

# Runaway Slave Advertisements in Mississippi: Violence and Dominion

by *Matthew Germenis*

Reading newspaper advertisements for runaway slaves in Mississippi reveals the essentially violent relationship between the owners and overseers and the slaves under their dominion. As violence was ubiquitous within the institution of slavery, so was the resistance to it by slaves. Many of these subjugated individuals did not merely resist slavery, they also rebelled against it, returning the violence enacted upon them by their owners and overseers. Runaway advertisements provide insight into the slave trade, both international and domestic, methods of slave resistance and rebellion, and the personal consequences for slaves for their resistance. Above all, these advertisements often reveal solidarity amongst slaves, a more abstract form of resistance, but one that enabled many enslaved people to persist in the hope of freedom, regardless of what price had to be paid.

The interstate slave trade developed into a cornerstone of America's economic infrastructure when the trans-Atlantic slave trade was officially abolished on January 1, 1808. However, it was not until 1820 that the trading of Africans to America was deemed an act of piracy, and therefore punishable by death.<sup>1</sup> Owners and traders had to rely on the preexisting population of slave labor already on American soil, thus increasing the value of an individual slave. The demand grew even higher, especially in Mississippi and other states in the lower South, when all Native American tribes were relocated west of the Mississippi River in the mid 1830s, thus increasing available territory for settlement.<sup>2</sup> A limited supply of slaves, a massive amount of newly acquired land,

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<sup>1</sup> Steven Deyle, *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 20.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

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*MATTHEW GERMENIS* earned bachelor's degrees in history and English at the University of Southern Mississippi, where he is at work on his master's in English.

and the continuation of the rise of cotton as the predominant cash crop in the South all led to the domestic slave trade becoming the nation's largest business—by 1860, all slave property in the United States was worth an estimated \$3 billion.<sup>3</sup>

Mississippi illustrates the growth of the domestic slave trade, in which its slave population increased from fewer than 33,000 in 1820 to almost 437,000 in 1860. The rest of the lower South also reflected this rapid influx of slaves, as more than 875,000 individuals were taken to the region during that time span.<sup>4</sup> To further indicate the profitability of the interstate slave trade, the average price for a prime male field hand in 1860 was \$1,800, a price that directly correlated with a bale of cotton in the years preceding the Civil War.<sup>5</sup> That the wealth of the South and of slave owners and traders depended on such highly valuable human property provides a logical reason why slave absconding was a major threat to business, and why such violent measures were taken to quell this form of resistance.

Resistance to oppression is as old as oppression itself, and running away was only one of the many ways that slaves resisted the dominion of slavery. It was also one of the most common methods of resistance. Other examples included breaking tools in order to delay work, injuring farm animals, and displaying lethargic and obstinate behavior to overseers. This complex relationship between slaves and overseers frequently escalated to altercations. According to Franklin and Schweninger, “verbal and physical confrontations occurred regularly, without regard to time and place. Indeed, despite severe punishments, or perhaps because of them, these challenges to white authority remained as much a part of the peculiar institution as the ubiquitous slave trader.”<sup>6</sup> Running away was not simply absconding from the plantation. Nor was it merely an act of resistance. To run away was an openly rebellious act against the institution of slavery and against white authority, thus making it a political statement. The impetus for fleeing was not simply a desire to achieve freedom in the North. Opportunities to escape sometimes stemmed from domestic issues, such as the death of the master, or the

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>6</sup> John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 6.

unwanted sexual advances made by a member of the plantation household. On rare occasions slaves were assisted by whites to escape, usually for the benefit of the white person, whether it was to enlist the slave as a hired laborer, or a partner in crime, or sometimes to sell them back into slavery.<sup>7</sup> The most prevalent reasons that drove slaves to run away were the ubiquity of violence found in the cruel conditions of life on the plantation and the threat of being sold within the domestic slave trade.

