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Runaway Slave Advertisements in Antebellum Florida: A Retrospective

by Matthew J. Clavin

We are told that the slaves are contented and happy, faring a great deal better than northern laborers, and not wishing to leave their masters if they could. At the same time we see southern papers filled with advertisements of runaway slaves, offering great rewards for their apprehension. How strange is it that they should make such attempts, and hazard so much, to get away from contentment and happiness!¹

Reverend David Root (1836)

As the abolitionist minister's observation suggests, enslaved African Americans were neither content nor happy. Indeed, from day-to-day acts of covert resistance to brazen acts of open rebellion, slaves in the antebellum United States daily proved the lie of paternalism as even a cursory glance at the historiogra-

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1 Rev. David Root, *The Abolition Cause eventually triumphant. A Sermon, Delivered Before the Anti-Slavery Society of Haverhill, Mass.* (Andover, MA: Gould and Newman, 1836), 4.

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phy of the South over the last half-century attests. Nevertheless, for anyone still unconvinced of the American slaves' thirst for freedom, there is a large cache of historical records that obliterate the myth of black Southerners accepting their enslaved status passively. Published in independently owned newspapers in nearly every significant city and town in the antebellum South, runaway slave advertisements—which offered cash awards for the capture of fugitive slaves or notified slaveowners of the incarceration of suspected runaways—have changed the way students, teachers, and scholars understand slavery.

Anyone interested in the study of slavery and slave resistance in antebellum Florida will find that many of these announcements are now easily accessible online. In recent years, public universities and private institutions have opened their archives to larger audiences through the digitization of collections and their presentation on open access databases. As a result thousands of runaway slave advertisements can now be accessed with the click of a mouse; in fact, with a high-speed connection and a little patience, researchers can embark on an extraordinary virtual tour of the antebellum South without ever leaving home. The result is a breathtaking look at the fierce contest over slavery and freedom between black and white Southerners in the first half of the nineteenth century.²

Almost ten years ago, as part of my research for a book on fugitive slaves in Pensacola, *Aiming for Pensacola: Fugitives Slaves on the Atlantic and Southern Frontiers*, I began seeking out every extant runaway slave advertisement published in antebellum Florida.³ Though the search continues, I have thus far encountered hundreds of unique ads identifying more than 600 enslaved men, women, and children who fled from their owners, overseers, and employers in the four decades before the Civil War.⁴ Often published multiple times in

2 Many of the advertisements used for this essay are available at the following: Florida Digital Newspaper Library, University of Florida Digital Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida, Gainesville, <http://ufdc.ufl.edu/newspapers> and *Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers*, Gale Cengage Learning, http://www.cengage.com/search/productOverview.do?jsessionid=6AEED04B571051B08CA7DC7B0C9ABAA1?N=197+4294895417&Ntk=P_EPI&Ntt=1676709507209959652110620868681243297815&Ntx=mode%2Bmatchallpartial, (accessed January 16, 2016).

3 Matthew J. Clavin, *Aiming for Pensacola: Fugitive Slaves on the Atlantic and Southern Frontiers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

4 This number reflects only a portion of the number of actual runaways as most slaveowners never paid to advertise for their absconded property. In their separate studies of fugitive slaves in antebellum Florida, Larry E. Rivers and Donorena Harris used slave advertisements and other primary materials to identify

multiple newspapers, and frequently appearing on the front pages of Florida's most widely read newspapers, these advertisements reveal that fugitive slaves in antebellum Florida shared many of the same characteristics of their counterparts in every other part of the South. They were, like the more than 8,000 runaways documented in John Hope Franklin's and Loren Schweninger's *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation*, "young and old, black and mulatto, healthy and infirm, female and male, skilled and unskilled, urban and rural. They absconded from farms, plantations, urban residences, town houses, job sites, and riverboats."⁵ Still, despite the similarities, fugitive slaves in antebellum Florida distinguished themselves from their contemporaries by seeking refuge in, or escaping from, an immense and largely uninhabited wilderness bounded by water.

An examination of these advertisements highlights their potential as informational and pedagogical tools for students, teachers, and anyone else interested in discovering a nineteenth-century Florida that was much more dynamic and divisive than is generally understood. In this article, analysis will only scratch the surface of the significance of these invaluable historical artifacts; nevertheless, it will illuminate the persistence of slave flight on the outer reaches of the United States' southern slave society, while revealing several key insights about slavery and slave resistance on the Florida frontier.

Runaway slave ads demonstrate that despite the concerted efforts of slaveowners and their allies—which consisted of federal, state, and local law enforcement officials along with ordinary citizens—slaves across the South considered Florida a refuge in both the territorial and state periods. The flight of American slaves to Florida during the Spanish colonial era is well known due to the pioneering work of Jane Landers.⁶ Runaways also continued to travel there in the four decades of American rule before the Civil War, demonstrating that fugitive slaves ran southward to freedom far more frequently than the chroniclers of the Underground Railroad would have us believe.⁷ "Florida's history, geogra-

1,009 and 742 runaways respectively. Larry E. Rivers, *Rebels and Runaways: Slave Resistance in Nineteenth-Century Florida* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012); Donorena Harris, "Abolitionist Sentiment in Florida 1821-1860" (MA thesis, Florida State University, 1989), 99.

