

## Flowers of the Sea: Marine Specimens at the Anti-Slavery Bazaar



There is a gruesome and literal connection between the beauty of the ocean's depths and the violence of the Middle Passage; the ocean is both an ecosystem and a mass grave. When Christina Sharpe in *In the Wake* writes about residence time—the “amount of time it takes for a substance to enter the ocean and then leave the ocean” —she recounts a conversation with Anne Gardulski:

[Because] nutrients cycle through the ocean . . . the atoms of those people who were thrown overboard are out there in the ocean even today. They were eaten, organisms processed them, and those organisms were in turn eaten and processed, and the cycle continues. Around 90 to 95 percent of the tissues of things that are eaten in the water column get recycled.

What do we make, then, of the popularity of marine specimens (which were once part of this cycle) resurfacing in the nineteenth century at anti-slavery fairs? What can we learn about abolition, natural science, and racial ecologies by studying the anti-slavery interests in harvesting, curating, and exchanging

the ocean's plants and organisms?



Figure 1: Red Specimen, Hannah Bassett, *Flowers of the Deep* (Lynn, MA, 1848). Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society.

Advertisements and articles in periodicals show us that marine specimens were highly sought after at American anti-slavery fairs. Issues of the abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator* tell us that the Boston Anti-Slavery Bazaar in Faneuil Hall had a "Botanical series of British Alga, Mosses and lichens in books and mahogany eases" in 1847, "Sets of Mosses, Lichens, Flowering Plants, Depatica, Zoophytes, Algae, Fungi, Ferns and Grapes . . . Sea Mosses exquisitely arranged in baskets and shells" in 1848, and a "collection of British Sea-Weed and shells" in 1850. Seaweed in particular, was a common sight. Reports on the sixth Rochester Anti-Slavery Bazaar in *The North Star* boasted: "Of the contributions of the Manchester box, none attracted more general attention than the beautiful portfolios of dried plants and seaweeds." Note how *curation* is

particularly prized in these descriptions. These plants are not scattered or loose, but set in books, easels, baskets, shells, and portfolios.



Figure 2: Arrangement, Hannah Bassett, *Flowers of the Deep* (Lynn, MA, 1848). Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society.

The interest in ocean specimens continued to grow over the course of the nineteenth century. In another instance, a report of the twenty-third National Anti-Slavery Bazaar in an 1857 issue of *The Liberator* explains:

Natural and scientific curiosities and collections were as abundant as literary ones. There were algae from every coast sent by the ladies of Britain and the prisoners at Belile. Here were ferns from every field, and shells from every sea, scientifically arranged, or poetically described.

From these accounts, it seems that seaweed and algae held the most appeal for

amateur oceanographers. Seaweeding, or algology, was a popular practice throughout the nineteenth century. As the phrase “scientifically arranged, or poetically described” shows us, there was an implied connection between seaweeding and literary practice. The two met most vividly in the seaweed album. The process of making an album was fairly simple, and laid out in many popular instructional guides. One would begin by walking down the coast to find these specimens, and then, once at home, place them in a large basin filled with water, lay the seaweed flat, insert a stiff piece of paper underneath it, and carefully spread the damp seaweed with a large pin. Very soon, one’s blank book would be filled with colorful seaweeds of all kinds, possibly accompanied by scientific labels, transcribed poems, or other details like the date and location of collection. Beginning in Britain, this trend offered mobility, solitude, and scientific curiosity to hobbyists and professionals alike and was particularly enjoyed by women. Seaweed collectors saw the coast and the ocean as an ecosystem that could be appreciated, studied, and even preserved.

Plate XI.



41.—*Striaria attenuata*, *Grev.*



42.—*Punctaria latifolia*, *Grev.*



43.—*Punctaria plantaginica*, *Grev.*



44.—*Asperococcus compressus*, *Griff.*

Figure 3: Margaret Gatty, *British Sea-Weeds*, vol 1. (London: Bell and Daldy, 1872), plate XI. [Google Books](#).

The presence of algae, seaweed, and other treasures of the deep at American anti-slavery fairs speaks to the reach and widespread popularity of this practice. Obviously, the funds that would be raised by capitalizing on this trend were a major motivation for organizers. However, by turning to seaweed as a material curiosity and symbol, anti-slavery activists also transformed this trend in three major ways. First, they used this trend to shift the Atlantic Ocean from a place of violence and separation into a space of witnessing and potential connection. Secondly, these albums established a place for scientific curiosity in abolitionist circles, implicitly critiquing the racist and exclusionary institutions which produced scientific knowledge in the nineteenth century. Finally, the album I will discuss in this article asserted God's promises to the enslaved by displaying the seaweed as an example of godly design.