Due to the limited number of firsthand accounts of slaves, such as published slave narratives, any insight into the experience of individual slaves is crucial. Even though slaves did not write runaway advertisements, the published advertisements and notices help to tell their story. Details such as the marks on their bodies, clothing, descriptions of personalities and behavior, and many other aspects, vicariously inform us about the experience of slaves, the slave trade, both international and domestic, and the violence that permeated it all. Franklin and Schweninger write that for “whatever the reason, ironically, fugitive slaves were described by whites with more objectivity than any other group of slaves,” as well as noting that “it would have been difficult to travel any distance or read any newspaper, even in sections far removed from the great plantation regions, without being reminded that there were runaway slaves ‘lurking about.’”<sup>8</sup>

As late as the 1830s, some of these runaways “lurking about” in Mississippi were Africans. Between 1830 and 1839 there were at least seventeen Africans in the various advertisements for runaways.<sup>9</sup> These ads demonstrate the remnants of the trans-Atlantic trade, or perhaps illegal smuggling, and depict the violence endured by slaves. An ad posted on August 21, 1835, about a slave kept in a Canton jail described “a negro man, who calls himself Thomas, an African by birth, and speaks broken, says he belongs to William Wiley, who lives in Sumter County, South Carolina. Said negro is 5 feet 6 inches high, 45 years old, 3 scars

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-32.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>9</sup> For Africans, including variations of “speaks broken like an African,” see the following: *The Natchez*, August 3, 1832; *The Natchez*, October 26, 1832; *The Natchez*, January 11, 1833; *The Vicksburg Register*, September 18, 1834; *The Vicksburg Register*, February 12, 1835; *The Mississippian*, August 21, 1835; *The Vicksburg Register*, August 6, 1835; *The Vicksburg Register*, October 22, 1835; *The Mississippian*, January 12, 1836; *Port Gibson Correspondent*, June 11, 1836; *The Vicksburg Register*, February 22, 1837; *The Vicksburg Register*, August 2, 1837; *The Vicksburg Register*, October 4, 1837; *Piney Woods Planter*, January 19, 1839.

above his left eye.”<sup>10</sup>

Another African runaway in 1830s Mississippi was described in an advertisement published on January 12, 1836: a “negro man named Fulton, he is an African fellow, speaks very broken, a great many of his words cannot be understood ... cannot understand from his language where he lives.” Fulton also had “some scars about his neck.”<sup>11</sup> Much of the attention in this ad is given to Fulton’s non-standard form of English, thus emphasizing how this phrase was a method of demarcating Africans and their immediate descendants.<sup>12</sup>

Violence is implicit in these ads as well—mental, emotional, and physical. For the aforementioned African runaways, their pain is that of the separation from their home and being put in an environment where one cannot be understood. This isolation can do just as much damage to a person as any physical injury. Adding to this separation from home and family is the frequency in which slaves were bought, sold, and transported within the domestic trade.

Then there is Henry (also called Harry), described as “about 18 or 20 years of age, light complexion, of middle stature, slender made, small features ... speaks in the dialect of negroes raised in the lower country of South Carolina, having been brought from Charleston a few years past.”<sup>13</sup> When juxtaposed with the ads featuring Thomas and Fulton, it is likely that Henry was either African or possibly first generation African-American, as he came from coastal South Carolina. He is also noted as speaking in a dialect attributed to slaves from the Low Country, just as Thomas’s speech also was “broken.” A reference to a slave’s broken speech, language being a cultural signifier, was usually a euphemism for saying that they were African, demarcating how slave culture, or the culture of slaves, was different. The presence of Africans in Mississippi this late into the 1830s, especially individuals who were originally

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<sup>10</sup> *The Mississippian*, August 21, 1835.

<sup>11</sup> *The Mississippian*, January 12, 1836.

<sup>12</sup> See for example the following advertisement from 1860 (*Mississippi Free Trader*, October 22, 1860): “Committed To The Jail Of Franklin County, Mississippi, September 26<sup>th</sup>, 1860, a Negro Man, who says his name is JOHN, and that he belongs to Mrs. COCHRAN, who lives near Madisonville, La. The color of said boy is black; he is about 25 or 30 years old, 5 feet 7 inches high, and weighs about 140 lbs. He speaks broken, as though he was part African, says his father is a full African, but that he himself was raised in the United States. He also states that he was sold to his present owner last winter or spring, and that he is a house carpenter by trade. No particular marks noticeable about him.”

<sup>13</sup> *The Mississippian*, August 15, 1834.

from the South Carolina Low Country, shows one regional influence of the domestic slave trade, which brought Africans as well as creoles to antebellum Mississippi. The marks on their bodies are an indication of the price of being a slave, the taxation of flesh, exacted across two slave-trades, one transatlantic and the other interstate.

