

# The Alexandria Chronicle

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## Runaway Slaves in Northern Virginia in the Early 19<sup>th</sup> Century

By Dan Hicks

**Benjamin Baker** When the slave Benjamin Baker ran away from his master, Thomas Latimer of Prince George's County, Maryland, Latimer posted an advertisement in local newspapers seeking assistance in returning Baker to him. As usual in such an advertisement, Latimer listed physical and behavioral features which might help identify Baker: In his late 20s, Baker was about five feet six inches tall, "slender made, somewhat bow legged, has a large foot for his size, has a scar on his forehead near the edge of his hair occasioned by the kick of a horse, his teeth decayed and one of them out."<sup>1</sup>

Latimer noted that Baker was "somewhat impertinent to strangers." Along with these details, Latimer speculated about where Baker might have run. Unsurprisingly, Latimer expected Baker to have fled northward—but not to a free state or to Canada. Instead, Latimer thought that "in all probability [Baker] is lurking in or about the City of Washington, if not, it is likely he has gone to Baltimore." Available evidence suggests that Latimer did not believe Baker would sojourn briefly in the District or Baltimore en route to points farther North. The ad describing Baker was published in the February 23, 1816 *Alexandria Gazette* and noted that Baker had escaped in July of the previous year, giving the fugitive more than enough time to have crossed the Mason-Dixon Line, were that his intention. Latimer did offer rewards for Baker's apprehension in Philadelphia or New York City, but considered it less likely that the fugitive had fled to one of those cities, where slavery was on the path toward extinction, than to Baltimore or Washington, where slavery was still entrenched.

Why would Latimer have expected Baker to "lurk" in the Upper South rather than travelling a few dozen miles

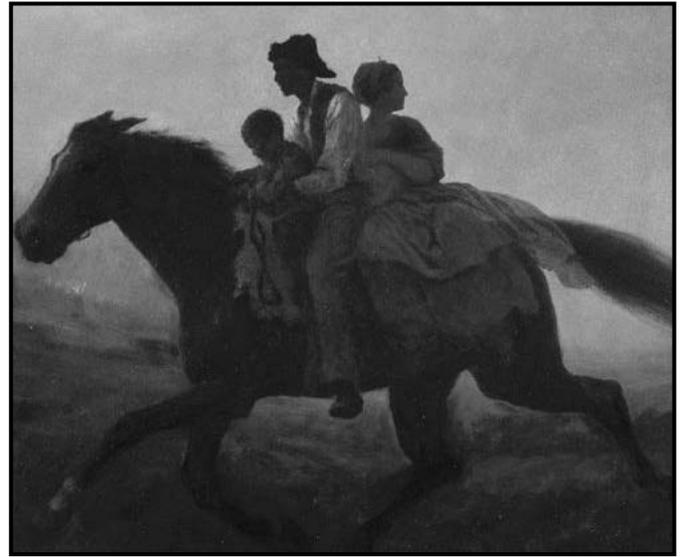
more into the free state of Pennsylvania? The answer presents challenges to popular understandings of slavery and particularly of the acts and goals of slaves from the region around the national capital who ran away from their masters in the early 1800s. Newspaper notices of fugitive slaves provide an enlightening glimpse into the society of northern Virginia in the early 1800s. These advertisements show that slaves were members of sprawling communities of family and friends encompassing a set of neighborhoods roughly equivalent to today's greater Washington area. Their connections centered on Alexandria and the Federal District (of which Alexandria was a part at that time), encompassing what we would now call the Greater Washington-Metro Area. These networks, moreover, overlapped on their edges with others, centered on other cities such as Richmond and Baltimore. (A cursory examination of ads from the Lower South suggests similar patterns there, with Charleston, for instance, serving as a hub for slave communities in South Carolina.<sup>2</sup>) Masters in northern early nineteenth-century Virginia looked for their slaves in northern Virginia, or the Federal District and Maryland, often identifying specific towns or even estates where they expected their runaway slaves could be found; they did not usually search for them in regions farther north.<sup>3</sup>

**The Underground Railroad** The mythology of the Underground Railroad and the celebration of romantic figures such as Harriet Tubman have shaped, to a degree even distorted, the way we remember runaway slaves. The prevailing image may be a young couple and their baby reaching freedom in the North by following the

North Star (perhaps, though rather improbably, escaping on horseback, as in Eastman Johnson's famous painting, *A Ride for Freedom – The Fugitive Slaves*), taking advantage of the assistance of “conductors” and “station masters” along the way. This popular myth is not without foundation, though more accurately depicts conditions in the late antebellum period than conditions of the early 1800s. Even in the 1850s, however, fugitive slaves who ran away often did not head for the northern states or for Canada, nor were they assisted by members of the Underground Railroad. Rather than relying on an anonymous network of abolitionist strangers, fugitives, when they received assistance, generally received it from friends and family members in their immediate vicinity and sometimes, if they could make it that far, in distant communities in other parts of a state or in a different state. When they ran, slaves often had a more concrete goal than the abstract desire for freedom which, in the popular imagination, propelled them to flight. Slaves often ran from their masters not in pursuit of liberty per se, but rather to return to their loved ones—friends and family from whom they had been separated.

