

The Untold Story: The Black Struggle for Freedom during the Revolutionary War in Maryland

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Grade Level: Elementary

Duration of lesson: 1 class periods or 90 minutes of instructional time

Overview: The slave trade began in Maryland as early as 1644. By the time of the American Revolution, the institution was well established in the colony. The threat of runaway slaves was a constant concern for their white owners, especially among enslaved men. Female slaves very often had young children to care for and/or were engaged in work that did not allow many opportunities for escape. During the revolution, between 9% and 17% of slaves attempted to escape, compelling many owners to advertise and offer rewards for the capture and return of their valuable property.

In this lesson students will read and analyze several runaway slave advertisements. They will be asked to consider the written descriptions of the slaves, as well as any of the biases of the owners that wrote the advertisement. Students will discuss why the American Revolution provided a unique opportunity for slaves to flee, as well as brainstorm what they think will happen to slaves after the war.

Content Standards:

Era 3: Revolution and the New Nation (1754-1820s)

Standard 2: The impact of the American Revolution on politics, economy, and society.

Standard 3: The institutions and practices of government created during the Revolution and how they were revised between 1787 and 1815 to create the foundation of the American political system based on the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

Historical Thinking Standards:

Standard 2: Historical Comprehension

A. Identify the author or source of the historical document or narrative and assess its credibility.

Standard 4: Historical Research Capabilities

C. Interrogate historical data.

- Students will identify slave owners runaway advertisements published in local newspapers and will analyze the accuracy of the advertisements and the bias of the owners.
- Students will analyze the role of slavery in assessing the effectiveness of the Declaration of Independence.
- Students will determine whether the founding fathers diminished the power of the message of the Declaration by continuing to support the institution of slavery.

Thomas Jefferson and George Washington are iconic figures in American history as the fathers of our country and the leaders of America's struggle for freedom. Yet at the same time, slaves held in southern colonies such as Maryland sought freedom of their own, running away from their masters and into the welcoming arms of the British military. This led owners to post ads in the newspapers of the era in an effort to recapture their lost property before they could join the British. These advertisements can be revealing primary documents with which to construct an understanding of the nature of slavery. They offer insight into a group of people who are commonly overlooked due to the lack of records available for analysis. These advertisements turn the masses of enslaved blacks into individual people giving them back some of the humanity that was often stripped by their masters.¹ But to place them in their proper context, it is critical to examine the history of the institution of slavery in Maryland.

The slave trade began in Maryland at least as early as 1644 when we find the first notice of a slave being sold. Much like the other colonies of the south and Chesapeake area, Marylanders turned to Africans to fill their labor demands primarily for economic reasons. Indentured servants from Europe could be forced to work a certain number of years, usually seven, before they became free. Also, many of these European servants were lured by the vast amount of land available in the new world and after their time was up they wanted to establish their own farms rather than continue working for others.² The institution of lifetime slavery in Maryland officially began with the passing of a 1664 Act which established practices of perpetual slavery. The act allowed slave owners to keep their slaves for an indefinite amount of

¹ Tom Costa, "What Can We Learn From A Digital Database of Runaway Slave Advertisements?" *International Social Science Review*, 76, 1 & 2 (2001): 38 & 40.

² Whittington B. Johnson, "The Origins and Nature of African Slavery in Seventeenth Century Maryland," *Maryland Historical Magazine*, 73, 3 (September 1978): 237.

time and also put limitations on the relations between whites and blacks by enslaving freeborn women who entered into a marriage with a black enslaved man.³

Slaves in seventeenth-century Maryland endured tremendous social obstacles. Many enslaved people found themselves working on small farms with little interaction with other slaves. Slaves during this time were primarily brought over from Africa which meant they were unfamiliar with the language and customs of life in the colonies. The lack of contact with other slaves and the alienation from a new culture made for a very isolated lives filled with days of hard, monotonous labor.⁴ As Maryland moved towards bigger tobacco plantations, in the 1710's and 1720's, the need for greater numbers of workers in more concentrated areas changed daily life for slaves.

Between the 1730's and 1750's male slaves began to have more diverse job opportunities as they moved to larger plantations and began to assimilate into the colony's culture. More and more slaves were born in Maryland instead of being transported from Africa which made assimilation much easier. More men were able to become skilled craftsmen or supervisors now that they were not competing with white indentured servants. Women slaves, however, did not share the same opportunities as men did. They often had to work in the fields several years before being offered a chance at more domestic labor.⁵

Men and women also found it easier to engage in relationships now that they were living on the same plantation instead of miles apart.⁶ Slave owners began to realize the importance of natural reproduction of the slave community. Women and men were often forced to marry and

³ Whittington B. Johnson, "The Origins and Nature of African Slavery in Seventeenth Century Maryland," *Maryland Historical Magazine*, 73, 3 (September 1978): 236, 239.

