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Nat Brandt, **Yanna Brandt**. *In the Shadow of the Civil War: Passmore Williamson and the Rescue of Jane Johnson.* University of South Carolina Press, 2007. 224. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57003-687-3.

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Contesting Slavery

The "impending crisis" is a phrase often used to describe the tumultuous climate of the 1850s, with the struggle between slavery and freedom, states' rights and the authority of the federal government. In this interpretation, the extraordinary actions of ordinary people are sometimes lost in the ideological storm that culminated in war. Nat Brandt and Yanna Kroyt Brandt's account of the story of Passmore Williamson–a Quaker abolitionist who used a Pennsylvania law to free Jane Johnson from bondage in 1855–reminds us that every grand narrative has its roots in the households and hearts of its citizens. *In the Shadow of the Civil War: Passmore Williamson and the Rescue of Jane Johnson* draws upon personal papers, legal documents, and newspaper commentary to provide a compelling account of one individual's commitment to freedom in a slave society struggling, as Thomas Jefferson so aptly put it, to hold a "wolf by the ears."

Passmore Williamson was no stranger to the abolitionist cause when he

sought to free Jane Johnson from bondage on a sweltering Philadelphia afternoon in mid-July 1855. A conveyancer and scrivener dealing in land deeds, estates, and property transfers, thirty-three-year-old Williamson was a husband, father, former member of the Society of Friends, and an active participant in the abolitionist movement since early adulthood. A member of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society from 1848-51, Williamson had abandoned the all-white, moderate society in favor of the more radical Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society, which welcomed blacks into its membership and sought more "involved, impatient, and aggressive" means of evoking change (p. 25). Intimately involved in the legal battles of runaway slaves and later serving as acting secretary of the society's General Vigilance Committee, Williamson was a key member of the anti-slavery movement in Philadelphia.

And as Williamson well knew, Pennsylvania's geographical and legal position on the issue of slavery rendered it a fascinating and complex place to carry out the abolitionist agenda. Located just north of the slave state of Maryland, Pennsylvania had taken a strong legal stand in favor of freedom. The Liberty Law, enacted in 1847, stated that "without exception … any slave brought into the state was free as soon as he or she stepped foot inside its borders" (p. 39). Philadelphia, the Brandts contend, became a city where the ideological and legal frameworks underpinning slavery were constantly being tested and contested.

Into this somewhat unique landscape came Jane Johnson, a slave with two boys in tow, en route to Nicaragua with her master. Stopping in Philadelphia for a brief time before boarding a ferry to New York, Jane had explained her plight to a black waiter at the Bloodgood's Hotel, who promised to do what he could to assist her to secure her freedom. Details about Jane and her children were relayed to William Still, a clerk at the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society's headquarters, and together with Passmore Williamson and a group of interested volunteers, the society swung into action. Jane and her children "have a perfect right to go where they please," Williamson declared, "and they can do so unless forcibly restrained by their master" (p. 16). Williamson and company arrived just as the *Washington* was about to set sail from the Walnut Street wharf. Barging onto the packed ferry, Williamson entered into a heated exchange with the slave master, making way for Jane's last-minute flight to freedom. Confident that he had acted within the boundaries of Pennsylvania law, Williamson handed his business card to the slave master and returned home to prepare for a business trip the next day.

At the time, the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society regarded the effort as a resounding success, unaware that the aggrieved slave master was, in fact, William Wheeler. The recently appointed U.S. resident minister to Nicaragua and former personal assistant to President Franklin Pierce, Walker was a staunch Democrat who regarded those who fought against slavery as a threat to the Union. Incensed by Williamson's seemingly flagrant disregard for his rights and his "property," Wheeler petitioned Judge John Kintzing Kane for assistance. "Together," the Brandts argue, "slave master and judge would plot–clearly with the administration's approval–how to quash an embarrassing situation that was drawing increasing national attention" (p. 60). Hastily drafting an affidavit stating that Williamson had Jane Johnson and her sons under detention, Wheeler requested "a writ of habeas corpus be directed to compel Williamson to bring his three slaves into district court" (p. 73).

In the sensational legal battle that followed, Williamson's steadfast denial that Jane and her children "were within his power, custody, or possession at any time whatever" prompted Judge Kane to dismiss the argument that state law dictated that any slave brought into Pennsylvania was automatically free. He found Williamson in contempt of court for refusing to answer the writ of habeas corpus and ordered his indefinite consignment to Philadelphia County Prison (p. 82). Williamson's imprisonment, which lasted one hundred days, unleashed fierce public debate about states' rights and the relevance of the Liberty Law in the face of the Fugitive Slave Laws of 1793 and 1850. More significantly, the Brandts argue that Passmore Williamson's efforts in the successful rescue of Jane Johnson, and his subsequent incarceration, shone a spotlight on the very issues that brought the United States to the brink of war in the late 1850s. "The conflict that broke out in 1861 was ostensibly about states' rights, about who governs whom," they conclude, "but its genesis was in the compromise over human bondage reflected in the federal constitution" (p. 171).

In the Shadow of the Civil War: Passmore Williamson and the Rescue of Jane Johnson is an exceptional work. Brandt and Brandt have produced a beautifully written narrative, underpinned by a moving story made all the more compelling because of its historical impact. The context behind the event is fleshed out skillfully and effectively. The book is well structured and comprehensively referenced, turning "the words of abolitionists into human images," and reminding us of the part that individual citizens played in shaping the ideology of freedom in the United States (p. 170).

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