Note: *Slaves ran away for a variety of reasons. Historians have long recognized that paramount among such reasons was a desire to reunite with loved ones. Some slaves did, of course, attempt to escape from slavery permanently, but they were the exception rather than the rule, particularly in the early nineteenth century. Slaves sometimes fled from their masters in order to escape a whipping or other punishment—surprisingly, instead of incensing masters further, this practice seems occasionally to have worked as a sort of informal safety valve, allowing passions on both sides to cool. In such cases, masters sometimes let it be known, in print or through word of mouth, that a slave who returned willingly would be forgiven. Slaves also often took flight for brief periods to spend a night or a weekend with a loved one on another estate; Frederick Douglass, separated from his mother at a young age, noted that among his only memories of her were having her lay beside him late at night, departing early in the morning long before the sun came up. Masters often seem to have tolerated such brief excursions, as long as they did not intrude on a slave's production. For scholarly assessments of runaway slaves, see Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), 109-124; Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 648-657; and John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (USA: Oxford University Press, 1979), 192-222.*

Permanent escape from the system of slavery required more than just a desire to be free—it required tools such



*A Ride for Freedom -- The Fugitive Slaves* by Eastman Johnson

as literacy, sailing skills, or light skin which only a handful of slaves possessed. Such escape also would likely entail leaving friends and loved ones behind; yet reuniting with friends and loved ones was the precise goal of many fugitives.<sup>4</sup> As a result, fugitive slaves in the first two decades of the 1800s often remained within slaveholding states, where their loved ones were most likely to be found.

Historians have long noted that escaped slaves did not always or even primarily flee to the free states of the North. That such was the case is less surprising upon reflection than it might be at first glance, especially for slaves of the early 1800s. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, slavery was legal throughout most of the United States—the institution was abolished in less than a handful of New England states. For example, although Massachusetts abolished slavery in 1783, most of the other northern states adopted policies of gradual emancipation, particularly from 1800 to 1820. Slavery lingered in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania. Other New England states implemented policies of gradual emancipation, generally giving freedom to slaves born after a certain date once they reached a certain age, while leaving people born prior to the date slaves for life (though later legislation sometimes freed them as well); but such gradual policies took decades to achieve full effect and, at the dawn of the nineteenth century, slavery remained legal in all of the Mid-Atlantic States. As a result, an enslaved Virginian in 1800 had little to gain by running to Pennsylvania or New York rather than to Alexandria or Baltimore.

The number of free states would grow over the course of the first half of the nineteenth century, as gradual emancipation whittled slavery down to negligible amounts in existing states, and new states emerged in which slavery was prohibited from the beginning.

Nonetheless, anti-black sentiment prevailed throughout the north and west, and many midwestern states adopted laws which restricted or outright prohibited immigration and settlement by free blacks. Moreover, all states, whatever their stance on slavery within their own borders, were required by the Constitution to return fugitive slaves from other states to their masters (or at least to allow federal authorities to do as much). Finally, during the first quarter of the nineteenth century there was little in the way of organized antislavery anywhere in the country. Until sectional tensions over slavery flared up during the controversy over Missouri's proposed statehood in 1819, exacerbated twelve years later with the publication of the first issue of William Lloyd Garrison's radical abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator*, southern planters seem to have had little cause for complaint about fugitive slaves finding safe haven in the north.

**Newspaper Notices** *The Alexandria Gazette* and *National Intelligencer* frequently ran notices for runaway slaves. Usually their ads focused on the aspects of the runaways that the masters knew well. For example, in the January 10, 1812 *Alexandria Gazette* "Fortune" was described as "sensible and artful, and I should not be surprised at his imposing on many people from the art and cunning he possesses."<sup>5</sup>

Another notice in the *Alexandria Gazette* that month offered more implicit acknowledgments of a fugitive's intelligence, as when Richard Stuart ended a brief review of the clothing worn by the fugitive Jerry by noting that, "There is no doubt but he will change his clothes; it is therefore thought unnecessary to describe them more particularly."<sup>6</sup> Similarly, a notice in the *National Intelligencer*, April 1810, noted about a runaway from Charles County, Maryland, that "his dress when he eloped from me was country cloth, but he has taken his Sunday clothes with him."<sup>7</sup>

Skin color was noted as well. Port Tobacco resident William Chapman described his slave Eliza's complexion as "so much fairer than that of Mulattoes generally, that unless she is particularly examined, she may easily pass for a free white woman."<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Samuel Owings of Maryland described his escaped slave Jack as "so light a mulatto that he might pass for a white lad, unless particularly noticed." Jack's hair was "nearly as straight as a white persons, and of a dark auburn color," and the only physical indication of his African ancestry which Owings could specify was a "settled blackness round his eye-lids that denotes his origins."<sup>9</sup>

Such "white slaves," so to speak, as Eliza and John could aspire to pass themselves off not as "free blacks" but as whites which was the only true route to freedom.

