

PRETENDS TO BE FREE:
IMAGINING RUNAWAY SLAVES
 AN INTRODUCTORY ESSAY FOR STUDENTS

Runs falls rises stumbles on from darkness into darkness
 and the darkness thicketed with shapes of terror
 and the hunters pursuing and the hounds pursuing
 and the night cold and the night long and the river
 to cross and the jack-muh-lanterns beckoning beckoning
 and blackness ahead and when shall I reach that somewhere
 morning and keep on going and never turn back and keep on
 going

Runagate
 Runagate
 Runagate

IF YOU WERE AN ENSLAVED INDIVIDUAL IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY NEW YORK OR NEW JERSEY, CHOOSING TO RUN AWAY WAS A VERY DIFFICULT DECISION. THE OPENING LINES FROM ROBERT HAYDEN'S POEM *RUNAGATE RUNAGATE* CAPTURE BOTH THE CONFUSION AND DETERMINATION PRESENT WHEN ENSLAVED INDIVIDUALS CHOSE TO RUN AWAY AND FREE THEMSELVES FROM THE BONDS OF SLAVERY. "PRETENDS TO BE FREE: IMAGINING RUNAWAY SLAVES" IS AN ART COMPETITION BASED ON THE RESEARCH AND INTERPRETATION CARRIED OUT BY PHILIPSBURG MANOR, AN OUTDOOR HISTORY MUSEUM LOCATED IN SLEEPY HOLLOW, NEW YORK. ONE OF SEVERAL HISTORIC SITES OWNED BY HISTORIC HUDSON VALLEY, PHILIPSBURG MANOR FOCUSES ON THE STORY OF ENSLAVEMENT IN THE COLONIAL NORTH AND ITS EFFECTS ON THE COMMERCIAL AND CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT OF NEW YORK.

STUDENTS VISITING PHILIPSBURG MANOR OFTEN EXPRESS ANGER AT THE SYSTEM OF ENSLAVEMENT AND SUGGEST THAT THEY WOULD HAVE RESISTED SLAVERY THROUGH ACTS OF SABOTAGE, REBELLION, PHYSICAL VIOLENCE AGAINST SLAVE OWNERS, AND BY RUNNING AWAY. NOT SURPRISINGLY, MANY ENSLAVED INDIVIDUALS DID EXACTLY

WHAT STUDENTS SUGGEST THEY WOULD DO IF CONFRONTED BY SUCH A SYSTEM. ALTHOUGH EVERY TYPE AND INDIVIDUAL ACT OF RESISTANCE HAS ITS OWN STORY, THERE IS MUCH TO BE LEARNED FROM THE ACT OF RUNNING AWAY. "PRETENDS TO BE FREE" IS DESIGNED FOR STUDENTS TO:

- CREATIVELY AND RESPONSIBLY CONCEPTUALIZE THE INFORMATION PUBLISHED IN NEW YORK AND NEW JERSEY NEWSPAPERS DURING THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY
- UNDERSTAND THAT SLAVERY IN THE COLONIAL NORTH WAS A COMPLEX AND SIGNIFICANT PART OF AMERICAN HISTORY THAT MUST BE APPROACHED WITH SENSITIVITY
- RECOGNIZE THE USES AND MISUSES OF PRIMARY DOCUMENTS AS A WINDOW INTO THE PAST
- GAIN INSIGHT INTO AND RESPECT FOR THE INDIVIDUALS WHO CHOSE SELF-EMANCIPATION
- LEARN THAT HISTORY IS EVER-CHANGING AND ALWAYS RELEVANT TO CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

CONTRARY TO POPULAR BELIEF, SLAVERY IN AMERICA WAS NOT LIMITED TO THE SOUTHERN STATES. AT THE TIME OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION, SLAVES WERE PRESENT IN ALL THIRTEEN COLONIES. IN FACT, BY 1776, ONE OF EVERY FIVE RESIDENTS OF THE COLONIES WAS ENSLAVED. THE LARGEST SLAVEHOLDING COLONY IN THE NORTH WAS NEW YORK. BY THE MIDDLE OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY, OF THE 11,000 OR SO RESIDENTS OF NEW YORK CITY, ABOUT 2200 WERE ENSLAVED. MOST SLAVE OWNERS IN NEW YORK OWNED BETWEEN ONE AND THREE INDIVIDUALS. HOWEVER, PROVISIONING PLANTATIONS ALONG THE HUDSON RIVER SUCH AS PHILIPSBURG MANOR AND VAN CORTLANDT MANOR EACH OWNED DOZENS OF ENSLAVED INDIVIDUALS.

