Abstract

It has been over the past few decades that historians have begun to recognize the previously underexplored cultural independence and aptitudes of American slave communities, as well as acknowledge the degree of cross-cultural exchange that took place between slaves and their masters in antebellum America. Through a temporal examination of runaway slave advertisements, the changing dynamics of slave runaways from North Carolina are quantified from 1751–1840 to illustrate both the independent and communal expression of slaves attempting to escape their life of bondage, addresses the relationship of gender and intent as it relates to running, assesses the reactions of the master class, and places these topics within the context of the American, French, and Haitian Revolutions.

Résumé

Ce n’est que depuis quelques décennies que les historiens ont commencé à accepter l’importance des aptitudes et de l’indépendance culturelle des communautés d’esclaves aux États-Unis en plus de reconnaître l’étendue des échanges culturels entre les esclaves et les maîtres avant la guerre civile américaine. L’examen des annonces d’esclaves en fuite produites en Caroline du Nord entre 1751 et 1840 ont été quantifiées ici afin d’illustrer les expressions indépendantes et communautaires de ces esclaves qui tentaient de s’échapper tout comme les réactions de la classe dirigeante de l’époque. Cette étude de cas place également les sujets dans le contexte des révolutions américaine, française et haïtienne.
The history of slavery in North Carolina is one of many contrasts. At one point, it was the land of smaller farms, fewer slaves, and slave laws were considerably more lax compared to other southern states; and at another point in its history, it seceded from the Union and declared its allegiance to the newly formed Confederacy and the institution of human bondage on which it thrived. The minor role that the colony first played in the formative years of American slavery can be attributed to its geography: a large string of islands that make up its Outer Banks presented a hazard for slave ships approaching the coast and attempting to unload their cargo. Instead, these ships either landed to its north or south, the only major exception being the port of Wilmington on the Cape Fear River. However, by the early 1800s, North Carolina had moved beyond the limiting definition of a “society with slaves” towards a more pervasive socio-economic structure based on the institution of human bondage—what can more appropriately be called a “slave society.” The invention of the cotton gin in 1793 served as the impetus for the settling of large-scale plantations and the wide extension of slavery in the southern states. Upon Nat Turner’s failed slave rebellion in Virginia in 1831, and more rigorous anti-slavery agitation in the North, the slave laws of North Carolina took a defensive turn. Writing in 1899, historian John Spencer Bassett commented that:

the story of slavery in the State of North Carolina may be considered in two parts, the dividing point of which is the year 1831. Before this year the general conditions of the slave were more humane than after it. Public feeling on the question was then unimpassioned. Some people opposed it; some favored it. It seems to have been discussed in a sane way, as a matter of public policy and without any extraordinary excitement or recrimination. After 1831, or about that year—for no fine and distinct dividing point can
properly be made—the conditions of slavery became more severe. One law after another was passed which bore harshly on the slave, until at last he was bound hand, foot, and brain in the power of his master. Moreover, public feeling became inflamed. Slavery could no longer be discussed as a public policy, and there arose with most people in the State a fervent intolerance of all views advanced against the system.¹

Bassett’s temporal distinction was made over one hundred years ago and can still be used to illustrate a focal point in the legal history of slavery in North Carolina. What is important to note though, is that Bassett’s “story of slavery” is one of white culture—that is, white expression; for if slave laws were formulated and encoded in state law by white men, with the intention to protect and maintain the prosperity of slave owners—which was predominantly white in its demographic—then Bassett’s “story of slavery” in North Carolina is one that relies predominantly on attitudes held by white men towards those individuals in bondage. Although Bassett does not discount the influence of black insurrection (Nat Turner’s unsuccessful slave rebellion in Virginia) as a motivator in the enacting of harsher slave laws in North Carolina, his inability to recognize other more widely employed forms of black expression can be attributed to the time in which he was writing: thirty-six years after the abolition of American slavery—a time when historical discourse on the matter was in its infancy and much emphasis placed on the perception of slave owners and little regard paid to the influence of slave culture in the shaping of American history. What has changed over the hundred-year period since the publication of Bassett’s findings has been the way that historians discern a relationship of cultural exchange between slaves and their masters—a change that has had a resounding impact on the history of slavery in general, and North Carolina in particular.

We find this change shortly after the American Civil Rights Movement, before which the history of American slavery was predominantly written from

the perspective of abolitionists and the master class. Historians of this perspective wrote of slaves in a considerably dependent and docile manner—as individuals who were at the whims and wishes of their owners, with little to no community, education or culture of their own. What became known as Stanley M. Elkins’ “Samboe model” of slavery relied little upon evidence of slave culture such as folktales, songs, and published narratives, which were certainly available to historians as early as the mid-nineteenth century. In fact, North Carolina had a particularly large outpouring of slave narratives from the late 1830s up until the early 1920s.\(^2\) The existence of these documents, however, did not stimulate their exploitation, as historian C. Vann Woodward has explained: “the questions Ulrich B. Phillips had raised about the authenticity and bias of old slave narratives published before and after the Civil War had inhibited their use for a generation.”\(^3\) A handful of slave narratives could not possibly represent the illiterate millions of individuals who were in bondage throughout the two and a half centuries of American slavery. By the 1970s, however, and at least in part to repudiate Elkins’ thesis, more scholars began to utilize these narratives and supplement them with the interviews of more than twenty-two hundred former slaves gathered for the Federal Writers Project in the 1930s.\(^4\) It is in the writings of these historians that we see a shift in the historical community towards a more self-determining perception of slaves with their own forms of culture that evolved independently from their masters—a bottom-up model which historian Peter