All black persons were slaves unless they carried writ-

ten proof to the contrary. The law assumed their enslavement as an axiomatic fact. It was not just that free blacks might be trapped in slavery by unscrupulous whites, or that they faced a steep burden of proof to establish their liberty if apprehended; rather, legally, there was no such thing as a free black held on suspicion of being a slave. Once apprehended by an officer of the law without papers proving their freedom, blacks instantly became, effectively, slaves, and their chances of regaining their freedom practically disappeared.



**The Fugitive**

**Caption reads:** This picture of a poor fugitive is from one of the stereotype cuts manufactured in this city for the southern market, and used on handbills offering rewards for runaway slaves. July 1837. Image, Wikipedia, from *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom* by Wilbur Henry Siebert, Albert Bushnell Hart, Edition: 2, Macmillan, 1898.

Newspapers provide evidence of the precariousness of freedom for free blacks. Authorities assumed that all black persons were slaves unless those persons could provide documentation proving otherwise; as a result, any black person walking public streets stood the risk of being arrested as a fugitive slave regardless of his or her actual legal status.. Sheriffs and jailers who arrested or held black strangers published descriptions of the apprehended persons in order to offer masters an opportunity to reclaim them. Sometimes, the captured person seems to have identified a master, as when David Thomas, confined in Alexandria, was said to be the property of a Mrs. Digges of Prince George's County in Maryland, or when "John Gelat," held in the Alexandria County jail, identified himself as the "property of Mr. Edward Ambter, of Jamestown."<sup>10</sup>

But frequently, arrested persons insisted that they were free, though seemingly to no avail. The wording of sher-

iffs' notices reveals the extent to which slave status was accepted as an established fact. A man calling himself Abram Maggs, for instance, ended up in an Alexandria jail. Though the jailer, James Campbell, noted that Maggs "says he was born free, in Middlesex county, Virginia," Campbell followed that claim immediately with the statement that, "The owner is requested to come, prove his property, pay charges, and take him away."<sup>11</sup> Notices such as this one posted by Campbell called on masters to bring proof of ownership and regain their property; the notices did not invite persons with knowledge of the imprisoned person's status to bring forth evidence that the person was, in fact, free. If no master claimed the imprisoned person in due time, the notices warned, the person would be dealt with "as the law directs"—that is, he or she would be auctioned away.

Free persons who lost those papers, or left home without them, placed themselves in grave jeopardy of being re-enslaved. Slaves who managed to acquire passes and similar papers, whether forged, purloined, or obtained from a free person, gained another important advantage in the pursuit of freedom. Notices of fugitives sometimes made reference to ill-begotten passes. One notice, for instance, noted that a fugitive had obtained a pass from a free black who had passed away. Other notices warned that a slave might forge a pass for himself, one of the reasons why slaveholders in general were so concerned about preventing the spread of literacy among their slaves. One Richard Stuart, for instance, expected that his escaped slave Jerry "has produced a pass, or a forged certificate of his freedom, as he went from a neighborhood where there are many free negroes who write, and from whom he might very readily obtain a copy of their pass, or certificate of freedom." Significantly, this Jerry was one of the few fugitives who was "confidently expected... [to] endeavor to get to some of the northern or eastern states."<sup>12</sup> A forged pass or certificate made such a prospect far more feasible for Jerry than it was for most fugitives.

Whites did assist blacks to escape a master sometimes. Some whites benefitted from assisting individual fugitives. Notices of fugitives recognized fissures in the façade of white unity—many of the notices concluded by asserting that, "All masters of vessels and other persons, are hereby forewarned from harboring or employing the above-described Negro Man, at their peril, or under the severest penalties of the law."<sup>13</sup> The warnings in notices in some instances indicated a fear that white people would aid fugitives for altruistic purposes—a notice about a twenty-five year-old woman who escaped with an eight month-old baby included the standard warning that "Masters of vessels and others are cautioned against harboring or carrying her off," yet a young woman and especially a suckling baby would have been a nuisance at best

*Ten Dollars Reward.*

**Ran away from the subscriber**  
in Prince William County on the 24th of  
July last, a Negre Woman named **CLARY**,  
with a male child about four months old :—  
She formerly belonged to the estate of John  
Gibson, she is about 25 years of age, very  
black, about five feet six inches high—she  
took with her sundry cloathing which I can-  
not describe ; it is expected she is harbored  
in Alexandria by a free sister who resides  
there and whose husband's name is Jesse  
Jennings. The above reward will be paid  
for securing her in any jail so that I get  
her again, and reasonable charges if brought  
home.