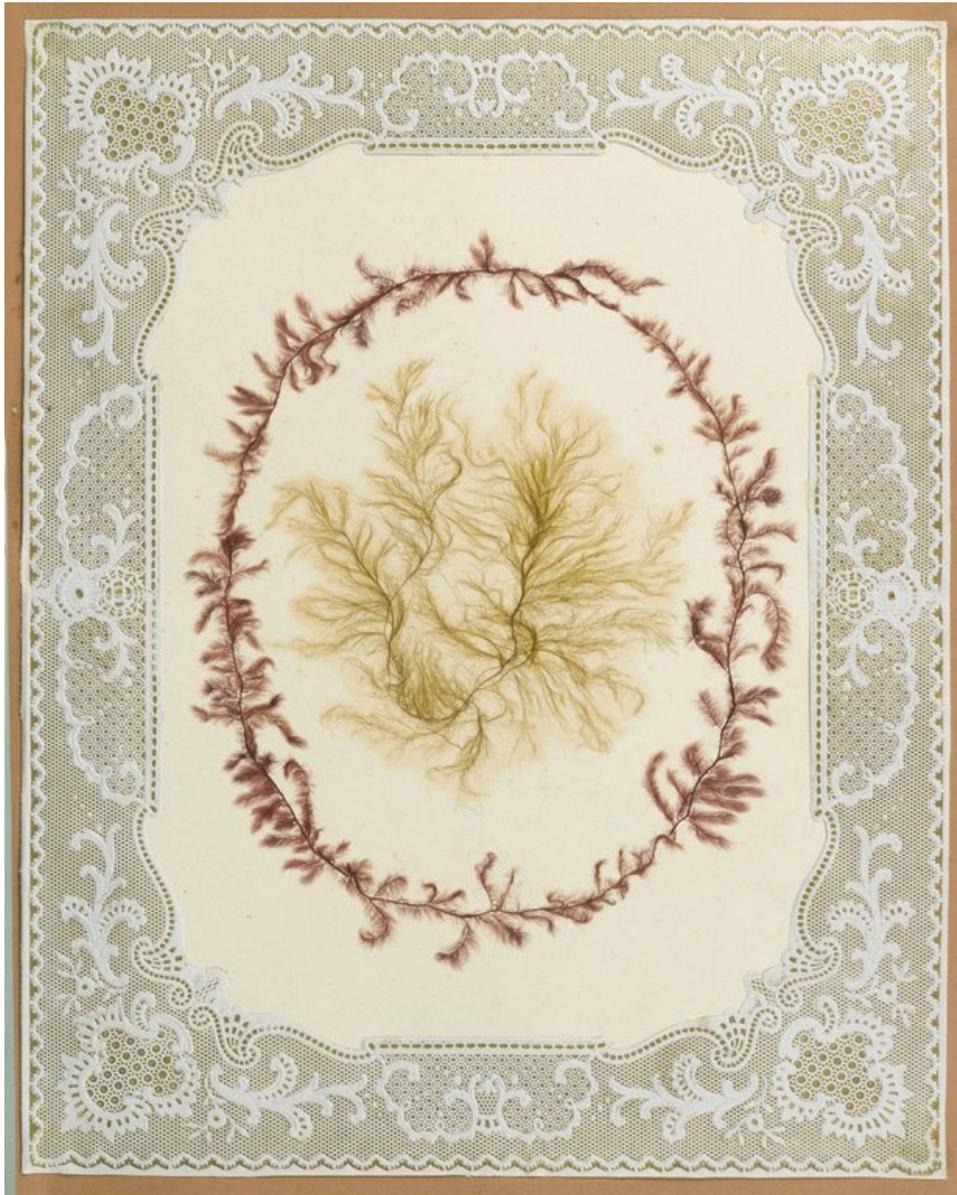


Figure 4: "Algae or seaweed specimen, pasted on colored construction paper, framed by paper lace doilies. The algae have been arranged into designs and scenes," *Sea Weeds 1848*, prepared by Eliza Jordan, Brooklyn, L.I. 1848. Printed material. [Brooklyn Museum](#). Photo courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum.

Consider, for instance, an account of an antislavery fair from *The Liberator* which inserts the entirety of the poem "Sea Weed's Address." Following the opening epigraph "Where the Atlantic rolls, wide continents have bloom'd," the address "to the American public" reads:

Regard us not as strangers! our race rose  
At the creative word that call'd forth thine,  
And with the doomed earth share in part thy woes,  
And like thee for a new creation pine.

It continues:

Hast thou forgot the Lord, that we have heard.  
Oft on our shores the cry of blood and strife,  
And every vagrant breeze our groves that stirred.  
Hath sighed the mournful tale of human life!  
And the winds wail the sorrows they have seen,  
Oppressed, and the oppressor every where;

For the abolitionist, these marine specimens were not separate from the world of suffering or an aesthetic distraction, but rather, through a common origin and shared environment (represented here by the “vagrant breeze” and wind), a witness to slavery’s horror. Unlike scientific practices which regard the seaweed as distinct from the economic, legal, and social conditions of slavery, this poem suggests that oppression reaches even the deepest depths of the ocean. In this cry, “Regard us not as strangers!” the seaweed implicitly announces itself as an abolitionist, also pining for a “new creation.” When looking closer at the presence of marine specimens at American anti-slavery fairs, it becomes clear that these objects were more than items of natural curiosity.

