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Black Runaways in Eighteenth-Century Britain

Stephen Mullen, Nelson Mundell and Simon P. Newman

Enslaved people were far from unusual in Georgian Britain, as suggested by an advertisement placed by a young London craftsman, who may well have owned the unnamed enslaved boy or acted on behalf of his owner:

There is a Negro Boy of 8 or 9 Years old, to be sold, of a very good black
Complexion. Enquire at Mr. Perchard's, Pewterer, the Corner of Abchurch-lane,
Cannon-street.¹

'For sale' notices such as this one, along with those advertising for the capture and return of escaped enslaved and bound labourers, were an everyday feature of English and Scottish newspapers, appearing alongside the day-to-day commercial notices that filled the burgeoning newspapers of Georgian Britain. Together they demonstrate not only that there was an enslaved population in Britain, but perhaps more significantly that trafficking of enslaved people was routine.

Sometimes such advertisements featured enslaved people that were new or recent arrivals from the colonies or even from Africa, as in the case of

A WINDWARD COAST BLACK BOY,

¹ *Daily Courant* (London), 20 November 1719, p. 2.

[Ap]pears to be under 14 Years old, well looking and tractable having been three Months in England.²

The named contact person for this advertisement was the publisher of the leading Liverpool newspaper *Williamson's Liverpool Advertiser and Mercantile Register*. Robert Williamson often acted as broker in the sale of enslaved people, and in this case he sought out an unnamed boy who had endured one of the more than 7,000 British transatlantic slave-trading voyages which shipped some 1.75 million enslaved people from West Africa to the Americas during the first three quarters of the eighteenth-century.³ Perhaps this boy had become a favourite of the ship's captain or a senior officer, who then retained him as a personal servant thereby enabling him to avoid plantation slavery, the fate of the vast majority transported from Africa.

This did not mean a full reprieve, however, for enslaved people who were brought to Britain were never more than one sale away from a return to colonial plantation slavery. They existed in a liminal state between the harsh racial slavery of the colonies and the more benign working conditions for white and black people alike in the British Isles. A return to the terrors of New World bondage was always possible, as one mid-eighteenth-century advertisement made clear:

To be SOLD,

² *Williamson's Liverpool Advertiser and Mercantile Register* (Liverpool), 17 August 1765, p.

3.

³ According to *Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database* between 1701 and 1800 British ships carried an estimated 2.5 million enslaved people from Africa to the New World colonies. <http://www.slavevoyages.org/assessment/estimates> (accessed 30 September 2018).

A Pretty little Negro Boy, about nine Years old, and well limb'd. If not disposed of, is to be sent to the West Indies in six Days Time.

He is to be seen at the Dolphin Tavern in Tower Street.⁴

A well-known tavern in central London, the Dolphin was a stone's throw from the Tower of London and no more than a couple of hundred yards from the wharves from which ships regularly departed for the American and Caribbean colonies. No doubt the Dolphin was frequented by ship captains who could easily sell a healthy young enslaved boy in Jamaica, Virginia or other colonies for a handsome profit.⁵ When enslaved people were returned to the plantation colonies they were subject to colonial slave codes and the brutal violence of the slave regime. When one 'Negroe Servant' in England was 'threatened by his Master, for some Misconduct, to be sent to the Plantations,' the threat was sufficiently terrifying for the man to hang himself in his owner's coal cellar.⁶

⁴ *Daily Advertiser* (London), 11 December 1744, p. 2.

⁵ The Dolphin Tavern was listed in such sources as *New Remarks of London Or, A Survey of the Cities of London and Westminster, of Southwark and Part of Middlesex and Surrey... Collected by the Company of Parish Clerks* (London: for E. Midwinter, 1732), p. 5.

⁶ 'Any Lady or Family going to the West-Indies,' *Public Advertiser* 24 Mar. 1768; 'A likely Black BOY,' *The Public Advertiser* 19 July 1764, p. 3; 'Yesterday a Negroe Servant', *Derby Mercury* (Derby), 22 June 1753, p. 2. In only three cases were prices specified: a 15 year-old male was advertised at 30 guineas in 1764, a boy at £40 in 1768, and a 10-11 year old boy for 50 guineas in 1769: see 'A likely Black BOY,' *Public Advertiser* 19 July 1764, p. 3; 'For sale' *Edinburgh Evening Courant* 18 April 1768; 'A NEGRO BOY, To be disposed of', *Public Advertiser*, 8 April 1769.

