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RICHARD PRICE (2005)

RUNAWAY SLAVES IN THE UNITED STATES

On June 27, 1838, Betty—a slave belonging to Micajah Ricks of Nash County, North Carolina—ran away with her two children, Burrell and Gray, aged seven and five. Betty had violated one of her owner’s rules because, a few days before she fled, Ricks had burned the letter *M* on the left side of her face. Humiliated by this, Betty tried to hide the brand by covering her head and face with a piece of cloth and a “fly bonnet.” The branding of Betty’s face was the spark that forced her to strike a personal blow against the institution of slavery in North Carolina. Ricks presumed that Betty and her children would “attempt to pass as free.”

Betty’s flight for some measure of psychological and physical freedom was an act played out by thousands of slaves in North Carolina and throughout the South during slavery. From slavery’s inception until its end, black slaves employed several methods to resist the dehumanization and horrors the institution presented. Slaves committed acts of day-to-day resistance, dozens of revolts occurred, and they ran away from their masters, often placing great distance between themselves and enslavement. Virginia, the first British colony in North America, was plagued with the problem of slave flight. As other American colonies were established, including Maryland, the Carolinas, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and even the New England colonies, wherever slavery existed, there is evidence of slave flight.

Slave owners throughout America were confronted with the problems that runaways presented in their quest to be free. Fugitive slaves lurked about farms and plantations, sometimes robbing owners, stealing food, and generally doing what was necessary to survive in a hostile environment where they were the targets of slave catchers and citizens seeking rewards for capturing runaways. Runaway slaves sometimes committed felonies, including bur-



Poster advertising reward for runaway slaves, St. Louis, 1847. THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

glary, arson, and murder. As troublesome as these actions were, simply put, runaway slaves represented a huge economic loss to their owners. During the 1820s, more than two thousand runaway slaves, valued at more than one million dollars, lived in the Great Dismal Swamp in Virginia and North Carolina.

Because of this enormous loss in revenue and the expenses that owners accrued in attempting to capture runaway slaves, along with the acts of violence and theft committed by runaways, slaveholders and nonslaveholders petitioned legislative bodies across America to enact laws to prevent and control the problem of slave flight. The colony of Virginia enacted runaway slave legislation soon after slavery was legally established in the early 1660s. Virginia passed a law that required that slaves have in their possession a “pass” or “ticket” when they were allowed to

leave the farm or plantation. The pass contained the slave’s name, destination, order of business, and the owner’s signature. Slave owners were held responsible and subject to a fine for slaves who were off the plantation without a pass. The Virginia legislature also established a reward system for citizens who apprehended runaway slaves. In addition to the reward, owners were required to pay a fee based on the distance (in miles) the runaway was apprehended from the owner’s property.

The reward system provided an incentive to would-be apprehenders to be vigilant in the quest to return slaves to the rightful owner. Most subscribers began their runaway notices with the reward amount offered. In 1741, following Virginia’s and South Carolina’s lead, North Carolina established a reward system based on proximity from the owner’s residence. If a slave were captured in the

RUNAWAY SLAVES: RUNAWAY SLAVES IN THE UNITED STATES



Map depicting the locations of revolts and fugitive slave communities in the Americas and the Caribbean, eighteenth century. As more African slaves were brought to the Americas during the 1700s, the number of maroon communities continued to grow. Among the best known in North America were largely inaccessible camps in the Florida everglades and in the bayous of Louisiana. MAP BY XNR PRODUCTIONS. THE GALE GROUP.

owner's county, five dollars plus any expenses accrued to the apprehender were due. A minimum of ten dollars and expenses were due if the slave was brought back from another county, and if the slave ventured into the Great Dismal Swamp, twenty-five dollars in addition to expenses were due.