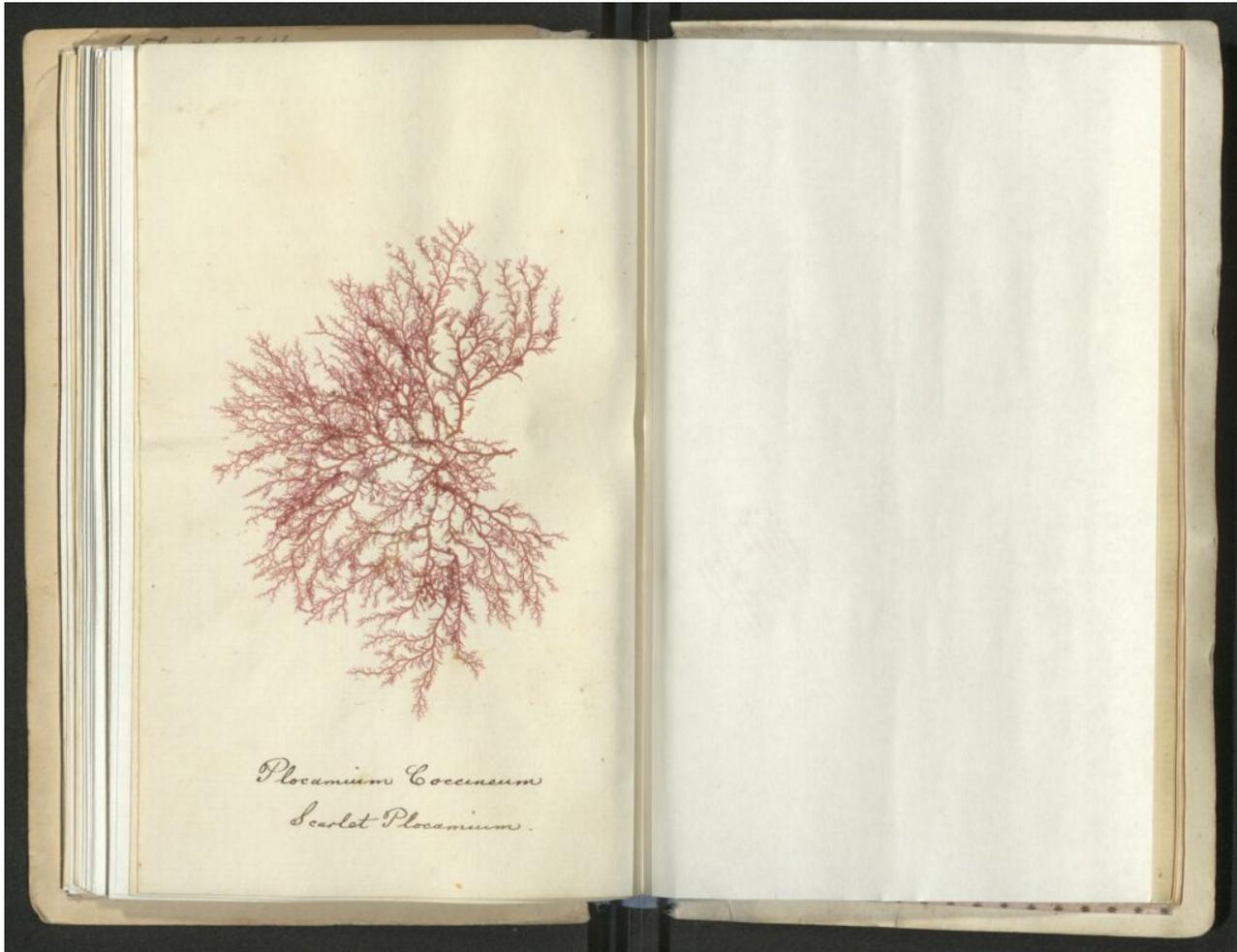


Figure 5: Plocamium Specimen, William G. Allen and Mary King Allen, *Sea-weeds* (1857), Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

The plants and marine specimens washed ashore are entities which have left the cycle Gardulski and Sharpe outline—not through the kind of agricultural cultivation and harvesting we see in the exploitative economy of Southern slavery, but through a different system of chance, discovery, and curation. Thus, a new network, or even ecosystem, of abolitionist exchange and trade rises to the surface. Yet we cannot forget that the seaweed leaves the depths and enters the surface world as a commodity. Remembering Sharpe's note on residence time, this return to market is uncomfortable and highlights a skepticism scholars maintain towards the emancipatory power of this exchange. In fact, it is exactly seaweed collections at the Boston fair (as seen in "Sea Weed's Address") that Teresa Goddu in *Selling Antislavery* describes as a means for "fairgoers to enjoy the rewards of sentimental exchange without becoming too closely identified with suffering"—an example of what she terms "nonslave items" that "allowed white shoppers to buy purer reflections of their liberal subjectivity." While they cannot escape their status as commodity, however, some anti-slavery seaweed albums did more than affirm a burgeoning liberal consumerism.



Figure 6: Specimen with Poem, Hannah Bassett, *Flowers of the Deep* (Lynn, MA, 1848). Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society.