5 John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 210 (quotation), 328.

6 Jane Landers, *Black Society in Spanish Florida* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

7 Seminal studies of the Underground Railroad that emphasize northern routes of escape include William Still, *The Underground Railroad* (Philadelphia, PA:

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phy, and topography combined to set a unique state for its rebels and runaways,” Larry E. Rivers has noted. “Unlike other southern states, Florida boasted a matchless history as a runaway slave haven, the reality of which changed little over time, at least until the final countdown to the Civil War.”⁸

As was the case in the days of Spanish rule, Georgia was a common point of origin for fugitive slaves who escaped into antebellum Florida. On the Gulf Coast at Apalachicola in 1837, City Marshal John Endiman took into custody a handsome, thirty-year-old man named John, who belonged “to a Mr. Hurd, who lives in Hamilton, Harris county, Ga.”⁹ In 1840, St. Marks jailer Henry Lander reported the imprisonment of Bob, who said he belonged to “Julius Accles, Stuart county Georgia,” and Frederick, who confessed his owner was “Aaron Champion of Savannah, Georgia.”¹⁰ In 1844 in St. Augustine, jailer Joseph Andreu announced the incarceration of “TWO NEGRO MALE SLAVES,” belonging to “the Estate of James Moore of Brunswick, Georgia.”¹¹

Despite the distance of several hundred miles, Pensacola also attracted bondspeople from Georgia. William White arrived in the former West Florida capital in 1828 after absconding from his owner, “Sandy King, now deceased, of Indian Springs, Georgia.” According to information gleaned in a jailhouse interview, “Said negro ran away about a month since from the heirs of the deceased and made his way to this City.”¹² In a similar case in 1840, Pensacola’s jailer Peter Woodbine locked up Isaac, “aged about 22 years, four feet five inches high, of black complexion, stout and well made, says he belongs to Amos Whitehead living in Burke county, in the State of Georgia, and that he runaway in the month of May or June.”¹³

Similar evidence demonstrates the flight of large numbers of slaves from Alabama to Florida. Among those who failed in their attempts to escape from bondage and landed behind the bars of

People’s Publishing Company, 1871); William Siebert, *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1898); Fergus M. Bordewich, *The Underground Railroad and the War for the Soul of America* (New York: Harper Collins), 2005.

8 Rivers, *Rebels and Runaways*, 161.

9 “Taken Up,” *Apalachicola Gazette*, June 17, 1837.

10 “Runaways in Jail,” *Tallahassee Floridian*, August 15, 1840.

11 “To all whom it may concern,” *St. Augustine Florida Herald and Southern Democrat*, August 13, 1844.

12 “TAKEN UP,” *Pensacola Gazette*, July 1, 1828.

13 “NOTICE,” *Pensacola Gazette*, April 25, 1840.

one of Florida's local jails were "a negro man, who says his name is WIET, and that he belongs to Thomas Ware of Monroe, County, Ala;"¹⁴ Sancho, who said "he belongs to one Mr. Seeberry of Baldwin County, in the State of Alabama;"¹⁵ and Abraham, who "Says he belongs to Lawrence Rambo, who resides about 20 miles from Montgomery, Alabama."¹⁶ When Miles, Jiblo, and Bob arrived in the St. Marks jail on suspicion of running away, their return to bondage seemed certain; however, as James Denham reminds us, "during Florida's antebellum period, experience proved that few jails could hold those determined to escape."¹⁷ The following advertisement placed by the St. Marks jailer confirms Denham's observation: "\$150 REWARD. BROKE Jail at St. Marks, on the 15th inst. a Negro Boy called MILES, about 24 years of age, five feet ten inches high, belongs to James McNeill, of Montgomery, Alabama. Also two negroe fellows, named GIBLO and BOB, belonging to Thomas Frizzle, of Pike County, Alabama." Evidence on just how long the three fugitives remained at large is wanting, but it is tempting to imagine they accomplished the near impossible and became free.¹⁸

Because of its proximity to the Alabama border, Pensacola was an attractive destination for bondspeople from the southern and central parts of the state. When slaveowners from those areas placed ads in Florida papers, they often cited Pensacola as a likely destination for their runaways. For example, Jacob Merrel of Covington County, Alabama, offered \$25 for the apprehension of the "negro boy named ATHEY," who while leaving home "stole a horse from Valeton (Ala.) and is on his way to Pensacola."¹⁹ John Lamkin of Lowndes County, Alabama, wrote of Harry, who absconded the previous month, "He is supposed to be about Pensacola—or may be making his way towards that place, from Alabama."²⁰ James Conyers of Montgomery County, Alabama, wrote similarly of Sam and Shaderick, two runaways for whose apprehension he offered a \$20 reward. "The above Negroes will no doubt try to get to Pensacola

14 "Committed to Jail," *Pensacola Gazette*, February 13, 1830.

15 "Taken Up," *Pensacola Gazette*, July 16, 1836.

16 "Taken up," *Pensacola Gazette*, May 12, 1838.

17 James M. Denham, "A Rogue's Paradise": *Crime and Punishment in Antebellum Florida, 1821-1861* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997), 178.

