


What We Can Learn from Runaway Slave Advertisements



RUNAWAY—\$20 REWARD.
The Negro Woman HANNAH, about 45 years of age, absented herself from my dwelling last February, without cause. She is low in stature and inclined to be fat. It is supposed she is harbored in the upper faubourg. Twenty dollars reward will be paid for her apprehension.
W. M. LAMETH.

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Trent House Museum Docent & Researcher
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Runaway slave advertisements are an excellent way to learn about slavery in the 18th century. When an enslaved person ran from their owner, the owner would put an advertisement in the newspaper for the return of that person. They generally list the following: The name of the enslaved person, the location that they ran from, the skills they had, the clothing they wore and took with them, as well as a physical description which often included evidence of brutality against the enslaved person like scars. The runaway ads also used words for the enslaved person that reflected their owner's opinion of them such as well made, and sensible. And they also provide evidence of resistance to enslavement such as stealing or forging a pass.

Names of Enslaved People

The American Weekly Mercury, November 15, 1722.

Runaway from William Yard of Trenton in West-Jersey, the Fifth Day of this Instant November, a Negroe Man named Fransh Manuel, but commonly called Manuel, of a pretty tall stature, and speaks indifferent english. He wears a dark coloured homespun coat, an Ozenbrig Jacket, old Leather breeches, Sheep-russet Stockings, new Shoes and an old Beveret hat. He pretended formerly to be a Freeman and had passes; but he did belong to one John Raymond of Fairfield in New England and I bought him of said Raymond. And the said Negro boy has told since he has run away, That he found a quantity of ore for his master, and that his master had given him Free. Whoever takes up the said Negroe, secures him and brings him to Mr. William Bradford of New York, or to Mr. William Burge of Philadelphia or to his said Master at Trenton, shall have forty shillings reward, beside all reasonable charges, paid by me, William Yard.

In looking at the runaway ads, one notices something; most of the time, African enslaved people were not described with last names. Generally speaking, this is because their names were most likely given to them by their owners and either they were not given last names, or they would use their owner's last name. However there were some exceptions to this. For example, an ad in the American Weekly Mercury from 1722, describes a man named Fransh Manuel.

Skills of Enslaved People

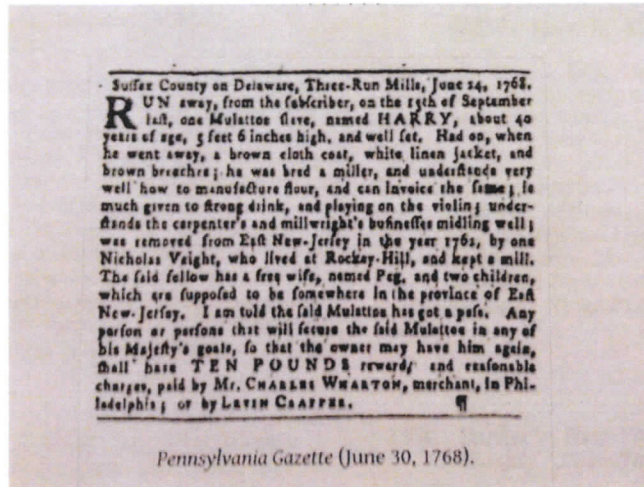
THIRTY DOLLARS Reward

RUN-AWAY from the subscribers, living in Hopewell township, Hunterdon county, and province of New Jersey, on Sunday evening last, the 13th inst. three Negro men, viz. BONTURAH, by trade a shoemaker, 27 years of age, and a well-set fellow: Had on and took with him, a suit of black clothes, a brown silk camblet coat, three linen shirts, good shoes and stockings. The second named JACK, 23 years old, and exceeds the others in stoutness: Had on and took with him a yellowish brown close bodied coat, a vest, the fore parts calf-skin, with the hair on, new buckskin breeches, a new felt hat, good shoes and stockings. The third named FRANK, 19 years old: Had on and took with him, a green sagathy coat, a light coloured cut velvet vest, two striped Holland jackets, a brown coat, a red great coat, a pair of leather breeches, three shirts, the one ruffled, a pair of tow trowsers, a new castor hat, good shoes and stockings. They are all this country born, each near 5 feet 6 inches high, of the blackest kind, and as they can read, it is supposed they have passes, which the subscribers desire to have secured, with them. The one has a wife in Philadelphia. They took with them a fearnought great coat, Whoever takes up and secures said Negroes in any of his Majesty's goals, so that their masters may have them again, shall have the above reward, or TEN DOLLARS for either, and reasonable charges, paid by SAMUEL STOUT, sen. BENJAMIN STOUTjun. and SAMUEL STOUT, jun. or by THOMAS SHIELDS, in Philadelphia.

