

INTRODUCTION

On page three of the March 6, 1850, edition of Natchez's *Mississippi Free Trader and Gazette*, nestled among the advertisements was the following notice:

RUNAWAY SLAVES.	
\$100	REWARD will be paid for the apprehension of two negro fellows, who left the residence of the undersigned, in Ouachita parish, about the 1st of November last; ANTHONY is about 24 years of age, stout built, black complexion; has a scar on his upper lip, has been shot in his right shoulder and arm, and cannot fully straighten his right hand fingers, hangs his head when spoken to. SAM , about 15 years, dark complexion, spare made, and inclined to be knock-kneed. They were brought from Decatur county, Georgia, in February, 1849, and will probably endeavor to return there. Fifty dollars will be paid for either of them if taken out of this state, or twenty-five dollars if taken in this state. Address JAMES J. VICKERS, Ringgold Post Office, Bienville parish, La.
Feb 27-50	

Advertisements such as this one had been common in southern newspapers for more than a century, and they are very good sources of information. Owners included all the details they thought would help in finding their property, and while some of their comments reflect racial stereotyping, we may assume that other details were as accurate as the subscribers could make them. Based on an analysis of many ads, we know nine out of ten of those being sought in most parts of the Lower Mississippi Valley were males like Anthony and Sam. At age fifteen, Sam was a little younger than most of them, who ranged in age from the late teens to the middle thirties. Anthony's "black complexion" suggests his African ancestry and Sam's "dark" skin probably also, but more than a third of the runaways were mixed-race people usually described in various shades of yellow or copper. In New Orleans the word "mulatto" described a person who was half black, and "griffe," one that was one quarter black. Anthony's downcast look when addressed by white people

was probably less a personality trait than a conscious attempt to project a false image of submissiveness that was belied by the rebellious act that got him into the papers. Physical descriptions that included gunshot wounds like Anthony's were rare, but about 3 percent of advertised runaways bore permanent marks of punishment. If James Vickers, their owner, was correct, and he probably was, Anthony and Sam were also typical fugitives in that they were heading for someplace in the South rather than to a free state in the North, motivated by the desire to be with friends, lovers, or family or to enjoy the excitement of a city and the fellowship of the black communities to be found there.

Running away from slavery was common enough to become a metaphor for many other kinds of escapes. There were runaway horses, runaway brides, runaway debtors, and the ceremony that followed elopement was sometimes referred to as runaway marriage. A Mississippi woman named Fanny Budlong ran an ad in an Alexandria, Virginia, paper looking for her husband whom she called not only a runaway but also "a drunkard and a Jackson man." The verbal "ran away" was commonly shortened to one word, as in the phrase "he ranaway."¹

Despite its ubiquitous use, in the past, the present, and in this volume, "runaway" is an inadequate way of describing a person who absented himself or herself from slavery. For one thing, it suggests escapees left some place where they should have remained, as if they fled from battle rather than bondage. It also ignores the fact that they left for a multiplicity of purposes, headed for many different places, and stayed away for varying lengths of time. Historians have attempted to solve this problem by referring to escapees who were gone for an evening or even a day or two as truants and those who sought permanent freedom in southern swamps and forests as maroons. Both terms are useful although not without problems, the one freighted with school-child associations and the other derived from West Indian runaways who achieved a degree of self-sufficiency that was rare in North America. Additionally, there is no word for urban runaways, although the circumstances of their enslavement, the manner of their flight, and quite often their goals, were much different than rural runaways.

The word "fugitivism" used in the title of this book emphasizes not only the ubiquitous nature of slave escapes but also their collective impact on the South. The willingness of slaves to take risks to secure their freedom created an opportunity for slave stealing, a common and

profitable crime in the South. Their unwillingness to be captured played an important role in making violence an important aspect of southern culture. And the violence associated with capture and punishment, the autobiographies of successful escapees, and the heartbreaking stories of recapture in the North, all played a role in making slavery so divisive an issue that it led to the Civil War.