THE LIFE AND LABOR OF CAPTIVE AFRICANS IN COLONIAL NEW YORK IS WELL-DOCUMENTED. SURVIVING RECORDS OF THE COLONY NOTE THE DEVELOPMENT OF NEW YORK'S "SLAVE CODES" AND DETAIL THE HARSH PUNISHMENTS GIVEN TO ENSLAVED INDIVIDUALS FOR ARSON, ROBBERY, CONSPIRACY AND INSURRECTION. SHIPPING RECORDS ATTEST TO THE SIZE AND SCOPE OF THE TRANSATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE CARRIED OUT BY NEW YORK MERCHANTS. PERSONAL WILLS AND PROBATE INVENTORIES NOTE THE NAMES, OCCUPATIONS AND AGES OF

NUMEROUS ENSLAVED MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN. RECENT AND ONGOING ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS IN MANHATTAN, BROOKLYN AND EASTERN LONG ISLAND PROVIDE PHYSICAL EVIDENCE OF SLAVERY'S BRUTALITY WHILE ALSO CONFIRMING THE SOURCE CULTURES OF CAPTIVE AFRICANS IN AMERICA. MANY LOCAL NEWSPAPERS PRINTED ADVERTISEMENTS FOR RUNAWAYS OFTEN DESCRIBING IN DETAIL THE CLOTHING, SKILLS, EDUCATION, PHYSICAL TRAITS AND EVEN PERCEIVED BEHAVIOR OF THOSE WHO RAN OFF.

IN NEW YORK, THE HUNDREDS OF RUNAWAY ADVERTISEMENTS THAT HAVE BEEN COLLECTED PROVIDE US WITH A WEALTH OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT ENSLAVED INDIVIDUALS AND THEIR COMMUNITY. THE ADS SHOW EVIDENCE OF ONGOING, ACTIVE RESISTANCE BY INDIVIDUALS AGAINST THE INSTITUTION OF SLAVERY AND ALLOW US A GLIMPSE INTO THE APPEARANCE, SKILLS, PERSONALITIES AND MOTIVES OF THOSE WHO CHOSE TO RUN. IN THEIR INTRODUCTION TO *"PRETENDS TO BE FREE:" RUNAWAY SLAVE ADVERTISEMENTS FROM COLONIAL AND REVOLUTIONARY NEW YORK AND NEW JERSEY* (NEW YORK: GARLAND PUBLISHING, 1994), AUTHORS GRAHAM RUSSELL HODGES AND ALAN EDWARD BROWN STATE THAT "ADVERTISEMENTS CULLED FROM THE NEWSPAPERS OF COLONIAL AND REVOLUTIONARY NEW YORK AND NEW JERSEY OFFER RICH EVIDENCE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN RESISTANCE TO SERVITUDE."

AFTER RESEARCHING THESE RUNAWAY ADS, HODGES AND BROWN FOUND THAT MANY ENSLAVED INDIVIDUALS RAN AWAY DURING THE BUSIEST TIMES OF THE AGRICULTURAL SEASON, A TIME WHEN THEIR ABSENCE WOULD HURT THE OWNERS THE MOST. AN EXAMPLE OF THIS CAN BE SEEN IN THE ATTACHED AD PLACED BY GEORGE MUMFORD OF FISHERS ISLAND, NEW YORK. DURING THE SPRING OF 1754, AT THE HEIGHT OF THE PLANTING SEASON, THREE OF MUMFORD'S ENSLAVED MEN AND ONE WHITE INDENTURED SERVANT RAN AWAY TOGETHER. BECAUSE SLAVES WERE CONSIDERED PROPERTY, THE ACT OF RUNNING AWAY WAS TREATED AS THEFT. NOT ONLY DID THESE MEN "STEAL THEMSELVES" (AND THE CLOTHES THEY WORE), THEY ALSO TOOK A TWO-MASTED BOAT, A CANOE, SIXTY POUNDS OF BUTTER, SIXTY-FOUR POUNDS OF CHEESE AND SOME BREAD.