Runaway slaves were often harbored by whites and free blacks throughout slaveholding America. To confront

this problem, legislative bodies passed laws that imposed fines, jail terms, and public whippings on those who concealed and harbored fugitives. Some owners warned in their notices for runaways that "all persons are forewarned from harboring" or "whoever harbors him will be prosecuted with the utmost rigour" of the law. The extent to which politicians and the citizenry, as a whole, fought to secure runaway legislation is evident in the North Carolina

Revised Slave Code of 1741. Of the dozens of laws passed that year, thirty-seven percent were devoted to some aspect of the runaway problem in North Carolina. Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina enacted “outlawry” legislation. Such laws mandated that owners who wished to have their runaway slave designated an outlaw go before two justices of the peace and draw up a proclamation stating that citizens could kill the outlawed slave without judicial reprisal. If the slave were killed, the owner would be compensated with at least two-thirds the slave’s value. Such legislation proved effective in reducing slave flight.

Runaway slaves proved to be such a problem that southern representatives attending the Constitutional Convention in 1787 fought for federal legislation securing the rights of slave owners. Representative Pierce Butler of South Carolina led the effort to ensure that the new federal government would recognize that flight from a slave to a free state did not guarantee freedom. Thus, Article IV, Section 2, Clause 3 of the Constitution states that: “No Person held to Service or Labour in one State, under the Laws thereof, escaping into another, shall, in Consequence of any Law or Regulation therein, be discharged from such Service or Labour, but shall be delivered up on Claim of the Party to whom such Service or Labour may be due.”

Later, Congress passed the 1793 Fugitive Slave Act, which allowed owners to claim their property in the North. Judges and magistrates were empowered to provide a certificate to the slave’s owner upon proof of ownership. A fine of \$500 was imposed on individuals who harbored or impeded the arrest of runaway slaves. Over the years, the law was highly ineffective and usually not enforced. As a result, slave owners fought to secure stronger legislation year after year, and were finally successful in 1850. The 1850 Fugitive Slave Act was far more stringent, and unlike the 1793 law, it was usually enforced, as evidenced by the thousands of slaves who were returned to the South during the 1850s.

Advertisements placed in hundreds of newspapers across America provide material for the study of runaway slaves. Thousands of slave owners across the South used the press to advertise for their absconded property. Runaway notices appeared in Virginia newspapers very early and continued during the Civil War. More than any other source, these advertisements provide vivid descriptions of who slaves were. The advertisements included the absconded slave’s name, gender, age, height, weight, attire, and possible destination, along with a description of the runaway’s personality, offers of rewards, and other information owners believed would lead to the return of their valuable property.

An analysis of the notices in all of the slaveholding states reveals that, on average, men constituted 78 to 82

percent of the runaway population. Female slaves composed the remaining 18 to 22 percent. Though female slaves desired freedom as well as men, familial ties kept them bound to the farms and plantations to a greater degree than men. Women were encouraged to have children at a young age, and as primary caregivers, running away with children obviously proved more difficult. Deborah White (1985) has shown that owners provided incentives to female slaves to reproduce would-be laborers for their owners. Despite the risks, some female slaves fled with their children, and there are hundreds of instances where they ran while pregnant.

Typical runaways, both male and female, were in their mid- to late twenties. By the time slaves reached their mid-twenties, they had usually been owned by more than one person. Many of these slaves had a spouse and children on each farm or plantation where they had been enslaved. They became familiar with the different parts of the state in which they lived, and in some instances different parts of the South, as many were shipped from other states. African-born slaves often ran away after being in the United States for only a short time. In order to secure their return, slave owners placed signs around the county and advertised in local newspapers, which described the slave’s inability to speak English or fluency in other languages. Owners also sometimes described African-born slaves as having “filed teeth” and ethnic “markings” on the face and arms.

Notices for runaway slaves throughout the South and even the northern states provided rich detail about the slave’s physical makeup. Specifically, advertisements described the slave’s complexion (or whether a slave was a mulatto), along with height, weight, cuts, bruises, oral health, scars that may have resulted from floggings, and other aspects of the slave’s anatomy. Slave owners also described the clothing that slaves wore when they fled and any clothing taken by them. Vivid descriptions about clothing were provided to alert would-be captors that the slave could present himself or herself in a variety of ways. Notices also pointed out that runaways would likely sell any additional clothing. The following advertisement, typical of colonial-era runaway notices, appeared in the *Virginia Gazette* on September 12, 1771.