⁴ Russell R. Menard, "The Maryland Slave Population, 1658-1730: A Demographic Profile of Blacks in Four Counties," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 1 (January, 1975): 34-37.

⁵ Menard, "The Maryland Slave Population," 49-53.

⁶ Menard, "The Maryland Slave Population," 49-53.

have children in order to ensure that their master had enough workers to make a profit. In the eighteenth-century the slave population continued to grow because slaves were increasingly less expensive than free white laborers. For example, one source stated that in the mid eighteenth-century, slaves cost around five pounds a year to employ where as free whites would cost around eleven pounds. This economic advantage along with the status symbol that slavery had become helped the slave population grow even after the Revolutionary War.⁷

One of the concerns for plantation owners as their dependency on slave labor grew was the possibility of slaves running away. Slaves ran away for a variety of reasons: freedom, to visit friends or family, to protect their children from the atrocities of slavery, or to keep their family together in the face of sale or relocation. Slaves also ran away to exert what little power they had over their masters. If they were in fear of being sold or felt a particular aspect of slave life was unbearable they might run away to force their master to compromise.⁸

Records show that running away was predominately done by male slaves prior to the Revolution. Women slaves often had the responsibility of caring for the children which would hinder their ability to make a successful escape. Another important deterrent for black women was the kinds of work they were usually assigned. Unlike their male counterparts, women normally worked in the field or in their master's house and were rarely permitted to leave the property. A runaway woman slave would be much more likely to look out of place on the road than a male slave. The daunting task of making a living with little training was also an obstacle women faced when deciding to run away.⁹

⁷ Barry Neville and Edward Jones, "Slavery in Worcester County Maryland, 1688-1766," *Maryland Historical Magazine*, 89, 3 (1994): 320-321.

⁸ Billy G. Smith, "Black Women Who Stole Themselves," in *Inequality in Early America* (1999): 140-141, 144.

⁹ Smith, "Black Women Who Stole Themselves," 137, 142.

Runaway slave advertisements indicate a lot of information about the people who decide to take the chance and run. There are numerous advertisements in newspapers all over the colonies written by masters who are trying to capture runaway slaves. These advertisements tended to be very descriptive because owners wanted their property returned quickly. The description often included the sex, age, height, clothing, skill level, literacy, distinctive marks, or even a reason the slave ran away.¹⁰ Further details included any markings a runaway may have had including those under their clothing, their posture, any speech defects such as a stutter when questioned or nervous. These detailed descriptions were possible not only because slaves in the eighteenth-century still had close contact with their masters but also because slaves were property and owners regularly examined workers.¹¹ Though historians have to be careful using runaway advertisements as a source for statistical purposes, the ads are especially helpful during the revolutionary period to identify the motivation of runaway slaves.

Many slaves took the freedom ideology of the pre-revolutionary period and applied it to their own situation in order to obtain their own freedom.¹² They began to petition for freedom, run away, rebel, and many joined the American or, more often, the British Army which promised freedom after the war.¹³ The Revolution period saw an increase in such forms of self-emancipation. Historians estimate that, between 55,000 and 100,000 (9% - 17% of all slaves), emancipated themselves by running away during these years, including larger numbers of women than in pre-revolutionary times. The war years brought more opportunities to men and women to run away successfully and they took advantage of them in order to make personal

¹⁰ Lathan A. Windley, *Runaway Slave Advertisements: A Documentary History from the 1730's to 1790*, 2 (West Port, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1983): xiii, xiv.

¹¹ Jonathan Prude, "To Look Upon the 'Lower Sort': Runaway Ads and the Appearance of Unfree Laborers in America, 1750-1800" *The Journal of American History*, 78, 1 (June, 1991): 133, 141.

¹² Gary B. Nash, *Race and Revolution*, (Madison, Wisconsin, 1990): 57-60.

