Samuel Ringgold Ward, Autobiography of a Fugitive Negro (1855)

I was born on the 17th October, 1817, in that part of the State of Maryland, commonly called the Eastern Shore. My parents were slaves. I was born a slave. They escaped, and took their then only child with them. I was not then old enough to know anything about my native place; and as I grew up, in the State of New Jersey, where my parents lived till I was nine years old, and in the State of New York, where we lived for many years, my parents were always in danger of being arrested and re-enslaved. To avoid this, among their measures of caution, was the keeping their children quite ignorant of their birthplace, and of their condition, whether free or slave, when born.

My father was a pure-blooded Negro, perfectly black, with woolly hair; but, as is frequently true of the purest Negroses, of small, handsome features. He was about 5 feet 10 inches in height, of good figure, cheerful disposition, bland manners, slow in deciding, firm when once decided, generous and unselfish to a fault; and one of the most consistent, simple-hearted, straightforward Christians, I ever knew. After his escape, my father learned to read, so that he could enjoy the priceless privilege of searching the Scriptures. Supporting himself by his trade as a house painter, or whatever else offered, he lived in Cumberland County, New Jersey, from 1820 until 1826; in New York city from that year until 1838; and in the city of Newark, New Jersey, from 1838 until May 1851, when he died, at the age of 68.

My mother was a widow at the time of her marriage with my father and was ten years his senior. To my father she bore three children, all boys, of whom I am the second. Her mother was a woman of light complexion; her grandmother, a mulattress; her great-grandmother, the daughter of an Irishman, named Martin, one of the largest slaveholders in Maryland. My mother was of dark complexion, but straight silk like hair; she was a person of large frame, as tall as my father, of quick discernment, ready decision, great firmness, strong will, ardent temperament, and of deep, devoted, religious character. Like my father, she was converted in early life, and was a member of the Methodist denomination (though a lover of all Christian denominations) until her death the first day of September, 1853, at New York.

My eldest brother died before my birth. My youngest brother, Isaiah Harper Ward, was born April 5th, 1822, in Cumberland County, New Jersey; and died at New York, April 16th, 1838. Being the youngest of the family, we all sought to fit him for usefulness, and to shield him from the thousand snares and the ten thousand forms of cruelty and injustice which the unspeakably cruel prejudice of the whites visits upon the head and the heart of every black young man, in New York. To that end, we secured to him the advantages of the Free School, for colored youths, in that city, advantages which, I am happy to say, were neither lost upon him nor unappreciated by him. Upon leaving school he commenced learning the trade of a printer, in the office of Mr. Henry R. Piercy, of New York, a gentleman who, braving the prejudices of his craft and of the community, took the lad upon the same terms as those upon which he took white lads: a fact all the more creditable to Mr. Piercy, as it was in the very teeth of the abominably debased public sentiment of that city and of the whole country. But before Isaiah had finished his trade, he suddenly took a severe cold, which resulted in pneumonia, and in death.

I doubt the legal validity of my brother’s freedom. According to slave law, “the child follows the condition of the mother, during life.” My mother being born of a slave woman, and not being legally freed, those who had a legal claim to her had also a legal claim to her offspring, wherever born, of whatever paternity. Besides, at that time New Jersey had not entirely ceased to be a Slave State. Had my mother been legally freed before his birth, then my brother would have been born free, because born of a free woman. As it was, we were all liable at any time to be captured, enslaved, and re-enslaved, first, because we had been robbed of our liberty; then, because our ancestors had been robbed in like manner; and, thirdly and conclusively, in law, because we were black Americans.