\(^2\) For a list of narratives of North Carolinian slaves published throughout the antebellum era, see the narratives of: Moses Roper, James Curry, Lunsford Lane, and Moses Grandy. For those interested in the narratives of slaves published from North Carolina during and after the Civil War, see the narratives of: Harriet Jacobs, John S. Jacobs, Elizabeth Keckley, Thomas Jones, Allen Parker, William H. Robinson, and William H. Singleton.


\(^4\) Although it was at first heralded as a decisive contribution to the historical narrative of American slavery, Elkins’ thesis is now widely rejected. For a critique of the Elkins thesis, see: Ann J. Lane, ed., The Debate over Slavery: Stanley Elkins and His Critics (Urbana, IL, 1971), and John W. Blassingame, The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1972).
Kolchin has termed the “utopian slave community.” This perception was not without its dangers however, as Kolchin warned in 1983:

Historians during the 1970s performed an extremely valuable service in destroying the myth that slaves were depersonalized Samboes and in focusing on slaves as actors who helped shape their own world. In doing so, however, they tended increasingly toward celebration and even mystification of slave life. There consequently appears to be a real danger that in rejecting old myths we are in the process of embracing a new one.\(^5\)

Heeding Kolchin’s advice, it is now more appropriate when approaching the study of American slavery to regard masters and slaves as culturally symbiotic beings. Any study that separates the cultural spheres of the enslaved from the cultural spheres of those that enslaved implies unilateral evolution, which trivializes and simplifies the complicated relationship of cause and effect that was the nature of an institution that involved millions of individuals. With slaves accounting for 26% to 33% of North Carolina’s total population between the years 1790 and 1840, a re-evaluation of the state’s cultural dynamics is required for a more accurate understanding of the state’s history throughout the revolutionary period.\(^6\) Bassett’s argument that 1831 represented a changing point in the history of slavery in North Carolina may still be used in the purely legal sense, but in the cultural sense – that is by giving equal regard to the expression of the state’s enslaved population – it will be revealed that the enacting of harsher laws in the 1830s was at least in part a reaction to the changes in slave expression that masters were witnessing throughout the revolutionary period.

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6. Historical Census Browser from the University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center.
“Change” in this study refers particularly to the variances in the dynamics of expression as quantified through the flight of slaves from North Carolina. Unlike slave rebellion—a far less frequent event in the history of colonial and post-colonial America—fleeing one’s master was the most common method used by slaves wishing to evade the prevailing socio-economic system to which they had been bound by law. Fleeing came with great personal risk, as well as risk to family members and friends. Slaves undoubtedly weighed their chances of success, carefully considered where they would go, how they would get there, what they would do with their freedom, how they would maintain it, and prepared themselves as best as they could. They secured various items to bring with them on the journey, and forged aliases, alibis, and passes in their attempts to elude capture. Most slaves made the trek on foot, and some managed to secure other forms of transportation. Runaways were helped by fellow slaves, and many were helped by free people, both white and black. They were cunning and tenacious in their escape, and it is highly probable that slaves used the tactic of running as one of the best methods with which to fight the institution of slavery and its players. Historian of African-American history Winthrop D. Jordan has commented that “probably more time, more money and energy [was] expended on the problem of runaway slaves by slaveowners, legislators, constables, jailers and newspaper printers than on any other aspect of administering the slave system.” If the problem of runaway slaves precipitated the expenditure of more money, energy and time than any other administrative function of the slave system, a fugitive slave was taking part in an act that was most destructive to the institution and the livelihood of those who wanted to maintain it. It is for its

7. David Brion Davis has suggested that slave rebellion was less frequent in America due to the smaller units of production across large geographical areas as opposed to the larger concentrations of slaves with absentee owners that were common in the West Indies. Closer relationships would develop between masters and slaves on American plantations and prevented the mass solidarity that was needed for large-scale insurrection. For a comparative glance at plantation slave systems, see David Brion Davis, “Slavery,” in The Comparative Approach to American History, ed. Woodward, C. Vann (New York: Basic Books, 1968).

destructive qualities and wide use that the phenomenon of runaways is used to quantify slave expression.