A sample of 75 newspaper notices advertising the sale of 89 enslaved people highlights some interesting points. Of those whose gender is known only 8 (10.3%) were female, while 70 (89.7%) were male. More remarkable was the fact that virtually all enslaved people offered for sale in Great Britain were children or young adults. While two were described as men, one as a "young fellow", and 12 (16.2%) were aged between 19 and 22, the other 59 (79.7%) were aged between 1 and 17. Almost one-third (24, 32.4%) were children aged between 8 and 12.⁷

These essential characteristics of people advertised for sale in British newspapers is indicative of the demographic characteristics of the enslaved population in England and Scotland, a population that was strikingly different from white British servants and enslaved plantation workers. White British men and women hired themselves out as agricultural workers, although women dominated the ranks of domestic servants.⁸ In the colonies planters sought out 'prime' male and female fields hands aged between their late teens and early thirties to carry out the physically demanding tasks of planting, tending, harvesting and processing staple crops such as sugar, rice and tobacco. Throughout the eighteenth-century it

⁷ The ages (or estimated ages) of 62 were specified in newspaper advertisements, eight were described as 'boy and one as 'girl', 1 as a 'young fellow' and two as 'man'.

⁸ Perhaps 80% of domestic servants in eighteenth-century Britain were female. See Carolyn Steedman, *Labours Lost: Domestic Service and the Making of Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 28, pp. 36-41; Bridget Hill, *Servants: English Domesticity in the Eighteenth century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 6-7, pp. 101-4; Paula Humfrey, *The Experience of Domestic Service for Women in Early Modern London* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 25-9. See also Tim Meldrum, *Domestic Service and Gender, 1660-1750: Life and Work in the London Household* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2000).

was the men and women in these age groups who dominated the human cargoes of the thousands of British slave ships; many of the deadly plantation societies had relatively few enslaved children and even fewer late-middle-aged or elderly enslaved people.⁹

However, when planters, merchants, lawyers, colonial officials, doctors, clerics, and naval and army officers selected enslaved people to accompany them to Great Britain, they rarely chose them from the great mass of plantation labourers. Instead, they tended to take trusted domestic attendants, or young boys and occasionally girls who had become favourites. Some enslaved people in Britain were craftsmen, and others were seamen, but most were personal and domestic servants, often dressed in smart livery and living emblems of the wealth of their owners. While it was West Africa's young men and women who toiled on the plantations of the Americas, it was children who attended to masters and mistresses in the British Isles.¹⁰ Many enslaved adults resisted their enslavement on plantations, occasionally participating in large scale rebellions but more commonly seeking short- or long-term escape, but in Britain it was often enslaved children and young adults who resisted by trying to escape, in search of a very different kind of freedom in the British Isles.

⁹ For a discussion of the plantation work forces, see Simon P. Newman, *A New World of Labor: The Development of Plantation Slavery in the British Atlantic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), pp. 189-242.

¹⁰ While the vast majority of enslaved and bound children in Britain were African in origin, some were South Asian and a few indigenous American. The only work to date focusing on enslaved children in eighteenth-century Britain is Dolly MacKinnon, 'Slave Children: Scotland's Children as Chattels at Home and Abroad in the Eighteenth Century,' in Janay Nugent and Elizabeth Ewan, (eds.), *Children and Youth in Premodern Scotland before the Nineteenth Century* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2015), pp. 120-35.

The demographic profile of freedom-seeking runaways in Britain was quite distinctive from the colonies, and those who sought freedom in England and Scotland were younger and more likely to be male than fugitives in the Americas. Among 622 whose actual or approximate age was specified in the newspaper advertisements placed by their masters, a remarkable 321 (51.6%) were no more than teenagers, aged between 6 and 19.¹¹ Moreover 105 (16.9%) of British runaways were aged 14 or less (or were described as ‘boys’), exactly three-times as many as were aged 31 or older. Just as significantly, these freedom-seekers were overwhelmingly male, and of 820 fugitives whose gender is known, 758 (92.4%) were male and only 62 (7.6%) were female.

