WHEN SHE RAN AWAY, she had to conceal the one thing she had been trying hardest to hold on to—her identity. She had been kidnapped from her West African homeland and sold to light-skinned people that she thought might be evil spirits or even cannibals. After that, they chained her to people who did not speak her language and sent her across a body of water that seemed never to end. After that long, terrifying, and painful journey, they sold her in North America, where they tried to take away her identity as well. One part of that process was forcing her to go by “Phebe,” a name she was still getting used to. She left Africa a valued part of an ethnic community and family and arrived across the ocean an outsider and a commodity.¹

The people who claimed ownership of her cared not that she had a home, family, and community. They did not even try to understand her body art and the language she spoke when she tried to communicate. They just wanted her to work, and they used her unique characteristics as oddities to describe her in newspaper advertisements after she escaped. Her captor warned that she was a “cunning Wench” who would likely “wear a Handkerchief round her Head” to hide the “four large Negroe scars up and down her forehead.” She would also hide her poor grasp of English by speaking fast. Despite the network of oppression that sought to re-kidnap her, “Phebe,” whose real name nobody ever bothered to learn or record, managed to remain at large ten weeks after fleeing. One can only imagine the heartbreak she must have felt after being hunted down and forced into a life of slavery a second time.²
Phebe, like many people who ended up enslaved in the mid-Atlantic region, was originally from West Africa—most likely part of the Asante, Benin, Tuareg, Ibo, Yoruba, or Senegambian group. Chances are, her kin placed the markings on her by scarring her face in a unique way that matched theirs. This was a custom that held cultural significance among many different groups and would also make it easier to find her way back to her people should she end up captured by an enemy nation or slave traders in Africa. Unfortunately, the marks could not help her get home from so far away. She now faced the reality of hard work for no pay, followed by an early death, an ocean and two continents away from the people she loved. In addition, her attempted escape now left her with the prospect of being beaten or sold into even worse circumstances.⁵

Telling the story of someone like Phebe remains difficult for historians. While the past few decades have shed light on enslavement and slavery in the South, much of the story of northern slavery remains hidden, especially when looking to understand it from the perspective of the humans who lived in bondage. For one matter, it remains challenging to find windows into their
lives, since the historical record contains few specifics about how they lived and worked, much less what they felt and thought. Complicating matters even further is the long-held (and incorrect) notion that slavery in the North was “not so bad” or somehow “more humane” due to the presence of abolitionists. This holds most true for Pennsylvania, the state that passed the first abolition law in the new nation soon after the United States gained independence from England. The Quaker presence in Pennsylvania has also encouraged an oversimplified narrative that focuses on moral opposition to slavery and the system’s early demise in the state. This false sense of moral superiority too often allows us to overlook the fact that slavery was ubiquitous and that there were many people who benefitted from it and fought to keep it, even as the abolition movement grew in the nineteenth century. It also hides the fact that antislavery sentiments too often grew from antiblack sentiments fed by fear and a desire for racial exclusion. It encourages a history that exonerates those who benefitted from human bondage and forced labor while downplaying the continuing legacy of slavery and racism, the scars of which continue to mar the nation’s social and political landscape even today. It is time to correct this false narrative. The bottom line is that there was no safe place for Africans or black Americans in the United States in the slavery years, not even in the “free North” or the Quaker State, and it is time to come to terms with that and develop a more authentic understanding of the U.S. past. Black and white Pennsylvanians need to know the full story in order to appreciate the historical collaboration that ended human bondage. They also need to understand the contributions black Americans made to Pennsylvania and the United States, and to understand the challenges they faced, and still face, in a society constructed for the benefit of whites.

The image of kindly Quakers ending slavery quickly out of the goodness of their hearts and with little resistance is one that must be replaced with a more authentic story of what really happened. That story must include a wide range of characters, including the Quakers who chose to keep enslaved laborers as well as those who fought against human bondage. It must also include black Americans like Phebe who refused to surrender to their plight and those of both colors who stood up for justice, acknowledged the wrong of owning human beings, and worked together to correct that wrong. Theirs was a fight led by people who knew that just because something is legal and accepted does not mean it is right. Though unpleasant, a true account must also tell the stories of those who clung to their fear, anger, and the resulting racist beliefs to fight against the tide of freedom.

The purpose of *Slavery and Abolition in Pennsylvania* is to tell the full and inclusive story and to bring to light the realities of both slavery and abolition
in the state. Though short, this volume presents a long-awaited synthesis on the topic of slavery and antislavery in the state, revealing the complexities of both and exploring the assumptions and realities of bondage and the quest to end it in the Quaker State. Although Pennsylvania is known as the first state to end slavery, in reality it was simply the first state to put abolition in motion through law, but people remained enslaved in the state until the eve of the Civil War. Contrary to popular belief, that process was not a peaceful one, and abolitionists met tremendous backlash that often endangered their property and their lives. After slavery ended in the state, black and white activists continued to fight the system, hoping to spread freedom beyond the commonwealth’s borders. That, too, brought dangerous backlash and resistance, not just from residents of other states but from Pennsylvanians as well.

Importantly, the fight for freedom did not end with the fight to end slavery. Certainly, owning oneself was an important first step to gaining liberty, but real freedom requires opportunity for true independence. Thus, it helps to think in the long term and view the fight against slavery as simply the first stage in a long civil rights movement that began in the colonial period and continues today.

Slavery and Abolition in Pennsylvania traces this movement from its beginning to the years immediately following the American Civil War. The first section explores the lives of people like Phebe—people who were robbed of their lives in Africa and forced across the Atlantic to the New World colonies, where they had to labor in difficult, often excruciating, work for no pay. It describes their work, their relations with those who believed they “owned” them, and their attempts to make the most of their situation by forging their own identity in any way they could. It also discusses their attempts to gain freedom, whether by “stealing” or buying themselves.

After examining slavery in Pennsylvania, the discussion turns to the complexities of the state’s antislavery movement by examining the reasons different groups of Pennsylvanians opposed slavery and the various ways they proposed to end bondage and reconstruct Pennsylvania society. It also traces the backlash abolitionists and black Americans faced and the growth of anti-abolition sentiment and racism that followed the passage of the gradual abolition act and grew in tandem with new forms of antislavery that developed in the antebellum years. The final section traces the civil rights movement from the period of state reconstruction through the national reconstruction that occurred after the Civil War.