The question is whether or not this expression was political in nature. Because slaves were forbidden from reading, writing, and gathering in large groups, the search for documentation that might attest to their political culture is somewhat of a daunting task. Slave narratives and interviews are often used in such an undertaking as they offer tremendous insight into the mentality of slaves, and can be used to not only illustrate why slaves fled their masters, but also why some, although given an opportunity to flee, chose to stay and work within the system to attain their freedom. Looking solely at those slaves who fled would paint an incomplete picture of slave life and understate the depth of slave expression that is vital to the study of slave culture. In other words, it is not only important to ask why, but why not? One must read these documents in their proper context however, and understand that: (I) most slave narratives were written only after their authors had escaped their life of bondage—that is, there is much room for haziness of memory and reasoning clouded by hindsight; (II) these narratives were written by the victims of slavery, and could suffer from an incessant and understandable need to paint a gruesome picture of their life brought on by a search for justice; and (III) the integrity of information found in the interviews gathered from former slaves for the Federal Writers Project is somewhat questionable: Vann Woodward has pointed out that the slave experience of the majority interviewed was of childhood—“a period before the full rigors and worst aspects of the slave discipline were typically felt and a period more likely than others to be favorably colored in the memory of the aged.”9 Sources of distortion further derive from those individuals who carried out the interviews as Southern whites certainly carried with them attitudes of white supremacy throughout the era of Jim Crow, which could have come across in either a patronizing and or paternalistic tone throughout the interviews. The types of questions and the manner in which they were asked heavily influenced the responses the interviewers received. This, however, is not to say that slave interviews and

narratives are useless; on the contrary, the scholarly world has benefited much from their existence. But it must be understood that this study mainly focuses on the quantitative information of slave expression and, although it does provide some context, should be used to supplement other pieces of qualitative research in order to more fully explore the political convictions of runaway slaves.

Such quantitative information gathered for this study was found in documents that were crafted by slave owners. Advertisements for runaway slaves were often placed in newspapers the same way that notices are posted today for lost pets or personal items. They are meticulously detailed documents in their physical and personal description of slaves, and serve as a reliable source of information that can be used to measure the dynamics of slave expression. Owners had very little reason to lie in these advertisements as the chances of having a runaway returned depended on the accuracy of information provided. One thousand and eighty-eight runaway slave advertisements were used in this study to collect information pertaining to the ages and genders of North Carolinian slaves, when they chose to flee, their degree of collectivity, and the preference of owners to have their slaves returned dead or alive. Tracking the rewards offered by owners was abandoned half way through the study due to the complicated nature of currency inflation, exchange rates, and assessing the value of rewards that were offered in kind. These advertisements were drawn from various newspapers based out of Edenton, Fayetteville, New Bern, and Wilmington found in the resources available. Because of the varying amounts of advertisements found for each time period, the integrity of statistics collected for the four time periods under review need mention and have been listed as follows from most accurate to least accurate and visualized in chart I: 1805–1829 (514 ads.), 10 1830–1840 (263 ads.), 11 1791–1804 (220 ads.), 12 and 1751–

1790 (91 ads.).\textsuperscript{13} A few tallying errors were bound to occur throughout the research, but some comfort can be taken in the fact that errors do not discriminate, and the statistics that have been accumulated are accurate and reflect the demographics of the North Carolinian slave population of the various time periods.\textsuperscript{14} These statistics were used to spot trends and patterns of runaway slaves, as well as the reactions of their masters and how they changed from 1751 to 1840.


\textsuperscript{14} This is on the basis that the advertisements compiled by Lathan A. Windley and Freddie L. Parker were done so impartially and without bias or special selection. The introductions in neither books clarifies how the advertisements were accumulated.
Before addressing the dynamics of slave expression, perhaps it is logical to start with an overview of North Carolina’s population and how it stood in comparison to other slave states in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. The first census figures available indicate that North Carolina had the fifth highest percentage (25.51%) of slaves compared to its overall population in 1790 (see Chart II).15 States with a higher percentage of slaves at the time included South Carolina (43%), Virginia (39.14%), Georgia (35.45%) and Maryland (32.23%). North Carolina’s slave population showed a steady rise until 1830 and then a small dip thereafter. The inclusion of Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi as slave-owning states in the 1820 census dropped North Carolina to the rank of seventh and then to eighth with the inclusion of Florida in 1840. If one looks solely at the population of North Carolina (see Chart III), it is apparent that the non-slave population was always higher than the slave population. But if one looks solely at the rates of growth (see Chart IV), it is noticeable that North Carolina’s slave population was always higher than the non-slave population from 1790 to 1830. Where we see a change in this pattern is from 1830 to 1840 when the non-slave population grew at a rate of 3.09%, whereas the slave population grew at a rate of only 0.09%. This phenomenon would appear negligible as both populations experienced a drastic decline in growth after 1830, but what

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15. The data in Charts II, III, and IV were extracted from the Historical Census Browser from the University of Virginia’s Geospatial and Statistical Data Center.
should be noted is that the growth of the slave population always exceeded that of the non-slave population from 1790 to 1830. The 1830s saw a change in this trend as the growth of North Carolina’s non-slave population superseded the growth of its slave population for the first time. A variety of factors could have contributed to this change: the non-slave population was perhaps reproducing or immigrating into North Carolina more so than in previous decades, while perhaps the natural reproductive rate of the state’s slave population was slowing, or quite possibly a combination of all of these variables. More than likely, however, the British Slave Trade Act and less effective American Act Prohibiting the Importation of Slaves in 1807 were major contributors to this phenomenon: the end of the transatlantic slave trade bolstered the domestic slave trade by increasing the value of slaves already in America. Slave owners in North Carolina were perhaps taking advantage of the higher prices paid for a slave after 1807, resulting in them selling their property out of state in greater numbers than in previous decades. Whatever the reasons may have been, the reality remains that a changing point was reached in the 1830s when the non-slave population began to outgrow the slave population for the first time in the state’s history. Although the statistics suggest that both populations would begin to shrink in the latter half of the nineteenth century, it must be stressed that neither population saw regression from 1751 to 1840, only a decline in the rate at which they grew. This is important to note, as it will lay the framework for an examination of the rates at which slaves fled.
Strata