Table 1. Ages of freedom-seeking runaways in Britain, 1700 to 1780

Age Range	Number	%
6 to 14 (including ‘boys’)	105	16.9
15-19 (including ‘young’)	216	34.7
20 to 30	266	42.8
31 and older	35	5.6

Source: 'Runaway Slaves in Britain' <https://www.runaways.gla.ac.uk/database/> (accessed 5 July 2018)

By way of comparison, a database of Jamaican runaways during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries revealed that almost one-quarter of 948 fugitives whose gender

¹¹ 4 runaways described as 'boy' and 14 as 'young' have been included in the 321 who comprise the youngest cohort; 1 'man' has been included in the 20 to 30 age cohort; and 3 'middle-aged' and 1 old are included in the oldest cohort.

was identified were female.¹² 231 (24.4%) female runaways meant that the proportion of female runaways in Jamaica was between three and four times as large as in Britain. The age of runaways revealed a similar disparity between Britain and Jamaica, for on the Caribbean island the proportion of young runaways was significantly lower, with 93 (36.9%) of those whose age was known 19 or younger. Significantly, many of the Jamaican children who eloped ran away with parents or family members as part of group escapes, or on occasion escaped to try and reunite with parents, siblings or other family members, so the number of children who escaped in Jamaica alone and on their own initiative was even lower. Family elopements were virtually unknown in Britain as most of the enslaved taken to England and Scotland were children who had been separated from their families in Africa, the American and Caribbean colonies, or South Asia, and who were alone in Britain.

To a master, the act of selecting a young boy and removing him from the plantation fields and then allowing him better food and clothing and the lighter physical labour of domestic work could feel like an act of great kindness. For example, one planter who returned to Britain, John Wedderburn, testified that he ‘took a liking’ to an enslaved African boy named Joseph Knight, and consequently making Knight ‘his personal servant and have upon all occasions... treated him with particular kindness and favour’.¹³ To white masters the act of bringing favoured enslaved children to Britain might appear the culmination of such

¹² This database has been compiled by Simon P. Newman, and included 1,000 Jamaican advertisements from between 1775 and 1823. It is the basis of ‘Hidden in Plain Sight: Escaped Slaves in Late Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth-Century Jamaica,’ *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., digital edition (June 2018).

¹³ Sir John Wedderburn of Ballindean, ‘Deposition before the Sheriff of Perth’, 15 November 1774, National Records of Scotland (hereafter NRS), CS 235/2/2.

largesse: freeing them from the experience and influences of American and Caribbean slavery, and immersing them in the day-to-day life of domestic service in Georgian Britain.

The surviving family portraits of elite British families attended by liveried enslaved are intended to show domestic harmony in the context of imperial and mercantile success, and they attest to the ways in which youthful enslaved domestics might flaunt the wealth and accomplishments of owners. Yet the portraits reveal nothing of the interior mental world of these enslaved children, of the horrors they had experienced, the dislocation and trauma.

Whether born in Africa or the Americas, these boys and girls had been ripped from parents and community and taken to live and work in the overwhelmingly white and alien British Isles. Some, like 12-year old Occorro, had endured the Middle Passage from Africa to the Americas, and the trauma of that experience was then compounded by further removal to Britain.¹⁴ Thirteen-year-old Somerset was branded both on his arm and his forehead, the latter perhaps a punishment for resistance or escape in the past. He may have been a cabin boy, for the advertisement seeking his capture encouraged anybody who took up the boy to return him to naval officers, either to Captain Fish or Lieutenant Masters.¹⁵ Fifteen- or sixteen-year old Vernon may also have been African-born, given the African country marks described as 'scars on his forehead'. Only about 4 feet nine inches tall he had 'but little of the English language'. Vernon was described as 'lame' having 'lost some of his toes,' though

¹⁴ Occoro was described in a runaway advertisement as have 'three Scars on each side of his Face,' 'Country Marks applied in West Africa and thus evidence of his African birth. See 'Went away on Sunday Night last...' *Daily Advertiser* (London) 4 January 1745, p. 2.

¹⁵ 'ELOP'D or Stolen...' *Daily Advertiser* (London), 12 April 1760, p. 2.

whether this was the result of injury or illness is unclear.¹⁶ Given his African day-name sixteen-year-old Quoshy was quite possibly African-born, and he was branded on his breast with the letters EA, the initials of his master Captain Edward Archer.¹⁷ Some runaways were even younger such as Bacchus, an eight-year-old 'little Negro Boy' who, when he escaped, was wearing old and worn clothing and shoes, and was hampered by the loss of toes from both feet.¹⁸

What drove such bound and enslaved young people to escape into a foreign environment? In most cases the only evidence we have is the short newspaper advertisement placed by masters, owners or their agents, thus reflecting more of the perceptions and objectives of white masters rather than the fugitives themselves.