¹³ Gary B. Nash, "African Americans in the Early Republic," *Magazine of History*, 14, 2 (2000): 12.

statements about the institution of slavery. While many ran off to join family members and friends in various cities, others ran to the British line in hopes that they would be set free. Some even ran off to form maroon communities where they could live freely among themselves.¹⁴

The decision to flee was not an easy one for most slaves. Often times slaves fleeing for their freedom were caught and either executed, forced to work hard labor or deported to the West Indies. Even those who successful in escaping to British lines were forced to take shelter in refugee camps that were poorly equipped to handle so many people. Here women and children often met starvation, disease and death.¹⁵ They risked starvation due to their lack of ability to support themselves. Slaves who ran away also risked harming family and friends who stayed behind. Many plantations suffered due to the lack of workers and thus starvation and hard times were present throughout the southern regions. Even when slaves were able to achieve their freedom there was a constant threat that they would be recaptured, their dreams of freedom ripped away, and returned to their masters or worse.¹⁶

It is difficult to determine whether the struggle for black freedom during the Revolutionary War was worth the costs that many had to endure. At first glance an optimist might say that the slaves were successful in affecting the institution of slavery. Some slaves gained freedom after fighting in the war. The governor of Virginia, Lord Dunmore, who had promised slaves of Patriots freedom in 1775 if they fought for the British, evacuated some blacks after the peace treaty was signed. Upwards of 5,000 gained freedom after serving in the Patriot army. Others were lucky enough to escape with French Troops. During the 1780's slaves in

¹⁴ Sylvia R. Frey, *Water From the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991): 326.

¹⁵ Jacqueline Jones, "Race, Sex and Self-Evident Truths: The Status of Slave Women during the Era of the American Revolution," in *Women in the Age of the American Revolution*, eds. Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989): 327, 328.

¹⁶ Jones, "Race, Sex, and Self-Evident Truths," 326.

Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Connecticut and Rhode Island were set free, generally by gradual emancipation. New York and New Jersey adopted gradual emancipation laws in 1799.¹⁷ These new free blacks migrated to seaports like New York and Philadelphia where they established churches and schools that began to establish the African American culture.¹⁸

The decline in tobacco production in Virginia and Maryland which had started before the Revolution but accelerated after the war led to the adoption of individual manumission. Though the large majority of owners did not emancipate their slaves, the free black community did grow. In Maryland in 1755 four percent of the black population was free. By 1810, twenty-three percent of all blacks in the state were free.¹⁹ However, it is telling that the authors of the Declaration of Independence and the first president of our country were unable or unwilling to free their slaves even after their death.

While some African Americans experienced advancements after the Revolution, blacks in the new nation continued to face challenges to their freedom and independence in the antebellum period. Slave men and women who joined the British Army because they were promised freedom by Lord Dunmore were devastated at the end of the war when many of them were abandoned or returned to their masters. Others were taken to be enslaved in the West Indies or struggle to start a new life in Sierra Leone or Nova Scotia.²⁰ The invention of the cotton gin in 1793 and the opposition of Georgia and South Carolina to the abolition of slavery effectively ended any real chance of national emancipation of slaves in America during the Post-

¹⁷ Paul Finkelman, ed., *Articles on American Slavery: Slavery, Revolutionary America, and the New Nation*, 4 (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1989): xii, xii.

¹⁸ Smith, "Black Women Who Stole Themselves," 148-151.

¹⁹ Willie Lee Rose, "Impact of the American Revolution on the Black Population," as appears in Paul Finkelman, ed., *Articles on American Slavery: Slavery, Revolutionary America, and the New Nation*, 4 (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1989): 415-416.

²⁰ Jones, "Race, Sex, and Self-Evident Truths," 329.

Revolutionary period.²¹ The cotton gin also led to the boom of the slave trade in the Deep South and the beginning of the horrors of antebellum slavery.

Amongst all of these set backs in the struggles for freedom, the greatest impediment lay in the new Federal government, which did little to abolish the institution of slavery. In fact the US Constitution, adopted in 1787, actually served to support slavery. The Constitution does not actually use the word slave, but instead refers to slaves as “other persons,” “such persons,” or “person held to Service or Labour.” The most glaring example of the support of slavery is the three-fifths clause. This allowed slave states to count three-fifths of all slaves to determine representation and taxes. Other examples include the slave importation laws which prohibited Congress from banning the slave trade until 1808 and the fugitive slave clause which forbade the emancipation of runaway slaves and demanded their immediate return to their masters across state lines. The institution of slavery was in fact protected by the clauses found in the Constitution written by men who only a few years before won their independence from Britain. Not until 1865, nearly eighty years after the adoption of the Constitution, would slavery be outlawed in the United States.²²

This is the story of the black struggle for freedom during the Revolutionary War and its ultimate denial by the very people we often praise for their ideals of equality. By compromising the ideals of the Revolution the Constitution continued to allow slaves to be treated like property. Slaves continued to be identified by their height, age and clothing in slave advertisements offering rewards for their return to owners. The slave advertisements of Maryland and the Constitution help to illuminate this often forgotten chapter of history.