The starting point for anyone studying antebellum fugitivism is the comprehensive history by John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation*, which came out in 1998. Since then, more specialized works have demonstrated the importance of looking at specific regions of the South, like the Lower Mississippi Valley that is the subject of this one. Larry Eugene Rivers's recent book, *Rebels and Runaways: Slave Resistance in Nineteenth-Century Florida*, shows how the history and geography of that state made the runaway phenomenon somewhat different from other places. When Spain controlled Florida, that country gave freedom to American-owned runaways from Georgia and South Carolina; meanwhile, Spanish-owned slaves were escaping to live in relative freedom with Native Americans. During the antebellum period enslaved people belonging to Florida planters did the same, and Rivers claims that more than a thousand black fugitives fought against the American Army in the Second Seminole War of 1835–1842. Another Florida study, Matthew Clavin's *Aiming for Pensacola: Fugitive Slaves on the Atlantic and Southern Frontier*, tells the intriguing story of how interaction with the Atlantic world, the impossibility of plantation agriculture on sandy soil, and the development of a small industrial sector created a multicultural and multiracial society in which African Americans enjoyed a significant degree of social freedom and economic opportunity. Small wonder then, that enslaved people seeking a better life fled to a city of three thousand people from as far away as New Orleans. Another area of geographic distinction was the coastal region of North Carolina. In *The Watermen's Song*, David S. Cecelski shows how free and enslaved black people played a critical role as sailors who navigated the rivers and coastal waters of the region and fished commercially in them. Slaves who did these jobs were often hired out by their owners, which gave the workers a large amount of freedom as well as the knowledge and skills necessary to escape from bondage and assist others to do the same.²

Other recent studies have illuminated specific aspects of fugitivism. Stephanie M. H. Camp's *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women & Everyday*

Resistance in the Plantation South shows how women thwarted the web of restraints, including “reveilles, curfews, slave patrols, and laws requiring passes and banning independent travel or meetings,” that were a part of daily life for black people on southern plantations. Women fled to distant parts far less often than men, largely because family responsibilities kept them at home, but they regularly engaged in what Camp and other historians call truancy. One form was to leave their cabins in the slave quarters to gather at distant places in the woods, sometimes for religious purposes, at other times to dance and party. Another gender study, *My Brother Slaves: Friendship, Masculinity, and Resistance in the Antebellum South*, by Sergio A. Lussana, discusses the close relationships that made life more bearable for enslaved males and was one reason why, like Anthony and Sam, they often ran off together or assisted others who were living in the woods or on the run. Toward the other end of the runaway scale from Camp’s truants were fugitives known as maroons, named after Spanish and French runaways in South America and the West Indies who fled to distant parts where they set up permanent camps and lived self-sufficiently. Such near-independence was rare in the American South, but fugitives did build rude homes for themselves in swamps and forests while subsisting for the most part on food and supplies stolen from plantations. *Slavery’s Exiles* by Sylviane A. Diouf is a recent and comprehensive study of the phenomenon.³

Steamboat escapes were important in the Lower Mississippi Valley, and Thomas C. Buchanan’s *Black Life on the Mississippi: Slaves, Free Blacks, and the Western Steamboat World*, was an especially important source for *Fugitivism*. Environmental aspects, especially the geography of rivers and wetlands, shaped the nature of fugitivism as well as almost everything else in the valley, and Christopher Morris’s *The Big Muddy: An Environmental History of the Mississippi and Its Peoples from DeSoto to Hurricane Katrina* is an essential guide to not only the physical environment but also the cultural patterns, economic development, and political change that shaped its last five hundred years of turbulent history.⁴

The Lower Mississippi Valley, as the term is used here, stretches from the mouth of the Ohio River at Cairo, Illinois, to the Gulf of Mexico, encompasses western Tennessee and Mississippi and most of Arkansas and Louisiana, and includes portions of the Arkansas and the Red Rivers that flow in from the west, the Yazoo River that is the eastern boundary of the Mississippi Delta, and the Atchafalaya Basin and Bayou Teche of southern Louisiana.