Occasionally, however, additional records beyond these runaway advertisements reveal more about the children who attempted to escape from slavery in eighteenth-century Britain. Jamie Montgomery was almost certainly born in Virginia about two hundred and fifty years ago, and given the massive forced migration of enslaved Africans to Virginia during the mid-eighteenth century it is quite possible that one or even both of Jamie's parents had been born in Africa. We do not know exactly how old Jamie was, but when he arrived in Scotland Jamie was most likely a young teenager, a boy who had grown up in a fairly large community of enslaved Africans working on the tobacco plantations of Joseph Hawkins. Hawkins first established a plantation in Spotsylvania County around 1740, and was

¹⁶ 'STOLEN or STRAY'D...' *London Daily Post and General Advertiser* (London), 27 July 1741, p. 2.

¹⁷ 'A Negro, named Quoshey,' *London Gazette* (London), 30 December 1700, p. 2.

¹⁸ 'WHEREAS a little Negro Boy,' *Daily Advertiser* (London), 20 May 1742, p. 2.

successful until his death, in which the *Virginia Gazette* carried an advertisement for the sale of his ‘EIGHTY likely Virginia born SLAVES’¹⁹

The owners of new tobacco plantations and farms in western Virginia found it difficult and expensive to purchase goods from and send crops back to ports on the Atlantic coast. Scottish merchants and factors—many of them representing Glasgow firms—neatly filled this need by establishing trading houses close to the new plantations, and soon these Virginia planters found themselves enmeshed in Glasgow’s Atlantic economy. The large majority of Virginia’s tobacco came through Glasgow and its Clyde ports, and the city grew wealthy from this trade. The largest tobacco merchants such as Andrew Buchanan, Archibald Ingram, Alexander Oswald and John Glassford have left an indelible impression on the city.²⁰

¹⁹ Hawkins’ will makes clear that he had already established his son, also named Joseph, on his own plantation. Joseph Sr. left his slaves and household goods to his daughters Lucy and Sarah. Neither had yet married, and the sale of the slaves would have provided them with sizeable dowries. See ‘Will of Joseph Hawkins, 30 March 1769, *Spotsylvania County, VA RECORDS, 1761-1772, Will Book D*, (MF Reel 27), p. 525; ‘To be SOLD... by Joseph Hawkins,’ *Supplement to the Virginia Gazette* (Williamsburg, Virginia), 26 April 1770, p. 1.

²⁰ J. H. Soltow, ‘Scottish Traders in Virginia, 1750-1775,’ *The Economic History Review*, 12.1 (1959), pp. 83-98; Robert D. Mitchell and Warren R. Hofstra, ‘How do settlement systems evolve? The Virginia backcountry during the eighteenth century,’ *Journal of Historical Geography*, 21.2 (1995), pp. 123-47; Warren R. Hofstra, *The Planting of New Virginia: Settlement and Landscape in the Shenandoah Valley* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); Alan L. Karras, *Sojourners in the Sun: Scottish Migrants in Jamaica and the Chesapeake, 1740-1800* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. 118-169; T.M. Devine, *The Tobacco Lords: A Study of the Tobacco Merchants of Glasgow and*

Several Scottish trading houses were based in Fredericksburg, the Spotsylvania county seat and a fast-growing town on the Rappahannock River which provided access to the coast.²¹

Like most of the tobacco planters of Spotsylvania County, Joseph Hawkins frequently visited Fredericksburg in order to conduct business.²² One of Hawkins' business transaction occurred on the 9th of March 1750. For a price of £56 12s 5d Virginia currency, Hawkins sold 'One Negro Boy named Jamie' to a Scottish merchant named Robert Shedden.²³ No record of Jamie survives in Virginia, and we know of this transaction only because the original bill of sale—the legal proof of ownership—is today held by the National Archives of Scotland.

We know a little more about Robert Shedden, the Scot who purchased Jamie. He was

their Trading Activities, c. 1740-90 (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1975); Simon P. Newman, 'Theorizing Class in an Atlantic World: A Case Study of Glasgow,' in Simon Middleton and Billy G. Smith (eds.), *Class Matters: Early North America and the Atlantic World*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), pp. 16-34.