18 "Committed to Jail," *Tallahassee Floridian*, July 21, 1838; "Brought to Jail," *Tallahassee Floridian*, July 28, 1838; "\$150 REWARD," *Tallahassee Floridian*, August 18, 1838.

19 "\$25 Reward," *Pensacola Gazette*, September 3, 1842.

20 "\$50 Reward," *Pensacola Gazette*, October 20, 1838.

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as Sam was once there as [a] runaway."²¹ Thomas Barnett of Mount Meigs, Alabama, insisted of Bill, Frank, and Virgil, "I have no doubt all the above Negroes will aim for Pensacola."²²

Florida's reputation as a safe haven extended all the way to Mississippi. After conveying two suspected runaways to the Pensacola jail in 1826, city constables learned that Josiah belonged to Isaac Harrel, "living in Green County, State of Mississippi," while Frank was a part of the estate of a recently deceased man named Amos Reed. The constables informed additionally, "The above negroes state that they ran away together from the same County about six months ago."²³ In an ad that ran in the *Tallahassee Floridian* every Saturday for six months in 1837, S. W. Barrington, the jailer of Jefferson County, Florida, announced the detention of "two fugitive slaves," including Bob of Leon County and Wesley, who claimed "he belongs to George Brown of Sumpter county, Mississippi."²⁴ The *Pensacola Gazette* advertised the incarceration of "a Negro man" calling himself Ranson for four months, noting, "he belongs to Jehu Evans, living in Winchester, Mississippi." Having made it as far as Pensacola, Ransom succeeded in breaking out of the jail on August 2. An exasperated city constable offered "a reward of six dollars (being what the law of the Territory allows, which it is probable would be increased by the owner of Ransom) and all necessary expenses, for the apprehension of said Negro and his delivery to me in Pensacola."²⁵

Given Florida's enduring tradition as a destination for American slaves, it may come as a surprise that the territory and state served just as frequently as a point of departure. There are instances of enslaved Floridians trying to reach the North or the West Indies, but they much more frequently aimed for parts of the South they recently called home. The finding is significant, for it suggests that time and again the primary goal of fugitive slaves from Florida and the rest of the slave South was reunification with loved ones rather than liberation. Among those hoping to rejoin friends and family was Byrd, a runaway from the public stables in Tallahassee in 1839, who, according to his employer, "was brought here by a trader named Ham, from Savannah, (where he had been confined

21 "\$20 REWARD," *Pensacola Gazette*, October 20, 1838.

22 "\$50 Reward," *Pensacola Gazette*, June 30, 1838.

23 "TAKEN UP," *Pensacola Gazette*, May 6, 1826.

24 "Jailer's Notice," *Tallahassee Floridian*, January 28—September 16, 1837.

25 "TAKEN UP," *Pensacola Gazette*, July 6, 1827, November 16, 1827.

in jail sometime) and to which place he probably has returned.”²⁶ After Charles, George, and Jacob ran from their employer on the St. Johns River in 1857, they garnered the following description in the *Jacksonville Florida News*: “These negroes were purchased in Charleston in February inst. and may be attempting to get back to Charleston or Savannah.” Though the chances of any slave returning home safely were never good, they were in this case particularly poor, for the boat the runaways appropriated “was leaking badly when they left.”²⁷

As victims of the domestic slave trade, which brought hundreds of thousands of slaves from the Upper South to the Lower South in the decades before the Civil War, enslaved Floridians often tried to reach destinations several hundred miles away. Among those hoping to reach the Upper South was Dick, a “daring artful villain” who, according to his owner, had illegally “procured free papers to enable to get to a free state, or to Virginia, where he was raised.”²⁸ Samuel Richard of Hickstown in Middle Florida, the region roughly halfway between Pensacola and St. Augustine, thought similarly of a twenty-four-year old runaway named Henry. “He had, when passing through Tallahassee, a forged pass until Christmas, which he will no doubt renew, as he can write a tolerable hand. He has relations in Richmond, VA, from whence he was purchased two year since, and to which place he will no doubt attempt to make his way.”²⁹

The expansion of racial slavery across the Old Southwest wreaked havoc on the antebellum slave family and advertisements include accounts of bondspeople risking their lives to reunite with mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, spouses, and children. As Ira Berlin noted “The Second Middle Passage, like the first, dismantled families, but not the idea of family.”³⁰ Some ads record families escaping together.³¹ In a typical case involving an enslaved family

26 “TWO HUNDRED AND FIFTY DOLLARS, REWARD,” *Tallahassee Floridian*, May 18, 1839.

27 “\$50 Reward,” *Jacksonville Florida News*, July 18, 1857.

28 “\$20 REWARD,” *Tallahassee Floridian*, June 1, 1833.

29 “\$20 Reward,” *Tallahassee Floridian*, January 2, 1841.

30 Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2003), 190.

