 6.

¹³⁰ Recent historical work by Stephanie Smallwood and Anne Bailey even strives to pull slave narratives from missionary reports, ledgers, and travel diaries; Saidiya Hartman famously re-animated and speculatively narrativized the lives of young women from written ship's logs. While these works fall outside traditional imaginings of the slave narrative genre, they further broadening the pool of written materials accounting for the enslaved existence. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*; Bailey, *African Voices*; Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts"

¹³¹ Aljoe and Finsenth, *Journeys of the Slave Narrative*, 7.

autobiographies among others.¹³² While individual narratives were still unique to their author and circumstances of production, the collectivity of narratives proved potent. Twentieth-century African American author Ralph Ellison later stated that “we tell ourselves our individual stories so as to become aware of our general story,” and that sentiment absolutely applies to the body of slave testimonials.¹³³ The collectivity of lived experience legitimized and gave context to the individual’s hardships; the single narrative was a potent human expression, but the sum total of works attested to the institutionalized power of the slave society.

To lend further credence to individual works, autobiographical or self-published slave narratives were almost always accompanied by testimonials of authenticity from white intellectuals and pointedly verifiable justifications from the author beginning on the front page. The omnipresence of legitimizing white voices in Black works led literary scholar John Sekora to label the slave narrative a “black message in a white envelope.”¹³⁴ The so-called legitimizing features of the *Bust of Nora August*’s narrative are both simultaneously foregrounded and subtly incorporated. The dedicatory inscription makes it clear to a viewer that Nora’s

¹³² See: Bercuci, Loredana. “Female and Unfree in America: Captivity and Slave Narratives.” *Romanian journal of English studies* 17.1 (2020): 22–30.

¹³³ Ellison quoted on Davis and Gates, *The Slave's Narrative*, xxv. Interview with *Y’Bird*.

¹³⁴ Sekora cited on Neary, *Fugitive Testimony*, 10.

narrative is accurate and potent enough to serve as the honorary token given to the “Nurses of Darien Ga.” for services rendered. By including her narrative level with the internationally recognizable anti-slavery seal, her individual story of enslavement and liberation is linked with an international struggle for freedom and a vast advocacy network, thus further endorsing it by association. Finally, the dates themselves act as legitimizing features by providing objectively verifiable evidence and a sense of factual certainty to Nora’s recorded life.

While all self-published or autobiographical slave narratives were forced to contend with the structurally mediating forces of white viewership in a slave society, *The Bust of Nora August* was shaped more directly by both the material constraints and the editorial presence of its maker. Placing it in dialogue with the mediated, but nevertheless powerfully testimonial, Federal Writers’ Project slave narratives enables a more complex reading of Nora’s life. Scholars have called the FWP narratives “twice-told tales of slavery,” and the *Bust of Nora August* is truly a twice-told story: once in words and once in ivory.¹³⁵ Considering these two styles of personal narrative in tandem invites crucial questions about the significance of “telling about the self” through the medium of another’s voice, pen, or scribe.

As much as they laud the tremendous documentary power of the Federal Writers’ Project, particularly in illuminating women’s experiences, historians have

¹³⁵ Davis and Gates, *The Slave's Narrative*, xxii.

also identified problems of interviewer bias and selective questioning that influenced the way that formerly enslaved people were able to share their stories and now impact the way we read them.¹³⁶ These questions of negotiated influence can clearly be applied to even the brief biography inscribed on the bust's neck. How much agency did Nora August have in relating her own story? What kinds of conversations resulted in the words and likeness we see now? How did the intended purpose of the bust memorial shape the narrative the maker crafted throughout their inscriptions?¹³⁷ If Nora were handed a scribe, or even a pen and paper, would she have included different events in her own brief history?

Though Nora was in her early twenties and many of the individuals interviewed by the FWP were children when they were emancipated, it would have been impossible to forget or minimize what historian Stephanie Jones-Rogers calls

¹³⁶ Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019) xviii. See also: Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). See also: Spencer Crew, Lonnie Bunch, and Clement Price, eds. *Slave Culture: A Documentary Collection of the Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project*, (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2014) xx. The introduction cites a project administrator John Lomax, who specifically preferred that "The details of the interview should be reported as accurately as possible in the language of the original statements. It should be remembered that the Federal Writers' Project is not interested in taking sides on any question. The worker should not censor any materials collected regardless of its nature." Lomax sought to standardize the process in order to secure the most effective interviews, but his words could not impact the structural social, cultural, and racial factors influencing the collection of testimony.

¹³⁷ Miles, *All that She Carried*, 18-19.

“salient life events.”¹³⁸ These “pivotal” experiences included births, deaths, marriages, and sale or forced relocation of loved ones, among other things. Formerly enslaved people like Washington Allen, who was separated from his family at auction at age five, remembered the auctioneer’s leering appraisal of his body as he stood on the block.¹³⁹ Delicia Patterson remembered the day her enslaver brought her to the courthouse and “put her up on the auction block to be sold” when she was fifteen.¹⁴⁰ Tom McGruder even remembered the precise amount of money exchanged for his body and labor when he was sold at the age of “eighteen or twenty:” \$1250.¹⁴¹

The primacy of the precise details of these “salient life events” in the memory of formerly enslaved individuals would explain how Nora August was able to recount the precise date of her sale in St. Augustine: April 17, 1860, as she told her story to the bust’s maker (fig. 18).¹⁴² The abrupt trauma of sale, and likely the forced separation from family or loved ones as well, ensured that these details were prominent among

¹³⁸ Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property*, xviii.

¹³⁹ Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 1, Adams-Furr. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn041/>. p. 10

¹⁴⁰ Patterson quoted on Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property*, xix.

¹⁴¹ Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property*, xix

¹⁴² While my discussion of this conversation is speculative, the details imparted on the bust make it clear that there was some kind of dialogue through which Nora was able to impart details (the totality of which presumably only she or her immediate family would know).

those she shared with the person who crafted her memorial.¹⁴³ Remembering crucial details about their enslavement, Jones-Rogers argues, enabled freed people to navigate the Southern landscape, physically and legally, bearing passes that identified them in relation to their former enslaver.¹⁴⁴ Producing written connections to white families that previously owned them could protect them from some of the racial violence pervasive throughout the Reconstruction-era South.

Remembering and publicizing specific details of slave auctions offered formerly enslaved men and women the chance to reconnect with lost family and friends. While the *Bust of Nora August* was a memorial to Nora's life and to emancipation broadly, it could have also served as a way for her to publicize her current whereabouts and the details of her bondage. After the Civil War ended, hundreds of newly freed people published advertisements in newspapers across the country seeking information about loved ones.¹⁴⁵ These advertisements included basic information about where the seeker had last seen their family member; not surprisingly, many of these moments of separation occurred at or near auctions.

¹⁴³ For additional analysis of the role of grief, loss, and longing in postbellum slave narratives, see: Anna Laurie and Robert A. Neimeyer. "Of Broken Bonds and Bondage: An Analysis of Loss in the Slave Narrative Collection." *Death studies* 34, no. 3 (2010): 221–256.

¹⁴⁴ Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property*, xx.

¹⁴⁵ For more, see the "Last Seen: Finding Family After Slavery" database: <https://informationwanted.org/>.

Information like the exact date and location of sale, as included on the *Bust of Nora August*, was crucial to identifying specific individuals and connecting missing people to points of origin. Therefore, even while the bust looks backward, memorializing her previously enslaved status, these simple details could have served as a tool to secure and reclaim a future with her family and other loved ones as she looked toward emancipation. Nora's slave narrative was therefore proactive and self-serving, even as it spoke to and engaged with broadly recognizable experiences of enslavement.