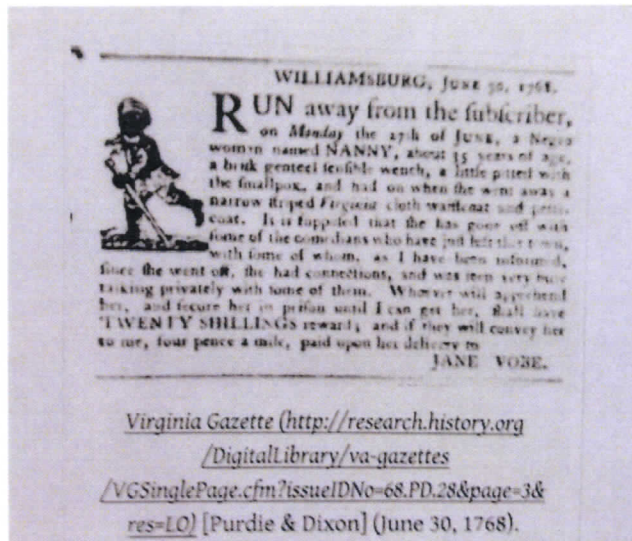
—The Pennsylvania Journal, No. 1593, June 16, 1773.

The enslaved people in the advertisements had just about every type of skill imaginable. There were carpenters, blacksmiths, domestics, wheelwrights, coopers, butchers, chimney sweeps, shoe makers, medical practitioners, farmers, soldiers, ship's crewmen, shipwrights, cooks, privateers, valets, weavers, animal caretakers, bakers, tailors, watch makers, navigators and even a silversmith and a brass founder. Many of the enslaved people in these ads learned to speak English. Other languages learned include Dutch and German. In addition to learning/speaking English a lot of the enslaved people in the ads could read and write. Many of the enslaved people had multiple skills listed. For example, an ad in the Pennsylvania Journal in 1773 describes an enslaved man named Bonturah, who could not only read and write, but was a shoemaker as well.

Another example of enslaved people having multiple skills is a man named Harry, who was a miller, a flour manufacturer, a violin player, a carpenter and a millwright, according to this ad in a 1768 edition of the Pennsylvania Gazette.



Opinion of the Owner/Personality of the Enslaved Person



Looking at the ads, one notices that sometimes words were used to describe the enslaved people that reflected opinions that their owners had about their personality or appearance. For example, many of the runaways were referred to as “well-set,” which means strongly built. Other words used for enslaved people described the personality of the individual. A wench or maid named Nanny was referred to as “brisk (energetic), genteel (having good manners) and sensible” (smart) in the Virginia Gazette in 1768.

Clothing of Enslaved People

Thirty Dollars Reward.

RUN-AWAY from the subscriber, living at Connecticut Farms, near Elizabeth-Town, New Jersey, the 13th of March, a negro man named BRET: He is the same fellow the Salmons have had at Weyoming for three years past; is stout and well made, near 6 feet high, about 33 years old: Had on when he went away, a red great coat half worn, a blue coat and a Kersey jacket of the same colour, with flat white metal buttons, buckskin breeches, and black and white stockings. He can read and write, and 'tis supposed will forge a pass. Whoever takes up and secures the said fellow in either Philadelphia or Easton goal so that his master may get him again, shall have the above reward, and all reasonable charges for bringing him to the subscriber. 'Tis probable he may endeavour to get to the Mississippi; and in case taken there, and sent to New York, the above reward will be paid by Hugh Gaine.... If apprehended, unless well secured, he will endeavour to make his escape, being strong and very artful. Those that harbour said fellow, may depend on being prosecuted by

JECAMIAH SMITH.

The New-York Gazette; and The Weekly Mercury, No. 1124, May 10, 1773.