31 The topic of the enslaved family has long enamored historians of the antebellum South. A sampling of the historiography includes: E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939); Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976); John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979);

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fleeing Florida, F. W. Sams of Palatka offered \$50 for the jailing of “my negro man Hampton, and his wife Nanny, with their 5 children.” The family disappeared “very mysteriously;” nevertheless, Sams believed they were headed to Jacksonville, “where they may be harbored for any length of time, or they may have been secreted on board some outward bound vessel.”³²

Slave families also fled toward Florida. In 1839, Charles Dubignon advertised in the *Jacksonville East Florida Advocate* the escape of a married couple from his plantation on Jekyll Island near Savannah, Georgia. The notice offered little information on Mary, other than her age of 35 and the loss of “her upper front teeth,” but it described her husband at length: “Charles is about 5 feet 9 or 10 inches in height, rather bald, and of erect carriage, and has the marks of an African on his cheeks—speaks the Minorcan and Seminole languages very well—is about 45 years of age and has a very prominent forehead for a negro, and deep set and reddish eyes.” Before offering a “liberal reward” for any information leading to the couple’s capture, Dubignon informed, “The above negroes will endeavor to make their way to ‘Musketo,’ in Florida, where Charles has formerly lived.”³³

Dubignon was only partly right. Six years later he published another advertisement for Charles, Mary, and this time added their teenaged daughter Fayette to the list of runaways. “These negroes all made their escape some few years since and there [sic] apprehended and confined for a time in the St. Augustine prison,” the planter explained. Consequently, he expected they were hiding in the vicinity of the city and offered a \$100 reward “for their delivery in the Fort at St. Augustine” or \$150 for their conveyance all the way to Savannah.³⁴

The fate of both of these enslaved families is unknown as local newspapers provided no additional information on them or, for that matter, most fugitive slaves. Yet there are exceptions. United States Marshal G. W. Hutchins jailed the bondsman Dick, his

Brenda E. Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999); Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

32 “Fifty Dollars Reward,” *Jacksonville Florida Republican*, September 26, 1850.

33 “RUNAWAY,” *Jacksonville East Florida Advocate*, October 12, 1839.

34 “\$150 Reward,” *St. Augustine Florida Herald and Southern Democrat*, June 24, 1845.

wife Margaret, and their five-year-old son, Charles, after they were “picked up at sea, in a canoe a few miles from St. Marks light, on the 12th ult. by the St. Marks Pilots.” Hailing from Marion County in East Florida, the family was “last from Cedar Keys, whither they had gone for the purpose of making their way to New Orleans.”³⁵ In Jacksonville, Elijah Higginbotham offered \$100 for the capture of “THREE negro slaves, a man, wife and child, the man and wife named John and Moll,” who had recently fled from the region. Though Higginbotham had “no knowledge where the negroes took their way,” he quickly regained his property.³⁶ A brief report published subsequently read, “The negroes of Mr. Elijah Higginbotham, which were advertised in our paper week before last, have been discovered and restored to him.”³⁷

Because the risks of capture were so great, enslaved families took extreme measures to increase their chances of reaching their destination successfully. When Edmund and his pregnant wife Rebecca absconded from Tallahassee, the duo demonstrated a fierce determination to remain out of the reach of their owner, Samuel Parkhill. The couple made it as far as Hawkinsville, Georgia, where they were apprehended and confined in the local jail. But their visit behind bars was brief, for Parkhill reported just days later, “Edmund fired the Jail and subsequently broke out, and now I understand is travelling towards Hamburg, S.C. through to Virginia, if possible.”³⁸ Cornelius Devane of Leon County asked readers to “LOOK OUT” for Loveless and his wife Pink, who were “trying to get back to North Carolina, where they were raised.” The couple took with them “three of their children—Isaac about 5 years old, Ellen about 3 years old and Jane about 5 months old.” Desperate to remain together and return home, they also took “an old shot-gun.”³⁹

Loveless and Pink were not unique in fleeing from slavery with arms. To the contrary, the pages of Florida’s antebellum newspapers are filled with descriptions of fugitive slaves carrying guns, pistols, knives, and other deadly weapons. The point is worth considering as it belies the widely accepted notion that running away was a non-violent form of resistance. Even Larry E. Rivers maintains

35 “Committed to Jail,” *Tallahassee Floridian*, September 9, 1848.

36 “Ran Away or Stolen—\$100 Reward,” *Jacksonville Florida Republican*, October 12, 1854.

37 “JACKSONVILLE,” *Jacksonville Florida Republican*, October 26, 1854.

38 “100 Dollars Reward,” *Tallahassee Floridian*, April 6, 1839.

39 “LOOK OUT,” *Tallahassee Floridian*, June 8, 1833.

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that slaves generally “recoiled at the idea of violent resistance.”⁴⁰ Yet, if we are to take the purchasers, printers, and publishers of runaway slave advertisements at their word, it is apparent that large numbers of fugitive slaves carried weapons to fend off anyone attempting to apprehend them.