WITH SLAVERY LEGAL AND PRACTICED IN ALL THIRTEEN COLONIES, FREEDOM WAS HARD TO FIND AND HARDER TO KEEP. IN THE

EIGHTEENTH CENTURY, ENSLAVED INDIVIDUALS OFTEN RAN TO FIND OR MAINTAIN FAMILY. ALTHOUGH MARRIAGE BETWEEN SLAVES WAS NOT LEGALLY RECOGNIZED, FAMILY TIES WERE NONETHELESS STRONG. FORCED SEPARATION OF FAMILY MEMBERS WAS COMMON AND OFTEN OCCURRED WITH LITTLE OR NO NOTICE TO THE ENSLAVED COMMUNITY. TWO OF THE ATTACHED ADS SPEAK TO THE FREQUENCY WITH WHICH ENSLAVED INDIVIDUALS RAN AWAY TO REUNITE WITH FAMILY. ONE RUNAWAY NOTICE IS FOR PRINCE AND SUCK, A MAN AND A WOMAN WITH DIFFERENT OWNERS WHO RAN AWAY TOGETHER. ANOTHER SPEAKS OF A TEN-YEAR-OLD ENSLAVED GIRL, DINAH, WHO, IN APRIL OF 1778, WAS "STOLEN BY HER MOTHER," A WOMAN NAMED CASH. A THIRD AD REFERS TO VIOLET, WHO IN 1783 RAN FROM HER OWNER TAKING HER TWO CHILDREN WITH HER.

IN ADDITION TO PROVIDING EVIDENCE OF RESISTANCE AND THE IMPORTANCE OF MAINTAINING FAMILY CONNECTIONS AT ANY COST, RUNAWAY ADVERTISEMENTS ALSO PROVIDE INFORMATION ABOUT THE SKILLS AND CULTURES WITHIN THE ENSLAVED COMMUNITY. THE SKILLS AND EDUCATION OF ENSLAVED PERSONS WERE SIMILAR TO THOSE OF WHITE NEW YORKERS. BECAUSE THERE WERE NO LEGAL RESTRICTIONS AGAINST EDUCATING ENSLAVED INDIVIDUALS, ONE'S JOB MORE OR LESS DICTATED THE AMOUNT OF FORMAL EDUCATION RECEIVED. SLAVES WORKING AS MILLERS, CARPENTERS, AND BLACKSMITHS NEEDED CERTAIN MATHEMATICAL SKILLS TO ACCOMPLISH THEIR TASKS, WHILE LITERACY SKILLS WERE NOTED FOR SEVERAL RUNAWAY BOAT PILOTS, MAN SERVANTS AND TRAVELING MUSICIANS. THE ABILITY TO READ AND WRITE IS APPARENT BY THE NUMEROUS REFERENCES IN ADVERTISEMENTS TO RUNAWAYS WHO "FORGE THEIR OWN PASS" AS A MEANS OF AVOIDING CAPTURE. ONE OF THE ATTACHED NOTICES MENTIONS A FIDDLER, MARK EDWARD, WHO RAN AWAY IN FEBRUARY OF 1761. ENSLAVED MUSICIANS OFTEN TRAVELED THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRYSIDE PERFORMING AT PARTIES AND DANCES. THIS MOBILITY PROVIDED NUMEROUS OPPORTUNITIES FOR SELF-EMANCIPATION.

MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN ABOUT THE ETHNIC DIVERSITY OF EUROPEANS IN COLONIAL NEW YORK, BUT THE ENSLAVED POPULATION WAS EQUALLY DIVERSE. RITUALISTIC SCARIFICATION PATTERNS AND CULTURALLY SPECIFIC NAMES NOTED IN RUNAWAY ADVERTISEMENTS ATTEST TO THE VARIETY OF NATIONALITIES PRESENT

IN THE ENSLAVED COMMUNITY. VENTURE, ONE OF THREE ENSLAVED MEN WHO RAN FROM GEORGE MUMFORD IN APRIL OF 1754, WAS DESCRIBED AS “MARK’D IN THE FACE, OR SCAR’D WITH A KNIFE IN HIS OWN COUNTRY. FACIAL SCARIFICATION WAS MOST PREVALENT IN THE SENEGAMBIA REGION OF WEST AFRICA. THE AKAN SPEAKING PEOPLES OF MODERN GHANA AND TOGO WERE EASILY IDENTIFIED THROUGH THEIR NAMES. THE NAMES CUFF AND CUFFEE WERE NOTED IN NUMEROUS ADS. THESE NAMES WERE A MODIFIED VERSION OF THE AKAN DAY-NAME, KOFE.

IT SHOULD BE NOTED, HOWEVER, THAT RUNAWAY ADVERTISEMENTS WERE WRITTEN BY SLAVE OWNERS AND WRITTEN FOR PEOPLE IN SUPPORT OF SLAVERY. ADVERTISEMENTS THAT REFER TO WOMEN AS “WENCHES,” MEN AS “BOYS,” HAIR AS “WOOLL” AND NUMEROUS CHARACTER TRAITS RANGING FROM DECEITFUL AND CUNNING TO SLOW-WITTED AND CLUMSY GIVE MORE INSIGHT INTO THE AUTHORS THAN THE TRUE NATURE OF THE INDIVIDUALS WHO RAN AWAY. WHILE A SIGNIFICANT RESOURCE, RUNAWAY NOTICES MUST BE READ WITH AN UNDERSTANDING THAT THESE ARE PAINFUL REMINDERS OF AN ERA MARKED BY GRAVE INHUMANITY. DOCUMENTS WRITTEN BY SLAVE OWNERS ABOUT THEIR SLAVES TELL ONLY ONE SIDE OF THE STORY.