In essence, the Federal Writers' Project narratives act as catalog entries in the larger archives of the history of American slavery constructed in the early 20th century. As a participant in the larger genre of slave narrative, the *Bust of Nora August* roughly follows this patterned outline of narrative. However, by incorporating the entry structure into bust form, it defies categorization. The sculpture defies the limits of the catalog as it visually and materially embeds individual personhood into a proscribed chronology of life events.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. argues that the slave narrative represents attempts by Black men and women across the Atlantic world to, "write themselves into being." Gates marvels at the prevailing presupposition that "a black person could become a human being by an act of self creation through the mastery of language."¹⁴⁶ In the case of the *Bust of Nora August*, that profound assertion of selfhood is doubled by the

¹⁴⁶ Davis and Gates, *The Slave's Narrative*, xxv.

assertion of individual personhood in the form of Nora's likeness. The likeness imbues a certain animate character to her narrative that distinguishes it from other literary examples. By imparting her narrative through the vessel of a portrait bust, Nora quite literally brings her words and her face into material being, rendering her doubly visible and epitomizing the slave narrative's potential for self-creation.

Speaking about archival absences and silences, literary scholar Carolyn Steedman argues that "an absence is not *nothing*, but is rather the space left by what has gone: how the emptiness indicates how it was once filled and animated."¹⁴⁷ A slave narrative like Nora's "adumbrates the shape of the absence" her living presence once filled both literally and figuratively by writing an embodied presence into being and doubling that presence in ivory.¹⁴⁸ The significance of the organic material- living human features expressed through once-living sculptural material- enhances the vitality of Nora's object likeness.¹⁴⁹ The profound statement of individual power and collective experience expresses the fullness of what the archive is missing, and demonstrates the evocative power of the bust-narrative for self-expression.

¹⁴⁷ Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History*, (Rutgers: Rutgers University Press, 2002) 11.

¹⁴⁸ Kristina Bross, "Coda: Animating Absence." In *Journeys of the Slave Narrative in the Early Americas*, Nicole N. Aljoe and Ian Finseth, eds. (University of Virginia Press, 2014) 212.

¹⁴⁹ Maggie M. Cao, "Maritime Media and the Long Eighteenth Century," *Journal 18* 12, (Fall 2021).

The *Bust of Nora August* therefore blends the visual assertion of power and dignity inherent in the nineteenth-century bust form with the power of the widely recognized slave narrative literary form.¹⁵⁰ In doing so, it makes materially manifest a visibility already latent in the slave narrative genre. Literary scholar Janet Neary argues for a powerful visibility that lingers within slave narrative texts and enriches our understanding of the lived world of enslavement. That visibility begins with, but far surpasses, pictorial tools like anti-slavery frontispieces in her view. Rather, she argues that it is embodied within the text itself and becomes a space where enslaved narrators can negotiate the complexities of authenticity and blackness at the heart of the slave narrative form. By crafting her narrative in an ivory vessel, Nora therefore creates a material platform for those critical visual-textual negotiations and one which also invites a coherent blending between canons of sculptural narrative and slave narrative.

Similar ideas about blending of textual and material narratives long precede modern scholarship. Ephraim Peabody of the *Christian Examiner* wrote in 1849 about the “arrival of this ‘new department’ in world literature” that was, “remarkable as being *pictures of slavery by the slave*, remarkable as disclosing under a new light the mixed elements of American civilization, and not less remarkable as a vivid exhibition

¹⁵⁰ Neary, *Fugitive Testimony*, 10.

of the working of the native love of freedom in the individual mind.”¹⁵¹ Indeed, the visual power of the Bust of Nora August is such that her words and dated testimony create a “picture of slavery by the slave,” while her carved visage simultaneously asserts itself proudly and independently as a free woman. Her clear-eyed, forward looking gaze attests to the “native love of freedom” in her mind, while her words attest to the experience of bondage she shared with millions of other people. It presents a dual visuality, one haptic and one expressed textually, that attests to her transitory status as a newly free person.

Frederick Douglass wrote in 1855 that a free person, “cannot see things in the same light with the slave, because he does not, and cannot, look from the same point which the slave does.”¹⁵² Douglass’ words are an obvious testament to the power of the slave narrative and the unapproachable trauma of bondage, but they intentionally draw an impassable dichotomy between enslavement and freedom. Douglass treats slavery and freedom in this instance with a fixity that does not acknowledge the most potent moment of transformation.¹⁵³ Carved in 1865, the *Bust of Nora August* is the

¹⁵¹ Ephraim Peabody quoted on Aljoe and Finsenth, *Journeys of the Slave Narrative*, 2.

¹⁵² Davis and Gates, *The Slave's Narrative*, xiii.

¹⁵³ William L. Andrews writes that the body of slave narratives, and particularly fugitive slave narratives, “gradually center on an imagined future self, a free self, an individual capable of and willing to commit to a personal ideal that eventually becomes the most powerful self-affirming motive in the narrator’s life.” The bust was arguably created at the end of that trajectory of yearning-- the moment where Nora begins to truly realize the potential of her free self. The bust is a celebration of the

rare slave narrative that can speak to both states simultaneously from a fluid point. The *Bust*'s narrative at once looks forwards into a liberated future and backwards into the temporary condition of enslavement. In doing so, it reflects on the power of transition and transformation. The carved subject literally stands in between the anti-slavery seal on one side of her body and the acknowledgement of her own freedom on the other, reminding the viewer-reader of the individual at the core of the fluid narrative.

While the bust's narrative derives power by implying movement towards liberation, it also attests to the tenuousness of transition and the desire to formally assert an emancipated status. St. Simons Island was captured by Union troops in 1862 and occupied thereafter. During the occupation, Retreat Plantation, on which Nora was once enslaved and which previously served as the primary point of Confederate defense on the island, was a safe haven for formerly enslaved families between 1862 and 1865.¹⁵⁴ By August 1862, more than 500 freed men and women lived on St. Simons. Nevertheless, freedom was not a status to take for granted at any point.¹⁵⁵ The formerly enslaved educator Susie King Taylor described the lingering fear among enslaved residents and freed refugees on the island amid misinformation and terrifying

self-actualized potential of emancipation that so many other narratives reach towards. William L. Andrews, *Slavery and Class in the American South: A Generation of Slave Narrative Testimony, 1840-1865* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). *Cited from online edition without page numbers; quotation appears in the book's epilogue.*

¹⁵⁴ Bell, *Major Butler's Legacy*, 352.

¹⁵⁵ Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 14.

reports of “rebels” that swirled between the disparate settlements on St. Simons after the Confederate retreat. “We were afraid to go far from our own quarters in the daytime, and at night to even go out of the house for a long time,” Taylor wrote, conveying a profound uncertainty of status even though Union marines guarded the island. Freedom was all but certain, but rarely felt.

Historian Henry Louis Gates writes that once slavery was formally abolished, “no need existed for the slave to write himself into the human community through the action of first-person narration.”¹⁵⁶ That may have been theoretically true in a retrospective sense, but it does not account for the uncertainty of lived experience in the moment. The *Bust of Nora August* was carved in 1865, at a point at where it may still be necessary for the liberated slave to write herself through her own voice and another’s hand, into the human community in her new emancipated state. Such an act would offer a sense of validation and certainty in a tenuous period. By enmeshing her declaration of freedom with a memorial object dedicated to a regionally known group (requiring only the basic description “Nurses of Darien, Ga.” to be honored), Nora was also making a public statement to other formerly enslaved people, planters, and Sea Island residents.¹⁵⁷ By creating her bust and dedicating it to a non-local group within the region, she declared her free status widely, thus further reinforcing its security.