The runaway advertisements in 1830s Mississippi clearly show the violence of dominion. Despite the efforts of slave owners and overseers to construct a tangible form of dominion, to assert absolute control over an individual's body and free will, slaves managed to rebel against their masters. Whether they succeeded in completely throwing off their shackles, literally and figuratively, one can see the rebellious spirit of runaway slaves in their ability to remain a serious opponent within the power struggle between themselves and their oppressors. The common threat of running away undermined the absolute dominion of white authority. For example, an advertisement posted on August 29, 1834, states: "Was committed to the jail of Rankin county, on the 13th instant, a negro boy who calls his name Willis ... said boy is about 18 years old, 5 feet 5 or 6 inches high, dark complexion ... had on cotton shirt and pantaloons." He also had with him a "red pocket-book with the names Jonathan Grice and J. Proctor, and \$7.62 ½ cents in silver," the implication being that he either stole the pocketbook before running away or ran away because he stole it. The ad continues to say that Willis "escaped from the jail of this county on the 17th," and that the "boy has a large iron on the right leg, and an iron and large chain on the left leg."<sup>14</sup> Willis's decision to take the pocketbook before he fled the plantation shows self-agency in assuring his freedom, as this money could be used to buy food, clothing, temporary shelter, or even transportation. His determination to run away is also demonstrated by the act of breaking out of jail after being caught, regardless of the fact that more large irons were placed on his body. These physical symbols of dominion and the violence of slavery could not stop this individual from running away from the plantation and breaking out of jail, illustrating that Willis did not let any of the means of control of slavery's regime keep him from seeking his freedom.

Another prime example of the violence of dominion comes from an advertisement placed in *The Mississippian* on July 11, 1834, for a runaway: "on the 23d of June last, a negro boy, about 20 or 22 years of age, 5 feet 10 inches high, spare made, has on an iron collar, and

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<sup>14</sup> *The Mississippian*, August 29, 1834.

his right hand has been burnt, two fingers off; calls his name Major.”<sup>15</sup> Similar to the ad featuring Willis, Major also bore a tangible signifier of slavery in the form of an iron collar. It is impossible to imagine that anyone who might have seen Major running away would not think him a slave once they saw the iron around his neck. Slavery’s foundation in violence is seen in this collar, as in Willis’s leg irons, which marked the individual as a slave regardless of all other aspects of his identity. The collar informs all others who gaze upon him that Major is a slave, a highly valuable piece of property, if perhaps a troublesome one. And if they were not work-related accidents, it is almost certain that Major’s burns and missing digits were due to punishment—quite possibly from running away. These physical punishments of a slave’s body, whether through scarring, branding, or amputating, were tangible manifestations of a slave owner or overseer’s desire to make permanent their dominion of a slave. As scars never disappear and fingers never grow back, if these injuries were indeed the result of punishment from his owner or some other master, then Major lived with a constant reminder of his status as a slave, and as a body to endure myriads of different pains and labors to produce a profit for someone else. However, instead of accepting this fate, Major rebelled against his situation. He ran away from the dominion of slavery, from the plantation life, and the violence of bondage. Regardless of his subsequent capture and placement in jail, Major was an agent of social change, a rebel in his own right.

One of the most interesting advertisements is one that appeared in the March 14, 1834, issue of *The Mississippian*:

Was committed to the Jail of Amite county, on the 18th of January last, a negro man, the property of the subscriber, on a charge of assault with the intent to kill my son by throwing him down into a well of 75 feet deep, then throwing down several heavy articles on him. The said negro together with two others, broke the Jail of this county on the night of the 28th of February, and made their escape. Said negro is named Levy, about 22 years old, of a coper [sic] complexion, five feet six or seven inches high, well set, his big toe on one of his feet is off at the first joint; had on when committed Linsy [sic] round-about pantaloons, has a small scar above his left nipple. The public are earnestly requested to apprehend said negro, so that he may meet the punishment he justly deserves.

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<sup>15</sup> *The Mississippian*, July 11, 1834.

Stephen Wilkinson  
Liberty, March 3, 1834.<sup>16</sup>

Levy is an exemplar of a rebel, one who violently fought back against the dominion of slavery, as opposed to merely resisting it. It is unclear if Levy meant to run away. The act of throwing his master's son down a well, which can be viewed as an act of retribution to return the price of slavery, could very well have been Levy's sole intention. However, it is unusual that the attempt to murder his owner's son did not warrant an immediate death penalty, but simply an arrest. In their discussion of slave assault and murder, Franklin and Schweninger write,

slaves understood the potentially grave consequences of assaulting a white person. In the period following the American Revolution, it could mean summary execution, and even later, extreme punishment. What is surprising is the persistence of violence on the plantation. For obvious reasons, such incidents often went unreported – masters did not wish to admit a failure in governing their human property and rumors that a slave was aggressive or belligerent diminished the slave's value. Most of the violence was spontaneous, and most of it was directed against whites – owners, members of the owner's family, overseers.<sup>17</sup>