ALTHOUGH RUNAWAY ADVERTISEMENTS CANNOT BE TAKEN AT FACE VALUE, NEITHER CAN THEY BE DISCOUNTED. WITH FEW WRITTEN RECORDS AUTHORED BY ENSLAVED INDIVIDUALS, RUNAWAY ADS ALLOW US TO “PUT A FACE” ON THE PAST. ONCE WE LEARN TO RECOGNIZE THE BIAS AND READ BEYOND IT, THESE DOCUMENTS BECOME MORE MEANINGFUL AND USEFUL BOTH TO SCHOLARS AND STUDENTS OF HISTORY. TAKING THE AUTHOR’S BIASES INTO CONSIDERATION IT BECOMES READILY APPARENT THAT ENSLAVED INDIVIDUALS LIVING IN NEW YORK AND NEW JERSEY HAD AMPLE REASONS AND OPPORTUNITIES TO RUN AWAY

WHILE MANY ENSLAVED INDIVIDUALS RAN AWAY, OTHERS, HOWEVER, CHOSE NOT TO FOR A VARIETY OF REASONS. ACTS OF SABOTAGE, VIOLENCE, AND RUNNING AWAY WERE MET WITH HARSH PUNISHMENTS — BOTH TO THE PERSON OR PERSONS WHO RAN OR RESISTED AND ALSO TO THE FAMILIES OF THOSE INVOLVED. KNOWING THAT ONE’S FAMILY AND FRIENDS COULD SUFFER FOR THE

ACTS OF ANOTHER MAY HAVE KEPT MANY FROM ACTIVELY RESISTING. THOSE WHO CHOSE NOT TO RUN AWAY OFTEN USED OTHER, MORE SECRETIVE METHODS OF DAILY RESISTANCE INCLUDING WORK SLOW-DOWNS, PRETENDING TO BE SICK, AND ACTING INCOMPETENT.

THE EIGHT RUNAWAY ADVERTISEMENTS SELECTED FOR THIS PROJECT CANNOT BE WHOLLY REPRESENTATIVE OF THE LARGE, DIVERSE AND MULTI-FACETED POPULATION OF PEOPLE WHO CHOSE TO RUN AWAY. HOWEVER, THE FIFTEEN ENSLAVED INDIVIDUALS NOTED IN THESE ADS EACH HAD PERSONAL REASONS, MOTIVATIONS, HOPES AND DESIRES FOR RUNNING AWAY THAT MAY WELL HAVE BEEN SHARED BY MANY, MANY OTHERS. SOME OF THESE REASONS MAY SEEM READILY APPARENT IN THE NOTICES, BUT OTHERS MOST CERTAINLY WERE HIDDEN FROM THE SLAVEHOLDERS WHO WERE THE AUTHORS OF THESE ADVERTISEMENTS. “PRETENDS TO BE FREE: IMAGINING RUNAWAY SLAVES” IS A PROJECT THAT ALLOWS STUDENTS TO REPRESENT THE OTHER SIDE OF THE STORY.

A NOTE ON THE FOLLOWING ADVERTISEMENTS:

THE RUNAWAY ADVERTISEMENTS CHOSEN CAN BE FOUND IN *PRETENDS TO BE FREE: RUNAWAY SLAVE ADVERTISEMENTS FROM COLONIAL AND REVOLUTIONARY NEW YORK AND NEW JERSEY*. (HODGES, GRAHAM RUSSELL AND ALAN EDWARD BROWN, EDS. NEW YORK: GARLAND PUBLISHING, 1994). ALTHOUGH THE LAYOUT AND CHOICE OF “PERIOD” FONTS WERE REPRODUCED USING MODERN EQUIPMENT, THE SPELLING, SYNTAX, PUNCTUATION, CAPITALIZATION AND CONTRACTIONS USED IN THE ORIGINAL ADS HAVE BEEN LARGELY RETAINED. PERHAPS THE MOST RECOGNIZABLE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CONTEMPORARY TYPEFACE AND THOSE USED IN 18TH CENTURY PRINT IS THE USE OF THE LONG “S” (*ËIRT, PERÇON*). CERTAIN LIGATURES SUCH AS THE DOUBLE “S” (*trab, vefel*) WERE ALSO USED. ALTHOUGH DIFFICULT TO READ AT FIRST, STUDENTS SHOULD BE AWARE THAT THESE CHARACTERS ARE PRONOUNCED LIKE THE MODERN “S.”