¹⁵⁶ Davis and Gates, *The Slave's Narrative*, xiii

¹⁵⁷ The Georgia Sea Islands around Brunswick were home to a profoundly interconnected society. A half-dozen wealthy planter families controlled vast swaths of plantation land on St. Simons, Butler Island, Jekyll Island, and the mainland

In addition to making social and politically loaded claims about her status as a free person, Nora August also used the material vessel of her slave narrative to make strong claims about her own legacy and legitimacy. By using luxury material like ivory as a structure through which to share her narrative, Nora and the bust's maker boldly monumentalized her claim to freedom and to personal power. She also asserted her own authority and sought to culturally legitimize her free state by crafting her narrative in the vessel of a portrait bust, a genre which had profound historicized aesthetic connotations in the nineteenth-century. Crucially, this object is not a sculpture with a subsidiary text attached to it, but rather is a holistic narrative expressed through sculpted human features. "The interaction between sculpture and viewer," art historian Charmaine Nelson argues, "can even activate a level of fantasy that contributes to the viewer's reading of a real human body."¹⁵⁸ Nora and her story are one in the same, and the medium of a portrait bust allows for that essential blending.

between Brunswick and Darien. Their regular movement between properties and routine intermarriage had profound effects on the enslaved population of the Sea Islands. Enslaved individuals moved with their enslavers, and were often the only ones able to actually navigate the treacherous currents and eddies that swirled between islands and mainland. They were therefore able to form bonds and even families with people enslaved by other Sea Island families. This is partially demonstrated by the de facto abolition of artificial plantation boundaries on St. Simons after the Confederate retreat; families moved between plantations to find one another and settle together.

¹⁵⁸ Nelson, *The Color of Stone*, xxxii.

Critically, this particular bust-narrative both differs from and engages with common elements of the bust medium. It acts as a challenge to pervasive sculptural representations of Black women in the period by acting as a forthright statement of self-constructed personhood. *Nora August* arguably follows the most common sculptural form, the portrait bust. Portrait busts depict exclusively the subject's head and upper shoulders, suggesting a total corporeal form but largely limiting the viewer's interaction with the body to an exploration of the face. The pathos and expression of sculptural art, therefore, had to be expressed within the features and contortions of the face and neck. Portrait busts were a popular medium for political declarations and status definition from Classical Antiquity through the early Modern period, but they took on new vigor in the nineteenth century. By making her declaration of emancipation through the portrait bust medium, Nora August declares herself equal in stature to the pantheon of elite male political and cultural figures who utilized the bust medium to assert their own prominence.

As James Smalls demonstrates, sculptural busts were also a powerful tool of imperial ethnography.¹⁵⁹ They combined notions of scientific objectivity and aesthetic subjectivity to firmly define cultural standards of beauty and racial difference.¹⁶⁰ As

¹⁵⁹ James Smalls, "Dressing Up/Stripping Down: Ethnographic Sculpture as Colonizing Act" in *Fictions of Emancipation: Carpeaux's Why Born Enslaved! Reconsidered*. (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2022) 66-76.

¹⁶⁰ Smalls, "Dressing Up/Stripping Down," 69.

an arguably self-determined narrative of personal progress and self-liberation, *Nora August* pushes back against the practices of external classification that defined these colonial products. Rather than allowing ethnographic data to be imposed upon her by an observer, she uses her personal narrative to subvert expectations of Black bodies in sculptural form.

The sculptural form embraces associations with both monumentality and anonymity. The portrait bust form alone invokes a long lineage of elite artistic commemoration, but the sculpture's relationship to scrimshaw only enhances monumental invocations. By featuring engraving techniques commonly associated with the handheld craft of shipboard carving, the *Bust of Nora August* appears gigantic in contrast to the body of smaller scrimshaw objects. It stands out as a colossal monument against the myriad of teeth and busks that share the same aesthetic profile. It presents itself as the magnum opus of maker and sitter alike, one that reflects their places at the pinnacle of craft and at a moment of reinvention. In the scrimshaw context, the juxtaposition between their anonymity and the quality of their artistic product is not as unusual. Most scrimshanders produced unsigned works.¹⁶¹ The unnamed maker and sitter only stand out against the pantheon of elite sculptural portraits made in other media.

¹⁶¹ Frank, *Scrimshaw on Nantucket*, 7.

The vacillation between the two poles reflects Nora August's journey as both person and object: forcibly anonymous as a living person, but monumental through her material afterlife. Art historian Marcia Pointon asserts that a portrait is a representation of a person depicted for his or her own sake, adding that many portraits aim to convey both body and soul within likeness.¹⁶² This would have been Nora's first chance to control the way in which she was depicted or described by others; as the legal property of her white enslaver, previous descriptions of her body and self-whether descriptions or numeric recordings- were undertaken for economic purposes. Here, she claims selfhood for her own sake and to ensure her own longevity despite her uncertain future.

While we have thus far thought about the bust in relation to scrimshaw objects, abolitionist imagery, and the portrait bust, its status as sculpture also invites comparison to nineteenth-century statues that addressed enslavement and emancipation. Two of the most famous examples are Hiram Powers' *Greek Slave* (1846) and Carpeaux's *Why Born Enslaved!* (1873), both of which express stances on slavery and emancipation through representations of women's bodies. Unlike Hiram Powers' *Greek Slave*, who looks down and away, and Carpeaux's *Why Born Enslaved!*, where the figure twists away from the viewer's vision, Nora looks proudly

¹⁶² Marcia Pointon, "Slavery and the Possibilities of Portraiture," in *Slave Portraiture in the Atlantic World*, ed. Agnes Lugo-Ortiz and Angela Rosenthal. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) 42.

forward to meet the viewer's gaze straight on (figs. 6, 7, & 1). Nora's expression is calm and unabashedly confident, as if she is reveling in the material permanence of her act of self-assertion. As a contemporary representation (ca. 1868) of an enslaved Black woman, *Why Born Enslaved!* offers a comparison that demonstrates the singularity of Nora's visual and material narrative.¹⁶³ The woman portrayed in *Why Born Enslaved!*, appears to strain against ropes looped around her bare shoulders. She shows visible emotion and looks askance, her hair tumbling about her face. As art historians Wendy Walters and Elyse Nelson write, this woman is both, "an invitation to sympathy... and an object of exquisite beauty that equates Blackness with exoticism, novelty, and desire."¹⁶⁴ She fights back, boldly challenging the viewer to answer for her enslavement, but unlike Nora she is still visibly captive.

Her body is exposed apparently against her will as she pulls against the ropes, and she is subject to the narratives of captivity and colonial conquest imposed upon her by her sculptor and decades of curation. Unlike Nora, she has yet to reach her moment of liberation and self possession. In contrast to the woman represented in *Why Born Enslaved!*, Nora's confidence is visible in her smooth face: emotion is conveyed through the words and images of her collaboratively expressed slave narrative, while her likeness conveys the self-possession that came with being "now a free woman"

¹⁶³ Elyse Nelson and Wendy S. Walters, eds. *Fictions of Emancipation: Carpeaux's Why Born Enslaved! Reconsidered* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2022).

¹⁶⁴ Nelson and Walters, *Fictions of Emancipation*, 16.

despite uncertainties. Even her hair, intricately braided high above her forehead like a crown, expresses her command of person and identity that contrasts with Carpeaux's subject's loose and tumbling curls.

We must assume that every visual aspect of Nora's portrait was a conscious act designed to shape different aspects of her emancipation narrative. Anthropology student Juliette Bowles focused on Nora's hair and connected it with African and African American women's natural hair styling practices. "The even, intricate detail of the hair indicates that the parting and braiding of Nora's hair was done by another woman," Bowles wrote, noting that "the elaborate, sculptural hair style is reminiscent of the treatments of hair on figures carved in traditional West African cultures."¹⁶⁵ Nora's hair crowns her as a woman with independent agency, but it also gestures towards her community.

By working with the sculptor to craft a representation of herself that was independent and forward looking while remaining closely rooted in a close community of Black women, Nora claimed connection to a culture and lineage larger than herself that could have grounded her in the uncertain moment of emancipation. Bowles writes that it is, "not possible to say whether the style was entirely a direct African retention or the spontaneous, creative response of two black women to the sculptural potential

¹⁶⁵ Juliette Bowles, "Natural Hair Styling: A Symbol and Function of African-American Women's Self-Creation," MA Thesis: College of William & Mary, 1990, 30.

of thick, kinky hair,” but that either way, the combined artistic impulses created, “a lasting portrait of a regal, self-possessed, African-featured woman.”¹⁶⁶ That regal self-possession was only enhanced by the associations of the portrait bust, which cloaked her in an additional mantle of artistic legitimacy.