²¹ For a discussion of Scots factors and merchants in early Fredericksburg see R. Walter Coakley, 'The Two James Hunters of Fredericksburg,' *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 56.1 (1948), pp. 3-21. Jacob M. Price, 'The Rise of Glasgow in the Chesapeake Tobacco Trade, 1707-1775,' *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d. ser., 11.2 (1954), p. 197, pp. 179-81.

²² William Armstrong Crozier, ed., *Spotsylvania County Records, 1721-1800: Being Transcriptions, From the Original Files at the County Court House, of Wills, Deeds, Administrators' and Guardians' Bonds, Marriage Licenses, and Lists of Revolutionary Pensioners* (Baltimore: Southern Book Company, 1955), pp. 160, 165, 167, 174, 179.

²³ Bill of Sale, dated Fredericksburgh, 9 March 1750, NRS, CS234/S/3/12. The purchaser's name appears as either Shedden or Sheddan in different records.

one of many Scottish sojourners who sought their fortunes working for merchant and trading houses in Britain's Chesapeake and Caribbean colonies. Robert was the second son of John and Margaret Shedden who owned the Marsheland property in the parish of Beith, Ayrshire.²⁴ Shedden was at the heart of the expanding tobacco trade in western Virginia, and he worked with leading Glaswegian merchants such as John Murdoch, William Crawford Jr. and Andrew Cochrane: indeed, Shedden would later describe himself as a 'Merchant in Glasgow.'²⁵

It was not unusual for successful Scottish factors and merchants to purchase slaves who would undertake physical labour in their trading houses, but this was not why Shedden purchased Jamie. Shedden planned to send Jamie to Scotland where he would be apprenticed to a joiner, and then return the skilled and thus more valuable boy back to Virginia and sell him back to Hawkins for a healthy profit.²⁶ White craftsmen were expensive to hire in western Virginia, and planters were eager to have their own enslaved boys trained in artisanal

²⁴ James Dobie, *Memoir of William Wilson of Crummock* (Edinburgh, privately printed, 1896), p. 67.

²⁵ Petition of Robert Shedden to the Lords of Council and Session, 9 August 1756, NRS, CS234/S/3/12. Some of Shedden's business dealings are revealed in the records of his estate following his death in 1759: see NRS, CC9/7/64/379.

²⁶ Shedden described this arrangement in *Memorial for Robert Sheddan of Morrice-hill, late Merchant in Glasgow* (9 July 1756), 2, Advocates Library, Session Papers, Campbell's Collection, p. 1; for discussion of this practice in comparative context, see John W. Cairns, 'Enforced Sojourners: Enslaved Apprentices in Eighteenth-Century Scotland', in E. J. M. F. C. Broers and R. M. H. Kubben (eds.), *Ad Fontes: Liber Amicorum Prof. Beatrix van Erp-Jacobs*, (Nijmegen: Wolf Legal Publishers, 2014), pp. 67-81.

crafts.

Shedden's younger sister Elizabeth was married to Robert Morrice, a skilled carpenter in their home town of Beith, and late in 1752 Shedden sent Jamie from Virginia to Scotland.²⁷ In Spotsylvania County Jamie had been part of a large community of black people: a generation later the First Federal Census recorded that the nearly six thousand enslaved people in Spotsylvania County constituted over half of the county's population.²⁸ It is very likely that Jamie had spent much of his early childhood mainly in the company of people whose skin was the same colour as his. His parents or others in this community would have told him tales of their own earlier lives in West Africa, and perhaps of the horrors of the Middle Passage, and with them he would have shared the vestiges of West African culture as well as the food and the developing language and culture of the emerging African American community of Virginia.

However, Ayrshire was a long, long way from Virginia. Midway between Paisley and Ardrossan, Beith was a small but growing town surrounded by arable and dairy farmland, and in 1759 the town was home to almost 700 'examinable persons'. These included a wide number of skilled craftsmen including masons, saddlers, shoemakers, smiths, coopers and carpenters, and Jamie was settled into the household of Robert and Elizabeth Morrice where

²⁷ The family connection is revealed in various family trees, and in the documents concern Shedden's estate following his death, NRS, CC9/7/64/57-60. In some documents Morrice's name is spelled as Morris.