For example, when the “Negro Man Slave, Jupiter,” fled from the house of the respected Pensacola doctor Eugenio Antonio Sierra, he “Took away with him a shot-gun and hatchet.”⁴¹ The “NEGRO FELLOW, named Edmond” fled Seth Tatum’s farm in southern Georgia and headed toward Florida, where, according to Tatum, he would seek employment as a carpenter “in some city or village.” Anticipating a confrontation with those who would return him to bondage, the twenty-five-year-old carpenter traveled with “a large horseman’s pistol, iron barred and brass mounted.”⁴² Edward, Ned, and Willis fled from Thomasville, Florida, in the opposite direction. According to their owner, John Gauley, they were headed “for some port where they will endeavor to get aboard some vessel.” To improve their chances of escaping, they took two horses and were “carrying with them two pistols, which they stole from the subscriber.”⁴³ Neither slaveowner Joseph Reese nor his business partner William Hammack were as knowledgeable of the personality of the “Mulatto fellow, named CHARLES,” as they claimed, for when the bondsman they described as having a “timid countenance” left Georgia for Florida, “he carried off a shot gun.”⁴⁴

Armed and dangerous, fugitive slaves repeatedly resorted to violence. In one remarkable advertisement, Florida Governor William Duval asked the public’s assistance in apprehending two runaways suspected of murdering a white man named George Roundtree. According to the notice, “The deceased was murdered in Leon County, near the line between Georgia and Florida.” The two fugitives were the “daring and bold villain” Crittendon and Joe, a blue-eyed mulatto who would “attempt to pass as a free man and may change his name.” On behalf of the territorial government of Florida, Duval offered \$100 for each runaway delivered to the authorities, while “the citizens of Tallahassee and vicinity” promised an additional \$205 along with “such further sums, as may

40 Rivers, *Slavery in Florida*, 219.

41 “Ten Dollars Reward,” *Pensacola Gazette*, January 25, 1828.

42 “Twenty Dollars Reward,” *Tallahassee Floridian*, October 6, 1838.

43 “\$50 Reward,” *Tallahassee Floridian*, March 30, 1839.

44 “50 Dollars Reward,” *Tallahassee Florida Intelligencer*, October 27, 1826.

be contributed by those who have not yet had an opportunity to subscribe."⁴⁵

Another fatal confrontation began on the Apalachicola River with the flight of Richard and Caesar from the proprietor of the steamship *Ellen*, John Jenkins, who reported the runaways were "well known by the men employed on all the steamers."⁴⁶ Richard and Caesar were at large for more than a year when they connected with "a negro boy named Hunter," who also worked on the vessels that plied the Apalachicola River.⁴⁷ One month after joining forces, the *Apalachicola Gazette* reported a violent clash between several hunters and the three runaways, along with "a gang of runaway negroes, whose camps they came upon unawares." No doubt in an effort to collect award money totaling more than \$100, the white hunters tried to apprehend the fugitives who seemed ready for a fight as they were "well armed with knives and pistols." In the "deadly struggle" that ensued, a "Mr. Herring was killed being shockingly cut and mangled; another of the party had his arm broke with a bludgeon, and was otherwise severely injured."⁴⁸ The murder sparked a statewide manhunt that lasted several weeks until Escambia County Sheriff Jesse Allen announced the capture of Caesar and Hunter as well as their incarceration in the Pensacola jail. What became of Richard is unknown.⁴⁹

The willingness of fugitive slaves to both kill and die for freedom is understandable given the depravity of the South's peculiar institution, something that runaway slave advertisements lay bare. Descriptions of runaways almost always mention scars rising on the shoulders and backs of enslaved people. Two advertisements placed by the Sheriff of Franklin County, C. J. Shepard, are representative. In the winter of 1844, Shepard reported the incarceration of an unnamed black suspected of running away from Harris County, Georgia. The prisoner, who carried "a badly written and worded pass," was roughly thirty-years-old with "a small scar over the right eye, one under the chin, and on each hand; and a large

45 "\$405 REWARD," *Tallahassee Floridian*, May 3, 1834.

46 "Forty Dollars Reward," *Apalachicola Gazette*, January 20, 1838.

47 "100 Dollars Reward," *Apalachicola Gazette*, April 15, 1839.

48 "Apalachicola," *Apalachicola Gazette*, May 11, 1839.

49 "Notice," *Pensacola Gazette*, June 22, 1839. According to court records in the State Archives of Florida and a reading of local newspapers, the territorial government of Florida executed Caesar for his part in the murder, while Hunter escaped the noose by freeing himself from jail just days before the scheduled execution. The case is described more fully in Clavin, *Aiming for Pensacola*, 93-94.

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scar on the left shoulder blade, back slightly scarred by the whip."⁵⁰ Four months later, Shepard confined a dark-skinned bondsman named Robert, who managed to make it more than 100 miles from eastern Alabama to Apalachicola before being apprehended. The five-foot-ten-inch tall bondsman of indeterminate age was "considerably scored on the back and legs with the whip."⁵¹

Without minimizing the marks left by leather whips, wooden paddles, and other instruments of torture, the physical tolls of slavery were not limited to the thick, raised scar lines that so many African Americans endured. In Tallahassee, C. P. Maher asked for assistance in locating Katy, an eighteen-year-old bondswoman who fled in the direction of St. Marks with "one of her front teeth broken out, and is somewhat lame in the ankle."⁵² Pensacola entrepreneur George Willis reported the escape of Smart, "a short mulatto fellow, lame in his left leg, having had his thigh broken."⁵³ Thomas Brincefield of Lee County, Georgia, described a "Negro Man" belonging to him, who had fled south into Florida, as "about 26 years old, five feet five or six inches high—stout built, dark complected, has had his Jaw bone broken near the chin by a blow."⁵⁴