The area south of Natchez was settled by France in the early eighteenth century and later governed Spain until the Louisiana Purchase. While this study focuses on the antebellum period, it also examines slavery in colonial Louisiana and argues that the difference between the French and Spanish system for hunting runaway slaves, which made capturing them a responsibility of the government, and the Anglo-American practice, which left that up to the public, had important consequences for the South.⁵

Not until the 1820s did the Americans move into the area north of Natchez, but in the 1830s as the Choctaw and Chickasaw were forced from their homelands in Mississippi, the Delta region of that state and adjacent portions of Tennessee and Arkansas joined the former Natchez District of Mississippi and much of Louisiana to become the heart of the Cotton Kingdom. Settlers brought enslaved workers with them, and an internal slave trade arose to supply many more. Walter Johnson's *Soul by Soul: Life inside the Antebellum Slave Market* is one of several studies that explain the importance of that institution, and it also describes the dehumanizing practices associated with the imprisonment and sale of the unwilling immigrants in New Orleans. The same author's *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* examines all aspects of the region's main industry and provides a slave's-eye view of life on the plantations. In *Flush Times & Fever Dreams: A Story of Capitalism and Slavery in the Age of Jackson*, Joshua D. Rothman analyzes the intense drive for wealth and upward mobility that led American settlers to drive their workers harder and punish them more severely than did masters in the older portions of the South. Sven Beckert's *Empire of Cotton* puts the Mississippi Delta in world-historical perspective as "the chief grower of the industrial world's most important commodity—a kind of Saudi Arabia of the early nineteenth century." However, cotton was not the only crop produced by the enslaved people of the Mississippi Valley, and Richard Follett's *The Sugar Masters, Planters and Slaves in Louisiana's Cane World, 1820–1860* is vital to understanding an industry that utilized steam-powered equipment and factory-like techniques but also demanded intense physical efforts from its male-dominated workforce. State laws and legal records play a vital role in the following chapters, and this book owes much to Judith Kelleher Schafer's *Slavery, the Civil Law, and the Supreme Court of Louisiana*.⁶

Fugitivism looks at runaway slaves from a somewhat different perspective than previous studies, most of which have emphasized their

importance as evidence that American slaves resisted slavery. Kenneth Stampp, whose *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Antebellum South*, published in 1956, began the modern study of slavery, declared escape and flight to be “an important form of protest against bondage.” Gerald W. Mullin’s *Flight and Rebellion: Slave Resistance in Eighteenth-Century Virginia*, which came out in 1972, elaborated the point, demonstrating that “New Negroes” born in Africa rebelled against their enslavement in individual acts of violence and ran away in groups, but acculturated workers, and especially those with special skills, ran away more often and for longer periods, largely because they were able to pose as free blacks. Resistance is also the dominant theme in the books of Franklin and Schweninger, Rivers, Camp, and Diouf. Woven into that interpretation is the concept of “agency,” the idea that even though bound by an oppressive system of control and punishment enslaved people exercised a significant degree of control over their own lives. At different times and places, they negotiated with their owners on minor matters, earned money by selling food from their private gardens, maintained significant family and kinship relations, conspired together, engaged in religious activities, and kept abreast of the ongoing sectional debate over their status. Still, as Walter Johnson has recently pointed out, agency is “almost always defined as the pursuit of civil rights and economic choice,” in other words it assisted in the resistance to the slaveholder oppression.⁷

Important though it is, emphasizing fugitivism as resistance tends to focus more attention on slavery rather than on the slave. *Fugitivism* attempts to give more attention to the individuals than the institution. Running away was certainly a rebellious act, but it was also a choice, and the pull of self-actualization and anticipated happiness was often more important to the decision than the push of exploitation. Viewed objectively, fugitivism was resistance and fugitives were rebels, but from a subjective perspective, runaway slaves were people willing to take dangerous risks to improve their physical, material, and psychological well-being. In doing so they were exercising the entire triad of natural rights that Thomas Jefferson claimed for Americans, “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” and the importance of the first two ought not to overshadow the significance of the third. *Fugitivism* takes a wholistic approach to escape and flight, recognizing that runaways were fighting against slavery, but also paying attention to the physical environment and historical context that influenced their behavior, and emphasizing that flight was often an act that involved ambition as well as defiance of authority.