²⁸ This number refers to those eligible for church membership. *Heads of Families at the First Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1790: Records of the State Enumerations: 1782-1785. Virginia* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1908), p. 9.

he began his apprenticeship.²⁹ How unfamiliar this small town in Scotland must have seemed to a young African American boy torn from his family and community in Virginia. Arriving late in the year the dark days, the food, the language – everything must have seemed alien to Jamie.

Robert Shedden paid Robert Morrice £40 as Jamie's apprenticeship fee and a further two shillings per week for Jamie's bed, board and clothing. It is unclear whether or not the two men had agreed upon a formal indenture.³⁰ We do not know if Jamie was Morrice's only apprentice, but it is likely that he was one of several in a larger business, and he would have lived and worked alongside these white boys, and ate his meals and slept with either Morrice's apprentices or his children. It would also appear that Jamie attended church with the Morrice family, along with most residents of Beith. This was quite likely the first time Jamie had ever been inside a church, for Virginia had fewer than one hundred clergymen and only one church per thousand white residents: organised Christianity in mid-eighteenth-century was a white affair.³¹

²⁹ John Sinclair, *The Statistic Account of Scotland. Drawn from the Communications of the Ministers of the Different Parishes. Volume Eight* (Edinburgh: William Creech, 1793), p. 317, p. 320.

³⁰ *Memorial for Robert Sheddan of Morrice-hill, late Merchant in Glasgow* (9 July 1756), 2, Advocates Library, Session Papers, Campbell's Collection, p. 2.

³¹ John M. Murrin, 'Religion and Politics in America from the First Settlements to the Civil War,' in Mark A. Noll and Luke E. Harlow, (eds.), *Religion and American Politics From the Colonial Period to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 41; Mark A. Noll, Nathan O. Hatch, George M. Marsden, David F. Wells and John D. Woodbridge, (eds.),

Two years into Jamie's apprenticeship his owner Robert Shedden returned home to Scotland. Having made his fortune Shedden had purchased the estate of Morrisill near Beith, and shortly after his return he then married Elizabeth Simson.³² For reasons that are unclear, Shedden reclaimed Jamie from Robert Morrice and brought him into the Shedden household. Jamie's subordinate status was confirmed by Shedden's decision to rename him 'Shanker', almost certainly a derogatory appellation, and to take him away from his professional training and his home with the Morrice family. Jamie would later assert that Shedden employed him:

in the most slavish and servile business, his only occupation being the sawing of wood, and other laborious works, which requiring neither skill nor ingenuity, but sinews and strength, were therefore judged proper for a Person of [his] complexion, and of his unusual strength and vigour.³³

This language is significant. While Jamie had left the colonies as a Virginia-born enslaved African American, after several years in Scotland he had begun to think of himself as a skilled craftsman who was qualified for more than menial manual labour. Why did Shedden treat Jamie this way? Shedden was a wealthy man, so it was unlikely to be a cost-cutting measure. Perhaps Shedden had realised that Jamie was growing into his later teens away from the violent discipline of slave society, and that having lived, worked and worshipped

Christianity in America: A Handbook (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Lion Publishing, 1983), p. 76.

³² James Dobie, *Memoir of William Wilson of Crummock* (Edinburgh, privately printed, 1896), p. 69; James Paterson, *History of the County of Ayr, With a Genealogical Account of the Families of Ayrshire*, I, (Ayr: John Dick, 1847), p. 276.

³³ *Memorial for James Montgomery – Sheddan [sic]; against Robert Sheddan* (23 July 1756), pp. 1-2. Advocates Library, Session Papers, Campbell's Collection, V.

alongside white people, the teenage boy was beginning to think of himself as an individual deserving of certain rights.

The fact that Jamie had been baptised by John Witherspoon, minister of the church in Beith, might support this interpretation. Shedden believed that Jamie ‘got it into his Head, that by being baptized he would become free’, and Shedden opposed Jamie’s baptism because of ‘the Fancies of Freedom which it might instill into his Slave’. Witherspoon provided Jamie with some basic religious instruction and in April 1756 the minister provided the young black man with a certificate testifying to the bearer’s good Christian conduct: it is interesting that Witherspoon proved ready and willing to welcome Jamie into his congregation on nominally equal terms, and to give him a certificate that recognised his independent agency as a Christian believer.³⁴