Like scars and broken bones, runaways also bore the signs of amputated body parts, reminders of the punishment system intended to keep slaves in line. In the town of Bunkerhill, Florida, D. A. Gaillard hoped to regain possession of a bondsman named May, who was likely a repeat offender, given "one of his small toes is cut off."⁵⁵ In Pensacola, Marshal John Gonzalez announced the incarceration of a bondsman from Alabama named Martin, "about 25 years of age, six feet high, stout built, has the first joint of the forefinger of his right hand cut off."⁵⁶ A thirty-eight-year-old tailor named Leonard, who came to Florida from Georgia, had a "scar near each eye and two scars upon his head, and a part of his right ear cut off."⁵⁷ According to Pensacola constable, F. T. Comyns, a "Dark Mulatto Fellow" from Mobile, Alabama, who wound up in the city jail, had "both his ears cropped."⁵⁸

50 "Runaway Negro," *Apalachicola Commercial Advertiser*, March 11, 1844.

51 "Runaway Negro," *Apalachicola Commercial Advertiser*, June 29, 1844.

52 "RUNAWAY," *Tallahassee Floridian*, February 15, 1840.

53 "\$30 Reward," *Pensacola Gazette*, April 15, 1837.

54 "25 DOLLARS REWARD," *Tallahassee Floridian & Advocate*, January 6, 1831.

55 "RANAWAY," *Tallahassee Floridian*, May 18, 1839.

56 "Taken up," *Pensacola Gazette*, November 15, 1834.

57 "NOTICE," *Pensacola Gazette*, February 1, 1840.

58 "TAKEN UP," *Pensacola Gazette*, November 7, 1828.

Probably no other bodily relics exemplified the inhumanity that was at the root of racial slavery than brands. Practiced throughout Florida as well as the rest of the antebellum South in an effort to control the enslaved, branding epitomized what David Brion Davis has referred to as the “animalization” of enslaved people.⁵⁹ When the twenty-five-year-old blacksmith Harry absconded from Washington County, his owner, Myles Everett, thought the runaway was heading north to Alabama or Georgia. Everett described Harry as “a black, low, well set fellow, and has the letter O branded distinctly on each cheek.”⁶⁰ Of the three valuable bondsmen who ran away from Henry Mash in Jones County, Georgia, toward Tallahassee, one stood out. Glenn was “an African about forty-five years of age, five feet 7 or 8 inches high, spare made, some teeth out in front, branded on both sides of his face, H. M.” Whether the owner’s initials, which he had burned into the bondsman’s face, assisted in the runaway’s capture is unknown.⁶¹

The baseness of the act of branding suggests another powerful impulse at work among slaveholders. Often overlooked in scholarly discussions of fugitive slaves is the amount of anger and affront slaveowners felt every time an individual believed to be under their control took flight. But it should not be overlooked, for it helps explain the often savage response of otherwise respectable people. In an era when slaveowners maintained that a paternalistic, reciprocal relationship existed between them and the people over whom they claimed ownership, there is no doubt they were personally offended when slaves absconded.⁶² It is why so many slaveowners

59 David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), passim.

60 “FIFTY DOLLARS REWARD,” *Tallahassee Floridian*, July 5, 1834.

61 “\$100 Reward,” *Tallahassee Florida Intelligencer*, November 24, 1826.

62 The scholarly discussion of paternalism begins with Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Régime* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1929); Eugene D. Genovese, *The World the Slaveholders Made: Two Essays in Interpretation* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969); Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: the World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976); and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988). For some of the various critiques of the concept, see: Richard C. Wade, *Slaves in the Cities: The South, 1820-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964); Victoria E. Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social & Sexual Control in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Lacy Ford, “Reconsidering the Internal Slave Trade: Paternalism, Markets, and the Character of the Old South,” in *The Chattel Principle:*

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often acted irrationally and even against their own economic self-interests. Among them was the reputable St. Augustine lawyer and banker, A. Watson, who placed the following ad in the *Florida Herald & Southern Democrat* after one of his bondsmen took flight: “\$25 REWARD. RUNAWAY the 14th instant, my slave TOM. I will pay twenty five dollars reward to any person who will give me information where I can find him, or produce him to me dead or alive.”⁶³

Despite slaveowners’ savagery and undoubtedly in part because of it, bondspople continued to dash to, from, and across antebellum Florida. And while slaveowners in every southern state struggled to maintain control over their human property, those in Florida seemed particularly susceptible to the problem of runaway slaves for at least two significant reasons. First, nearly every enslaved person lived or worked near a body of water, which not only provided them access to a possible route of escape but additionally offered them an opportunity to acquire some of the skills and knowledge necessary to embolden them to make the attempt. These slaves possessed an “Atlantic worldview,” writes Larry E. Rivers, and thus understood “that freedom could become a reality beyond Florida’s shores.”⁶⁴ With this in mind, it is anticipated that along Florida’s coasts and waterways, where bondspople with names like “Port,” “Bayou,” “London,” and “Dublin,” were often described as being “used to the sea” or “accustomed to a sea-faring life,” fugitive slaves turned to the water to escape, belying the image of the barefooted runaway racing across the land with a bundle and stick slung over his shoulder.⁶⁵

The cases of groups of fugitive slaves embarking on the water with the assistance of northern abolitionists are often well-known. In 1844, for example, when Jonathan Walker failed to deliver seven bondsmen from the Pensacola Navy Yard to the Bahamas in his whaleboat, he became a cause célèbre of the American and British abolitionist movements after being branded in the palm of his

Internal Slave Trades in the Americas, ed. Walter Johnson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004); Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013)

63 “\$25 REWARD,” *St. Augustine Florida Herald & Southern Democrat*, April 2, 1841.