What happens if we deemphasize the white consumer, and focus instead on the act of creating the album? More specifically, how might the hand of a Black seaweed album maker complicate this exchange and allow us to read this curatorial work as literary and scientific exercises in critiquing liberal subjectivity? Few scholars who have worked on nineteenth-century seaweed albums have noted the way this craze reached American anti-slavery societies. The major reason for this, I suspect, is fairly straightforward: very few are still intact or easily accessible. The most complete example of an abolitionist seaweed album I have seen thus far is *Sea-weeds collected on the British coast, presented to the Boston Anti-Slavery Bazaar*, a manuscript held at the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections at Cornell University Library.

*Sea-weeds* is filled with seaweed specimens carefully curated and arranged by William G. Allen and Mary King Allen, an interracial couple who moved to

England in 1853 to escape racist mob violence (their story would go on to inspire Louisa May Alcott's "[M. L.](#)"). In England, William Allen, a Black educator and lecturer, maintained close correspondences with American abolitionists. *Sea-weeds*, then, testifies not only to the Allens' continued participation in anti-slavery societies while in exile and their interest in natural science, but also functions as an affirmation of their "controversial" marital union through the shared byline of "W & M.A."



Figure 7: Professor William G. Allen. [Road to the Civil War](#).

The Allens' assembled book, which was presented to the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, provides a unique glimpse into the intersections of natural science and abolition; a pursuit that may encapsulate the kind of Foucauldian "counter-science" Britt Rusert has termed "fugitive science." With the front page announcing its connection to the Boston Anti-Slavery Bazaar, the book announces itself as a political object, setting it apart from seaweed albums or instructional books which foreground the plants. The generic title, *Sea-weeds collected on the British coast*, is vastly overshadowed by the green stamp of its anti-slavery destination. Even the conventionality of the title has the charge of political sentiment, as the British coast was the couple's place of refuge.

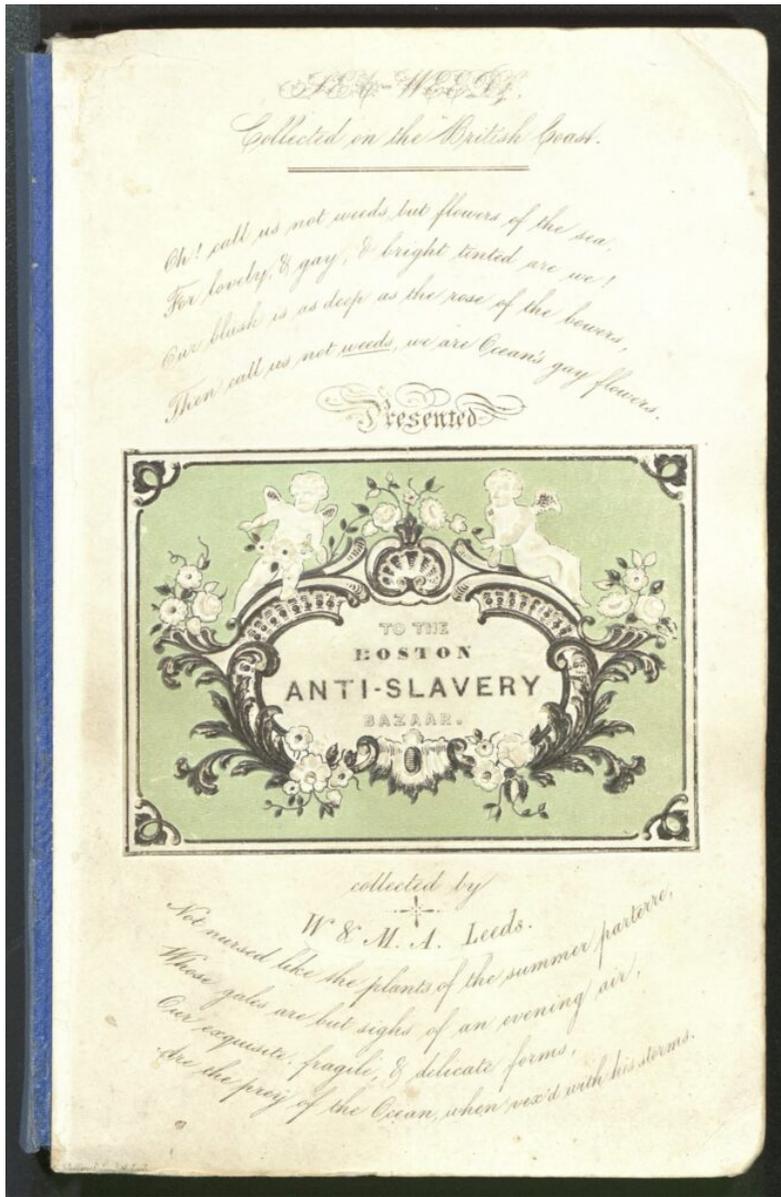


Figure 8: Cover Page, William G. Allen and Mary King Allen, *Sea-weeds* (1857), Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

The front cover of *Sea-weeds* also includes a poem which proclaims “Oh! call us not weeds, but flowers of the sea.” Variations on these verses appear across many seaweed albums, sometimes [attributed](#) to an Elizabeth Aveline. In the opening pages, another poem accompanies a seaweed arrangement set to look like flowers:

Not the spoils of conquered dead,  
Ocean's willing offerings these!  
From her treasure house not riven,  
But of her abundance given.