Colin North

Chart II
Slaves as % of Total Population

Chart III
(Non) Slave Populations of North Carolina
Although it is nearly impossible to say precisely how many slaves attempted to flee North Carolina over the eighty-nine years being reviewed, the average number of slaves mentioned per advertisement studied indicates that slaves fled in increasingly greater numbers from 1751 to 1829 and less so from 1830 to 1840 (see Chart V).\(^{16}\) In regards to their degree of collectivity, it appears that slaves fled more so in groups (of two or more) in the periods preceding 1830 to 1840 (see Chart VI).\(^ {17}\) In both cases, the 1830s witnessed a decline in the rate of which slaves fled, indicative of some force that kept them bound to the plantation. It is not unreasonable to conclude that this was a result of harsher laws enacted in that decade, because even though North Carolina’s slave population experienced a slower rate of growth in the 1830s

\(^{16}\) The data in Chart V were calculated by tracking how many slaves were mentioned in each advertisement according to their respective time period. These totals were then divided by the number of advertisements that were studied in those time periods so to reach an average number of runaways per advertisement.

\(^{17}\) The data displayed in Chart VI were calculated by tracking the total number of slaves per era that were mentioned in advertisements that stated two or more runaways. This number was then divided by the total number of mentioned runaways per time period and multiplied by a hundred to give a percentage of slave group runaways per time period.
than in previous decades, the total slave population, as discussed above, never went into recession, whereas the degree to which slaves fled—whether in groups or as individuals—declined severely. What is also striking is the drastic decline in slave group runaways compared to individual runaways after 1829. The percentage of slave group runaways shows a 23.23% decline, whereas the average number of runaways shows a decline of only 6.82%. This gap illustrates that although slaves ultimately fled in less numbers throughout the 1830s, more slaves decided to flee as individuals than in groups. These statistics perhaps show that slaves considered their chances of survival to be higher if they fled as individuals after harsher laws were enacted in the early 1830s, and continued to flee—albeit in slightly smaller numbers than in previous decades.

**Chart V**

**Average Number of Runaways Per Ad.**

- 1751-1790: 1.08
- 1791-1804: 1.22
- 1805-1829: 1.32
- 1830-1840: 1.23

**Time Period**

- 1751-1790
- 1791-1804
- 1805-1829
- 1830-1840

**Number of Runaways**

- 0
- 0.5
- 1
- 1.5
Of the 1369 slaves that were mentioned in all the advertisements, the number of male runaways (1116) was absolutely higher than female (253), with an average ratio of 4.41 men to every (1) woman. The same holds true when these advertisements are divvied up into their respective time periods as the number of men who ran away was always higher than the number of women: the ratio of male to female runaways was 9.89: 1 from 1751 to 1790, 5.73: 1 from 1791 to 1804, 4.26: 1 from 1805 to 1829, and 3.31: 1 from 1830 to 1840. There was, however, a steady rise in the percentage of female runaways throughout the four time periods, rising 5.69% from 1751 to 1804, 4.13% from 1791 to 1829, and another 4.22% from 1805 to 1840, although the rate at which female slaves fled seemed to be experiencing a small decline over the eighty-nine years (see chart VII). What this illustrates is that even though the percentage of male runaways was always higher than female, females became increasingly active in their expression to become free people as time progressed from 1751 to 1840. Moreover, if harsher laws prevented slaves from fleeing in the numbers that were seen prior to the 1830s, these laws apparently had little affect on gender as it related to running away because the

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18. The numerical values illustrated in Chart VII were calculated by tracking the number of males and females that were mentioned in the total advertisements reviewed for each time period. These values were then divided by the total number of slaves mentioned per time period and multiplied by a hundred to arrive at a comparative percentage of male and female runaways per time period.
number of male and female runaways were progressively reaching equilibrium and showed no signs of regression in the decade that those laws were enacted. It is unfortunate that this study does not examine any advertisements beyond the year 1840 as it could illustrate yet another rise in the percentage of female runaways.\textsuperscript{19} Regardless, the statistics that have been gathered show that the ratio of men to women was increasingly equalizing over time.