Literary scholar John Sekora described a slave narrative as a “black message in a white envelope,” and indeed the *Bust of Nora August* is a Black woman’s likeness, voice, and story captured in a traditionally elite white form and material.¹⁶⁷ The bust reclaims the cultural meanings of sculpting a visibly Black body from a “white” material. The use of ivory to render a Black face fundamentally subverts the widely understood associations between white material, white skin, and neoclassical virtue. Associations between Classical statuary and virtuous nature rested on the erroneous understanding that ancient sculptors relied exclusively on white marble, but the use of white marble became central to neoclassical sculptural practices in the nineteenth-century.¹⁶⁸ For many white sculptors and their elite or middle-class viewers, white marble was seen as color-neutral but racially prescriptive, achieving both moral purity and racial assignment for its subjects. White marble achieved an “abstraction of form” that eliminated questions of prurient sensuality that might have accompanied

¹⁶⁶ Bowles, “Natural Hair Styling,” 31.

¹⁶⁷ Sekora cited on Neary, *Fugitive Testimony*, 10.

¹⁶⁸ Andreas Bluhm, ed. *The Color of Sculpture 1840-1910*. (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 1996) 73.

viewership of nude female sculpture. While the near-whiteness of the ivory material of the *Bust of Nora August* might appear to imitate the appearance and cultural meanings of a marble bust at first glance, it actually plays a crucial part in the visual deployment of slave narrative through the bust form.

Art historian Charmaine Nelson argues that “the exclusivity of marble was in part about the neoclassical desire to reclaim the ancient aesthetic forms and materials of the Greeks... who had historically been cited as the root of western democracy and civilization.”¹⁶⁹ Following that logic, if the use of marble in nineteenth-century sculpture was in part an effort to reclaim ancient Western power in a racially unstable and politically uncertain present, then from what does ivory claim historical lineage? Ivory was an extremely costly, increasingly rare, and entirely imported material in the mid nineteenth century.¹⁷⁰ Carving a partial ivory tusk was a conscious choice by maker and sitter rather than a soldiers’ craft of convenience; it challenged the cultural and political assumptions inherent within a carved “white” material.¹⁷¹

At the time of the bust’s creation, ivory was fundamentally linked to the global slave trade. Elephant ivory was frequently traded for or alongside enslaved people

¹⁶⁹ Nelson, *The Color of Stone*, 58.

¹⁷⁰ Benjamin Burack, *Ivory and Its Uses* (Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle & Company, 1984) 25.

¹⁷¹ Compare the *Bust of Nora August* to extant examples of soldiers’ craft: see: Lea Catherine Lane, “‘a Marvel of Taste and Skill’: Carved Pipes of the American Civil War,” University of Delaware MA Thesis, 2015.

throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and both ivory and enslaved people were treated as strategic commodities rather than living and formerly living entities.¹⁷² Nora August's future-focused story of emancipation was a direct challenge to the racial and colonial hegemonies inherent within the ivory trade. The use of the ivory material only served to enhance her extraordinary narrative of liberation and self-determination as she re-asserted her personhood against historical legacies of exploitative commodification.

Rather than connecting to an ancient Greek past, elephant ivory reached back towards an historical African past and gestured at a contemporary African present, suggesting that even the material fabric itself laid the foundation for Nora August's narrative statement. Though Nora and the sculptor/creator recognized and applied the visual vocabulary of white Neoclassical sculpture, they did so in a way that fundamentally centered Black identity and global history. Discourses on the role of the

¹⁷² See: Alexandra Celia Kelly, *Consuming Ivory: Mercantile Legacies of East Africa and New England*, Culture, Place, and Nature Studies in Anthropology and Environment (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2021). As Madelyn Shaw and Amy J. Anderson demonstrate, the commodities and traders of the American South also played a crucial role in the global ivory trade throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, the scale of ivory importation and production in New England was unequaled. See: Shaw and Anderson, "Ivory for Cotton – Textile Trade Documents at the National Museum of American History," *Curator: The Museum Journal* 61, no. 1 (2018): 147–60. Harvey M. Feinberg, and Marion Johnson. See also: "The West African Ivory Trade during the Eighteenth Century: The '... and Ivory' Complex." *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 15, no. 3 (1982): 435–53. and R. W. Beachey, "The East African Ivory Trade in the Nineteenth Century." *The Journal of African History* 8, no. 2 (1967): 269–90.

ancient kingdom of Ethiopia to African American intellectual and cultural identity were already taking root within Black intellectual circles by the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁷³ The choice of an ivory material may have been a gesture towards these formative debates about Ethiopian antecedence and African exceptionalism that would go on to influence thinkers like W.E.B. DuBois and Martin Delany just a few decades later. If so, it was a direct rejoinder to the implicit argument made by neoclassical sculpture that the ancient Western civilizations of Greece and Rome were the only historical sources for virtuous political and social inspiration. It declared that African Americans had an ancient lineage that influenced their present and future just as it established Nora's optimistic gaze towards her own liberated future.

Few sculptural representations of emancipation show a female liberated figure. Instead, sculpted women were most commonly depicted in a state of subservience or enslavement, while sculpted men were represented in the physical act of achieving emancipation. Edmonia Lewis' famous *Forever Free* and J.Q.A. Ward's *The Freedman* both depict a powerfully built, bare chested Black man in the literal act of breaking his chain (fig.12). Lewis' *Forever Free* shows her subject already standing with one fist raised in triumph, while Ward's subject is just beginning the act of rising

¹⁷³ See these contemporary writings on Ethiopian heritage, among many others: Sarah Shuften, "Ethiopia's Dead," *The Colored American* (30 December 1865), p. 3.; D. Dorr, *A Colored Man Round the World* (Cleveland, OH, 1858), pp. 11-12; B. Taylor, "The Negro Race," *The Cleveland Herald*, April 21, 1852: Issue 95, Column B.; F. E. W. Harper, "Ethiopia," *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* (Philadelphia, 1857), pp. 11-12.

from a seated position with hands newly unbound.¹⁷⁴ Even Thomas Ball's Freedman's Memorial to Abraham Lincoln, oft discussed for its more passive construction of Black emancipation, still depicts the kneeling Black subject in the physical act of breaking his own chains, though at Lincoln's gesture.¹⁷⁵ Art historian Kirsten Pai Buick discusses the contrast between Lewis' emancipation group and Ball's: Ball portrays Black freedom as a function of white power, while Lewis offered freedom translated into clear active gesture.¹⁷⁶ At the same time, Buick notes that Lewis' powerful depiction of Black male freedom played into white paranoia about freedmen's violence and physicality.¹⁷⁷

Lewis' *Forever Free* also depicts a woman under the physical shadow and protection of the standing male figure. Kneeling with her hands clasped piously in front of her, she is a clear representation of the more passively constructed Black female emancipation in printed media and sculpture.¹⁷⁸ Black women are rarely, if

¹⁷⁴ Kirk Savage. "Molding Emancipation: John Quincy Adams Ward's 'The Freedman' and the Meaning of the Civil War." *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 27, no. 1 (2001): 28.

¹⁷⁵ Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves*, 90.

¹⁷⁶ Kirsten Pai Buick, *Child of the Fire: Mary Edmonia Lewis and the Problem of Art History's Black and Indian Subject*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) 63.

¹⁷⁷ Buick, *Child of the Fire*, 64.