Shedden and Jamie told different stories about what happened next, and these survive in their contradictory accounts in the National Records of Scotland. Robert Shedden’s brother Matthew was due to sail to Virginia in the spring of 1756, and Robert decided to honour his agreement with Joseph Hawkins and send Jamie back to Virginia and sell him at a profit. According to Shedden, Jamie went willingly to the ship at Port Glasgow, eager to see his family once again. In contrast, Jamie recalled that he had been forcibly taken from his bed by Shedden, his brother James and two other men. With his hands tied Jamie was tethered to a horse and dragged from Beith to Port Glasgow, ‘not upon the King’s high way, but thro’ muirs or lonely places, and other by-roads’. If Jamie is right, it is possible that Shedden did not want friends and neighbours to see how he was treating Jamie. In Port Glasgow the Virginia-bound ship was not yet ready, and Jamie was imprisoned and guarded by his captors, but he was allowed to walk along the quay, ‘which was necessary for the recovery of

³⁴ Deposition by Shedden, dated Morrishill, 22 June 1756, NRS, CS 234/S/3/12.

his health'. Jamie seized this opportunity to escape and made his way to Edinburgh.³⁵

Jamie had no intention of returning to Virginia. This was a momentous decision for the young man, as it was for other young runaways in Britain. Escaping from Shedden and asserting his freedom made it highly unlikely that Jamie could ever again return to Virginia and see his parents, siblings, family and community. During his years in Scotland Jamie's life, work and community had become familiar and comfortable. He no doubt remembered Virginia's slave society, and apparently he had no desire to return to a land where he would only ever be property.

Following Jamie's escape Shedden placed advertisements in Glasgow and Edinburgh newspapers, including one which appeared in the *Edinburgh Evening Courant*.

RUN Away from the Subscriber, living near Beith, Shire of Ayr, ONE NEGRO MAN, aged about 22 years, five feet and a half high or thereby. He is a Virginian born Slave, speaks pretty good English; he has been five years in this country, and has served sometimes with a joiner; he has a deep Scare above one of his eyes, occasioned by a stroke of a horse; he also has got with him a Certificate, which calls him Jamie Montgomerie, signed, John Witherspoone Minister. Whoever takes up the said Run-away, and brings him home, or secures him, and gets notice to his master, shall have two guineas reward, besides all other charges paid by me

³⁵ *Memorial for Robert Sheddan of Morrice-hill, late Merchant in Glasgow* (9 July 1756)

Advocates Library, Session Papers, Campbell's Collection, p. 2; *Memorial for James Montgomery – Sheddan [sic]; against Robert Sheddan* (23 July 1756), Advocates Library, Session Papers, Campbell's Collection, V, pp. 2-3.

ROB. SHEDDEN³⁶

This was the first time that Jamie appeared in any kind of public document or record. Jamie's status as 'a Virginian born Slave' was brashly and publicly asserted by Shedden, who clearly felt no shame in asserting his right of ownership of another human being in the pages of Scotland's leading newspapers. A good number of Scots either had interests in businesses concerned with the trade in goods produced by slaves or owned slaves themselves, and at this point few if any Scots opposed slavery: the movement to abolish the transatlantic slave trade would not exist for another generation. But while asserting Jamie's enslaved status, Shedden's advertisement also revealed how acclimatised Jamie has become: he had lived in Scotland for five years, spoke English well, had been baptized and had apprenticed with a joiner.

Moreover, Shedden admitted that Jamie carried with him a certificate given him by the Rev. John Witherspoon 'which calls him Jamie Montgomery.' These few words speak volumes about the many battles over ownership of a human that were inherent in slavery. By renaming Jamie as 'Shanker', Shedden had asserted absolute control over the young slave, not only by the act of renaming but also by the use of name not normally applied to people. Perhaps Shedden resented the fact that Jamie had appropriated a surname: at this point enslaved people in Virginia generally were recorded with only first names, for surnames gave lineage and legal identity to those whose status as property made such individuality impossible. We do not know why Jamie had chosen the name Montgomery, although we do know that it was a fairly common surname in Ayrshire. Perhaps the choice was inspired by Elizabeth Montgomerie, the young wife of John Witherspoon, in whose home Jamie had

³⁶ *The Glasgow Courant*, 3-10 May 1756, p. 3; *Glasgow Journal*, 3 May 1756, p. 3; *Edinburgh Evening Courant* (Edinburgh), 4 May 1756.