My father had a cousin, in New Jersey, who had escaped from slavery. In the spring of 1826 he was cutting down a tree, which accidentally fell upon him, breaking both thighs. While suffering from this accident his master came and took him back into Maryland. Two of my father’s nephews, who had escaped to New York, were taken back in the most summary manner, in 1828. I never saw a family thrown into such deep distress by the death of any two of its members, as were our family by the re-enslavement of these two young men. Seven-and-twenty years have past, but we have none of us heard a word concerning them, since their consignment to the living death, the temporal hell, of American slavery.
At the time of my parents’ escape it was not always necessary to go to Canada; they therefore did as the few who then escaped mostly did, aim for a Free State, and settle among Quakers. This honored sect, unlike any other in the world, in this respect, was regarded as the slave’s friend. This peculiarity of their religion they not only held, but so practiced that it impressed itself on the ready mind of the poor victim of American tyranny. To reach a Free State, and to live among Quakers, were among the highest ideas of these fugitives; accordingly, obtaining the best directions they could, they set out for Cumberland County, in the State of New Jersey, where they had learned slavery did not exist, Quakers lived in numbers, who would afford the escaped any and every protection consistent with their peculiar tenets, and where a number of blacks lived, who in cases of emergency could and would make common cause with and for each other. Then these attractions of Cumberland were sufficient to determine their course.

They safely arrived at Greenwich, Cumberland County, early in the year 1820. They found, as they had been told, that at Springtown, and Bridgetown, and other places, there were numerous colored people; that the Quakers in that region were truly, practically friendly, “not loving in word and tongue,” but in deed and truth; and that there were no slaveholders in that part of the State, and when slave-catchers came prowling about the Quakers threw all manner of peaceful obstacles in their way, while the Negroes made it a little too hot for their comfort.

We lived several years at Waldron’s Landing, in the neighborhood of the Reeves, Woods, Bacons, and Lippineuts, who were among my father’s very best friends, and whose children were among my school fellows. However, in the spring and summer of 1826, so numerous and alarming were the depredations of kidnapping and slave-catching in the neighborhood, that my parents, after keeping the house armed night after night, determined to remove to a place of greater distance and greater safety. Being accommodated with horses and a wagon by kind friends, they set out with my brother in their arms for New York City, where they arrived on the 3rd day of August, 1826, and lodged the first night with relations, the parents of the Rev. H. H. Garnett. Here we found some 20,000 colored people. The State had just emancipated all its slaves on the fourth day of the preceding month and it was deemed safer to live in such a city than in a more open country place, such as we had just left.

I grew up in the city of New York. I was placed at a public school in Mulberry Street, taught by Mr. C. C. Andrew, and subsequently by Mr. Adams, a Quaker gentleman, from both of whom I received great kindness. Poverty compelled me to work, but inclination led me to study; hence I was enabled, in spite of poverty, to make some progress in necessary learning. Added to poverty, however, in the case of a black lad in that city, is the ever-present, ever-crushing Negro-hate, which hedges up his path, discourages his efforts, damps his ardor, blasts his hopes, and embitters his spirits.

At the age of sixteen I found a friend in George Atkinson Ward, from whom I received encouragement to persevere, in spite of Negro-hate. In 1833 I became a clerk of Thomas L. Jennings, one of the most worthy of the colored race; subsequently my brother and I served David Ruggles, then of New York. In 1833 it pleased God to answer the prayers of my parents in my conversion. My attention being turned to the ministry, I was advised and recommended by the late Rev. G. Hogarth of Brooklyn, to the teachership of a school for colored children, established by the late Peter Remsen of New Town, N.Y. The most distinctive thing I can say of myself, in this my first attempt at the profession of a pedagogue, is that I succeeded the Rev. Dr. Pennington. I afterwards taught for two-and-a-half years in Newark, New Jersey, where I was living in January 1838, when I was married to Miss Reynolds of New York. In October 1838. Samuel Ringgold Ward the younger was born, and I became, “to all intents, constructions, and purposes whatsoever,” a family man, aged twenty-one years and twelve days.

In May, 1839, I was licensed to preach the gospel by the New York Congregational Association, assembled at Poughkeepsie. In November of the same year, I became the traveling agent of first the American and afterwards the New York Anti-slavery Society. In April, 1841, I accepted the unanimous invitation of the Congregational Church of South Butler, Wayne Co., N.Y., to be their pastor; and in September of that year I was publicly ordained and inducted as minister of that Church.