¹⁷⁸ Buick, *Child of the Fire*, 64.

ever, depicted breaking their own chains or rising from a seated state of bondage. Instead of expressing their relationship to slavery and emancipation through their bodies' actions, female figures more commonly convey their emotion and establish agency through their facial features. The body is stripped away, literally in the case of portrait busts, as the sculptor's focus narrows on the power of the face. The female figure's furrowed brow in *Why Born Enslaved!* expresses frustration and determination, while the woman in Lewis' *Forever Free* gazes heavenward in clear relief. *Nora August* also conveys clear agency and presence through her facial features.

Devoid of body, she is also devoid of literally expressed physical agency in her own emancipation. Her sculptural narrative comes not in action, but through her voice and her gaze conveying her previous achievements and her determination for the future. Unlike the supplicating figure in *Forever Free* and the bound woman in *Why Born Enslaved!*, *Nora August*'s sculptor does not assign any visual markers to her sculpted features that would mark her as chattel in past or present. Her smooth face and clear gaze conceals the tumultuous and uncertain process of emancipation, offering the superficial illusion of a passive participant. Unlike Lewis' and Carpeaux's female figures, Nora was already in the process of reinvention by the time she and her sculptor set her story to ivory. She had no need to break chains once again in her monument to freedom, instead relying on the words, images, and likeness that composed her material slave narrative to express the depth and meaning of her transformation from enslaved to free.

Nora's personal expression of emancipation spoke within the conventions of the slave narrative genre, but it spoke through and against the visual language of the portrait bust medium and the public sculpture to emancipation. Understanding the depth of meaning behind her story depended on a nineteenth-century audience's visual and cultural literacy of portrait bust convention while also acting as a direct challenge to the racial and colonial assumptions embedded within said medium. Her narrative is woven through with mediations from maker and viewer, but as her visual and literary self-possession demonstrates, the core of the story is Nora herself. Her words and likeness transform the bust from physical object into a manifestation of lived experiences.

Chapter 4

OBJECT AS RELIC

Present-day St. Simons Island, Georgia has two stories it tells about its own history. At times they collide with, repel from, or run parallel to one another. The first tale St. Simons tells about itself is the most visible. It celebrates the island's unquestionable beauty- its live oaks dripping with moss, its pristine coastline, and the way that the marsh seems to glow gold from within each day at sunset- in conjunction with its reputation for heritage and hospitality past and present. It honors the achievements of the island's famous planter inhabitants and quietly mourns the death of the island's "Golden Age" during the Plantation Days. The second story St. Simons tells about itself has been frequently masked, obscured from immediate public view, or reframed. Nevertheless, it forms the bedrock of the island's historical memory.¹⁷⁹ This story begins to address the myriad of ways that slavery shaped the lives and personal histories of many present-day residents, and crafts.

¹⁷⁹ Rebecca Cawood McIntyre's study of the historical origins of tourism in the American South addresses what she calls the "melange" of mythology. McIntyre argues that the blending of these competing landscapes of Southern tourism was essential to manufacturing the Southern lure. Their real power, she argues, "was the fact that they appealed to their audience, overwhelmingly middle-class Northerners." (6) For greater exploration of the development of the South as "nostalgic refuge, leisurely retreat, or substitute Europe," see Rebecca Cawood McIntyre, *Souvenirs of the Old South: Northern Tourism and Southern Mythology*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida: 2011).

Like the *Bust of Nora August* itself, contemporary St. Simons can be understood as a story of mediation: in narrative, space, and landscape. Those who believe in the first story cannot avoid engaging with the second: it is unavoidable truth echoed in community memory and material remains. In order to believe in the first story, the teller must minimize the second, but in order to tell the second story, one must actively contradict the first. Analyzing the ongoing relationship between these two narratives through the lenses of access (both physical and intellectual), preservation, and mediation offers us a way to begin to untangle the complex legacies of slavery, emancipation, and tourism on the island.

The *Bust of Nora August* has a central role to play in these discussions. Displayed by the Coastal Georgia Historical Society and on long-term loan from the Sea Island Company, the bust sits at the intersection of public and private history on the island. Its isolation from historical context and from academic research defines the ways it can be interpreted and places it in conversation with other privatized elements of the island's history. Therefore, in order to understand the most recent chapter of the object's history, we must break down power structures inherent within the narratives St. Simons Island tells about itself and its material history.

Dueling ecosystems of leisure and labor have always existed within the island's social landscape, but they have presented themselves in different forms over time. Today's leisure economy is a far cry from that of Antebellum St. Simons, despite efforts to draw on the visual vocabulary of Antebellum nostalgia. Given this economic discrepancy, there has been a marked desire from boosters to establish continuity with

an Antebellum past. Thus, the presence and maintenance of historical ruins is central to the way that St. Simons maintains and tells about its past. The *Bust of Nora August* is a smaller-scale material remnant of St. Simons' antebellum past, legally owned and controlled by the Sea Island Company. We can better understand the context for its preservation, interpretation, and display by studying the myriad of other private historical "relics and ruins" that mark the island's landscape.

Upon arriving on St. Simons from the mainland of Georgia, visitors arrive at a long tree-lined parkway populated on both sides by gated housing developments, golf resorts, and private clubs named for the plantations that preceded them. Soon, they are greeted by a traffic circle that directs them east to the St. Simons Pier Village, north to resorts on the other side of the island, or immediately down Retreat Avenue through the imposing gates of the Sea Island Golf Club. Attentive visitors might note a nearby Georgia state historical marker noting the location of Retreat Plantation, notable for being the first site to successfully cultivate long staple cotton in the American South, at the current Sea Island Club. The sign notes famous inhabitants like Anna Matilda Page King and Thomas Butler King, but elects not to mention the hundreds of enslaved people whose labor made the Kings' agricultural success possible.

Founded in 1926 by Ohio businessman Howard Coffin, the Sea Island Club is an elite golf course and resort constructed on the site of Retreat Plantation.¹⁸⁰ The Sea

¹⁸⁰ Ellen H. Rogers, "Sea Island Company," New Georgia Encyclopedia. January 27, 2023. <https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/business-economy/sea-island-company/>

Island Company are the permanent owners of the *Bust of Nora August*, which used to be displayed in the Sea Island Clubhouse. For an investor from Ohio, maintaining remnants of St. Simons' plantation past and connecting to dominant historical ideology was essential to constructing and legitimizing an "authentically Southern" presence for the Sea Island Company resorts.¹⁸¹ Thus, the resort's primary architectural landscape claims a strong aesthetic connection to the idealized Antebellum South, though many private cottages on the property reach towards a more "exotic" Spanish mission revival style.

However, owning objects like the *Bust* and designing the core of the sprawling resort around the physical ruins of Retreat Plantation allowed the company to draw a direct material line between past and present. Meghan Kate Nelson defines a ruin as "a material whole that has been violently broken into parts," but, "enough of these parts must remain in situ, however, that the observer can recognize what they used to be." Nelson argues that ruins often possess a sense of "unsettling... temporal dislocation."¹⁸² Her study focuses on the physical and human destruction of the Civil War, which frequently manifested in these material fragments on the landscape. War

¹⁸¹ Kate Mikel, "Georgia's Future as Seen by Howard Coffin," *The Georgia Lawyer*, ca. 1930-1940. Georgia Historical Society, Sea Island Company Papers Box 7.

¹⁸² Meghan Kate Nelson, *Ruin Nation: Destruction and the American Civil War*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012) 2.

ruins were imbued with the pathos of collective trauma and were treated as mementoes of irrevocable change. Retreat Plantation's material ruins are presented with the visual vocabulary of many Civil War ruins: craggy chimneys, forlorn rock piles, the air of domestic innocence lost. They "quell conversation" and inspire a "kind of hushed reverence" reserved for visibly historic places, even though they populate a working resort.¹⁸³ However, Retreat's ruins are not the product of wartime destruction. A photo taken around 1890 shows a group of people standing in front of the intact main house, which would survive into the twentieth century along with many outbuildings. Today, the looming chimney of the Retreat mansion is carefully maintained beside the Clubhouse and Golf Performance Center, while visitor parking lots fill the space between the extant foundations of the greenhouse and hospital buildings (fig. 16). Sea Island Club offices are housed in the reclaimed cotton barn (fig. 13).