**Simon Luttrell,**

Masters of vessels and others are cautioned  
against harboring or carrying her off.  
August 10. eo7t\*

*Alexandria Daily Gazette Commercial & Political, August 20, 1811*

on an early nineteenth-century ship.<sup>14</sup> A captain who allowed her on board would have gained nothing materially from doing so, and so presumably would have acted from selfless motives.

Nonetheless, those whites who aided fugitives did not necessarily do so out of the kindness of their hearts. Fugitives with valuable skills to offer had an advantage in seeking help from whites, and notices suggest especial concern on the part of masters that such slaves would trade their art for protection. John Threlkeld of Georgetown, for instance, noted that his escaped slave Sam was a "GOOD BLACKSMITH" who "probably will endeavor to hire as a free man." Sam's skills were so pronounced as to make Threlkeld desire his return even though Sam was "apt to get drunk; and very quarrelsome." That he was nonetheless "very active and healthy," and presumably therefore quiet profitable, made Sam a piece of property which Threlkeld was loathe to let escape.<sup>15</sup>

Most fugitive slaves, though, were in a vulnerable position, which white persons were in a position to exploit. In one extreme case, a white man allegedly "stole" a fugitive from jail and took him about the state leasing out his services. The fugitive belonged to a master from South Carolina from whom he had escaped while the master was en route to New Orleans. The fugitive ended up in what seems to have been a Milledgville jail in Georgia (the notice is not clear), from which he was removed "by a Mr. Edward Dolley, who took him to Georgetown... & pawned him for 60 dollars to a Mr. Adams, who hired him to a Mr. Lawrison [?] to work a boat on the Potomac."<sup>16</sup> If true, this account would have involved three different men exploiting a purloined slave

for personal gain. More commonly, perhaps, whites could employ fugitives while holding over the fugitives' heads the threat of surrendering them to the authorities if the fugitives acted out or complained. Such a practice was probably most common on seagoing ships.

**At Sea** The ocean represented, essentially, a lawless frontier. Able-bodied male fugitives likely stood a better chance of gaining their freedom by entering the rolls of a merchant or naval vessel than by running to a northern state. The Dumfries jailer John Fewel, pursuing the fugitive Baccus who had escaped from his custody, noted that Baccus “had been runaway 2 or 3 years and been following the water, has been to the West Indies, and will likely try to get on board of some vessel.”<sup>17</sup>

Sea captains of the early nineteenth century often hired men who made flimsy claims to false identities—during the Napoleonic Wars, in particular, American captains took on board tens of thousands of British sailors who pretended to be Americans, a practice which aggravated tensions between the United States and Great Britain and contributed significantly to the outbreak of the War of 1812. Such sailors often acquired “protections,” legal documents issued by a variety of authorities in the United States, local and federal, which purported to prove that the bearer was an American citizen. A healthy illicit market in these protections placed them in the hands of thousands of British subjects who were not and had no intention of ever becoming Americans. Captains recognized that many of the men holding protections were not, in fact, Americans, but the documents, fraudulent though many obviously were, offered an excuse to ship needed hands, while also giving the captain leverage over the faux “American” if he acted unruly, as sailors of the time had the tendency to do. Captains seem to have followed a similar practice with regard to fugitive slaves who claimed to be free men.

As the historian W. Jeffrey Bolster has shown, blacks were overrepresented among early nineteenth-century seafarers, and sailing was one of the few occupations in which blacks could compete on a somewhat equal footing with whites.<sup>18</sup>

Some fugitives took advantage of this situation, and masters often expressed more concern that their “property” would gain a berth on a seagoing vessel than that a fugitive would escape to the North. The protections which allowed British sailors to pass for Americans could also allow fugitives to pass for free men—Frederick Douglass famously used a free black sailor’s protection to escape to the North. Indeed, the similarities between sailors on the high seas and fugitive slaves on public highways played an important role in bringing the United States and Britain to war in 1812: Whites from the South and the West resented the fact that American sailors who

plied the oceans had to carry papers proving themselves to be Americans and protecting them from British impressment, just like free blacks in their states had to carry papers proving themselves to be free and protecting them from enslavement.