PRINCE GEORGE, August 27, 1771. RUN away from the Subscriber, on Tuesday the 6th Instant, a NEGRO FELLOW, named FRANK, twenty seven Years of Age, five Feet five or six Inches high, of a yellow Complexion, has a Scar in his right Cheek, and the Sinews in one of his Hams seem to be drawn up in Knots. He has run away several Times, and always passed for a Freeman.

As he may possibly try to get out of the Country, I hereby forewarn all Masters of Vessels from carrying out the said Slave, at their Peril. I imagine he is sculking about Indian Town on Pamunkey among the Indians, as in one of his former Trips he got himself a Wife amongst them. Whoever brings the said Slave to me shall be handsomely rewarded. DAVID SCOTT.

In an effort to place distance between themselves and their masters, one would expect slaves to have fled by horseback. However, flight by horseback or horse and buggy occurred infrequently because it drew attention to runaways; additionally, horses required feeding and rest. Some slaves fled by boat, but boat travel was slow and exposed the runaway. Slaves often found freedom by boarding vessels leaving southern ports bound for the North. Boarding outbound vessels became such a problem that states enacted legislation to prevent ship captains from harboring, employing, or conveying runaways to the North. It was a capital offense in Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina for ship captains to carry slaves to the North. Slave owners warned captains in their notices by writing that: “Masters of vessels and others are cautioned at their peril” not to take runaway slaves out of the state. In 1837 Governor Edward B. Dudley of North Carolina offered a \$1,000 reward for the return of his slave who had been taken to Boston by a “master of vessel.” Dudley pledged \$500 for the slave and \$500 for the capture of the captain who carried his slave to Boston.

Overwhelmingly, slaves resorted to “foot flight.” This mode of escape was safest because it allowed runaways to hide in the woods and swamps free of any encumbrances. Typical of the notices for such runaway slaves is the following advertisement for Quash, who fled from his Wilmington, North Carolina, owner on January 7, 1805.

Ten Dollars Reward. RAN Away from the subscriber on the 7th inst. A Negro man named QUASH; he is about Twenty-five years old, five feet ten or eleven inches high. The above reward will be given to any person who will deliver him to the Subscriber. Masters of vessels are forewarned from employing or carrying him away. Wilmington, Jan. 22. Thomas Robeson

In the United States, as in Jamaica, Brazil, Cuba, and other slave-owning societies, slaves who fled from farms and plantations formed Maroon societies. These runaway communities provided a sanctuary for thousands of slaves. They could be found deep in the woods, in the mountains, and in the swamps throughout the southern part of the United States. Some slaves lived in these communities for

weeks, months, and even years. Slaves used Maroon societies as a launching pad to take livestock, chickens, and vegetables from neighboring farms and plantations. The Great Dismal Swamp—known as the site of the largest Maroon society in North America—was located in southeastern Virginia and northeastern North Carolina. Before its drainage in the 1780s and 1790s, the swamp covered 2,200 square miles, encompassing Norfolk and Nansemond counties in Virginia, and Currituck, Camden, Pasquotank, and Gates counties in North Carolina. The Great Dismal Swamp provided refuge for thousands of runaway slaves for more than two hundred years.

Whites in Virginia and North Carolina were aware of the black presence and how dangerous it was to venture near or into the Great Dismal Swamp. The swamp was nearly impenetrable, and slave catchers in Virginia and North Carolina received substantially higher rewards when they returned runaways from the Great Dismal Swamp. A recollection of a contemporary of the era indicated that if a runaway slave made it to the swamp, “unless he was betrayed, it would be a matter of impossibility to catch him” (Arnold, p. 6). Writing in 1817, Samuel H. Perkins, a Yale College graduate hired to tutor the children of a prominent citizen in Hyde County, North Carolina, wrote that: “Traveling here without pistols is considered very dangerous owing to the great number of runaway Negroes. They conceal themselves in the woods & swamps by day and frequently plunder by night.” Perkins further exclaimed that the Dismal Swamp was “inhabited almost exclusively by run away Negroes, bears, wild cats & wild cattle” (McLean, p. 56). Stories of the Great Dismal Swamp encouraged the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow to pen a poem titled “The Slave in the Dismal Swamp” (1842). Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1851–1852), wrote a novel about the swamp titled *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (1856).