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
Time Period & 1751-1790 & 1791-1804 & 1805-1829 & 1830-1840 \\
\hline
Males & 90.82 & 85.13 & 81 & 76.78 \\
Females & 9.18 & 14.87 & 19 & 23.22 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{center}

\textbf{Chart VII}

\textbf{Percentage of Male & Female Runaways Per Era}

19. If one wishes to extrapolate through mathematical triangulation the year at which the ratio of male to female runaways would reach 1:1 if slavery continued unobstructed in North Carolina, the year would be 1967. Although there can be no certainty when it comes to forecasting historical trends, it is a striking coincidence that the equilibrium of male to female runaways is reached at the peak of the African American Civil Rights Movement. The year 1967 was reached by taking the total number of years examined in this study and divided by the number of time periods (\(89/4 = 22.25\)). Given that an additional 26.78\% rise was needed in the statistics of female runaways to meet their male counterparts at a ratio of 1:1 (50\%), this number was divided by the average rise in the percentage of female runaways per time period (26.78/4.68 = 5.72). This number was then multiplied by the average number of years in the four time periods (5.72 \times 22.25 = 127.27). This number was then added to the final year examined in this study (127.27 + 1840 = 1967) to conclude that the ratio of male to female runaways would be 1:1 in the year 1967.
The relationship of age to slave expression is a slightly less linear affair (see chart VIII). Slaves were fleeing at increasingly younger years of age from 1751 to 1804, but reverted back to older ages from 1805 to 1840. The average age of both male and female runaways from 1751 to 1840 is calculated at 27.5 years. However, if the statistics are broken down by sex and time period, it would seem that both males and females were more prone to fleeing in their late twenties throughout the years 1751 to 1790, with the age of men being slightly higher (1.89 years) than women. The years 1791 to 1804 saw a paralleling decline in the ages of both males and females, and then a rise in the ages of both sexes from 1805 to 1840, with the age of both men and women leveling off again in the late twenties from 1805 to 1840. If the ages of both males and females for each era are averaged, it appears that men tended to flee at 28.1 years of age, and women at 26.9 years of age from 1751 to 1840.

At first glance, there seems to be little to no pattern in regards to the time of year that these slaves (both male and female) chose to flee (see chart VIII). This paper does not thoroughly examine the importance of slave age as it relates to the culture of North Carolinian slaves. The data is displayed to illustrate the change in the dynamics of runaways as well as a tool for anyone wishing to explore further this topic.

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20. The values in Chart VIII were reached by adding every age mentioned in an advertisement of its respective time period. This number was then divided by the number of times an age was mentioned to arrive at an average age per time period.

21. This paper does not thoroughly examine the importance of slave age as it relates to the culture of North Carolinian slaves. The data is displayed to illustrate the change in the dynamics of runaways as well as a tool for anyone wishing to explore further this topic.
charts IX.I and IX.II). This is due to a variety of circumstantial factors that encouraged slaves to, or prevented them from, running: weather conditions, the threat of being sold or the sale of a family member or friend, or simply an opportunity that presented itself. As historian Merilyn Kern-Foxworth has explained, there were:

(1) those who ran away in protest to a heavy beating or some loss of privilege, such as a reduction in rations or cancellation of a holiday, (2) those who fled to join separated families or to attain freedom in the North, Canada, or Mexico, and (3) recalcitrants whose desire for freedom would not let them rest until they were freedmen or until they had been maimed into submission or killed.

The complexity of circumstances prompting slaves to flee makes it nearly impossible to discern a relationship of cause and effect relating to the months that slaves chose to run. The statistics compiled support this conclusion as they are drastically and minutely different per month if the time periods under review are put into comparison (see Chart IX.I). But if the data collected from each time period is consolidated and averaged by month, and one looks at factors of flight that are standardized from year to year—such as the expected temperature of different months, passes given to slaves to see friends or family members during times of annual celebrations, as well as the planting and harvesting seasons of the North Carolinian tobacco industry—then it becomes a little clearer when slaves generally decided to flee.

A small rise in the percentage of runaways occurred on average in January, March, April, June, and July from 1751 to 1840 (see Chart IX.II). The higher degree of runaways in these months seems to indicate that slaves fled during warmer weather conditions, New Year celebrations, as well as just prior

22. The values in charts IX.I and IX.II were reached by either tracking the month that an owner mentioned that his slave took flight, or the month of the advertisement’s publication if a date is not mentioned. These values were arrived at by tallying this information according to time period and then converted into a percentage.
to and during the tobacco planting and harvesting seasons. There is an undeniable parallel between the North Carolinian tobacco industry and the highest average percentage of runaway slaves.

Tobacco has historically been North Carolina’s number one cash crop and required extensive labour to cultivate and harvest. The seeds of the plant would be grounded around mid-April and transplanted into the fields in long rows around the first week of May. The harvesting process was long and gradual as the tobacco leaves ripened, which would commence in late July or early August and continue into late fall. The highest percentage of slave runaways recorded for this study was during the month of June (10.68%), just before the beginning of the harvesting season; and the second and third highest percentage of runaways took place in March (10.09%) and April (10.01%), just before the beginning of the planting and transplanting seasons. Because of the strenuous labour involved in the planting, transplanting, and harvesting processes, it would seem that slaves fled so to avoid the pain and exhaustion of working the tobacco fields, resulting in asset and productive losses for slave owners, as well as additional expenses required to retrieve their property. The loss of an owner’s means of production was detrimental to the income of a plantation for the harvesting process required constant attention. Without the means to harvest the plant over a four-month period (July-October), the flight of a slave had the potential to result in extreme financial losses for owners, especially if they decided to flee in large numbers. Because of their immersion in the tobacco industry—that is, slaves were the producers on the plantation and often accompanied their masters to the market—slaves certainly knew the price paid for a bundle of tobacco, as well as economic hardships their flight would have caused to the plantation and its owner. Slaves were an integral component of the plantation system, and it is no surprise that a higher degree of runaways coincided with the tobacco planting and harvesting season than at any other time of the year.