Note: *It is worth noting here the case of a man named John Simpson, who claimed to be a free man living in Providence, Rhode Island, who was somehow “taken by the British and carried to Norfolk,” from whence he managed to make his way as far north as Fairfax, where he ended up in jail, awaiting a master to claim him before the authorities sold him into slavery. If Simpson was honest about his plight, then a war to prevent American sailors from being impressed into the service of the British Navy may well have resulted in a free American being enslaved by the legal authority of an American state. Alexandria Gazette, December 23, 1813.*

Escape to the high seas, however, seems to have been an option adopted by only a handful of fugitives from northern Virginia, based on notices in the newspapers. As with flight to the North, escape on the seas offered opportunity, but also uncertainty. The popular image of the fugitive slave seeking freedom at the end of the Underground Railroad treats freedom as an end in itself, and tends to ignore the difficulties which escaped slaves would face even in a free land. Where would they live? What would they eat? How would they earn their keep? Such questions are often overlooked today, but could not have been far from the minds of fugitives themselves.

**Geographic Patterns** A review of early nineteenth-century newspapers from the Washington area reveals interesting geographical patterns related to the slave system—and shows that fugitive slaves in the early 1800s stayed within the Federal District area rather than fleeing from it. For a start, masters in pursuit of fugitives generally posted notices in one or perhaps two newspapers rather than broadcasting notices widely. If a fugitive remained absent for several weeks, the master continued to post the same notice in the same newspaper or newspapers instead of publishing notices in an ever-growing circle of journals. This practice suggests that masters expected fugitives to remain close by—otherwise, there was little to be gained from publishing the same notice in the same local newspaper week after week, as was often the case.

Moreover, masters from the same region often used the same newspapers to post notices of escaped slaves. On the one hand, that is hardly surprising—where else would a Georgetown master start a search for a fugitive slave than in a Washington newspaper? On the other hand, the limits of searches sometimes seemed arbitrary—notice regarding fugitives from western or southeastern Virginia occasionally appeared in Alexandrian

newspapers, less frequently in Washington newspapers. Masters in the Federal District, its Maryland suburbs, and Fairfax County often posted notices in Alexandrian newspapers; conversely, Baltimore masters routinely posted notices in Federal District newspapers, but not in Alexandrian ones, despite the close proximity. Baltimoreans perhaps calculated that an Alexandrian reader would read a Washington journal along with, or in preference to, an Alexandrian newspaper, and so posting notices in Washington and Alexandria newspapers would be a waste of money.

Certainly, monetary considerations figured prominently in fugitive slave notices. The notices offered cash rewards to whosoever returned the fugitive to the master. The amount of the reward ranged from a low of ten dollars to a high of one hundred. The average reward totaled around twenty-five or thirty dollars. (By way of comparison, a slave couple in their early thirties along with their seven-month old child was offered for sale together for seven hundred dollars.) Combined with expenses accrued in the return of a fugitive, which masters usually agreed to pay, such rewards represented a significant sum of money. Perhaps not surprisingly, therefore, a common adjective describing fugitives was “likely,” a vague, catchall term of approbation which could mean “strapping,” “hale,” “hearty,” “pleasing,” or any number of similar attributes. In the context of the notices, the best synonym for “likely” might be “valuable.” Masters offered rewards for the return of slaves from their teens to middle age, with strong backs or specific skills, whose services justified spending a significant percentage of their overall market value to retrieve them. If elderly, sickly, or otherwise unprofitable slaves fled from their masters, the evidence of the newspapers suggests that the masters did not invest much effort or money in finding them.

The size of the reward which masters offered for fugitives often varied not only from fugitive to fugitive, but also according to where the fugitive was apprehended, with the sum growing larger the farther the fugitive escaped from the master’s home. For instance, one master with a farm near Alexandria, who expected his escaped slave John to flee to either Port Tobacco or Baltimore in Maryland, offered forty dollars to anyone who captured his slave more than forty miles from Alexandria; twenty dollars to anyone catching the slave within forty miles of Alexandria; but only ten dollars if John was apprehended in Fairfax county or Washington.<sup>19</sup>

In part, these growing sums were a response to the greater time and effort required to transport a slave a greater distance, particularly in an age of limited travel options. Since masters also generally offered to pay the expenses of returning the fugitive, however, other factors

might have been involved. Specifically, masters might have offered the highest rewards on the assumption that fugitives who escaped from the neighboring areas were all but lost, and so the highest rewards were unlikely ever to be claimed. This supposition is supported by the practice previously mentioned of confining notices to local newspapers, even after a fugitive had been missing for weeks.