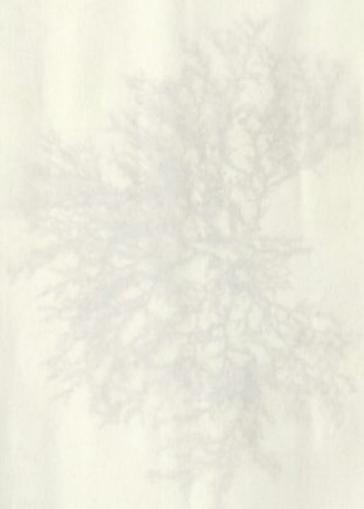
Though these lines are fairly generic, the reminder that these plants were not

“conquered” nor “riven” seem to again champion a less extractive and exploitive form of exchange.



Figure 9: Opening Poem, William G. Allen and Mary King Allen, *Sea-weeds* (1857), Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

American consumers would have already been familiar with albums like the Allens' *Sea-weeds*, which arrived from Leeds in 1853. The audience for this album was likely other scientific enthusiasts who owned relevant equipment of their own, as one description notes that appreciating “most of the specimens in this book, requires the aid of a lens, to discover half its beauties.” The Allens themselves drew from popular seaweed collection guides, as some of the pressed seaweeds include scientific names and a number of longer descriptions or poems. For instance, in the description of Scarlet Plocamium, a common and particularly red type of seaweed, they attribute the description to *Marine Botanist* and Philip Henry Gosse's *The Ocean*.

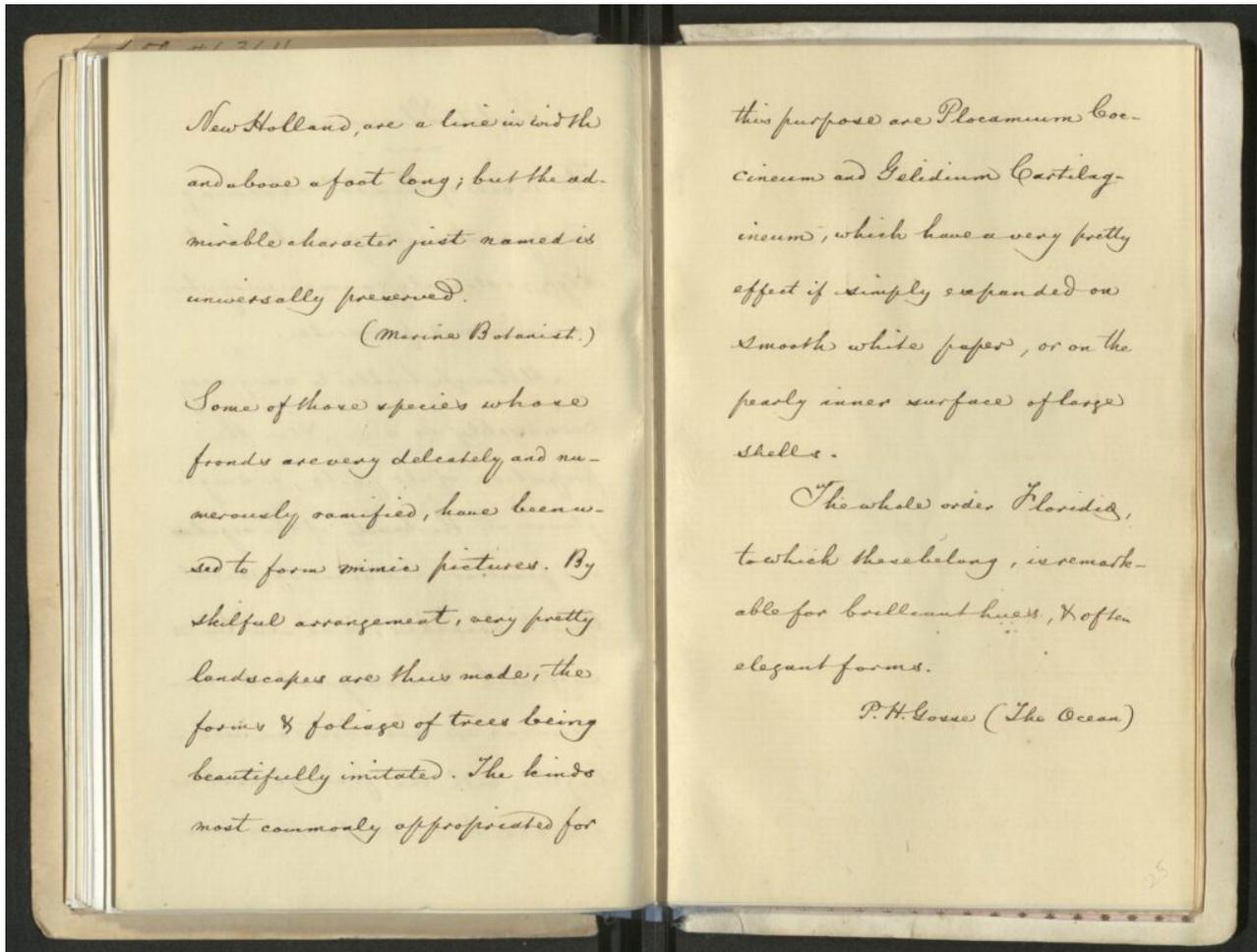


*Plocamium*  
*Scarlet Plocamium*

*Scarlet Plocamium*

This is one of the most charming and symmetrical of our British Algs; extremely common everywhere & a universal favourite.

