Runaway Slave Advertisements Historical Analysis

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The purpose of the Runaway Slaves ads article is to study advertisements concerning runaway slaves in the dark days of slavery in America. Historical documentation reveals that slavery was not a walk in the park and many tried to flee the painful experiences. In cases where they disappeared, their masters sought them and often recaptured them. However, those who managed to escape often took their masters' property, albeit in small proportions, to fend for themselves. A study into five ads reveals shocking facts about slavery (Freedom on the Move, n.d.; Windley, 1983; Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, n.d.; Library of Congress, n.d.).

Williamsburg, Friday, September 24, 1736

In the first advert, a shoemaker has run away. His owner seeks him and promises to reward those who provide information leading to his recovery. From the vagabond's description in the advertisement, it is clear that he is young. At only twenty years of age, he is a slave confined to the oppressive life of the plantation. For one to get to this level, especially when one is so young, it must be a challenging experience. Moreover, living at the farm means that he lived at his master's mercy (Franklin & Schweninger, 1999), toiling to make an income from which he hardly benefited. Possibly, the terrible experiences made him run away. Additionally, because of his poverty, he took some items that were not his. The advert says he took a horse and some things, including shoemaking tools. In this case, he used the horse to help him run fast and the tools to start a new trade elsewhere.

Virginia Gazette (Parks), Williamsburg, October 22, 1736

Here, five slaves are missing. Just like in the first advert, they took something belonging to their master, a boat. Seemingly, they used the ship for fast escape and more accessible transport. From the advertisement's description, it is evident the slaves are poor. For instance, Francis O'Conner dresses poorly, and Mary Barnes' gown is bloated. Due to their poverty, they decided to run away perhaps to find better employers or even live as free men and women. Also, the ad describes one of the runaways as lusty. By so doing, the advertiser seeks to taint their images, making them unwelcome and easily shunned by those who may encounter them. From the precise description of

the clothes they wore, one can deduce that the slaves at this time had meagre possessions, an explanation for the advertiser's full knowledge. The different rewards the master is willing to pay indicate that just like material property, human life has value.

Virginia Gazette (Parks), Williamsburg, September 12, 1745

The advert seeks the recapture of a twenty-six-year-old black man herein referred to as a Negro. From the description, although he ran away, the master believes he still lurks around the neighbouring plantations. Also, he is John Mercer's property. Furthermore, the advertiser talks of his willingness to pay for his Negro servants in case they are apprehended. He proudly talks about how owning black people as slaves mirrors the society's inclination toward racism where people of colour are subordinates of the whites. Another point presented here is the tendency of slaves to make away with their master's possessions. In Joe's case, he stole a suit and some clothes. His act of thievery is understandable given the basic human need for clothing. Moreover, slaves in this era were valued highly for their input in the economic activities of American society. No wonder, the master, John Mercer, is willing to pay according to the law to recover his black slave.

Virginia Gazette (Parks), Williamsburg, November 7, 1754

The advertisement begins with an unfair description of the Angolan Negro runaway. From the story, it would appear that the boy is malnourished, as is evident in his thin face and head, thick lips, large mouth, broad, flat feet, and small legs. Apparently, his features are not proportional. Additionally, in this case, the two boys are under the age of majority. They are aged sixteen and yet have to work as slaves. Just like in the previous adverts over the years where the slaves steal their masters' property, this case is not exceptional. The Virginia-born Negro boy took tools, clothes from his masters, and a horse. Evidently, situations warrant these erratic actions as one must find a way to run and survive in an escape.

Virginia Gazette (Parks), Williamsburg, August 1, 1766

The ad seeks recapture of a bow-legged Robin. From the information given, it is crystal clear that the slave suffered before the escape. The master admits that the scars on the slave's back are a result of whipping on the back. Although this article is slightly different from the rest, it serves the purpose of exposing the ills with which slavery came. To slave masters, the slaves were merely pawns in a

system of satisfying and fulfilling their desires. Contravention of rules led to severe punishment such as the whipping in this ad. Additionally, as part of their situation requirements, slaves were forced to train in something to have a technical skill. In this case, Robin was a skilled carpenter. Sadly, slaves suffered at the hands of their masters. For whipping to leave marks on one's body, the beating must have been severe and consequently inhumane. As a result, slave masters broke all manner of human rights enshrined in our constitutional dispensation.

In conclusion, it is evident that slavery was oppressive and abusive of fundamental human rights (Waldstreicher, 1999). While slaves lived in acute poverty and were impoverished, their masters lorded over them and treated them as mere objects whose existence was for the sole purpose of working. Additionally, the whipping of slaves was part of the oppression they endured. Their practice of stealing was their only way of seeking compensation for their toils. Abolition of slavery is arguably the best thing that happened to most of them.

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