Notices in the 1808 *Alexandria Gazette* suggest that masters in Alexandria and Fairfax expected to find their fugitives in nearby areas. They did not seem to expect that most runaway slaves were headed for freedom in the North. Rather, masters focused their searches on fugi-

**Ten Dollars Reward.**

**RAN AWAY** from the Little River Turnpike Company, on Wednesday night, the 25th of May last, a Negro man named **GABRIEL**. He is about 21 years of age, a tolerable black man, his height not exactly known, but is about a middle size and likely. It is not recollected that he has any particular marks, except that his master (Mr. Harrison Fitzhugh, from whom he was hired for this year by the Company) informs that he had a very perceivable mark on one of his ankles, occasioned by a cut. It is expected he left Fairfax county with Fox, a negro man belonging to Mr. John Washington, and who, it is supposed, has gone to the neighbourhood of Mattox Bridge, in Westmoreland county. If taken up in this county, Five Dollars reward will be paid, and if out of the county the above reward, on securing him in any jail so that he may be got again, or on delivery to

**Richard Ratcliffe,**  
Superintendent for the L. & R. T. Company,  
July 12. 23w.

*Alexandria Daily Advertiser*, July 12, 1804

tives’ known relatives. Coleman Lewis, for instance, who lived near the Fairfax Court House, expected that his runaway slave Nancy would be found in Alexandria or Leesburg, as she had “connexions” in both places.<sup>20</sup> Benjamin Patterson guessed that his slave Charlotte Hightower was “lurking” around the estate of Samuel Harpers in Alexandria, because she was married to one of Harpers’s slaves.<sup>21</sup> The slave owner James Sanderson, who did not identify his place of residence, but published a notice for his escaped slave in the *Alexandria Herald*, noted that the fugitive, John Allen, “has an uncle at Annapolis of the name of Godfrey, who harbored him on a former occasion, when he ran away.”<sup>22</sup>

Even when masters were unaware of any specific family members to whom a fugitive might have run, they nonetheless seemed to have assumed that a reunion with

loved ones was the fugitive's goal. Hence some notices offered a detailed history of a slave's prior ownership in order to map out the places where the fugitive might have run to. Often, a notice listed previous employers and locations of fugitives' known relatives, as was the case of an ad in the *Alexandria Gazette*, placed by William Benton, agent of president James Monroe, who sought "Sam, formerly the property of Mr. William Robinson, of Fairfax County... He formerly worked in a brick and timber yard in Alexandria, and has some relatives in Westmoreland County, and also at the Sedley Mills in Fairfax."<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, a notice about the runaway "negro wench Lotty" in a Washington, DC, newspaper reported that she "was formerly the property of Dr. Edward Gantt, has lived some time past with Mrs. H. Hayward, and is well known in Georgetown and in the city of Washington. It is very probable that having changed her name and represented herself as being free, she is either living in some family in the eastern part of the city of Washington, or has gone to the eastern shore of Maryland from whence she originally came."<sup>24</sup> Masters in search of fugitives looked to the fugitives' pasts for evidence of where they might run, rather than assuming that the fugitives would try to run to a brighter future. In particular, masters looked for fugitives where those fugitives might have friends and family.

Northern Virginian slaves' family members and associates were often dispersed throughout the region. The laws of Virginia and neighboring slave states, of course, did not recognize the sanctity or legality of slaves' families. Marriages involving a slave held no validity according to the law—the claims of a husband would conflict with the rights of a master, and so such claims were denied. Many masters did try to keep enslaved families together, however. One master, for instance, offered for sale, "A Negro woman, about 20 years of age, with her two female children, one about two years old, and the other 8 months."<sup>25</sup>

Even this act of basic kindness, keeping the mother with her children, nonetheless entailed separating the children from their father, and the woman from her husband. Another woman and her child were offered for sale with the stipulation that, "She will not be sold out of the neighborhood," and other ads contained similar provisions.<sup>26</sup> Some advertisements, however, forthrightly offered families for sale together or individually, as when Sampson Martin of Fairfax offered to sale "A likely Negro woman with Two Children (or without her Children)."<sup>27</sup>

Slaves, therefore, often had close relations not only in the master's household or the immediate vicinity, but in neighborhoods throughout the Washington area. The

scattered nature of slaves' families presented a problem but also an opportunity. Thomas Burgess of Charles County, Maryland, for instance, noted that his runaway slave Treace had "extensive acquaintance throughout Charles county, state of Maryland, and from her extreme part I make no doubt she has acquired them in Prince George's county, Washington city, Georgetown, and Alexandria."<sup>28</sup> These "extensive acquaintances" provided Treace with a network of friends to help her escape Burgess's clutches. Other notices offer similar evidence of fugitives with far-flung connections: William Chilton of Leesburg pursued the fugitive Sampson, "who was bought out of the estate of the late Mr. Daniel MacCarty of Loudon, and latterly was taken up at Cedar Grove, in Fairfax county, & made his escape from those who guarded him at night. Last week he was seen in Alexandria. He frequently has been seen passing from Prince George county in Maryland by Sheppard's Mills into Loudon, and is believed to be generally concealed in Kean's Neck, Fairfax county."<sup>29</sup> Many slaves, it seems, had extensive familiarity of the areas surrounding their masters' estates, and this knowledge helped them to evade capture when they ran away.

