

Law and Disorder North of the Ohio

Runaways and the Patriarchy of Print Culture, 1793-1815

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In the years following the Revolution, American leaders codified their vision for the territory north of the Ohio River. In the ordinances passed from 1784 to 1787, the Confederation Congress laid out a blueprint for land sales, political structures, and jurisprudence in the fertile, potentially rich region. The ordinances supported education, promised the peaceful practice of varying religious beliefs, and provided for settlement and commerce to proceed at an orderly pace. The Ordinance of 1787 also promised liberal and fair treatment for the region's natives, "except in just wars authorised by Congress," and banned slavery in the Northwest Territory.¹

The leaders of the new territory assumed the continuation of a patriarchal and paternal system of social order, the maintenance of

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¹The relationship between unfree labor and freedom is addressed by Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York, 1975).

which would require ongoing controls. Rather than maintain these strictures through heavy-handed government enforcement, they hoped to wield the societal reins through a dialogue among like-minded, property-holding white males. But the frontier confounded many expectations. As settlers poured onto the new lands, nascent governmental bodies struggled to keep pace with their numbers. Highly structured religious groups found themselves unable to provide the needed leaders and buildings. To make matters worse, many of the settlers who flooded into the Ohio Valley seemed unruly, even rebellious, and from their ranks came an ever-increasing number of property-holding males, now eligible to vote and contend for public offices.

Even on the frontier, however, there were still ways to distinguish one group of men from another. In the Early Republic, as during the Colonial era, the possession of slaves (still possible just across the Ohio River in Kentucky), apprentices, and wives helped to distinguish successful men of property from their lesser competitors. These three groups provided essential labor and connoted social capital as well. But the frontier, with few towns and partially cleared farms scattered through a forested wilderness, provided excellent opportunities for human possessions to make off. Property-owning men faced the question of how to maintain control in such a volatile environment.

One of the ways in which these men appealed to one another was through the public press, in terms that maintained both their actual assets and their social standing in the new republic. Some of the best examples of how this played out come from newspaper advertisements for three categories of runaways—slaves, apprentices, and wives.

From the perspective of free adult men with at least some property (i.e., the electorate), runaway slaves, runaway apprentices, and runaway wives constituted particular nuisances. They provoked debate and dialogue about the socio-legal code of bound labor. The efforts of slaves, servants, and aggrieved wives to resist the control of their masters provides an important window into how the electorate's ethos of what we might call "controlled liberty" functioned. By definition, the system offered liberty for some and not for all, and the runaway ads tell us as much about how it would ultimately fail as they do about how it was justified and maintained.

Looking specifically at runaway ads in the early territorial newspapers offers advantages to the historian seeking to understand the maintenance of social order in the region. The Northwest Territory would be divided into some of the first post-Revolutionary states added to the U.S.

—a process that in itself proved a bold experiment. Also, while some excellent scholarship has examined runaways in the eighteenth-century Mid-Atlantic,² little work examines this phenomenon on the turbulent frontier of the Early Republic. Finally, this study addresses the key issue of people using the newspapers as a form of public dialogue and as an auxiliary of law enforcement in an area where law and order could be scarce.

Controlling these categories of people, whose labor fell on a sliding scale between completely forced and potentially voluntary, was deemed important enough for white, propertied men to take their private difficulties into the public sphere, often through the local newspaper. They placed advertisements for their runaways in an effort to restore public confidence in the system of hierarchically controlled labor,³ and more directly, to defend their reputations. A man who chose to advertise struck a delicate balance: provide enough information about the runaway to secure his/her return, and also maintain personal honor by projecting an image of a master somehow too just and liberal to rightfully run away from.

Looking at Ohio Valley newspapers from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries can tell us quite a lot about the practical side of how Americans struggled to protect both individual rights and collective law and order. I argue that frontier citizens collectively chose to utilize newspapers as a key arm for the enforcement of contracts and laws because they allowed for considerable self-fashioning, and at the same time helped to obviate an expensive and potentially oppressive system of law enforcement.