The driving forces behind slave flight were many. Overwhelmingly, the desire to find loved ones from whom slaves had been separated was a primary motive for running away. Husbands and wives were separated from their children and other loved ones through the domestic slave trade that lasted through the Civil War. In their private correspondence and advertisements for fugitives, slave owners revealed where they believed slaves were headed. In many cases, fugitives were destined for other farms and plantations in the state where they lived. Slaves would run away from their new owner back to the area where they had lived and raised families. In some cases, slaves risked their lives to find family members in other states. During the 1820s and 1830s, slave owners moved to the virgin soils of Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, and Texas, often

RUNAWAY SLAVES: RUNAWAY SLAVES IN THE UNITED STATES



Map depicting the locations of revolts and fugitive slave communities in the Americas and the Caribbean, nineteenth century. With the abolition of slavery in Brazil in 1888, the institution of slavery was formally prohibited throughout the western hemisphere. Nevertheless, many maroon communities in isolated, inaccessible areas continued to exist into the twentieth century. MAP BY XNR PRODUCTIONS. THE GALE GROUP.

taking their slaves with them. This flight by whites to the Deep South and Southwest resulted in the breaking up of many slave families. Thousands of slaves reportedly lurked about the farms and plantations of former owners to reunite with family members. This action by slaves is testimony to the desire to maintain an intact family unit, despite the constant strain that the family was under on a daily basis.

Slaves ran when they thought their owner would sell them to another owner, within or out of the state in which they lived. The fear of the unknown undoubtedly served as a catalyst for flight. Other slaves fled after being whipped or in fear of such punishment. And there were always slaves who simply sought total freedom from the environs of slavery. Heading north to a free state or to Canada, many of these slaves would obtain free papers and

write passes for themselves and their loved ones. Slave flight to the North occurred from colonial times through the end of the Civil War. Though flight was an individual and occasionally a group effort, there is some evidence that an organized system of aid to runaways developed in the mid-1700s and continued through the end of slavery.

It was the advent of the Underground Railroad in the 1830s that compelled larger numbers of slaves to flee to freedom. It is estimated that as many as fifty thousand slaves ran away from southern plantations and farms between the late 1820s and 1865. The Underground Railroad was not a formal organization, but a loosely structured series of connections that helped slaves reach freedom in the North. Thousands of Americans, black and white, were involved in the intricate network of stations that dotted the South to North corridors to freedom. Both land and water routes were used by slaves traveling to freedom in the North. Individuals who assisted runaway slaves in the Underground Railroad were known as *agents*. Persons who physically aided slaves from station to station were known as *conductors*. Harriet Tubman, who assisted at least three hundred slaves to freedom was one of the best-known conductors of the Underground Railroad.

In 1827 the *Freedom’s Journal* became the first abolitionist newspaper in the United States. It was founded in New York City by two black journalists, Samuel Cornish and John B. Russwurn. In 1830 free blacks in Philadelphia established the National Negro Convention Movement. William Lloyd Garrison founded *The Liberator* in 1831 and the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1833. Many readers of these publications and members of these organizations were involved in Underground Railroad activity through the end of the Civil War

Whether slaves ran away to find loved ones from whom they had been separated, to escape a flogging, out of fear of being sold, or to find permanent freedom in the North, flight by slaves is a testimony to the human quest to be free from the oppression of enslavement. Slaves usually fled alone, at night, to face wild animals, snakes, and weather so cold that it sometimes caused frostbite. Running away was not a frivolous act, but slaves were able to achieve some measure of physical and psychological freedom by “stealing themselves.”

See also Runaway Slaves in Latin America and the Caribbean; Slave Codes; Slave Narratives; Slave Trade; Slavery

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FREDDIE PARKER (2005)

Run-D.M.C.

Flaunting untied Adidas sneakers, pricey Kangol hats, sweatsuits, and thick-rope gold chains, Run-D.M.C.’s ostentatious image and electric guitar-ridden sound captivated America’s white youth culture in the 1980s. Joseph “Run” Simmons (b. November 14, 1964) and Darryl “DMC” McDaniels (b. May 31, 1964) began rapping together and convinced Jason “Jam Master Jay” Mizell (b.