

Chapter 188 – The Black Population Regards The Fugitive Slave Act As An Existential Threat



Dates:
1850

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Date: 1850

The 1850 Act Threatens Both Slaves And Freedmen Alike



Perhaps A Field Hand

Reactions to the 1850 Act among whites in the South and North pale in comparison to concerns among the black population.

At the time there are a total of 3.4 million living in America, including some 200,000 living as freedmen and another 3.2 million who remain enslaved.

U.S. State Population (000) – 1850

Total	North	South	Ratio
Total	13,447	9,411	1.43:1
White	13,251	6,004	2.21:1
Free Black	196	205	0.96:1
Slave		3,200	***
% Black	1.5%	34.0%	

The Fugitive Slave law is a dire threat to them all.

For those still trapped in the South on plantations, hope for a successful and lasting escape are diminished by the prospect of long distance bounty hunters joining the local “patterollers” in chasing them down.

For those living as freedmen – either through birth to a free mother, manumission, payments to masters or running away – the prospect of being kidnapped and thrust into slavery becomes paramount.

The law itself almost guarantees that any black accused of being a fugitive will be convicted in the kangaroo court scheme which rewards judges with \$10 for convictions against \$5 for acquittals, and prohibits the accused from speaking in his own defense.

The odds of escaping to freedom and remaining free thus narrow after 1850.

Date: 1850's

Roughly 50,000 Slaves Attempt To Escape Each Year

Despite the increased risks, attempts to escape are ongoing.

While reliable data on the incidence of runaways don't exist, the historian Dr. John Hope Franklin makes some educated guesses by analyzing contemporary documents along with "fugitive slave ads" running in Southern newspapers.

According to Franklin, roughly 50,000 to 60,000 slaves try to escape each year.

About 23,000 attempts are made each year from large plantations...

Estimated # Of Runaways Each Year: Plantations

Total	Number
Households owning slaves in 1850	385,000
x Percent who run plantations	12%
= Total plantation owners	46,000
x Guesstimated % with one runaway/year	50%
= Total runaways from plantations	23,000

Note: Dr. John Hope Franklin – *Runaway Slaves* (1999)

With another 34,000 flights from traditional, smaller farms and households.

Estimated Runaways: Traditional Farms

Total	Number
Households owning slaves in 1850	385,000
x Percent who are not planters	88%
= Total non-plantation owners	339,000
x Guesstimated % with one runaway/year	10%
= Total runaways from traditional farms	34,000

Date: 1850's

Profiles Of Those Who Attempt To Run Away

Franklin is also able to create fascinating profiles of the runaways by further combing his newspaper databases across five states.

Newspaper Ads Seeking Run-Away Slaves

States	# Ads For Run-Aways
Virginia	195
North Carolina	132
Tennessee	168
South Carolina	458
Louisiana	363
Total	1,316

Note: *Runaway Slaves* (John Hope Franklin)

He finds that eight in ten are men, undoubtedly because they are more physically equipped for the hardships of flight and then living off the land on their own for extended periods of time.

Gender Of Runaways

Men	Women
81%	19%

The predominant age for both men and women runaways seems to fall in the 20-30 year old range, prime time for physical vitality in an age where only 8% of all adults survive to their fiftieth birthday.

Age Of Runaways

Age	Men	Women
Kids/Teens	23%	30%
Twenties	54	45
Thirties	17	21
Forty +	6	4
Total	100%	100%

Note: Five state average (va,nc,sc,tn,la)

The decision to escape is largely made and carried out by a single individual, probably pushed beyond his or her personal threshold of suffering, and ready to gamble all on walking into a nearby forest or swamp. Some attempt to take their spouse or children along, although companions often compound the complexities.

Running Away

Alone	With Others
72%	28%

Very few flights are as well planned or sophisticated as that of Ellen and William Craft. Instead the typical scenario seems to involve packing food, other small supplies, and precious possessions in a carrying pouch, and slipping away unobserved at the end of a workday, hoping not to be missed before sun-up.