While they visually purport to be the Civil War-era fragments of Antebellum domesticity, their ruination has little to no connection to the war itself. The skeletal interpretive plaques do little to discourage visitors' assumptions (fig. 17). In actuality, these sites are "folly ruins in the landscape of Civil War memory," capturing the glamor and nostalgia of wartime destruction without confronting the weight of collective trauma."¹⁸⁴ Critically, the implication of wartime (read: "Yankee")

¹⁸³ Nelson, *Ruin Nation*, 239.

¹⁸⁴ Nelson, *Ruin Nation*, 233.

destruction only serves to deflect from the permanently embedded trauma of enslavement that permeates every aspect of the memorial landscape. Folly or not, these ruins still serve a valuable purpose for the Sea Island Club. As newcomers to the region and to the luxury economy at large in the early twentieth century, they sought to define themselves through their continuity, physically and culturally, with the island's profitable plantation past.

The company sought to make those linkages more visible by strategically restoring ruins in order to utilize their capacity to present the possibility of a personal and embodied connection to the past. It became a crucial selling point for the Club and the Company at large. An early twentieth-century postcard presented an idyllic vision of white tourists lounging next to the immaculately restored clubhouse "where cotton and corn were once stored" in the "once-famous" plantation period (fig. 13). In restoring the "ruined" barn to a literally whitewashed luxury accommodation, the Sea Island Company made their intensive transformation of the property from a landscape of labor to a landscape of leisure appear seamless.

The Sea Island Company purchased the *Bust of Nora August* in the late twentieth century in a subsequent phase of their corporate and ideological development. Contemporary scholarship describes the *Bust of Nora August* on display in that restored clubhouse, presented as another important remnant of St. Simons' plantation past but only tangentially connected to critical context about its creation and preservation. The bust performed the same function as the folly ruins by visually connecting the Sea Island Company to the idealized past it tried desperately to

emulate. Of course, in that context, the bust became its own kind of folly ruin as the irony of possessing and displaying the sculptural image of a formerly enslaved woman within the pristinely restored walls of a building in which she may have worked went unremarked upon. Charmaine Nelson's study of gender and race in nineteenth-century sculpture addresses the deep-rooted significance of displaying a Black female figure. "There is the very real consideration of sculptural possession by whites as a psychic and social stand-in and reiteration of the real life possession of slaves," she writes.¹⁸⁵ In a sense, the Sea Island Club's captive display of *Nora August* undermined the joyous narrative of emancipation expressed through her features by displaying her in her former place of bondage for the visual pleasure of elite white tourists.

Nevertheless, the possession and display of these objects enabled the corporation to create what sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel calls a "time map."¹⁸⁶ Zerubavel argues that groups of people form their own identities by, "imposing a continuous historical narrative over noncontiguous events of the past." In order to do so, the process requires a kind of memory "adhesive" to bridge the gap between disparate events. The Sea Island Company, seeking the validation of a Southern identity and the lure of a commodified Antebellum past, used the materials at their

¹⁸⁵ Nelson, *The Color of Stone*, XXXI.

¹⁸⁶ See: Shannon Bontrager, *Death at the Edges of Empire: Fallen Soldiers, Cultural Memory, and the Making of an American Nation, 1863-1921*, (Omaha: University of Nebraska Press), 67, and Eviatar Zerubavel, *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) 40.

disposal to manufacture an artificial link between noncontiguous events. The development of Retreat into an elite golf resort was not inevitable, but the memory adhesive of the aestheticized ruins and prominently displayed *Bust of Nora August* serve to make the connection seamless.

Moreover, by constructing the core of the Sea Island Club around the ghostly footprint of the Retreat Plantation built environment, Sea Island Company effectively used the ruins to reinscribe the power structures of the plantation onto their contemporary landscape. One promotional newspaper (ca. 1940) boasted about the, “a sporty 18-hole course [that] now winds its way over a once-famous colonial plantation where the first Sea Island Cotton was grown,” where, “piccaninnies now caddy where their ancestors toiled as slaves.”¹⁸⁷ The transition between working plantation and sporty course was so seamless, the article implied, that “the haunting sound of negro spirituals still lingers in the air.”¹⁸⁸ The club enhanced the memorial adhesive power of the landscape itself by manipulating romanticized Lost Cause rhetoric about the Antebellum South to further emphasize the cohesion between past and present. They used those linkages to legitimize and reinscribe the labor systems of the former

¹⁸⁷ “Sea Island Beach: Gem of the ‘Golden Isles’,” *Savannah Morning News*, ca. 1940. Georgia Historical Society, Sea Island Company Papers Box 7. The term “pickaninny” is a racial slur referring to enslaved Black children. It has associations with minstrelsy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

¹⁸⁸ Sea Island Beach: Gem of the ‘Golden Isles’,” *Savannah Morning News*, ca. 1940. Georgia Historical Society, Sea Island Company Papers Box 7.

plantation as well. In this case, historicity of the plantation and proximity to its ruins and artifacts legitimized and romanticized the use of Black children's labor. In essence, the Sea Island Company used the materials and nostalgic reputation of St. Simons' so-called first Golden Age to advocate for their own corporation as the natural leaders of the island's second Golden Age.

The spaces that Nora August and her contemporaries once inhabited are still partially visible through the presence of the ruins, though its legibility as a space of collective memory and identity has been almost totally minimized by the Sea Island Company's overwhelming transformations of the cultural meanings of the land. One of Retreat's most crucial ruins is that of the Plantation Hospital, now situated among a thick bed of ferns between two visitor parking lots on the Sea Island Club's sprawling resort compound. Its crumbling tabby walls are carefully maintained, preserving the structure in a state of limbo between natural decay and artificial rehabilitation. A small sign announces that the structure was once a hospital where "sick slaves" could seek treatment.

At every opportunity, documentation and interpretation of the hospital uses its existence to laud the King family's generosity towards those they held in bondage, rather than noting that King family members regarded the hospital as a strategic investment in the physical health of their enslaved labor force. The hospital's central presence on the estate was an ideological and economic statement supporting the institution of slavery, and its central presence in the interpretation of the extant Retreat Plantation structures continues to perpetuate damaging Lost Cause mythology about

benevolent enslavers. The King family's purported benevolence acts as a boon for the Sea Island company as well, which presents itself as an ethical corporate presence within the contemporary island community. Given the parallels that the corporation has actively drawn between the former planter class and their own club, the ruins arguably function as the Sea Island Company's physical response to criticism of themselves and their enslaver predecessors.

Just as the hospital's presence has been used to allay criticism of the King family's legacy as enslavers, the presence of the ruins throughout the Sea Island Club attempts to alleviate the damage the Club's very presence inflicts upon the memorial and historical landscapes of Retreat Plantation. By terraforming the former cotton fields, work yards, gardens, and surrounding landscape, not to mention destroying extant structures, to construct the golf course and resort, Sea Island Club developers did irrevocable damage to the archaeological potential of the site. Their stark privatization of the ruins has done even more social and memorial damage by rendering a site of collective memory inaccessible.