While Levy's case is a most strange and rare occurrence, it is likely that such incidents were more frequent than available records can tell us. For example, it is known that "every year, in virtually every state in the South, slaves were indicted for killing their owners."<sup>18</sup> These spontaneous acts of hostility, laden with murderous intent, were desperate reactions to the dominion of slavery, and to the domestic slave trade, and so they should be considered as rebellious responses in that existential power struggle between enslaved people and those who held sway over them.

Levy's ad furthers the notion of slavery's dependency on violence, which is indicated by the scar on his chest and his missing toe. It also reveals that Levy was most likely a field hand, frequently working without a shirt or shoes, as the owner knew of these detailed physical injuries. That Levy attempted to murder his owner's son by throwing him down a seventy-five-foot well, followed by dropping heavy objects

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<sup>16</sup> *The Mississippian*, March 14, 1834.

<sup>17</sup> Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 77.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

to ensure the boy's demise, illustrates the dialectic of violence between slaves and their oppressors, as the boy in this scenario no doubt stood in for his father, Levy's master. Slaves often became violent due to "an argument over work, punishment, or treatment of loved ones ... But there were instances of long-held resentment that led some slaves to plan the murder of their owners, overseers ... or members of their owner's family,"<sup>19</sup> as is the case with Levy, suggesting that the act against his master's son was an act of vengeance.

Solidarity amongst slaves was a resource used in resisting by running away. When Levy broke out of jail as he waited for his punishment he did so with two other slaves. The frequency with which slaves were bought and sold, and shipped throughout the country, often split apart families, and this fear of being separated was a major contributor to running away and the undermining of the system. More difficult than running away alone, to escape with a husband or wife, or even an entire family, usually consisting of children and grandparents, dramatically increased the chance of being caught and returned to slavery. Husbands and wives escaping together were more likely to be seen by someone as opposed to a slave fleeing alone, and an entire family running away was almost guaranteed to be caught.<sup>20</sup> However, this threat of being captured and sold back did not prevent families from rebelling against slavery. Searching for a loved one or fleeing with one's family to avoid separation provided even more impetus to run away.

An ad published in *The Mississippian* on August 21, 1835, reveals one such family resisting the dominion of slavery and its inherent threat of violence:

A black man, his wife, and three children, says his name is Benj. Matthews, He is 5 feet 8 inches high, forty years old, his left thumb has been bitten off. His wife Clarissa, is of a yellow complexion, 5 feet 3 inches high, 30 years old. His first child is Mary Jane, yellow complected, about 15 years old, very likely; his second, July Ann, dark complected, about 9 years old; his third, Louisa, dark complected, 6 years old.<sup>21</sup>

Benjamin, a middle-aged man with a thumb bitten off, his younger wife, whom judging by her light complexion could be a mulatto, and

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>21</sup> *The Mississippian*, August 21, 1835.

their three young daughters, ran away together despite the likelihood of being captured, considering the size of their family and the unfavorable odds of escaping to freedom. This family represents a tremendous level of persistence and determination to escape, and the agency to rebel against white authority. Franklin and Schweninger write,

Collecting food, clothing, and other necessities before leaving, coordinating the time and place for getaway, and traveling in groups without being detected were only a few of the obstacles entire families faced ... Parents had to assist youngsters, remain calm, and convey a mood of confidence. It was necessary to remain positive and encouraging despite the constant dangers. Nevertheless, families did leave together, and while they rarely made it to freedom, some were able to find refuge for extended periods.<sup>22</sup>

Amidst the ubiquitous violence of slavery in Mississippi as elsewhere, and the real physical risks of resistance, these examples of rebellion reveal an undying spirit, something of a collective solidarity. Whether enslaved individuals were the victims of all forms of violence and punishment, or the ones returning it to their masters, they remained active agents in the quest for freedom, for personal autonomy, for escape from a violent dominion based on profits made from human property. Within runaway slave advertisements we are able to see the lengths to which slaves went to resist their bondage, the injuries that they endured, and myriads of ways they undermined their owners' authority, which, despite all of the energy spent to be absolute in their dominion over slaves, was met with tenacious opposition in a dynamic and never-ending struggle for power and freedom.

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<sup>22</sup> Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 66.