Although liable to vary very considerably in size, & in the proportion of its parts, a single glance at the beauty of the regular and peculiar divisions of the ultimate branches, is at all times sufficient to distinguish it. Some specimens are not above an inch in length, with the frond almost as fine as a hair; while others from



Figures 10a-b: Scarlet Plocamium, William G. Allen and Mary King Allen, *Sea-weeds* (1857), Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

The inclusion of Gosse, the English naturalist who introduced the first public aquarium to the London public, is worth lingering on here. Not only does this citation reveal the Allens' scientific knowledge, it also ties their work with Gosse's own criticism of slavery. Gosse's letters, first published in the magazine *The Home Friend* in 1855 and later collected in the book *Letters from Alabama*, recount the work he did while tutoring at the Belvoir plantation in Pleasant Hill. He describes the brutality of slavery, ending one letter in September 1838 with the proclamation:

In spite of the beauty and grandeur of the country, the lucrative remuneration which a person of education receives for this talent and time, and the rich and almost virgin field for the pursuit of natural history (no small temptation to me), -I feel slavery alone to be so enormous an evil, that I could not live here: I am already hastening to be gone.

As *Sea-weeds* precedes Gosse publishing his letters, it seems unlikely that the Allens knew about Gosse's experiences in Alabama. Yet this sentiment about the inability to do scientific work (in other words, to extract knowledge from the American natural world while the violence of slavery persists), is one

magnified in William Allen who was, prior to his escape to England, teaching at New-York Central College as the second ever Black college professor in the United States.

guard against this, the ordinary mode of attachment to the rock would be insufficient; and, instead of the primary root, the base of the stem is swollen out into a large hollow bulb, the extended surface of which putting forth powerful rootlets from every



THE SEA-FURBELOWS (*Laminaria bulbosa*).

part enables the plant to defy the violence of the winter storm. It is a fact worthy of our notice and admiration, that nothing of the kind takes place while the plant is young and small; it is only when it acquires size and weight, or, in other words, it is only when additional support becomes needful, that this extraordinary but most effective contrivance is resorted to. The English name of the species is

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Figure 11: Philip Henry Gosse, *The Wonders of The Great Deep; or the Physical, Animal, Geological, and Vegetable Curiosities of the Ocean* (Philadelphia: Quaker City Publishing House, 1874), 49. [Google Books](#).

*Sea-weeds* thus fits into Allen's larger body of work as another testament to the obstacles Black Americans faced when they sought an education (even when they were, as Allen was, free and wealthy). In Allen's *A Short Personal Narrative*, he recalls how his early education was dependent on the political climate of Virginia, the goodwill of others, and the "Free Papers" and permissive documents that he terms a "curious specimen of American literature." His early schooling as a free youth was "destined to be of short duration" following Nat Turner's rebellion, which led Virginia to abolish "every colored

school within their borders.” He gained new schooling through soldiers at Fort Monroe and found access to libraries through slaveholders (he comments himself that this “seems like a paradox”), before attending the famous Oneida Institute. *Sea-weeds* shows us not only the range of Allen’s intellectual work, but also the conditions that could encourage or preclude that work.