Each of these foundational ruins are open access within the gates of the resort but none are accessible to the general public, suggesting that the Club views them not as historical records but as carefully maintained decoration for the Club's paying members. Only with a privately issued guest pass are visitors allowed to pass through

the club's entrance and view the historical structures housed within.¹⁸⁹ Indeed, the only "ruin" accessible to the wider public is the famed "Avenue of the Oaks" that reportedly marked the entrance to the plantation in the Antebellum period. Once visitors pass through the Club's exterior gates, they are permitted to drive parallel to the oak allee and catch a glimpse of the pristine golf courses on either side before being turned away at the gatehouse. The Avenue is a popular destination for wedding photographs, and it has effectively become the most circulated symbol of the façade of stately grandeur that the Sea Island Club offers its guests.¹⁹⁰

However, one promotional photo for the Sea Island Club in the *Golden Isles Visitor Guide* is particularly evocative of the underlying relationship between privatization and historical consciousness.¹⁹¹ It is shot with a focus straight down the center of the Retreat Plantation oak allee, capturing the craggy trees and draping moss in all their glory. Its framing responds to dozens of famous portraits of plantation homes where the central white-columned mansion is perfectly framed by its preceding

¹⁸⁹ I first tried to enter by introducing myself as a researcher. After being turned away at the gatehouse, I applied for a guest pass by emailing visitor services. A day later, they connected me with the company historian, who offered me a pass for the following morning. I was able to spend several hours exploring the landscape, photographing significant sites, and studying interpretation in June 2022.

¹⁹⁰ "The Lodge," Sea Island Company, 2023. <https://www.seaisland.com/stay/the-lodge/>

¹⁹¹ *Golden Isles Visitor Guide*, 2022. p. 7

oaks.¹⁹² In this photo, the slightly blurred structure at the core of the tree tunnel is not a plantation home, but the white-columned gatehouse to the Sea Island Golf Club. On contemporary St. Simons, the plantation home is no longer the most visible symbol of power, surveillance, and social stratification. Instead, the private gatehouse takes its metaphorical place. Its architectural character and physical framing sends a stark message to the public, particularly St. Simons' descendant communities, about the reasons behind their inability to access the material evidence of their collective historical memory.

The accessibility of historical ruins across the island are one more example of how historical memory and the built environment have become privatized. The ruins of several outbuildings, possibly slave quarters, are extant at Hampton Plantation on the north end of the island. The structures were well maintained but access was limited to residents of the private gated community, Hampton Plantation (fig. 15). The ruins were visible from the road through a tall fence that separated the community from neighboring housing developments. The fence conveys the proprietary relationship between contemporary Hampton Plantation housing community residents and the historical ruins. As such, similar surveillance networks operate between community residents and the outbuilding ruins as existed on the former Hampton Plantation in the

¹⁹² Most clear example is this photo of the famous Oak Alley Plantation in Mississippi. <https://www.architecturaldigest.com/gallery/plantation-style-houses-architecture>

Antebellum period. Residents still maintain visual control over anyone who seeks to access the ruins as well as physical control in the form of a manned gatehouse.

As at the Sea Island Club, the gatehouse communicates an intellectual and structural separation between public and historical objects as well as a physical separation. It suggests that only a select group of people are qualified, financially or otherwise, to access objects of collective historical memory. This kind of privatization not only reinforces long-standing structures of power, but it fundamentally limits the educational and memorial potential of the ruins. Confined behind the private fence barrier, they stand as both showpieces and a kind of validation for those who seek to claim connection to a version of the property's history. These artificial barriers to access around plantation ruins are tinged with another layer of irony. Testimony from formerly enslaved residents of St. Simons demonstrates that boundaries between plantations were fairly permeable despite enslavers' surveillance networks. Like the other "ruins" on St. Simons, they have been transformed from active sites of memory formation to pristinely preserved private property stripped of both life and memory.

Ultimately, it is more than just objects and memory that are impacted by the privatization of history on St. Simons. St. Simons' robust Gullah Geechee community, many of whom are directly descended from individuals enslaved on the island's many plantations, has been deeply affected by the entrenchment of a private tourist infrastructure. Amy Roberts, historian and matriarch of St. Simons' Black community, writes that the Golden Isles have lost, "an enormous part of its traditional Gullah

Geechee Culture with the invasion of tourism and resorts.”¹⁹³ Roberts writes that since the introduction of the resort economy, the Black population has slowly been displaced by a growing white leisure class both numerically and culturally. That wealthy white influx has contributed to higher property values with even more rapidly increasing property taxes. Ms. Roberts acknowledges that the resorts have brought jobs and an economic boost to the island, but emphasizes that the boost largely benefits the resort clientele. The resort jobs frequently pay too little to accommodate families and higher expenses, so many longtime islanders have been forced to leave the generational homes they can no longer afford.¹⁹⁴

That loss of ancestral land impacts the whole community and contributes to the greater expansion of resort properties, beginning the cycle over again. Anxieties about land loss are not exclusive to the Black community. A 1979 story in the *Atlanta Constitution* conveyed a similar sense of urgency and fear from a longtime white islander. “I don’t answer their letters anymore,” Buddy Hassell said of the Sea Island Club, “if they want my land, they can talk to my children after I’m gone.”¹⁹⁵ Hassell’s

¹⁹³ Amy Lotson Roberts and Patrick J. Holladay, *Gullah Geechee Heritage in the Golden Isles*, (Charleston: The History Press, 2019) 34.

¹⁹⁴ Roberts and Holladay, *Gullah Geechee Heritage in the Golden Isles*, 35.

¹⁹⁵ Howard Pousner. “Saint’s Alive,” *The Atlanta Constitution* (Atlanta, Georgia), September 16, 1979.

resigned comments demonstrate that developers' encroachment has been a steady process, and one where longtime residents have little possibility for redress.

However, the threat is even more potent to the Gullah Geechee community, as the “invasion” of resorts fundamentally limits community access to their own heritage. Retreat Burial Ground, where people enslaved on Retreat and their direct descendants are buried, is part of the Sea Island Club property and is located within a golf course. As such, it is not accessible to the public nor is it accessible to the family members of those interred there. Accessing the cemetery requires a special pass from Sea Island Club security acquired in advance of the visit.¹⁹⁶ This entirely arbitrary barrier that only serves to distance the present-day Gullah Geechee community from their ancestral heritage.

The privatization of history and limitation of access have both been at play in various encounters with the *Bust of Nora August* over the course of this project. Though owned and formerly displayed by the Sea Island Company, the bust is currently displayed behind a large plexiglass case in the Lighthouse Museum at the Coastal Georgia Historical Society in St. Simons Pier Village.¹⁹⁷ Limited

¹⁹⁶ Roberts and Holladay, *Gullah Geechee Heritage in the Golden Isles*, 65.

¹⁹⁷ St. Simons' Pier Village abuts the Sea Island Club and inhabits land once occupied by Retreat Plantation. Though little survives materially, the shadow of Retreat Plantation is still firmly embedded in the urban landscape of the Pier Village. The grid that defines the Village's boundaries is populated by streets named for the King children that lived on Retreat just before the Civil War: Matilda, Lord, Virginia, Mallory, and others.

interpretation gestures at the bust's historical significance while offering little about its cultural meaning or significance to St. Simons' present-day Gullah Geechee community. After repeated inquiries, the Sea Island Company did not allow access to the bust for this project. They declined requests for analytical testing on the ivory material, requests to handle the bust outside of plexiglass, and requests to visually examine it without a case barrier.¹⁹⁸ They also declined requests for provenance information, a more detailed object record, and conservation history.¹⁹⁹ They also declined repeated requests to speak to company representatives about the bust's history within the organization.²⁰⁰ They approached the bust as property to maintain and display, rather than an active site of historical research and community engagement. In doing so, they sever the bust, its information potential, and its memorial significance from those who desire to learn from it. The historical silences resulting from their intervention are even more potent because of their deliberate artificiality.

The *Bust of Nora August* is a story of mediations: between maker and sitter, between bust and audience, between owner and viewer. The Sea Island Company's damaging mediation is the final chapter in a rich story of collaborations, intersections,

¹⁹⁸ Mimi Rogers, Email to Author, May 9, 2022.

¹⁹⁹ Wheeler Bryan, Email to Author, June 7, 2022.