²¹ Nash, “African Americans in the Early Republic,” 13-14.

²² Paul Finkelman, “Slavery and the Constitutional Convention: Making a Covenant with Death” appears in *Articles on American Slavery: Slavery, Revolutionary America, and the New Nation* Vol. 4 (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1989) 62-63.

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Vocabulary:

Slavery: taking away people's freedom and treating them as property, typically used for labor

Subscriber: slave owner who wrote the runaway slave advertisement

Negro: name for African/African Americans (especially referring to slaves)

Mulatto: person of mixed race (white and black)

Motivation:

1. Ask students the following lead question:

What do you know about slaves in the American Revolution?

Procedures:

1. Read the *Maryland Gazette's* Runaway Slave Advertisement from 1778 to the class (RS #3).
2. Present the following lead discussion questions:
 - A. What words are used to describe the slave/slaves?**
 - B. Who wrote the advertisement? What is the source of the advertisement?**
 - C. How accurate is the source? What biases can be examined when reading the advertisement?**
 - D. What can we learn about slavery from the advertisement?**
3. Present background information concerning runaway slaves. Ask students:
 - A. Why do they think the slaves ran away?
Share with them that 9% to 17% of all slaves ran away during the Revolutionary War?
4. Ask students to complete the Vocabulary Sheet (RS #13).
 - A. Read the first sentence and model how to use context clues to determine the meaning.

- B. Tell students to read the rest of the sentences and determine the meaning of the terms.
 - C. Lead a class discussion of the correct definitions of the terms.
5. Group Learning Strategies: Place students in groups of five.
6. Distribute the Advertisement Analysis Worksheet to the groups (RS #11).
7. Hand out two advertisements to each group (RS #1-5, before the war and RS #6-10, after the war.)
8. Give the groups 10-15 minutes to examine the advertisements and complete the worksheet.
9. Lead a class discussion where students share what they have learned about slaves, owners, and the institution of slavery during the Revolutionary War.
 - A. Motivations for running away: freedom, reunite with family members, join the army, rebel against slavery.
 - B. What do you think happens to slaves? Slavery will expand after the war because of the invention of the cotton gin and the addition of new lands for Southern planters.

Closure:

1. Discuss the following lead question:

Why do you think slavery continues after the revolution?

Assessment:

1. Give each student a copy of a slave advertisement they have not seen during class. Distribute the exit ticket (RS Sheet #12) and allow students to work independently to complete the worksheet.

Primary Source Annotations

Maryland State Archives. Teaching American History in Maryland: Documents for the Classroom. "Runaway Slave Advertisements During the Revolutionary War Era."

Compiled by Nancy Bramucci, Maryland State Archives. Retrieved from

<http://teachingamericanhistorymd.net/000001/000000/000101/html/t101.html>

Teachers:

As students interrogate each document, they will likely find mention of time, date, clothing, age, appearance, possible location, possible accomplices, identifying characteristics, reward(s), skills/trades, etc. that will help them create a story of each person described.

Document 1-

This source, "RUN AWAY" is a fugitive slave advertisement from the New York Gazette on October 27, 1763. The ad was placed by William Bull from New York. His advertisement sought the return of four slaves. Bull offers a description of each and a reward for either their return or for information about anyone who may be harboring them. Students will analyze this document and discuss the rationale behind four fugitive slaves escaping together. Students will look for evidence that indicates why the slaves ran away or if a destination for their whereabouts was indicated.

Document 2-

This source, "THIRTY DOLLARS REWARD" is a fugitive slave advertisement from the New York Gazette on October 27, 1763. The ad was placed by Wilson Hunt for the return of Bood. Hunt describes the physical appearance and mental capabilities of Bood. He offers a reward of thirty dollars. Students will find several facts of Bood to be identifying characteristics. Upon a discussion of those characteristics, students can determine how the advertisement includes both implied and explicit information. Essentially the advertisement reveals a story within a story. Students should examine the details and determine what they find to be the true story and why.

Document 3-

This Virginia Gazette source dated September 14, 1769, advertises a fugitive slave named Sandy. The ad was placed by Thomas Jefferson from Albemarle County, VA. The ad describes the physical features, skilled trade, personality traits, and what Sandy likely has with him. A reward is offered and varies according to where Sandy is located. Students will find the use of the word, Mulatto in this ad and consider how the accompaniment of a horse meant something different for Sandy than other fugitive slaves. What considerations did Sandy likely reflect upon before deciding to leave with the horse?