Franklin estimates that only 7% of runaways are shielded from discovery by securing forged documents or passes to help them along, and only 4% are aided by their ability to read or write.

The timing of escapes is fairly evenly spread across the year, except for the Fall harvesting season where monitoring by overseers is most intense.

Time Of Year For Escapes

When	Percent
Winter	28%
Spring	27
Summer	27
Fall	18
	100%

Date: 1850's

Description Of Runaways By Their Owners

Further analysis of the newspaper ads also reveals how owners “describe” their runaways – the intent being to provide enough detail that pursuers can accurately identify their targets.

The descriptions typically begin with fundamentals, such as the slave’s name, gender, age and general build (slight, average, stout, heavy).

From there, however, they tend to highlight whatever “features” strike the eyes of their white masters as being most unique and definitive.

Franklin finds that “skin color” is often cited as a primary differentiator – with “hues” ranging from “black as night” to “nearly black, brown, copper, reddish, dark ginger, tawny, yellow, high yellow, griff, mulatto, tolerably bright, full bright.”

Other “skin-related” call-outs include the presence of “dark freckles,” tattoos, or owner-induced marks, such as perceivable scars, cropped ears or burned-in brands, applied to foreheads, cheeks, chests or thumbs.

Hair styles are mentioned in less than 10% of the ads, with “bushy, plaited, standing high on head” referenced.

Clothing is another often cited clue to identification, with a focus on favorite dresses or headscarves for females, and caps, work shirts or trousers for males.

Finally some ads attempt to capture what the owner sees as the “demeanor” of the runaway. Franklin highlights the key words they use as follows:

Descriptions Of “Runaway Demeanors”	
Profile	% Mention
Intelligent/artful	11%
Friendly/polite	11
Looks down/slow speech	8
Active	6
Cunning	4
Surly	3
Nervous	3

Owners who elaborate on “demeanor” tend to warn potential captors of a given slaves capacity to deceive, as in:

A proud, cunning fellow with a very smooth dissembling tongue, a tall mulatto woman who is artful and talks very properly to deceive anyone.

Very few ads mention either disobedience or violence, the former behavior being a reflection on the owner’s inability to maintain discipline; the latter a potential “stay-away” warning to all slave catchers.

Finally, Franklin examines the “rewards” being offered for the runaways. He finds that eight out of ten ads include a reward, the average being around \$25. Although this amount seems modest in relation to the typical slave value (\$377 in 1850), it is not insignificant when a day laborer may be earning \$100 per year.

Select Southern Newspaper Ads Seeking Run-Away Slaves (1838-1860)

States	# Ads For Run-Aways	# Offering Reward	Ave. \$ Reward
Virginia	195	162	\$32
North Carolina	132	113	27
Tennessee	168	121	23
South Carolina	458	298	19
Louisiana	363	340	28
Total	1,316	1,034 (79%)	\$25 (ave)

Note: *Runaway Slaves* (John Hope Franklin)

Date: 1850’s

Owners Try To Find Ways To Prevent Escapes

Remarkably, some masters regard the act of running away as a surprise, given what they evidently see as the favorable treatment the enslaved experience in captivity. This phenomenon is addressed in an 1850 issue of the widely read New Orleans periodical, *Debow’s Review*, by one Dr. Samuel Cartwright who coins the term “drapetomania,” a form of mental illness which causes negroes to run away.

Whatever the cause, once an escape is discovered, slave owners typically react swiftly and aggressively.

Some are motivated in part by pride – seeing the flight as a personal affront to their sense of power and control, and a potential source of humiliation among their peers.

But for all, retrieval is a matter of simple economics.

In 1850, the value of the “average” slave is \$377, and it is about to double in the next decade. A male field hand brings in much more, some \$756, often matched by females in their early child-bearing years. Meanwhile the average annual income for white men in 1850 ranges between \$225 for a common laborer to \$400 for an artisan and \$550 for a skilled white collar worker.