In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America, patriarchy, and its more subtle cousin paternalism, existed through the fiction that free white men knew what was best for women, children, and minorities, and that society functioned best when the latter groups submitted to the former. Because the benefits of such an arrangement were supposed to

²The growing body of literature includes David Waldstreicher, "Reading the Runaways: Self-Fashioning, Print Culture, and Confidence in Slavery in the Eighteenth-Century Mid-Atlantic," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 56 (April 1999), 243-72; Waldstreicher, *Runaway America: Benjamin Franklin, Slavery, and the American Revolution* (New York, 2004); Ronald Hoffman, Mechal Sobel, & Fredrika J. Teute, eds., *Through a Glass Darkly: Reflections on Personal Identity in Early America* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1997); Carla Gardina Pestana & Sharon V. Salinger, eds., *Inequality in Early America* (Hanover, N.H., 1999).

³Waldstreicher, "Reading the Runaways," 247.

be obvious to all parties, patriarchs needed to feel that their dependents had *cheerfully* submitted to them.⁴ When dependents fled, they blatantly signaled that all was not well in the family, and they opened up the sore question of the patriarch's legitimacy to rule others. Slaves, apprentices, or wives who ran away from those who claimed them were seen as obstacles both to personal economic success and to a broader societal order. Notably, the imagery of the Revolution had variously portrayed Americans as children of a domineering mother country, as a maiden forced into an unhappy union with her British husband, or as slaves of British masters. Yet despite the Revolution's emphasis on natural rights, many Americans still depended upon unfree or unpaid labor.

RUNAWAY SLAVES

Article Six of the 1787 ordinance had stated that "there shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude in the said territory, otherwise than in the punishment of crimes whereof the party shall have been duly convicted." The exception to the rule applied to runaways: "That any person escaping into the same, from whom labor or service is lawfully claimed in any one of the original States, such fugitive may be lawfully reclaimed and conveyed to the person claiming his or her labor or service as aforesaid." Despite what appeared to be an outright ban, slavery, in various forms, continued in the region for decades.⁵ For a time, territorial governors, partly to assuage settlers from the French era, refused to interpret the ban on slavery as retroactive: because the 1787 ordinance had not specifically emancipated slaves, the slaves already in the territory could still be considered as property. Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois territories also passed laws allowing imported slaves to be converted to the

⁴Nicole Etcheson, *The Emerging Midwest: Upland Southerners and the Political Culture of the Old Northwest, 1787-1861* (Bloomington, Ind., 1996), 6, 42. For an example of a colonial patriarch's reaction to disobedient slaves and children, see Rhys Isaac, *Landon Carter's Uneasy Kingdom: Revolution and Rebellion on a Virginia Plantation* (New York, 2004).

⁵"Indenture" laws also specified that children would inherit the permanently indentured status of their parent(s). Even when the Indiana and Illinois state constitutions were adopted after the War of 1812, emancipation was not immediately enforced. See Ellen Eslinger, "The Evolution of Racial Politics in Early Ohio," in *The Center of a Great Empire: The Ohio Country in the Early Republic*, eds. Andrew R. L. Cayton and Stuart D. Hobbs (Athens, Ohio, 2005), 81-104; Eugene Berwanger, *The Frontier Against Slavery: Western Anti-Negro Prejudice and Slavery Extension Controversy* (Urbana, Ill., 1967); Emma Lou Thornbrough, *The Negro In Indiana Before 1900: A Study of a Minority* (Indianapolis, 1957), chap. 1.

status of indentured servants, with terms of indenture that assured “servants” would never be free.

The vast frontier of the Ohio Valley, however, seemed to beckon to both free and unfree people and to offer the possibility of a fresh start. Of all the runaways who appeared in frontier newspaper ads, slaves (most of them from south of the Ohio, with a few local bondsmen mixed in) had the most obvious reasons to run. They might attempt to reunite with (or at least to visit) relatives from whom they had been sold away. They might take to the woods temporarily to avoid a particularly harsh punishment, or as a gesture of defiance towards a master. Female slaves sometimes ran away to escape unwanted sexual advances, or took their daughters with them to avoid such a fate. And some slaves took to their heels to strike a subversive blow at slavery itself by “stealing” themselves.⁶

Several factors made a slave more or less likely to run away: age, gender, skills, and familial situation were all critical. Young men in their late teens and early twenties comprised by far the majority of runaways. They were better prepared for the physical rigors of escape, could put up the fiercest resistance if cornered, and often had no wives or children to tie them to their owners. A major survey of Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, South Carolina, and Louisiana from 1790 to 1816, for example, has revealed that 81 percent of runaway slaves were males.⁷

Male slaves, from the nature of their tasks, tended to find more opportunity for escape and to bring with them a better geographic knowledge of the surrounding area. While men might be assigned to work flatboats, deliver messages, or serve as coachmen, women were rarely given such chores. As historian Billy G. Smith notes, “an African-American woman on the road was an oddity that would arouse suspicion, and thus some female runaways disguised themselves as men.” Smith adds that slave women rarely escaped on horseback, as few of them had much practice in riding.⁸

Men also stood a better chance of finding a more agreeable master, or even employment as a laborer in the North, because skilled or

⁶Billy G. Smith, “Black Women Who Stole Themselves In Eighteenth-Century America,” in *Inequality in Early America*, 140.