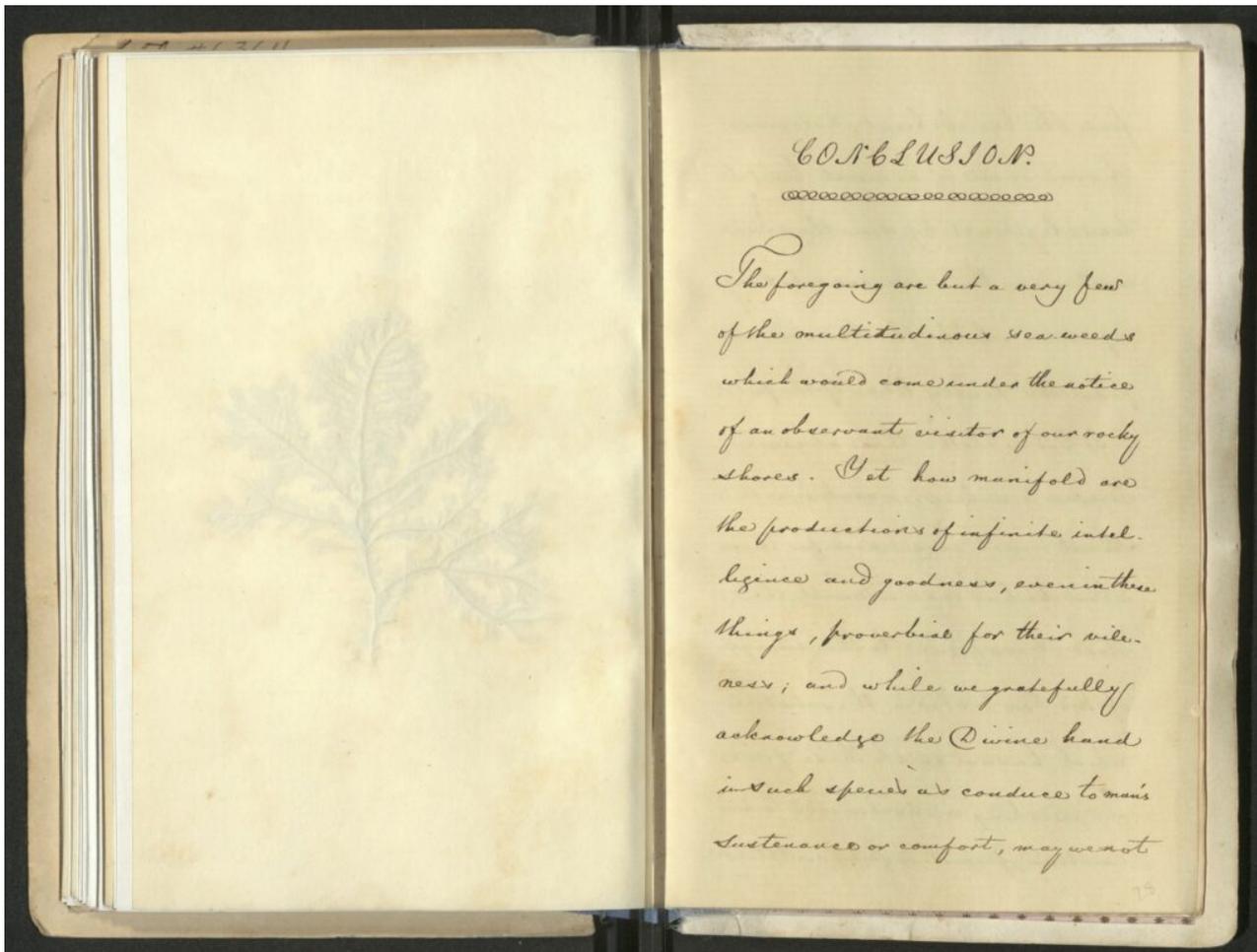


Figure 12: Sea Fir, William G. Allen and Mary King Allen, *Sea-weeds* (1857), Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

Of course, the Allens’ escape to Britain was not simply about research. It was, first and foremost, about the threats of violence they faced following their marriage. *Sea-weeds* demonstrates how fiercely William Allen defended his union with Mary King as a legitimate and pious one. Attributed to “W & M.A.”, *Sea-weeds*’s byline reads as a proud defense of their relationship as man and wife, as collaborators in anti-slavery organization, and partners in scientific research. In Allen’s personal narrative, *The American Prejudice Against Color*, the professor recalls the moment he and King decided to leave the country. He recounts their resolve, stating, “we would obey our heart’s convictions, though all the world should oppose us; that, come what would, we would stand by each other, looking to Heaven to bless us, and not to man, for either smiles or favor.”

Their faithful decision to look "to Heaven to bless us, and not to man" is deeply resonant with the way *Sea-weeds* uses the language of scientific observation to reassure the reader of God's promises. The collection's final entry, titled "Conclusion" connects the beauty and complexity of the seaweed with religious creation. These qualities, the Allens write, ought to be read as affirmations of God's care:

If God so clothe these obscure caverns and submerged rocks, will He not much more care for those whom he has redeemed with the blood and conformed to the image of His Son? . . . If, by searching into the laws by which He governs the Universe, the mind attains a calm and quiet enjoyment, as unmixed with evil as anything earthly can be, how much more conducive to his happiness must that knowledge be which 'aketh wise unto Salvation!'