This is not to say that this was the case for every runaway from North Carolina. It must be emphasized that these statistics are averaged, and those

slaves that fled in the months of March, April and June (422.61) constitute less than 31% (30.87%) of the total slaves (1369) mentioned in all the advertisements reviewed. But that one third of all runaways did so just before the planting and harvesting seasons of the tobacco industry raises some serious questions regarding the intentions of these slaves, questions that require a much deeper analysis of slave life. Answers to these questions cannot be had with a study based so heavily in statistics, but some context can be offered to better understand the sociology of America’s “peculiar institution” in order to grasp the impact of a fleeing slave.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year Range</th>
<th>Jan</th>
<th>Feb</th>
<th>Mar</th>
<th>Apr</th>
<th>May</th>
<th>Jun</th>
<th>Jul</th>
<th>Aug</th>
<th>Sep</th>
<th>Oct</th>
<th>Nov</th>
<th>Dec</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>1751-1790</td>
<td>5.81</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>4.65</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>13.95</td>
<td>12.79</td>
<td>6.98</td>
<td>5.81</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>6.98</td>
<td>5.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1830-1840</td>
<td>10.59</td>
<td>6.36</td>
<td>14.83</td>
<td>8.47</td>
<td>9.32</td>
<td>10.59</td>
<td>7.63</td>
<td>4.66</td>
<td>5.08</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>8.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The advertisements analyzed in this study illustrate that owners placed a tremendous amount of faith in other individuals, both free and enslaved, to maintain the institution of slavery and threatened legal recourse to anyone – black or white – who was aiding and abetting runaways. They often described the act of fleeing as a pernicious practice, harbourers as villainous, and associated the concepts of black freedom and equality with evil and disposed people.\textsuperscript{25} Owners often stated that their slaves ran without provocation, and at times rationalized their argument by referring to the absence of physical abuse.\textsuperscript{26} Owners constantly expressed concern for the economic ruin of the plantation that would be caused by a fleeing slave, frequently cited state laws and often offered high rewards for information leading to the arrest of harbourers.\textsuperscript{27} One owner was even willing to offer a reward “to any person who will cause such [a person] to be apprehended with legal process, and give the subscriber, timely information of the fact, so that he may be able to attend

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{chart}
\caption{Average Percentage of Runaways Per Month}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{25} State Gazette of North Carolina [Edenton], 22 December 1796, 4 July 1798, Hall’s Wilmington Gazette, 20 April 1797, 20 April 1797, in Stealing a Little Freedom, 32, 35, 128, 129.
\textsuperscript{26} State Gazette of North Carolina, 2 March 1793, in ibid., 20–21.
\textsuperscript{27} State Gazette of North Carolina, 4 July 1798, in ibid., 35.
the trial.” There is no doubt that owners considered the institution of slavery to be an economic necessity, which is reflected in the frequency of owners that advertised for the safe (alive) return of their absconded property.

The statistics show a steady increase over time in the percentage of owners that advertised for the safe return of their slave, and a steady decline in the percentage of owners that advertised for the return of a slave that was dead or alive (see Chart X). Not a single advertisement was discovered in which the owner strictly advertised for the death of their slave, although a few alluded to the notion that the owner was going to kill the slave upon their return. These advertisements were rare, however; and given that by 1860, over 75% of southern slaves lived on small-holding plantations with anywhere between one to forty-nine other slaves, it seems logical to conclude that the majority of southern slave owners would not be so rash in killing such an expensive piece of property. This assumption of course becomes skewed if a slave had fled multiple times, as the decision to kill a runaway could be rationalized as being more economical than expending time, energy, and money on his or her capture. One advertisement even stands out as an indication that some owners advertised solely out of revenge. These advertisements, as mentioned, were rare however, and few and far between so as not to drastically alter the statistics that have been compiled for this study. It can therefore be concluded that a large majority of slave owners wished for their slaves to be returned alive for their productive and commodity values,

28. *The Edenton Gazette* and *North Carolina General Advertiser* [Edenton], 2 March 1810, in *ibid.*, 349.

29. The values displayed in chart IX were calculated by tracking the preference of owners to have his/her slave returned dead, alive, or neither. These values are tallied according their respective time periods and converted into a percentage.

30. Peter Kolchin has indicated that southern slaves lived on smallholdings by international standards, and has compared the distribution of slaves and serfs in the United States to those in Jamaica and Russia. See Table 1, in Peter Kolchin’s *Reevaluating the Antebellum Slave Community: A Comparative Perspective*, 583.