Document 4-

This Maryland Gazette source dated January 16, 1775, advertises a fugitive slave named Tom. The ad was placed by James Jordan from St. Mary's County, MD. This ad also contains a physical description of a mulatto man but his age is older than other ads described. His trade and physical injuries could help a reader recognize this man. Students could discuss the motivations that urged Tom to leave at this stage of his life and with obvious physical injuries. Students will want to consider the fugitive's location and surmise as to which route may have led this person to his escape.

Document 5-

This source, "FIVE POUNDS REWARD" is a fugitive slave advertisement from the Maryland Gazette. The ad was placed on April 6, 1775, by Walter Beall for James Mason. The fugitive slave escaped from Frederick County, MD. Students may first notice that this fugitive slave has

a last name. Upon interrogating the information contained in the ad, they will find the slaveholder referred to James as a “likely mulatto.” In addition, the age, physical description, intelligence, skills, etc. of James attests to how well this slaveholder, Beall, knows James. Students will want to consider why James has a last name and what this implies.

Document 6-

This source, “SIX DOLLARS REWARD” is a fugitive slave advertisement from the Maryland Gazette. The ad was placed by Benjamin Brookes on May 25, 1775, for Sam Locker. The fugitive slave escaped from Prince George’s County, MD. Students will find this fugitive has a last name and is described as “being of the East Indian breed.” His age is predicted over a span of ten years. Upon interrogating this ad, students will consider the age (range), physical appearance, previous owner and how this movement impacted his life, and how his wife may have affected his decision to leave. The adjective “artful” has been used in this ad and in previous ads to describe fugitives. The students will want to consider why this term is used and what word could be used today that has a similar meaning.

Document 7-

This Maryland Gazette source dated June 15, 1775, advertises Peirce Burn, an Irish servant, and Nancy Bannaker, a fugitive slave. The ad was placed by Abidnigo Hyatt from Frederick County, MD. Students will find this ad interesting by the fact that a servant and fugitive slave escaped together. The slaveholder, Hyatt, is aware that the Irish servant and the fugitive slave have changed their names. Students will consider his description of each in terms of clothing, physical appearance, characteristics, age, etc. The fact that Hyatt is under the impression that they changed their names indicates someone has shared this information. Also, students will want to consider why Hyatt offers a difference in the amount of reward.

Document 8-

This source, “SIX POUNDS REWARD” is a fugitive slave advertisement from the Maryland Gazette. The ad was placed by John Ashton on June 15, 1775, for Tom. The fugitive slave escaped from Prince George’s County, MD. This ad reveals the age, limited physical appearance, and possible trade and location(s) where Tom is suspected to be. Students will consider the trade and connection with the white family as interesting identifiable characteristics. It seems the two are connected. Might the white family who are an acquaintance of Tom also be involved in shoemaking? Students will also consider the possible religious affiliation the white family may have. Considering they are Quaker, how does that influence how they react to fugitive slaves and slaveholders?

Document 9-

This source, “FIVE POUNDS REWARD” is a fugitive slave advertisement from the Maryland Gazette. The ad was placed by Roger Johnson on June 10, 1776, for Tom and Milbey. The fugitive slaves escaped from Frederick County, MD. Students will consider the fact that both fugitive slaves were seen together but it is surmised that they may have returned to their former residences. Both would need to travel quite a distance and were last spotted traveling south (in the direction of Annapolis) so students will want to consider the motives for returning to one’s previous home. Is the physical height of Milbey a typographical error? Since other physical ailments weren’t offered in this ad, it is likely that his true height is 5’9” or 10”, not 2’. Students

will want to consider the advantages and disadvantages the fugitive slaves took when they decided to leave together.

Document 10-

This source, "TWENTY DOLLARS REWARD" is a fugitive slave advertisement from the Maryland Journal and the Baltimore Advertiser. The ad was placed by John Chapple on February 19, 1779, for Peg, a young boy, and her husband, Abraham. The fugitive slaves escaped from Patapsco Neck, MD. Students will consider the delicate condition of the boy's eyes- as he was taken to bed to recuperate for five weeks. In addition, students will consider whether Peg's husband worked with her in their plans to escape. Did they find it necessary to escape in order to salvage the young child's eyesight? Or did Peg and Abraham plan to escape and find it unbearable to leave the ill boy behind? Abraham was familiar with Baltimore; students could consider the pros and cons of this fact. Considering the time of year and their lack of clothing, would the rug have been used to provide warmth from the cold? Could the rug have served another purpose?