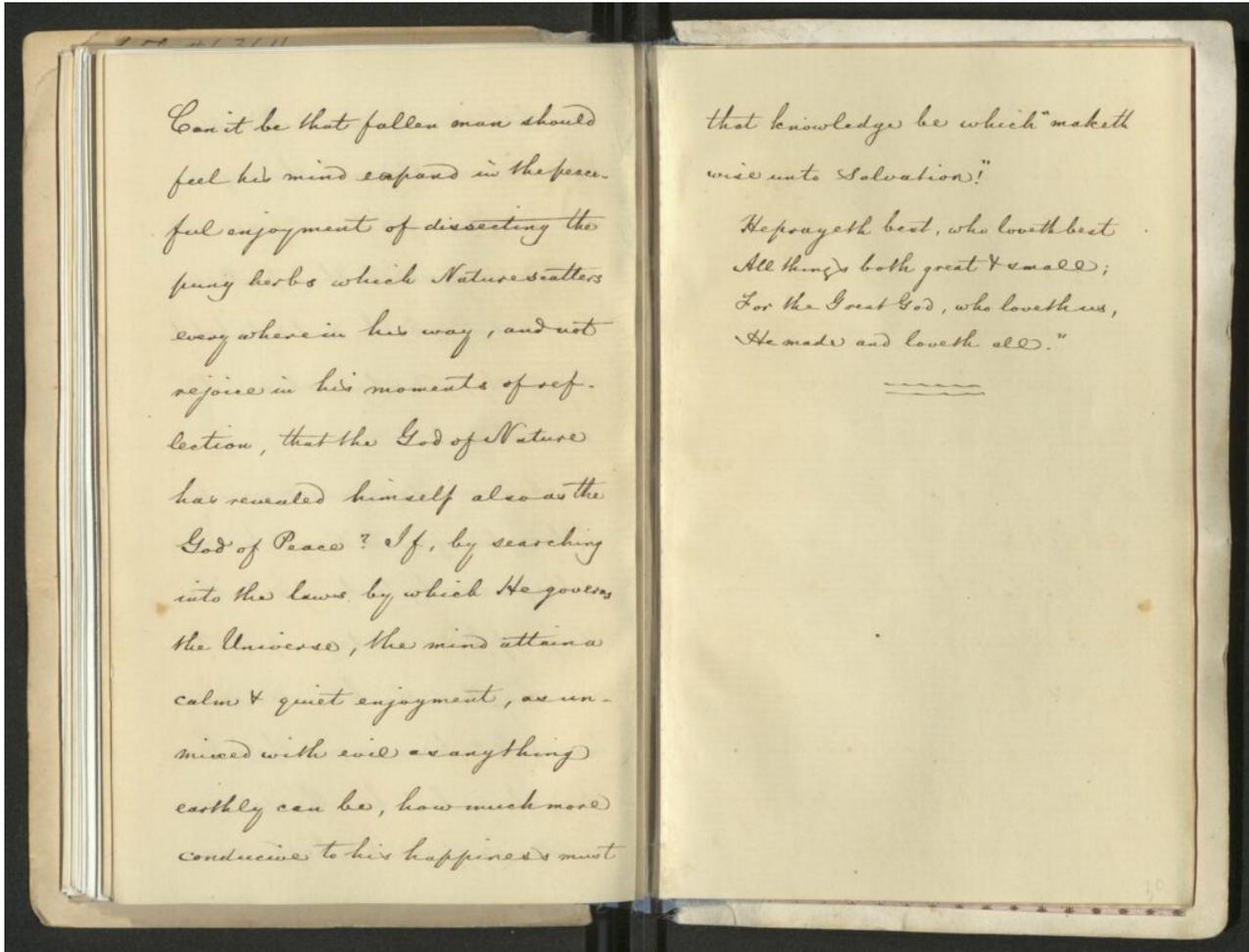


from the lavish beauty & elegance  
of such as are of no direct benefit  
to us, legitimately draw the same  
conclusion, the same consolatory  
inference which the Saviour drew  
from the lovely lilies of the field:

- If God so clothes these obscure  
covered & submerged rocks, will  
He not much more care for those  
whom he has redeemed with the  
blood, & conformed to the image  
of His Son? Nor is the relation  
which he sustains to these frail  
and perishing weeds limited to an  
exercise of creative power. All are

marshalled in order; each is pro-  
vided incessantly with the requi-  
site supplies for its welfare, and  
each is assigned to that particu-  
lar locality which suits its habit  
of growth, and where alone it  
flourishes.

And scarcely indeed must  
he be, who, after adding to his store  
of happiness by looking into the  
things of God's creation, fails to  
discover that the knowledge and  
love of God, his own and their Cre-  
ator, should be to him the source  
and spring of all his happiness.



Figures 13a-c: Conclusion, William G. Allen and Mary King Allen, *Sea-weeds* (1857), Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

Like the seaweed which addresses readers of *The Liberator* above, the specimen in the Allens' album is treated as something akin to the human body (or at least its clothes), and then, as proof of God's word. Thus, we see that seaweed collection at the anti-slavery fair was not simply an extension of a larger scientific trend or craze. Rather, abolitionists like William and Mary King Allen used the seaweed album to reflect on their own state of exile, to critique slavery's relationship to systems of scientific knowledge production, to uplift their marriage, and to find religious promises in the obscure and submerged.

## Further Reading

*A Singularly Marine & Fabulous Produce: The Cultures of Seaweed* (New Bedford: New Bedford Whaling Museum, 2023).

Stephen Hunt, "'Free, Bold, Joyous': The Love of Seaweed in Margaret Gatty and Other Mid-Victorian Writers," *Environment and History* 11:1 (Feb 2005): 5-34.

Molly Duggins, "Pacific Ocean flowers: colonial seaweed albums" in *The Sea and Nineteenth-Century Anglophone Literary Culture*, ed. Steve Mentz and Martha Elena Rojas (New York: Routledge, 2017), 119-34.

Maria Zytaruk, "Preserved in Print: Victorian Books with Mounted Natural History Specimens," *Victorian Studies* 60 (2018): 185-200.

Sasha Archibald, "[Love and Longing in the Seaweed Album](#)," *The Public Domain Review*, March 9, 2022.

William G. Allen, *The American Prejudice Against Color: An Authentic Narrative, Showing How Easily the Nation Got Into an Uproar* (London: W. and F. G. Cash, 1853).

R. J. M. Blackett, William G. Allen: The Forgotten Professor," *Civil War History* 26:1 (1980), 39-52.

Teresa A. Goddu, *Selling Antislavery: Abolition and Mass Media in Antebellum America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020).

Britt Rusert, *Fugitive Science: Empiricism and Freedom in Early African American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2017).

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