31. *Fayetteville Advertiser* [Fayetteville, NC], 2 March 1808, in *Stealing a Little Freedom*, 341. This advertisements stands alone as the only advertisement reviewed that did not advertise for the return of a slave, neither dead or alive. The owner offered two dollars to anyone who would find his slave and give him twenty lashings. The owner made clear that the reward would only be given upon satisfactory proof that the lashings were “WELL LAID ON.”
which was probably the result of three factors: [I] the invention of the cotton gin in 1793 served as the impetus for the widespread extension of slavery in the southern states and emphasized the importance of a coerced workforce to the economic prosperity of the South; [II] British abolition of the slave trade in 1807 decreased the supply of slave imports from Africa and emphasized the importance of ‘home-grown’ slaves in America; and [III] the Missouri Compromise of 1820 and the British outlawing of slavery in 1833 may have contributed to the belief amongst slave owners that the institution was under attack and had to be preserved at all costs. Harsher slave laws after 1831 seem to support the conclusion that owners wished to keep their slaves alive and bound to the plantation—they only wished to have them killed as a last resort. That only 6.44% (45 owners) of total advertisements reviewed (1088) called for the return of a slave that was dead or alive illustrates that it was never a popular choice and became even less so as time progressed. These statistics reflect a growing belief amongst North Carolinian slave owners that they needed to guard their assets as their right to own slaves was coming into question.
With the Emancipation Proclamation the American slave system came to a close in 1863, and for approximately a century thereafter, emancipation was discussed in historical circles primarily as a white affair. However, with the newfound focus on slave culture over the last forty years, it has become untenable to view slaves solely as the beneficiaries of abolition and more appropriate to view them as advocates in their own right. The statistics gathered for this study support this conclusion as they clearly illustrate that owners felt a considerable degree of subversion from their slaves: by stealing themselves, they were making clear that they refused to accept their subservient status and sought to change their life of bondage by physically leaving it. Some may point to ideals that came out of the American and French Revolutions as motivators for such an act—that is, slaves ran away to pursue their own interpretations of life, liberty, equality and fraternity—but
this would imply that slaves only began to flee in the 1770s, 1780s and 1790s. These advertisements have clearly illustrated that slaves fled their lives of bondage long before the revolutionary period. The phenomenon of runaways has in fact existed wherever slavery has been present, regardless of society or time period. What should be understood, though, is that these revolutions had the potential to serve as templates of possibilities for codified change, although all three unfolded in very different manners: the American Revolution as one from above, as it was the more affluent merchant and landowning class from which it originated, and the French Revolution as one from below, for it originated from the poorer agricultural and working classes of feudal France. The Haitian Revolution, however, has to be seen in its own right, for it had the possibility to serve as an example of codified change to which American slaves could most relate. “Haiti was a symbol of black power and authority, not of desperate rebellion, and that is why it could inspire or terrify,” historian Robin Blackburn has commented.

The Haitian Revolution was one of the most important events in the Age of Revolution, as it created the first independent black polity in the Western Hemisphere, and in just over a decade, Haitians shattered the armies of the world’s three most powerful empires and shook the confidence of slave owners and those who had a vested interested in the maintenance of the institution in both Europe and the New World. What commenced with petitions for rights as Frenchmen from the island’s rich planter class, ended with the island’s slaves demanding their own rights as Frenchmen, throwing off their shackles and waging bloody warfare when their demands were not met. Although the Haitian Revolution started with agitation from above, it certainly ended as one from below. There can be no doubt that Haitian Independence played a significant role in the shaping of black nationhood in America, and there has certainly been no shortage of debates pertaining to its importance to, and influence on, antebellum slaves and their struggles for freedom. Historian James Sidbury has pointed out that:

An examination of slave revolts that occurred after the Haitian Revolution established an analytical distinction in the historical community between the influences of internal forces (ethnic compositions, sex ratios) and external forces (commodity prices, warfare abroad) of libertarian ideas. In response to this discourse Sidbury commented that:

if ideologies simultaneously influence people’s actions and are influenced by the same people’s experiences, then they are both internal and external. . . . Rather than asking how the Haitian Revolution affected various slave rebels, scholars must follow Julius S. Scott’s example in tracing when and how various enslaved peoples learned of the revolution, and then attempt to uncover the sense that they made of it.34

Historian Ashli White believes that the sense that American slaves made of the Haitian Revolution depended heavily upon their understanding of race, revolution, freedom, and how these concepts related to Frenchness in the 1790s. Even though news of the uprisings in Saint Domingue was not the first time that American slaves encountered a wave of libertarian ideas—they had

34. Ibid., 533.
been exposed to them long before the American Revolution when the issues of taxation without representation rustled feelings of discontent amongst British settlers—there was no doubt amongst these slaves that the ideals of life, liberty and happiness were applied exclusively to free people. It was not until the early 1790s—when France experienced her own revolution and the Constituent Assembly decreed emancipation for enslaved people—that American slaves probably begun to count France as a country that opposed slavery in the Atlantic world. French emancipation probably supported a growing association of Frenchness with freedom that had derived from the American Revolutionary War as the French garrison that was stationed in Virginia nearing the end of hostilities in the mid-1780s provided refuge for fleeing slaves onboard departing ships. Although little documentation exists detailing exactly how many slaves escaped with the French fleet, Sidbury has pointed out that Virginians thought the number was high enough to justify official inquiries.  

