

An Analysis of Runaway Slave Ads from Edgecombe and Nash Counties in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

Erich Brewer, History Teacher (Nash Central High)

Overview

There is an emphasis today in education towards having students do authentic tasks. In history classes, students should be able to use primary historical documents to investigate the past and make it come alive.

An area of keen interest to historians, teachers and students in Eastern North Carolina is the institution of slavery and the lives of slaves and slave owners. Unfortunately, historical documents and evidence of this early history are rare. An exception to this is the large number of runaway slave advertisements collected in a joint project by UNC Greensboro and NC Agricultural and Technical Univ. The website, "Runaway Slave Advertisements" <http://libcdm1.uncg.edu/cdm/about/collection/RASNC>, holds a data base of 2,400 runaway slave ads from 1750 to 1865. This large database of archival records will allow students to complete the data analysis chart provided and extrapolate information and historical trends on slavery. This hands on activity will allow students to explore the past and make their own interpretations.

Course & Grade

This activity may be used in the American History I course, grades 8-11.

Materials

- NC Runaway Slave Advertisements 1750 to 1865 website UNC Greensboro and NC Agricultural and Technical Univ.
<http://libcdm1.uncg.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/RAS>
- Data sheet, NC Runaway Slave Advertisements
- Laptop with internet access

Duration

90 minutes, two sessions.

Teacher Preparation

If there is anything special to be done by the teacher in preparation for the activity (i.e., arranging the classroom in a special way, preparing parents for the introduction of controversial material, etc.)

Access the website <http://libcdm1.uncg.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/RAS> . This website has information the teacher should read.

- A Brief History of Slavery in NC" by Samantha Winer.
- "Trends in Runaway Slave Advertisements" by Olivia Carlisle.
- Review the database and familiarize yourself with it.

Procedure

1. As a warm up, go to the website on Runaway slave advertisements in North Carolina (above). Show the students a runaway slave advertisement. Read it together and discuss the types of information on slavery the advertisement provides.
2. Find runaway slave advertisements specifically for slaves in Edgecombe and Nash Counties.
3. Pick one advertisement from each of the historical periods: Colonial, Antebellum and Civil War.
4. Fill in the information for each section. If the information is not present, put n/a in the cell.
5. Compare and contrast the results from the different periods. Can you see differences in the information or types of information relating to the differences in the historical periods?
6. Have the students discuss their results in small groups. Given that each student probably picked different ads, see if students see the same historical trends.
7. The students can brainstorm the trends they see on the board.
8. Have the students address and explain one trend in a half page exposition.
9. If the students have further interests in the runaway slave ads, you may assign a research project. For example, rather than focusing on differences in historical periods as they did in this exercise, students can focus on gender differences in the ads. Students can also create their own data sheets to run their own data analysis.
10. Students then will read a passage that summarizes the incident behind the State v. Negro Will case. This slave was owned by James Battle, who bought what would eventually be Rocky Mount Mills. They will use this case to discuss different forms of resistance.
11. Students will then complete the wrap-it-up that combines information about the ads and the case.

Data Sheet for Runaway Slave Advertisement

Table #1 – Runaway Slave Advertisement: Owner background information

<u>Owner information</u>	Colonial Period (1750 to 1776)	Antebellum Period (1812-1859)	Civil War Period (1860-1865)
Owner name			
Date of advertisement			
Reward amount			
County – Edgecombe or Nash			

Table #2 – Runaway Slave Advertisement: Slave physical and personal information

<u>Slave information, physical and personal</u>	Colonial Period (1750 to 1776)	Antebellum Period (1812-1859)	Civil War Period (1860-1865)
Slave name			
Age			
Height, Weight			
Hair			
Skin, color, birthmarks, brands			
Trade, skills, literate?			
Personality traits			
Based off the previous two rows, why do you think this slave ran away?			