Separate chapters among those that follow discuss the impact of fugitivism on southern society and culture. One understudied aspect is the runaway phenomenon as it developed in urban areas, a subject to which Richard C. Wade gave some attention half a century ago in his classic *Slavery in the Cities*. *Fugitivism* looks closely at rural slaves who fled to the cities, urban slaves who left their owners but not their city, and those who fled from both. New Orleans is discussed at length, but the relatively understudied city of Memphis is also emphasized, and the smaller urban centers of Baton Rouge, Natchez, Vicksburg, and Little Rock get their share of attention. Also, while much has been written about southern violence, and slavery is usually mentioned in that regard, this is the first study to illustrate the important role that blacks who fled and whites who chased them played in helping to make violence a regional characteristic. The stealing of slaves, heretofore largely ignored, also gets a full treatment. It was a common crime whose perpetrators lured risk-taking people away from their owners by pretending to help them escape. Finally, *Fugitivism* for the first time shows how fugitives from the Mississippi Valley played a role in heightening the sectional conflict that led to the Civil War.⁸

Much of the evidence for this study comes from newspapers published in the Lower Mississippi Valley. Franklin and Schweninger based most of their work on runaway slave advertisements and an extensive collection of local court records. They rejected entirely the many autobiographies published by runaway slaves who escaped to the North, and the interviews with ex-slaves done by WPA workers funded by the New Deal. The former have been criticized because they were published by abolitionists and sometimes edited to reflect the interests of that group, and the latter because of the perhaps faulty memory of the aged interviewees and the possibility they were influenced by the people who asked the questions. In the last several decades, however, historians have begun to place more emphasis on both the autobiographies and the interviews, arguing that there is no reason to believe they are less reliable than the traditional documents written by white people, and that the voices of slaves are essential to understanding slavery. Stephanie Camp, Walter Johnson, Larry Eugene Rivers, and Edward E. Baptist, whose *The Half Has Never Been Told* has much to say about the Lower Mississippi Valley, have used them extensively and effectively. With respect to *Fugitivism*, however, fugitive slave autobiographies have an important limitation. The successful escapees who wrote them while living in northern states

or Canada are a small and unrepresentative percentage of the runaway population, almost all of whom left only for brief periods, stayed out as long as possible without going far, or tried to get somewhere else in the South. Anthony and Sam, for example, fled from Bienville Parish in northwest Louisiana, which is about the same distance from Ohio as it is from Georgia, yet their goal was not the free state to the north but the slave state to the east.

Fugitivism draws on anecdotal evidence from more than 3,000 runaway slave advertisements taken from newspapers published in New Orleans, Natchez, Vicksburg, Memphis, and Little Rock and quantitative data collected from a representative sample of 1,396 of them, but its major source is news stories about fugitives and attempts to get them back. They were written by newspapermen who wanted to sell papers and were not above sensationalizing a story, but the content was important to their readers, and we may assume that most of the facts were as accurate as the reporters could make them. Runaway slave advertisements were posted by owners who described people who had escaped or by jailors who described those that had been caught. Newspaper articles offer evidence about what happened between the plantation and the jail and sometimes escapes that ended in success. They also tell us about white attitudes toward fugitivism, public policies designed to control it, and how criminals made money from it.

By far the most important paper in the antebellum Lower Mississippi Valley was the New Orleans *Daily Picayune*, which began publication in January 1837 and has continued down to the present, merging with the *Times-Democrat* in 1914 and changing its title to the *Times-Picayune* in 1937. The *Picayune* brought to New Orleans the “penny press” journalism of the 1830s, which published news stories designed for the general public rather than only people interested in politics and foreign affairs. The *Picayune* sold on the streets for the price of its namesake, a coin worth 1/16th of a Spanish dollar or 6 ¼ cents, well under other papers that were going for 10 cents a copy. Editors George W. Kendall and Francis A. Lumsden hired reporters to cover local news, including activity in the city’s courts, and write about it in short articles laced with humor and satire. They also delivered national and international news faster than their competitors by utilizing an express system of horses, steamboats, and trains before the telegraph became available in 1848. Kendall fought as a volunteer in the Mexican War and sent articles to the *Picayune* on a

regular basis, becoming the nation's first war correspondent and helping the newspaper earn a national reputation. Most important here, is the *Picayune's* role as a regional newspaper that reprinted local stories taken from papers throughout the Lower Mississippi Valley, many of them no longer extant.⁹

Readers of the following pages will see that they contain a large amount of quoted material, which is used because I believe it conveys an important sense of antebellum culture and historical reality. For the same reason, the wording, spelling, and punctuation have been left as they appeared in the original text, adding only a few words in brackets that seemed necessary for understanding the meaning of a particular sentence.