Many of the ads described the clothing worn and taken by the enslaved person. Many of these ads describe it in some detail. For example, an enslaved man named Bret was described as wearing a red great coat half worn, a blue coat and a kersey jacket of the same color, with flat white metal buttons, buckskin breeches, and black and white stockings.

Evidence of Brutality/Violence

For example, a slave named Sterling is described in the Virginia Gazette in 1768 as having been whipped and his ears cropped.

Sterling, a Negro fellow, about 5 feet 6 or 7 inches high, about 30 years old, and speaks as bad as the former, had on a purple or bluish jacket and breeches (the jacket being too narrow, had a piece of blue cloth put in to widen it at the neck and shoulders.) oznabrig shirt, and took his blanket also. I am told he lived several years in or about Edenton?, where if I mistake not, ***he has been severely whipped, from which he bears intolerable marks, I believe all over his body, his breast especially, I know to be so as I saw it, at the time of his being whipped, he was slightly cropped, which I did not perceive when he told me.*** These two fellows are very strong and well made, went off together, and I suppose will go toward Edenton, at the falls of the James River, as Adam has a wife there, I make no doubt that they are at or about Lyon's Creek, in Surry country, and may lurk there for some time. Whoever takes up the said Negroes and delivers them to Mr. James Dunlop at??? in Nansemond, or to me at Hog Island, In Surry, shall receive 5 pounds reward, if taken in the colony, and if out of there 15 pounds”.

As one looks at the ads, you will notice evidence of the brutal treatment/violence and harsh living conditions that enslaved people were forced to endure. Most of the time this evidence took the form of scars or marks on the body. The enslaved person might be described as having scars from being whipped, their ears cropped and other signs of brutality, like Sterling in the ad here.

Another form of brutality enslaved people faced was branding.
Like Dick, who was described in the Virginia Gazette as being
branded.

**Virginia Gazette (Parks),
Williamsburg, August 11 to August 18, 1738.**

RAN away the 15th of July last, from Crump's Neck, a Plantation belonging to the Hon. William Byrd, Esq; in the County of Hanover, a whitish Mulatto Man slave, called Dick: He is about 24 Years old, and of a middle Size, with the Letter R branded on his right Cheek, and a large Scar on the Calf of his right Leg. Whoever shall take up the said Mulatto, and bring him to the Subscriber at the Falls of James River, be he Free Man or Slave, shall have Three Pistoles Reward, Witness my Hand Nelson Anderson.

Dick had a letter R branded on his right cheek.

Resistance to Enslavement

For example, an enslaved man named Jack, described in the New York Gazette and Weekly Mercury in 1776, "Stole his master's gun and a Grenadier's sword."

Ten Dollars Reward,

RUN-away last Thursday from the Subscriber, at Newark, a certain Negro Fellow named Jack, about 25 years old, a square well-built Fellow, pretty black, Guiney born, and spoke bad English: He took with him several Sorts of Cloths, his Master's Gun, and a Grenadier's Sword, with Brass Mountings: He is supposed to have had on a good Beaver Hat cocked in the Fashion, a light coloured fine Cloth jacket, without Sleeves, and may wear a Blanket Coat, he has a Scar right down his Forehead to his Nose, his country Mark, can handle a File, and understands the Brass Founder's Business. Whoever takes up the said Fellow, and delivers him to Mrs. Wilkins, near Ogden's Furnace, in Newark, shall have the above reward; or in New-York, to

JACOB WILKINS.

The runaway ads make it clear- enslaved people resisted. Multiple forms of resistance to enslavement are documented in runaway ads. First, it can be said that all of the enslaved people in these ads resisted by running away. And many of them resisted in some other way. Some stole items from their owners and many attempted or succeeded in forging a pass. One enslaved person in one of the ads stole a sloop (ship) to get away, one stole a horse, guns were often taken as well as clothing and other items.

Another example is a wench or maid named Sarah, described in the NY Gazette in 1750 as having robbed her master.

Run away on Sunday Night the 3d Instant, from Judah Hays, a Negro Wench, named Sarah, aged about 30 Years; she is a likely Wench of a Mulatto Complexion, was brought up at Amboy in Col. Hamilton's Family, and has had several Masters in the Jerseys: She dresses very well, has a good Parcel of Cloaths, and speaks good English. Whoever takes up the said Wench, and brings her to her said Master, or secures her in any Country Goal, so that he may have her again, shall receive Forty Shillings Reward, and all reasonable Charges. Whoever entertains said Wench, shall be prosecuted with the utmost Rigour of the Law. All Masters of Vessels, Boat men, &c. are forewarned of conveying said Wench away, as they shall answer the same.