It was through French aid in the Revolutionary War that American slaves probably began to count on the French as proponents of the anti-slavery crusade, although Napoleon would later attempt to re-establish the institution in the New World. It was also the source of much sympathy that led the American government to allow French planters and an undocumented number of their slaves to take up asylum in the United States with the opening of hostilities in Saint-Domingue approximately a decade later.

Various American port towns were filled with individuals able and willing to provide first-hand accounts of the uprisings in the former French colony soon after they occurred. Considering that news travelled from the coasts inland, and the overwhelming amount of owners that thought it necessary to mention that their runaway(s) would most likely head to various port towns and waterways, it is possible that some slaves either had contact with these exiled individuals, or at least heard their stories of large-scale slave

35. Ibid., 535.
insurrection as word spread throughout the state. It was through the dispersal of these exiled Saint Dominguans along the coast of the United States, the diffusion of their revolutionary narratives, and strained relations between the American and French governments in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that White believes the concept of Frenchness became inextricably linked to black liberation. She further explains that the term “French negro”:

came to mean something more than simply a slave from the French West Indies. With the advent of the Haitian Revolution, white Americans applied the label almost exclusively to exiled black or colored Saint Dominguans and attributed to them a spirit of rebellion.37

White has further explained that the presence of French negroes in the United States was perceived by white Americans to be threatening as they might not only instigate insurrectionary activity, but “corrupt the “good character” of black Americans;”38 and these fears were not necessarily unfounded. Thousands of black Americans moved to Haiti in the 1820s “as a remedy for the oppression they suffered in the United States;”39 although many chose to return because of various linguistic, religious and social differences between them and the majority of African-born slaves on the island. Although not a single advertisement was found in which an owner specifically mentions that their slave(s) were originally from St. Domingue nor came into contact with an exiled St. Dominguan, one advertisement was found that specifically mentions that the runaway would “take shipping for Hayti.”40

The lack of advertisements that mention the former French colony, however, is not necessarily an indication that the Haitian Revolution played little to no role in inspiring feelings of national awakenings amongst North

37. Ibid., 105.
38. Ibid., 109.
39. Ibid., 120.
40 Carolina Observer [Fayetteville, NC], 7 June 1831, in Stealing a Little Freedom, 587.
Carolinian slaves: another advertisement mentions a runaway that “was born in the Island of Guadaloupe, to which place he has lately threatened to go.” Furthermore, with enough evidence to indicate that North Carolina had a small sized French-speaking slave population in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it is also plausible to assume that some of these native French-speaking slaves felt a degree of affinity towards stories of large-scale rebellion and eventual independence, of the first black republic established in the New World by former slaves under French control.

This study is of course too limited to establish with absolute certainty that the American, French, and Haitian Revolutions affected runaways—both English and French speaking—in such a profound manner. Such an undertaking would require a more thorough analysis of American foreign relations throughout the revolutionary era, what American slaves made of these relations, and how their interpretations of events were manifested in slave culture. It is not improbable, however, that slaves from North Carolina looked to the Haitian Revolution and Haitian Independence with envy, as it was the sole example of black liberation and authority that had the potential to inspire slaves to seek out what had been denied to them after American Independence. With slaves running away in increasingly greater numbers up until the 1830s, and female slaves joining their male counterparts at an exponential rate, it seems likely that some historical force was at work prompting slaves to drop their shackles and head for the door. Though the enacting of harsher laws in the 1830s seems to have decrease the comparative number runaways, it would also seem that not all slaves had lost hope as many decided to flee more so as individuals than in groups. Whether or not these

41 The Edenton Gazette and North Carolina General Advertiser [Edenton], 15 October 1811, in Ibid., 356

42 Some owners referred specifically to their runaways as French negros, as well as having been previously owned by French men; several owners also mentioned that their runaways speak French or Creole French as a native language: North Carolina Gazette [New Bern], 31 July 1778, in Runaway Slave Advertisements, 452; North Carolina Gazette [New Bern], 14 May 1796, in Stealing a Little Freedom, 13–14; State Gazette of North Carolina [Edenton], 8 October 1795, in Ibid., 29; Hall’s Wilmington Gazette, 30 August 1798, in Ibid., 134; Wilmington Gazette, 26 June 1800, 9 April 1801, 28 April 1803, 5 May 1803, 10 June 1806, in Ibid., 141, 144, 151, 154, 165.
Slaves fled out of spite for their masters and or to escape their life of bondage is still to be decided and seems to be quite a trivial matter, as it is obvious that these fugitives were expressing their desire to find a better life for themselves although their expression was always met with a high degree of resistance from their owners. It is therefore likely that the enacting of harsher laws in the 1830s was at least in part a reaction to the subversion that owners were witnessing from their slaves throughout the revolutionary period. Bassett’s temporal distinction that 1831 represented a changing point in the history of North Carolina is a view that is no longer tenable, as it suffers from innate deficiencies of inductive reasoning from the dominant white population of late nineteenth-century America. Through an examination of runaway slave advertisements from 1751 to 1840, the conventional narrative of slaves as a culturally passive people has now more than ever been brought into question as the relationship of cause and effect as it relates to the motives and intentions of runaways has been flushed out for further discussion.
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