Runaway slaves frequently sought to reunite with family members, many of whom were slaves themselves. James G. Evans of Dumfries, for instance, expected his fugitive slave Shadrack to be found "lurking about Mount Vernon or in Alexandria, as his father lives in Alexandria."<sup>30</sup> Similarly, Thomas Peter of Georgetown noted that "A free negro man by name Sambo, living on Judge Washington's estate, Mt, Vernon," was the father of Peter's escaped slave Ralph, and therefore Ralph was "very probab[ly]...thereabout or in Alexandria, and with little trouble may be found."<sup>31</sup> A slave owned by a master in Difficult Run, Fairfax, might be married to a free man in Georgetown, as was the case of Samuel Adams's slave Winny.<sup>32</sup> If she escaped, she was likely to head to Georgetown, to be close to her loved ones. Moreover, her master was likely to know of her connections and expect to find her in their vicinity. Masters thereby expressed an awareness of their slaves' love for their families and desire to live with the ones they loved..

Notices of fugitive slaves acknowledged fugitives as human beings with siblings, spouses, children, and friends; some notices even spoke of a fugitive's "husband" or "wife," relationships which had no standing in the eyes of the law. One master for instance, posted notice of a lapsed Baptist named Daniel, who seems to have "lost much of his religion, and is fond of talking on that subject," and who was believed to be "still in the neighborhood of Alexandria where he has a wife, and is harbored by the negroes belonging, or who have lately belonged to the estate of Benjamin Dulany, Esq. and their

connections.”<sup>33</sup> Some masters implicitly recognized and made concessions to their slaves’ networks of friends and families, as when ads announcing the sale of slaves stipulated that they would not be sold out of the area. It is difficult to understand how masters could acknowledge such emotional attachments, yet still place an ad in the newspaper offering for sale a twenty-three year-old woman—“a good cook, washer and ironer”—directly above an ad to sale “600 bushels Rhode Island potatoes in nice order.”<sup>34</sup>

Fleeing to a family member or other acquaintances offered fugitives something which they would need to remain free of their master’s grasp—a helping hand in a hostile world. Certainly, masters often assumed that their fugitives would seek assistance from their loved ones. Such was the case with Edmund I. Lee’s slave Ben: “As he claims for his wife, a Negro Woman, named Hetty, belonging to Mr. Wm. Fowle of this town who has one child, and who absconded some time ago from her master, and is said to be in Talbot county, Maryland, it is probable that he will endeavor to go there.”<sup>35</sup>

At times, masters did not stipulate why they believed a fugitive was headed in a particular direction: Priscilla H. Courts of Charles County, Maryland, for instance, suggested in a notice “Bill Payne,” as her escaped slave “Bill” seems to have called himself, was expected “to go to Frederick Town (Maryland),” though Courts did not identify the basis of that supposition.<sup>36</sup> Nonetheless, Courts presumed to know where Bill would head, and expected that it would not be outside the borders of Maryland.

**1820** By around 1820, the motivation of slaves to flee their masters had begun to change, and masters more frequently entertained the possibility that a slave had fled to a free state. Hence, in 1819, one J. A. Marshall of Fauquier County (presumably a relative of the Chief Justice), noted of the fugitive Lewey that “it is probable that he will endeavor to make his way to Pennsylvania.”<sup>37</sup> Similarly, an ad from March 21, 1820, sought the return of James Hooe, who, it was expected, could be found “about the City of Washington, or Baltimore”; but, significantly, the master, Thomas Marshall, in this instance thought that Hooe would only stop briefly in those southern cities while “endeavoring to make his way to Philadelphia.”<sup>38</sup> George Dement of Piscataway suspected that his slave Frederick had fled to Alexandria, not to reunite with loved ones but “for the passage of obtaining a passage for the north.”<sup>39</sup>

This notable change likely resulted from a number of factors: The events of the War of 1812, when hundreds of Chesapeake slaves had fled to British lines, a number of them taking up arms to serve with British troops, which

seems to have aggravated racial tensions in the Upper South; the early rumblings of antislavery fervor in the North and the increasingly sharp distinction between the free states of the North and the slave states of the South made the North an increasingly attractive option; but, perhaps above all else, the emergence of what historians would sometimes call the Second Middle Passage—the large-scale removal of “excess” slaves from the Upper South to the labor-hungry cotton plantations of the Deep South—significantly undermined the stability of slave families and communities in the Upper South, severing, often irreparably, the familial ties which early nineteenth-century runaways had struggled to preserve.