received religious instruction.³⁷

The certificate given by Witherspoon to Jamie Montgomery was typical of those given by ministers to parishioners who were moving, and by demonstrating religious identity and affiliation they could be utilised in other parishes as evidence of good Christian standing. Witherspoon had therefore validated Montgomery's belief that he was more than enslaved property. But property is what Jamie Montgomery was, at least as far as Robert Shedden was concerned. With no apparent sense of shame Shedden would later assert that he had 'paid *L. 56 Virginia Currency*' for Montgomery, as well as 'considerable Sums for his Apprentice Fee, his Board, Clothing, and the Expence of recovering him, &c,' Montgomery was not, Shedden believed, entitled to *Habeus Corpus*, 'for by *Magna Charta* only a Freeman is intitled thereto'.³⁸

We do not know how and why Montgomery made his way across Scotland to Edinburgh, but once there he was able to use his training and church certificate to secure work as a journeyman joiner in Peter Wright's workshop. Montgomery's apprenticeship had given him a skill and a professional identity, and thus a means by which to subsist. While we do not know what, if any, long-term plans Montgomery may have made, it appears that he thought that he could live, work and worship alongside Scotsmen, practising his craft and living as a free man. Perhaps, too, he thought of one day settling down, marrying and having a family, for other black men were able to marry into the community and make lives for themselves and their families in mid-eighteenth-century Scotland and England. These were

³⁷ J. Walter McGinty, *'An Animated Son of Liberty': A Life of John Witherspoon* (Bury St. Edmunds: Arena Books, 2012), p. 8.

³⁸ *Memorial for Robert Sheddan of Morrice-hill, late Merchant in Glasgow* (9 July 1756) Advocates Library, Session Papers, Campbell's Collection, p. 15, p. 17.

all aspirations that would have been unthinkable back in Virginia. Anti-slavery and the Underground Railroad did not yet exist, and an escaped slave would have had few prospects for work and an independent life. In Virginia, working alongside white craftsmen as a free and equal man, and marrying into white society, were illegal.

Unfortunately for young Jamie Montgomery, Shedden's reward of two guineas plus expenses proved his undoing. At the bottom of the original bill of sale for Jamie an officer of the Baillie Court named John Braidwood wrote a receipt for £2 2s, dated 13th May 1756, paid to him 'for apprehending one Negro Black boy named James Montgomerie'.³⁹ No doubt Shedden had brought the receipt with him to Edinburgh, as proof of his ownership of Jamie, and then had Braidwood write a receipt for the reward money on this same document.

Shedden petitioned the Edinburgh courts to have Montgomery returned to him, but the judges authorised Robert Gray, the procurator fiscal of their court, to act for Montgomery. Gray responded to Shedden's petition asking 'upon what principle can the pursuer pretend that *Jamie Montgomery* is a slave?'⁴⁰ But Edinburgh's Tolbooth jail was a dirty and disease-ridden place, and Jamie Montgomery died before his case could be heard.

Jamie Montgomery chose to escape only when he was threatened with a return to Virginia and a degrading of his perceived rights. He represents the experience of many of the enslaved children brought to Britain. While their passage to England and Scotland may have been highly traumatic, for some residence in Britain gave them an opportunity to develop a life with new opportunities. For Montgomery, familiar with the violence and work regimen of Virginia slavery, life as a skilled carpenter and church-member in Scotland afforded him a

³⁹ Bill of Sale, 9 March 1750 and receipt, 13 May 1756, NRS CS 234/5/3/12.

⁴⁰ *Memorial for James Montgomery – Sheddan [sic]; against Robert Sheddan* (23 July 1756), pp. 16-17. Advocates Library, Session Papers, Campbell's Collection, V.

taste of a kind of life that it would have been impossible for him to enjoy in Virginia.

In North America and the Caribbean a great many enslaved people ran away in order to reunite with family members or to find refuge within welcoming communities of African Americans, whether free or enslaved. In Britain, Jamie Montgomery and many others like him did not, indeed could not do this. By running away on the eve of his return voyage to Virginia, Jamie knew that successful escape meant that never again seeing kith and kin and eschewing any opportunity to find solace within African American society and culture. Some three thousand miles from his native Virginia, he instead sought something entirely different in Scotland. The great irony of the transportation of enslaved children to Georgian Britain is that it could be both traumatising *and* liberating: an act of great cruelty and psychological harm which might yet present opportunities to enslaved children and youths to create lives for themselves away from the racism, the violence and the horror of plantation slavery.