64 Rivers, *Rebels and Runaways*, 64.

65 “RAN AWAY,” *Pensacola Gazette*, November 5, 1825; “RUNAWAY,” *Pensacola Gazette*, June 8, 1822; “One Hundred Dollars Reward,” *Tallahassee Floridian*, January 2, 1836; “Notice,” *Jacksonville Florida News*, July 6, 1850; “\$50 REWARD,” *Tallahassee Florida Intelligencer*, October 27, 1826; “Fifty Dollars Reward,” *Tallahassee Floridian*, March 25, 1837.

hand “S.S.,” which stood for Slave Stealer.⁶⁶ Walker’s was only one of countless collective efforts of fugitive slaves to escape from antebellum Florida on the water; however, most of these attempts failed to draw much attention from contemporary media and later historians. Because such attempts did not involve the efforts of northern abolitionists, they lacked the sensationalism of Walker’s endeavor.

Just a year before Walker’s historic journey, the enslaved crew of the U. S. transport schooner *Walter M.* and several of their companions fled from St. Augustine on a vessel loaded with a compass and spy glass, bread, watermelons, pork, and water. “It appeared, beyond a doubt,” reported one local newspaper, “that the runaways had stolen the boat and put out to sea for a long voyage.” City officials sought the runaways’ capture in Florida, Georgia, or South Carolina, even though some suspected the seven bondsmen were headed for the Bahamas as at least one of the fugitives was an island native. Also among the runaways was “the notorious *Andrew* who made some noise in the beginning of our Indian troubles.” The advertisement that offered \$350 for the apprehension of Andrew, William, Robert, Joe, Jim, Casper, and Henry read, “Said Slaves went off in a whaleboat, belonging to the pilots of this port. They were seen last night about ten miles north of this city, and it is supposed they went to sea immediately thereafter.” As was typical of the time and place, local observers seemed genuinely shocked by the slaves’ daring for “With one or two exception they were thought to be most faithful negroes and stood high in the estimation of their owners.”⁶⁷ Three years before this episode, Abraham Brown, George, and William Isaac fled from a sawmill on Barkers Island near the St. John’s River. Wearing striped blue jackets and carrying blankets and cooking equipment in preparation for a long trip, the bondsmen “left the mill in a whale boat, part of the left side broken in.”⁶⁸ Given that these collective efforts to escape from Florida on the water occurred while Walker made Pensacola his home, it is

66 Clavin, *Aiming for Pensacola*, 124-140; Bordewich, *The Underground Railroad and the War for the Soul of America*, 268-271.

67 “Negroes Absconded,” *St. Augustine Florida Herald and Southern Democrat*, July 31, 1843; “THE RUNAWAY NEGROES” and “350 DOLLARS REWARD,” *St. Augustine Florida Herald and Southern Democrat*, August 7, 1843. For an enlightening overview of this case and the resulting international dialogue, see Irvin D. S. Winsboro and Joe Knetsch, “Florida Slaves, the ‘Saltwater Railroad’ to the Bahamas, and Anglo-American Diplomacy,” *Journal of Southern History* LXXIX, No. 1 (February 2013): 51-78.

68 “RUNAWAY,” *Jacksonville East Florida Advocate*, June 16, 1840.

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highly probable that the egalitarian northern ship captain and the fugitive slaves who boarded his boat drew inspiration from them.

The second factor underlying the continuance of slave flight in antebellum Florida was the presence of large numbers of free people who resided on the geographic and economic margins of the United States' southern slave society and thus had nothing to gain by assisting slave owners in their never-ending war against those they held in bondage. As a result, fugitive slaves frequently had help. Aid from Native Americans, along with their African American allies, who dwelled in the woods and swamps of the Florida wilderness, are well-known to anyone familiar with the history of the Seminole Wars. But there were also people of European descent from the northern United States or other parts of the Atlantic world who helped bondspople abscond.⁶⁹

In most cases, identifying these anonymous poor white farmers, laborers, sailors, and seamen is nearly impossible since slaveowners themselves usually had no idea who it was that aided and abetted fugitive slaves. Confused and frustrated, the slaveowners often resorted to name-calling. In the *Tallahassee Floridian*, William Reid offered \$100 for the capture of the bow-legged runaway named Wiley and another \$100 for the "villainous white person" who encouraged the "boy" to run away.⁷⁰ By comparison, Seth Tatum offered only \$50 for the apprehension of the "villainous white man" who assisted his bondsman in escaping, while George Willis offered a measly \$15 for the "worthless white man" who helped a twenty-five-year-old mulatto escape from Willis's lumberyard.⁷¹ After Sam, Joe, Bob, Bryan, Rachel, and Tom absconded from Jefferson County, their owner K. M. Moore Lipona offered \$20 for the capture of each of the first five runaways and \$100 for Tom, who had absconded three years earlier. As for the "white scoundrel" who "induced them off," Lipona offered \$100 for any information leading to his prosecution.⁷²

69 For assistance in escaping from Florida and the rest of the antebellum South see Clavin, *Aiming for Pensacola*; Stanley Harrold, *Subversives: Antislavery Community in Washington, D.C., 1828-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002); and David Cecelski, *The Waterman's Song: Slavery and Freedom in Maritime North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

70 "My negro boy WILEY," *Tallahassee Floridian*, June 1, 1839.