At the onset of the 1800s, however, notices of escaped slaves in Alexandria-area newspapers showed that slaves from the area usually remained in the area if they ran away from their masters. These ads reveal that there were two distinct, but overlapping geographies in the old Federal District – Northern Virginia area. One constituted the established homes and estates of the free community revealed by maps, censuses, and tax rolls. The other consisted of the enslaved community, whose personal and familial connections sprawled out of the confines of their masters’ estates and neighborhoods. The map of this community cannot be found in legal documents and records, but is traced instead by the pathways of the fugitives who kept it intact.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup>*Alexandria Gazette* [Hereafter *AG*, which is also used for the same journal under different various titles: *Alexandria Gazette* and *Daily Advertiser*; *Alexandria Gazette, Commercial and Political*; and *Alexandria Daily Gazette, Commercial and Political*], February 23, 1816. Baker also had a cravat marked with his initials and a handkerchief embroidered with his name.

<sup>2</sup> See for instance the ad in South Carolina’s *City Gazette and Commercial* from January 6, 1823, which sought the return of “Negro Man Watson,” property of Jacob Wayne of Georgetown, South Carolina, who noted that the fugitive “has been employed in the coasting business between Georgetown and Charleston, and has a wife named Hester, belonging to G. W. Egleston, Esq. of Charleston, and is supposed to be in or about Charleston, or probably engaged in some of the fishing boats.”

<sup>3</sup>Curiously, notices in DC newspapers were far more likely to presume that a fugitive was headed north, particularly to Pennsylvania, even when the fugitive in question fled from an estate in Virginia.

<sup>4</sup>Some slaves did escape together, particularly a young woman with her children; but most escapees fled alone.

- <sup>5</sup>AG, January 10, 1812.  
<sup>6</sup>AG, January 2, 1812.  
<sup>7</sup>*National Intelligencer* [Hereafter *NI*], April 6, 1810.  
<sup>8</sup>AG, October 14, 1813.  
<sup>9</sup>AG, January 10 and January 30, 1810.  
<sup>10</sup>*Federal Republican & Commercial Gazette*,  
January 24, 1810.  
<sup>11</sup>AG, August 2, 1812.  
<sup>12</sup>AG, January 2, 1812.  
<sup>13</sup>AG, January 2, 1812.  
<sup>14</sup>AG, January 13, 1812.  
<sup>15</sup>AG, October 14, 1813.  
<sup>16</sup>AG, November 16, 1812.  
<sup>17</sup>AG, July 7, 1812.  
<sup>18</sup>W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen  
in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard UP,  
1997).  
<sup>19</sup>AG, July 11, 1808.  
<sup>20</sup>AG, June 6, 1810.  
  
<sup>21</sup>AG, June 6, 1810.  
<sup>22</sup>*Alexandria Herald*, December 1, 1820.  
<sup>23</sup>AG, June 28, 1819.  
<sup>24</sup>*NI*, April 6, 1810.  
<sup>25</sup>AG, July 1, 1812.  
<sup>26</sup>AG, July 11, 1808.  
<sup>27</sup>AG, February 3, 1813.  
<sup>28</sup>AG, July 7, 1812.  
<sup>29</sup>AG, July 7, 1812.  
<sup>30</sup>AG, June 1, 1810.  
<sup>31</sup>AG, June 29, 1810  
<sup>32</sup>AG, June 29, 1810.  
<sup>33</sup>AG, June 1, 1810.  
<sup>34</sup>AG, January 13, 1812.  
<sup>35</sup>AG, July 7, 1812.  
<sup>36</sup>AG, January 30, 1810.  
<sup>37</sup>AG, August 14, 1819.  
<sup>38</sup>AG, March 21, 1820.  
<sup>39</sup>AG, June 8, 1819.

### **Dan Hicks**

Dan Hicks received his BA in History and English from the College of William and Mary in 1996 and his Ph.D. in History from Penn State in 2007 for his dissertation, *True Born Columbians: The Promises and Perils of National Identity for American Seafarers of the Early Republican Period*, which analyzed the role and representation of the US Navy in the War of 1812. He has taught at a number of universities including George Mason University and University of Maryland University College. He currently resides in Alexandria, Virginia, with his wife Katherine and their daughter Caroline.

# The Alexandria Chronicle

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In the next issue of the *Alexandria Chronicle*, Jack Sullivan describes the lives of two post-Civil War local merchants, Frank Hume and E. E. Downham. He also explains how liquor was bottled and sold.



**THE FUGITIVE** This picture of a “poor fugitive is from one of the stereotype cuts manufactured in this city for the southern market, and used on handbills offering rewards for runaway slaves.” In this issue of the *Alexandria Chronicle* Dan Hicks explains where slaves went when they fled their masters in northern Virginia in the early 1800s.