This activity was completed as part of the 2018 workshop “History Unfiltered: Exploring the Local Textile Industry in Rocky Mount,” hosted by [Carolina K-12](#) in partnership with [Community Histories Workshop](#), and funded by the National Archives.

Table #3- Information related to the escape, capture and owner’s attitude towards slave

<u>Information related to escape, capture and owner’s attitude to slave</u>	Colonial Period (1750 to 1776)	Antebellum Period (1812-1859)	Civil War Period (1860-1865)
Slave’s clothing and possessions			
Slave’s family name, genealogical info.			
Previous owner or home			
Circumstances/motivation of escape			
Crime committed?			
Aids to capture of slave			
Personal attitude of slave owner to slave			

Discussion Questions:

1. What similarities did you notice between all the runaway slave advertisements?
2. What differences do you notice between the time periods?
3. Are there any other differences you noticed?
4. Do you think running away was the only option slaves have for going against their masters? What other options did they have?

An Alternative Option: Self Defense

Directions: *This excerpt describes an encounter between a slave name will and his overseer, Richard Baxter. Will was owned by James Battle, who would eventually purchase Rocky Mount Mills, a cotton factory that developed into a textile mill in Rocky Mount. You will read how Will resisted against his overseer and the effects of that resistance*

This activity was completed as part of the 2018 workshop “History Unfiltered: Exploring the Local Textile Industry in Rocky Mount,” hosted by [Carolina K-12](#) in partnership with [Community Histories Workshop](#), and funded by the National Archives.

Slavery Resistance in Edgecombe County

On **January 22, 1834**, Will, a slave belonging to James Battle of Edgecombe County, killed a white man. The killing resulted in the *State v. Negro Will* case, in which the North Carolina Supreme Court protected slaves from a charge of murder when acting in self-defense.

The day started with an argument between Will and a slave foreman named Allen over the possession of a gardening tool. Tempers flared and Will broke the gardening tool before going to work at a nearby cotton mill. After learning of Will's behavior Richard Baxter, Battle's overseer, set off on horseback with his gun. Allen followed with his whip. Confronted by Baxter, Will attempted to flee but was shot in the back. Wounded and running for his life, Will was overtaken. Armed with a knife with poison on the blade, Will fought off Baxter. A deep knife wound to Baxter's arm proved fatal.

After looking at the evidence Battle believed that Will acted in self-defense, and he hired two prominent lawyers to insure that Will received justice.

The case was appealed to the state Supreme Court, which ruled unanimously that any slave under such provocation could only be charged with manslaughter. This challenged the 1829 *State v. Mann* decision which held that a master's power was absolute. Will's lawyer argued against a murder case on legal grounds – Baxter would have faced manslaughter charges had he killed Will – and as a moral question. "Absolute power," he argued, "is irresponsible power." His defense struck a note with Gaston, who decided the case for the N.C. Supreme Court. It may be difficult, viewed through a modern lens, to see this decision as a move toward justice considering slavery would endure for another three decades. Will's success in court seems even more hollow considering James Smith Battle sent him to a plantation in Mississippi after the trial, hoping to avoid any difficulties on his own land with a slave who had killed a white man

Later, when in Mississippi, Will killed a fellow slave and – that time – died by hanging. His wife, known as Aunt Rose, was heard to lament, "Will surely had hard luck."

But nearly two centuries later, on the road where he lived in bondage, his name and his pride remain.

Whole-Class Activity 2: Slavery Resistance in Edgecombe County

1. Why did Will kill his overseer?
2. Why did this incident reach the Supreme Court? (think about the role of the Supreme Court and the Judicial Branch)
3. How did this court case help future slaves?

4. Based off this incident, how do you think James Battle treated his slaves?

5. Does this incident make James Battle a “good” person? Why or why not?

Ext Ticket

1. What information did the runaway slave advertisements tell you about the practice of slavery in the South?
2. How did the summary about Will reveal different forms of resistance slaves could have taken?