⁷John Hope Franklin and Loren Schwenger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (New York, 1999), 210-11.

⁸Smith, “Black Women Who Stole Themselves,” 142.



A slave being hunted by hounds

Most runaway slaves, like the one pictured here, were young males.

Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive Slave, 1847

unskilled, their labor was usually valued more highly than women's. Plenty of women worked in the fields, but men were generally considered the prime field hands. Calculating slave women knew that unless they were near a metropolitan area, their otherwise marketable skills in the kitchen or the laundry would not be in demand. Regardless of their prospects, slaves sometimes ran away fully expecting to be recaptured, in the hope of making themselves such a nuisance that their owners would sell them to another. Smith offers that, "[o]n occasion, slaves must have struck deals with whites to purchase them cheaply once they ran away." And a few returned runaways may even have become bond servants, rather than property.⁹

⁹Smith, "Black Women Who Stole Themselves," 142, 145; Billy G. Smith, "Runaway Slaves in the Mid-Atlantic Region during the Revolutionary Era," in *The Transforming Hand of Revolution: Reconsidering the American Revolution as a Social Movement*, Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert, eds. (Charlottesville, Va., 1996), 229.

If a slave managed to escape his or her immediate surroundings, the master often wrote a newspaper advertisement to solicit aid in returning the slave. The runaway slave database referred to above calculates that the average award posted for a runaway was \$15 (only \$9 in South Carolina). While owners typically did not post large rewards for runaways, they might up the ante if they felt someone was harboring the fugitive. Advertisements noted the slave's approximate age, physical characteristics, clothing, trade, and personality.¹⁰

Thirty Dollars Reward. Ran Away from my paper mill near Georgetown [KY], last evening, a MULATTO MAN, named James, a papermaker to trade, soft hands (and is frequently taken for a white man) about twenty-two years of age, about five feet nine or ten inches high, has black hair and frequently quered, affable and well spoken Elijah Craig, Nov. 8, 1802

N. B. As I raised this man from his infancy, used him well and learned him a good trade, and meant to give him his freedom at 31 on behaviour, and now my useful manufactory must suffer, I hope none will harbor him, but give him speedy information.¹¹

Such ads served several purposes. When slaves ran off, they hurt their owners financially. Mr. Craig wanted his skilled papermaker returned, and the fear that some might “harbor him” was a genuine concern when a slave with marketable skills ran off. He also suggests a fondness for James, noting the slave's friendly manners and clear speech. Much of the ad was designed to assuage those who might take pity on an escaped slave, pointing out that James had been well treated and would be freed while still relatively young. The ad may also have been directed at James—it is not unreasonable to think that a trained craftsman could read. While the literacy rate among all escaped slaves in this era was only 1 to 2 percent, among mulatto runaways like James it may have

¹⁰Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 170-78, table p. 177.

¹¹*Western Spy and Hamilton Gazette* (Cincinnati), Nov. 17, 1802. Joseph Carpenter of Cincinnati published the *Western Spy and Hamilton Gazette* (1799-1805), the *Western Spy and Miami Gazette* (1805-1809), and the *Western Spy* (1810-1819); they will all be referred to hereafter as the *Western Spy*. Thanks to Dr. James Cornelius, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, for clarifying this point.

been as high as 10 percent. Even illiterate runaways had—through literate sympathizers or other means—access to a local newspaper.¹²

Thus an advertisement for a runaway slave was not simply a financial transaction, but could be an exercise in self-fashioning to the community at large—not unlike a modern press release. And it might be the master's only chance to communicate again with his runaway human property.