²⁰⁰ Wheeler Bryan, Email to Author, January 2, 2023; Wheeler Bryan, Email to Author, September 26, 2022.

and cultural confluences. Nevertheless, Nora's story is clearly expressed enough to be legible and impactful even without the aid of an artist's manifesto, critical interpretation, or a period-produced guide for viewing. Her words, images, and physical likeness speak for a young woman seeking to define herself against the trauma of her past with an eye towards the liberatory possibilities of her future. Her likeness is deeply legible to those who seek to delve beneath the surface and into the lives beneath.

CONCLUSION

I first encountered the *Bust of Nora August* while visiting St. Simons Island in December 2021. The statue quite literally stopped me in my tracks: I could not pull my eyes away from her. Her face, her eyes, and her hair were like nothing I'd ever seen. I was also captivated by the amount of information inscribed upon the sculpture. Surely, the inscriptions' specificity would make it simple to situate this incredible object within a body of documentary evidence. Sixteen months later, I am no closer to firmly attaching this object to the existing historical record, but the *Bust of Nora August* has encouraged me to ask different questions.

Absences and anonymity are omnipresent within the object's material fabric. They are embedded in its narratives and are especially central to this thesis' account of its stories. We will never know the names of each individual involved with the making, preservation, and use of the object, but they have nevertheless left indelible marks on its very fabric. Objects are better at asking questions than answering them, and the most interesting objects leave researchers with more questions than answers at the end of a period of inquiry. Even when answers are elusive, these objects do not merit indifference and disregard.

On the contrary, these objects invite creative methods of investigation that work around missing matter and obscured archives. I have confronted those constant absences and shadows through speculative, human-centered reasoning. While this methodology can never fully account for the depth and breadth of these absences, it nevertheless reveals the object as this object as a material archive, as a rich narrative

of a young woman's liberation, and as a crucial relic within the nostalgic stories elite white St. Simons Island continues to share about its history. Perhaps the *Bust of Nora August*'s greatest contribution is that it encourages us to thoughtfully embrace uncertainty.

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Appendix A

FIGURES



Figure 1: Frontal view of the *Bust of Nora August* at the Coastal Georgia Historical Society in December 2021. The bust was made on St. Simons Island, Georgia in 1865 by an unknown maker. (Photograph by Author)



Figure 2: Side view (left) of the *Bust of Nora August*, showing detail of inscribed antislavery seal. (Photograph by Author)



Figure 3: Side view (right) of the *Bust of Nora August*, showing detail of Nora's personal biography.
(Photograph by Author)



Figure 4: Rear view of the *Bust of Nora August*, showing detail of Nora August's elaborate hairstyle.
(Photograph by Author)

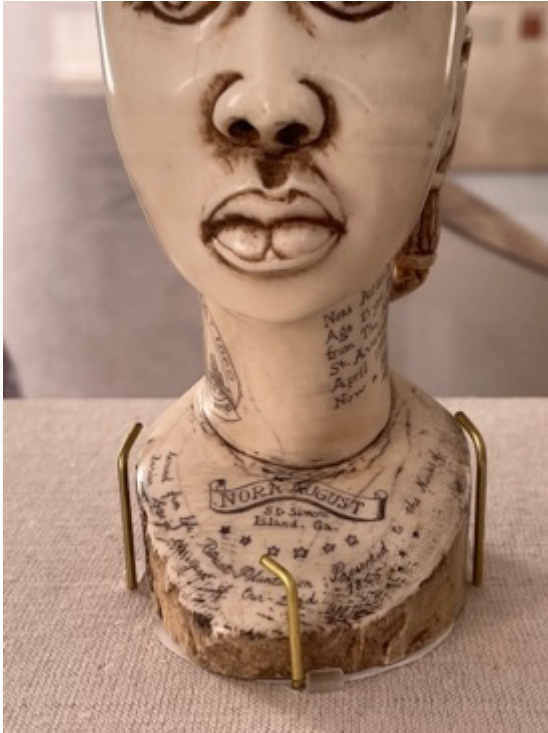


Figure 5: Enlarged frontal view of the *Bust of Nora August*, showing detail of the dedicatory inscription. (Photograph by Author)



Figure 6: Hiram Powers, *The Greek Slave*, modeled 1841-1843 and carved 1846. Seravezza marble, 167.5 × 51.4 × 47 cm. (Image courtesy of: National Gallery of Art, Washington)



Figure 7: Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux, *Why Born Enslaved!*, modeled 1868 and carved 1873. Marble, 58.1 × 40.6 × 31.8 cm. (Image courtesy of: Metropolitan Museum of Art)



Figure 8: View of the landscape at the former Cannon's Point Plantation, now called the Cannon's Point Preserve on St. Simons Island, Georgia, as seen in January 2023. (Photograph by Author)



Figure 9: Josiah Wedgwood (manufacturer) and William Hackwood (modeler), Antislavery Medallion, ca. 1787. Jasperware, 3 × 2.7 cm. (Image courtesy of: Metropolitan Museum of Art)



Figure 10: Whale Tooth (Scribshaw Tooth). 1830-1840. Ivory (sperm whale) and ink. 9.84 x 20.96 x 5.4 cm. (Image courtesy of: Winterthur Museum)



Figure 11: Lydia Maria Child, Frontispiece from *Authentic Anecdotes of American Slavery*, published 1835 (Courtesy of Library of Congress, Rare Book and Special Collections Division)



Figure 12: John Quincy Adams Ward, *The Freedman*, 1863 (cast 1891). Bronze, 49.5 x 37.5 x 24.8 cm. (Image courtesy of: Metropolitan Museum of Art)

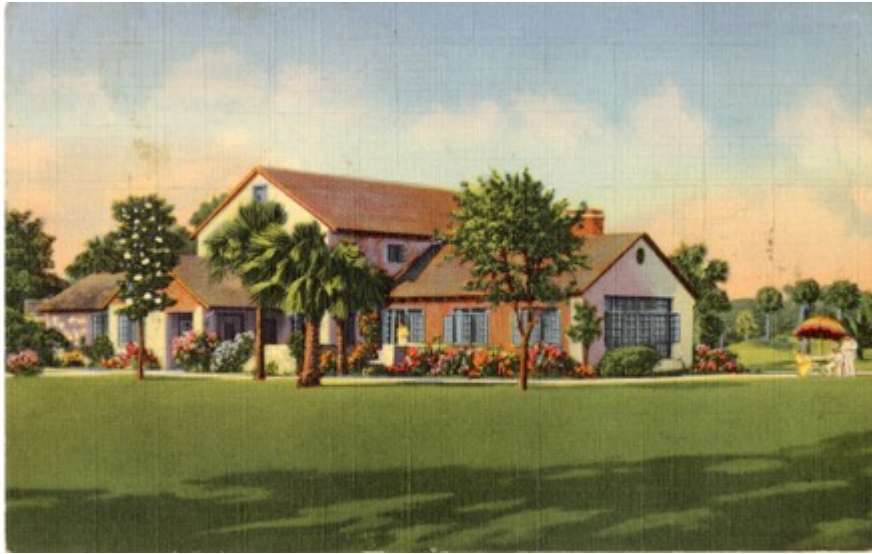


Figure 13: Postcard: Colorized image of Sea Island Golf Club House, St. Simons Island, Georgia. Published by Ward News Co., St. Simons Island. (Image courtesy of: Coastal Georgia Historical Society)



Figure 14: Photographic print of Retreat Plantation house on St. Simons Island, ca. 1890. (Image courtesy of: Coastal Georgia Historical Society)



Figure 15: Hampton Plantation Gated Community & Ruins on St. Simons Island, Georgia, as seen in January 2023. (Photograph by Author)



Figure 16: Ruins of the Retreat Plantation house at the Sea Island Club on St. Simons Island, Georgia, as seen in June 2022. (Photograph by Author)



Figure 17: Ruins of Retreat Hospital and interpretive plaque at the Sea Island Club on St. Simons Island, Georgia, as seen in June 2022. (Photograph by Author)



Figure 18: View of the “Market” at “Plaza” from the east, St. Augustine, Florida as seen in June 2022 (Photograph by Author)