71 "Twenty Dollars Reward," *Tallahassee Floridian*, October 6, 1838; "\$30 Reward," *Pensacola Gazette*, August 4, 1838.

72 "\$300 Reward," *Tallahassee Floridian*, March 13, 1847.

Cases involving named co-conspirators are fascinating to consider as they often raise more questions than they answer about the white Southerners who tried to help their enslaved black friends, neighbors, and co-workers become free. In Gadsden County, William McCall suspected the twenty-five-year-old mulatto Jesse was “induced to go off by the persuasions of a white man who calls himself William Sitzar, who is a blacksmith by trade, and has been in Quincy for some time past, but left the place about the time that Jesse absconded.”⁷³ An enslaved Georgia blacksmith and carriage smith named Ruben, who may have been headed to Florida, likewise received support and assistance from a nefarious white man. According to his corporate owner, the “very intelligent” and “superior workman” absconded “with a man by the name of David McDowell, an Irishman, [who] is very tall, with large whiskers and dark hair—supposed to be about forty years of age.”⁷⁴

Like workshops and factories, jails were potentially subversive sites in antebellum Florida as they united men across racial and ethnic lines. When Governor Richard Call offered \$400 for the apprehension of Hugh Duncan and Alek, two prisoners who had escaped from the Jefferson County jail after burning a hole through the building’s floor, he ordered “all magistrates and peace officers to be vigilant in the apprehension of the said offenders.” Duncan was a white man, “about five feet 10 inches high, dark skin, black hair and eyes, thin visage, and about thirty years old, was originally from the lower part of North Carolina.” Alek, a “Negro man Slave is about five feet two or three inches high, thick set, quite black, of a forbidden countenance, a down look, and when addressed seldom looks up.”⁷⁵ It is apparent that the two fugitives succeeded in avoiding capture for at least three months, because that is how long Call’s reward offer appeared prominently in the classified pages of the *Tallahassee Floridian*.⁷⁶

Members of the United States military stationed in Florida also helped bondspeople escape from slavery.⁷⁷ When Nelson, Jinney, Judy, and Mary fled from the Oscilla Ferry on the St. Augustine River, suspicion fell immediately on two soldiers residing at Fort Roger Jones. One of the soldiers quickly returned to the fort.

73 “\$130 Reward,” *Pensacola Gazette*, July 17, 1830.

74 \$1000 REWARD,” *Pensacola Gazette*, March 19, 1836.

75 “Four Hundred Dollars Reward,” *Tallahassee Floridian*, July 21, 1838.

76 “Four Hundred Dollars Reward,” *Tallahassee Floridian*, October 20, 1838.

77 Russell F. Weigley, *History of the United States Army* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 168.

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The other, however, remained at large for several days before the owner of the absconded slaves placed an advertisement in the *Tallahassee Floridian*. According to the unusually long notice, the enlisted man's name was Francis Ashley, "aged about 23 years. Height, five feet four inches, complexion dark, eyes hazle, hair black, and born in Canada, speaks very bad English, owing to his French descent." Cornelius Beazley, who recently purchased the slaves from a well-known trader in Tallahassee, believed that with Ashley's assistance, "the said negroes will endeavor to go back to South Carolina, or be working their way towards Pensacola or New Orleans." The slaveowner concluded his advertisement with a warning that was typical throughout the antebellum era: "All Masters or Captains of vessels are cautioned against taking said negroes off, at the peril of the law."⁷⁸

This account of a small group of enslaved men and women fleeing towards the Gulf Coast, seeking reunification with loved ones elsewhere in the Deep South, with the assistance of a foreign-born enlisted man, does not fit squarely into the standard account of fugitive slaves and the Underground Railroad. Nevertheless, it is typical of what one can expect to find when reviewing runaway slave advertisements published in Florida's antebellum newspapers. More than any other contemporary primary source, the ads lift the curtain on slavery in the Old South, revealing at least two important ideas worth remembering about antebellum Florida. First, they reinforce the fact that slavery was a ruthless economic and social system in which white people bought, sold, and traded black men, women, and children with impunity and then hunted them like animals when they tried to escape from enslavement and enjoy the same rights and privileges that free people had enjoyed for generations. Second, they demonstrate that resistance to this inhumane labor system was extraordinarily widespread, and that antebellum Florida, like the rest of the South, was an expansive battlefield on which black and white people contested and fought over the meanings of freedom and slavery daily. It would be wise to continue to collect, study, and circulate these advertisements as they provide important insight to many of the problems of the past and just might offer some clues as to how to deal with some of the problems of race and racial injustice we are likely to face in the future.

78 "\$100 REWARD," *Tallahassee Floridian*, June 8, 1839.