An ad from a Tennessee planter, printed June 19, 1802, asked for help in recovering “a negro man named GEORGE,” whom the author described as being of

Yellow complexion, about 6 feet high, 30 years of age, stout made, and very active talks sensibly, and stops a little in his walk . . . I have no doubt but he will pass for a free man, and perhaps produce a pass, as heretofore a free fellow of the name of Brown, forged him a pass by the name of George Velvio, and signed Thomas Hutchings, and 6 residing justices of Davidson court, thereto; he will make for the North Western territory, or Detroit; he has obtained by some means a good idea of the Geography of that country; if apprehended, he is artful and will make his escape, unless well secured.¹³

The plantation owner, while evincing no fondness for his runaway, does seem to appreciate his value and even to respect his intellect, at least regarding escapes. If George made it from Tennessee all the way to the Ohio Country, such respect was certainly merited. George's owner, notably, was Andrew Jackson, at this time a lawyer and former senator relatively unknown outside of his home state.¹⁴

One of the more striking features of runaway slave ads is their relatively calm and objective tone. As John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweningen assert, “ads were in large measure accurate and objective in

¹²See Waldstreicher, “Reading the Runaways,” 270. Franklin and Schweningen note that “nearly 10 percent of mulatto runaways possessed forged papers, compared with 6 percent among blacks”; *Runaway Slaves*, 215.

¹³*Western Spy*, June 19, 1802.

¹⁴On the search for George, see *The Papers of Andrew Jackson*, vol. 2: 1804-1813, Harold D. Moser and Sharon Macpherson, eds. (Knoxville, Tenn., 1984), 94-95, and note 76.

Stop the Assassin,
WHO ATTEMPTED TO MURDER HIS MASTER!
A CA after stabbing the subscriber, made his
 escape on the 16th inst. He is a likely
 black fellow, 21 years of age, 5 feet 8 or 9 in-
 ches high, and ties his hair above his ears in
 small locks—he had very little cloathing with
 him when he ran off, and will probably at-
 tempt to steal what he wants. I will give 50
 dollars to any person who shall bring him to
 me or secure him so that I get him again,
 provided he be taken out of the State; or 30
 dollars if taken within the State.
Reuben Twyman.
Woodford county, K. Sept. 17, 1807.

Advertisement for a runaway slave from the *Liberty Hall and
 Cincinnati Mercury*, September 29, 1807

Some writers were mild and persuasive, but many ads seeking runaways
 were couched in the harsh language used by Reuben Twyman.

describing the demeanor, dress, speech, character, abilities, background, and possible destination of runaway slaves. It would not have benefited owners to include false information.” Oddly, some of the more objective contemporary writings we have from masters about slaves concern runaways.¹⁵

As a system, however, slavery contained too much inherent malevolence for all runaway ads to be mild. Reuben Twyman of Kentucky placed an ad asking subscribers to “Stop the Assassin, WHO ATTEMPTED TO MURDER HIS MASTER.” The slave was described as a “likely [i. e., a strong, reliable worker] black fellow,” and worth \$50 for anyone

¹⁵Franklin and Schwenger, *Runaway Slaves*, 170; on how to read the ads’ descriptions, see Jonathan Prude “To Look Upon the ‘Lower Sort’: Runway Ads and the Appearance of Unfree Laborers in America, 1750-1800,” *Journal of American History*, 78 (June 1991), 124-59.

who could secure him long enough for Twyman to recover him.¹⁶ Presumably the slave would have been subjected to harsh punishment, perhaps even death, either as revenge or as an example to fellow slaves.

Fifty dollars was also the reward for Jim, a well-digger who ran away from James Suggett. Though no altercation was mentioned, and Suggett also described Jim as “a likely fellow,” considerable spleen emanated from the ad. Jim was “often drunk” and “became lazy and did not love to work,” despite the fact that he had been “indulged very much.” Suggett added: “It was my desire to make him live as comfortable as I could: he has therefore paid me for it.”¹⁷

Many of the ads suggest why slaves ran. Thomas Johnson of Kentucky offered \$100 for the return of Nat, about twenty-nine years old, with “a kind of brand on his left cheek which resembles a C, and has a scar on his throat.” When James B. January issued his \$50 reward for Fanny, a mulatto woman, he noted that she had a free husband in St. Louis, and had most likely run there. When Kitty fled from Richard Dickinson’s plantation in Beargrass, Kentucky, she was not alone. “She was enticed away by a Mulatto Man called NED, tall and well made.” In addition to his physical attributes, Ned was also bright and had secured passes of freedom for himself and Kitty “from a person not prudent now to mention.”¹⁸