JUDAH HAYS.

N. B. Said Wench has robb'd her said Master, in Apparel, &c. upwards of fifty Pounds.—*The N. Y. Gazette Revived in the Weekly Post Troy, Feb. 11, 1751.*

Sarah robbed her owner of apparel (clothing) and other items upwards of fifty pounds.

Many of the enslaved people that ran away forged passes. Here we see Bret again, described in the NY Gazette and Weekly Mercury in 1773 as having forged a pass.

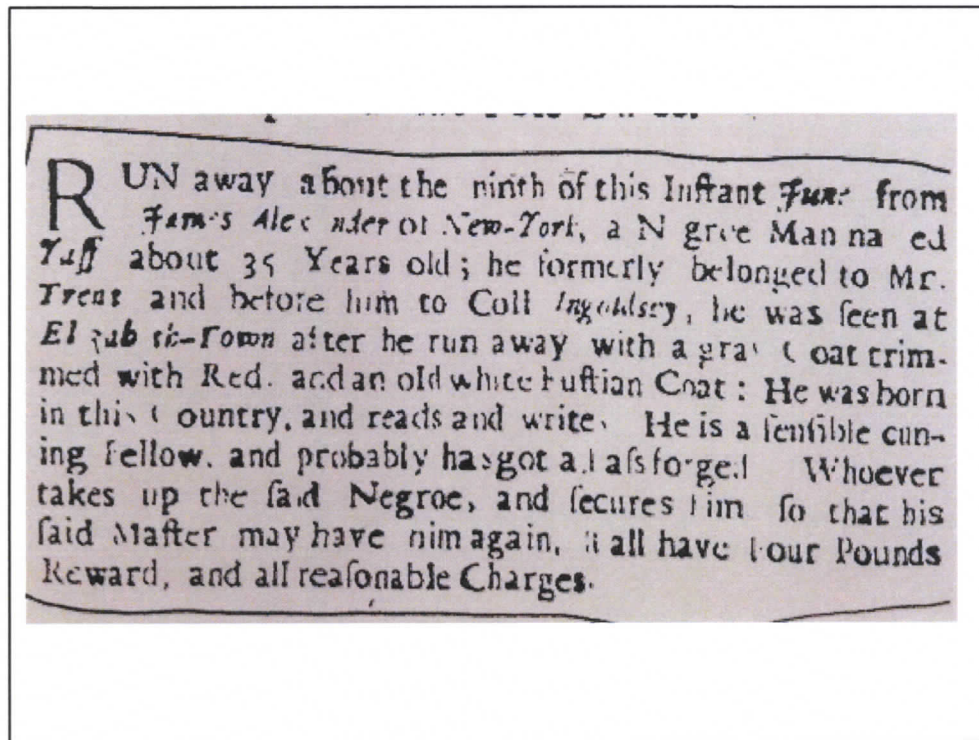
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Runaway slave ads help us understand who the enslaved were as people. They had names, identities, a various array of skills and dreams of being free. Their owners thought of them as well made and cunning among other things. They often took multiple changes of clothing with them, including extra coats, jackets and petticoats. Enslaved people endured brutality and violence that is hard to imagine. The ads paint a picture of this in some detail. And despite the brutality they faced and the harsh conditions they were subjected to, enslaved people resisted their bondage in many ways.



This ad is for Yaff, an enslaved man who was owned by William Trent and listed in the probate inventory conducted after Trent's death. After Trent's death, Yaff was sold to a man named James Alexander and he ran from him. James Alexander then put this ad in the newspaper for his return.

What does this ad tell us about Yaff?

- He was about 35 years old.
- He belonged to a Colonel Ingolsey before Trent.
- He was heading south from New York to Elizabethtown.
- He ran away wearing a grey coat trimmed with red and old white fustian coat.
- He was born in the colonies.
- He can read and write.
- He is a sensible cunning fellow – smart.
- He probably forged a pass.

This ad also tells us that Yaff resisted his enslavement like so many other enslaved people who ran away.

It is unknown whether Yaff was apprehended or remained free.