Thus losing a single slave can represent the equivalent of losing more than a year’s worth of paid labor!

To prevent such losses, slave-holders adopt a range of strategies.

The first is “preventive” in nature. It lies in striking terror into the hearts and minds of one’s slave about the potential punishments awaiting all who flee and are then returned.

The second is “reinforcement.” It comes in the form of actually carrying out threatened punishments before the very eyes of the captured runaway’s fellow slaves. One such example is recounted many years later by 88 year old W. L. Bost, a former slave from Ashville, North Carolina.

The nigger was put in the whipping post. They was two holes cut for the arms stretch up in the air and a block to put your feet in, then they whip you with a cowhide whip. I remember how they kill him...He was stubborn and had been lashed before. They strip his clothes off and then the man stand off and cut him with the whip. The cuts about half inch apart. After they whip him they tie him down and put salt on him. Then after he lie in the sun awhile they whip him agin. But when they finish he dead.

However, before one can “make an example” out of runaways, they must first be captured.

Date: 1850’s

“Patterollers” And Bounty Hunters Are Charged With Capturing Runaways

The first hurdle facing escapees are what the slaves call the “patterollers” – a linguistic slurring of the word “patrollers.” These are bands of lawless men who survive in the countryside by illicit trafficking with slaves and then by turning around to collect rewards for capturing them.

A runaway slave, Francis Henderson, describes them as follows:

The patrols are poor white men, who live by plundering and stealing...and setting up little shops on the public roads. They will take whatever the slaves steal, paying in money or whiskey or whatever the slaves want. They take pigs, sheep, wheat, corn, anything they encourage the slaves to steal; these they take to market and sell the next day. And when the slaves run away, these same traders catch them if they can to get a reward. They don’t care if the slaves threaten to expose them, for the slave’s word is good for nothing and would not be taken.

Written slave recollections are replete with references to the “patterollers.” One comes from a 105 year old freedman named Anthony Dawson, interviewed in Tulsa, Oklahoma:

None of my old master’s boys tried to get away ‘cepting two, and dey met up with the patterollers, both of them. One of the songs de slaves all knowed and de children used to sing when dey playing in de moonlight round de cabins in de quarters goes:

*Run nigger, run,
The Patteroll, get you
De Patteroll come,
De Patteroll trick you,
Watch, nigger, watch,
The Patteroll, get you
He got a big gun.*

If a capture fails to materialize quickly by simply tacking up posters or putting the word out of an escape, owners can next turn to placing an ad in the local newspaper or even hiring a bounty-hunter.

Hiring a “professional slave-catcher” tends to be a last resort, given the expenses involved. Bounty hunters typically charge by the day and mile, with an added fee for returning the slave alive and perhaps even administering punishment.

A Louisiana slave catcher named Edward King charged \$2 a day and 6 cents a mile, while a Georgian hunter, Oliver Findlay, charged \$30 for capturing a runaway and another \$5 for whipping him.

These bounty-hunters were vicious men, armed with the usual guns, whips and shackle, and in some cases with what become known as “negro dogs.”

These dogs were locked up never allowed to see a negro except while training to catch him. During training they were given a black man or woman’s shoe or article of clothing and taught to follow the scent. Finally trainee slaves would be given a head start and, when the dogs treed him, they were given meat as a reward. Attempts to throw off the scent by heading into streams or sprinkling pepper on a trail seldom did more than delay the time to capture.

Slave hunter David Turner of Hardeman County, Tennessee, boasts of his bloodhounds in local newspapers:

I have two of the finest bloodhounds for catching negroes in the southwest. They can take the trail twelve hours after the negro passed and catch him with ease, and I am ready at all times to go after runaways.

As fearsome as the combination of “patterollers” and bounty-hunters are, desperate slaves begin to create a network to escape their clutches.