In addition to what they suggest of the owners’ state of mind or the slaves’ reasons for fleeing, the newspaper ads offer additional data. A survey of the *Western Spy* (Cincinnati) from 1799-1807 yields advertisements for sixty-two runaway slaves. Forty-seven (three-quarters of the total number) were from neighboring Kentucky, nine from the Ohio Territory, and the remaining six from Tennessee, Indiana Territory, or Detroit. Slightly more than half of the overall group (thirty-two) had run away alone. The rest ran off in small groups, the largest of which included six men, a boy, and a woman from Kentucky.

The lowest advertised reward was easily Josiah Holly’s “One Cent Reward” for a fifteen-year-old “bound servant girl” with “sandy com-

¹⁶*Liberty Hall and Cincinnati Mercury*, September 29, 1807.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, August 6, 1808.

¹⁸*Freedonian* (Chillicothe), January 5, 1808; *The Ohio Herald*, June 23, 1806; *Freedonian*, May 16, 1807.

plexion,” Matilda Brown.¹⁹ Other posted rewards ranged from \$5 for a woman or a boy, to as much as \$100 for a particularly valuable man. Andrew Jackson valued his slave George enough to offer \$50 for his return, but \$20 (an amount slightly higher than the average reward posted in the South) seems to have been the most common reward offered for one slave.

The *Centinel of the Northwestern Territory* (Cincinnati), the first newspaper in Ohio, featured ads for fifteen runaways between 1794 and 1796. Almost all of the slaves came from Kentucky. The typical reward was \$5-10, with \$30 being the highest. *The Western Sun* (Vincennes) ran ads for eleven runaway slaves, most from Kentucky or Tennessee, between 1807 and 1811. Here, rewards were considerably higher. From a low of \$10, they ran as high as \$150-200, the latter price for a mulatto collier named Billy.²⁰

Owners sometimes offered no reward in their ad (about 24 percent of the time in Franklin and Schweningen’s study), and rewards over \$50 were comparatively rare. Mulattos tended to carry higher value, as did slaves who could write their own passes. Slaves in those categories also had a better chance of passing for freemen and making good their escape. Owners often held off placing an ad when they felt a slave might be quickly apprehended, but placed larger rewards when they feared the runaway was leaving the state. While Franklin and Schweningen’s study of runaways who were still within the South indicates that, “generally owners offered 5 percent or less of the value of the runaway as a reward,”²¹ the rewards for those presumed to have made it north of the Ohio were somewhat greater. This may reflect the overall trend of the most valuable slaves being the ones most capable of effecting their escape. Presumably slaves who could pass from Tennessee to the Ohio country were skilled indeed.

Many white Americans who settled in the Northwest Territory disliked the institution of slavery. Some opposed it on moral grounds—in Ohio and Indiana, Quakers and Methodists were particularly vocal opponents of slavery and often supporters of the Underground Railroad. Others who opposed the extension of slavery into the Northwest did so

¹⁹Josiah Holly ad, *Western Spy*, March 27, 1805.

²⁰*Vincennes Western Sun*, November 18, 1807.

²¹Franklin and Schweningen, *Runaway Slaves*, 175-76.

out of racial prejudice, wanting to exclude blacks, both slave and free, from settling. Many whites expressed simultaneous hatred for slavery and for blacks, as did Indiana Territory Judge Thomas T. Davis. "I dispise the Colour & Situation," he wrote to a friend.²² For everyone who read a newspaper, the ads calling for the return of runaway slaves served as a continual reminder of how much of the country depended on the labor of the enslaved, and how anxious slave masters remained about their patriarchal standing. Viewed from the present, the ads remind that free labor was far from a foregone conclusion and that slavery seemed perfectly plausible to many white Americans.

RUNAWAY APPRENTICES

African American slaves were not the only unfree laborers in the Ohio Valley. Even those who abhorred slavery assumed that unfree labor was necessary in certain businesses and trades. In particular, many of the skilled trades still relied upon apprentices, albeit with mixed results. Apprentices, usually pre-teens or young teenaged boys, worked for room and board, plus the opportunity to learn a valuable trade. Often provisions were made for the boy's education; in cities the terms of an apprenticeship might even stipulate attendance at night school. Apprentices usually served indentures of four to seven years—making them not unlike white indentured servants—or until the age of twenty-one. Masters practiced deferred gratification in accepting apprentices. The youth would produce little valuable labor early on, and would still need food, shelter, and clothing. But after a year or two, when his skills had progressed, he compensated his master with unpaid labor.²³

Apprenticeships traditionally had a familial, patriarchal quality. With a kindly master, an apprentice's quality of life was relatively good. Some apprentices even married their master's daughters and inherited businesses. But the situation held the potential for considerable abuse by the unscrupulous. Masters and apprentices had legal recourse in dire circumstances, though actual enforcement of the law on this point was not uniform.

²²Thomas T. Davis to John Breckenridge, January 26, 1806, in *Territorial Papers of the U.S.*, Vol. 7, *Indiana 1801-1810*, Clarence Edwin Carter, ed. (Washington, 1936), 355.

²³W. J. Rorabaugh, "I Thought I Should Liberate Myself from the Thralldom of Others: Apprentices, Masters, and the Revolution," in *Beyond the American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism*, Alfred F. Young, ed. (De Kalb, Ill., 1993), 187; Carl Bridenbaugh, *The Colonial Craftsman* (New York, 1950), 130.

The laws of the Northwest Territory allowed a justice of the peace to place poor or orphaned children in apprenticeships until boys were twenty-one or girls were eighteen. Indiana Territory reserved that right for the courts. Even under the best circumstances, apprenticeships were often involuntary—the child was sent away by a poor family to avoid the cost of upkeep—and tended toward the tedious. There were other drawbacks as well. The indenture might stipulate that the apprentice “not Committ fornication nor Contract Matrimony within the said term.”²⁴ For boys in the throes of puberty, this restriction must have been difficult. Doubtless it inspired some to run off, yet forces even greater than hormones were at play as well.

In an increasingly literate republic, popular literature was often intended to inspire morality and virtue. Among the bestselling books of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was the autobiography of Benjamin Franklin. But alas for the tradesman whose bonded workman read the volume. Franklin was easily America’s most famous and successful runaway apprentice, having fled his older brother’s print shop. In his autobiography, he did claim that it was one of the great mistakes of his life, as his brother had not treated him unfairly. But Franklin’s subsequent accomplishments seemed to many to justify his flight. The wildly popular autobiography went through seven editions in the 1790s, and was a favorite, not surprisingly, among printers’ apprentices. (The same decade also witnessed the formation of artisan organizations that tried to stanch the flood of runaways.) An unsuspecting master might suggest the book to an apprentice as a handbook for success, but, as W. J. Rorabaugh notes, Franklin’s autobiography put dangerous messages into impressionable minds, seeming to say “leave your master, become rich, famous, and renowned.”²⁵

Franklin’s story said something greater about the American saga as well, according to David Waldstreicher. Franklin’s success was based upon talents, hard work, and an indomitable will. But eggs were broken to make that omelet.

²⁴Quote, Bridenbaugh, *Colonial Craftsman*, 131; *The Laws of the Northwest Territory 1788-1800*, Theodore Calvin Pease, ed. (Springfield, Ill., 1925), 191, 219; *Laws of Indiana Territory 1801-1809*, Francis S. Philbrick, ed. (Springfield, Ill., 1930), 273.

²⁵Rorabaugh, “I Thought I Should Liberate Myself,” 201-202.

It took a real crime, the stealing of his own labor, to make the self-made man. . . . America is also the story of the James Franklins, the not-so-fortunate sons who tried to become self-sufficient and found that other people's unfreedom was one of the few resources at their disposal.²⁶

As with slave owners, craftsmen held wildly disparate views of their runaway charges' value. Because apprentices could not be held for life and one rarely had to pay cash up front to secure the contract, the rewards offered were usually much lower than those for slaves. Often the amount was in pennies rather than dollars. Of the seventeen runaway apprentices sought in the *Western Spy* between 1799 and 1806, for example, nine would bring a reward of twenty-five cents or less. Given that such ads typically cost at least fifty cents to post for each of the first three weeks, why bother to post an ad for an apprentice deemed worth less than half that cost? Even if we assume that, as with slaves, apprentice rewards often amounted to only 5 percent of the assumed value of the runaway, the numbers still do not add up.²⁷

Perhaps, as some argue with ads for escaped slaves, postings served to reassure the public that the apprenticeship system itself was legitimate. Masters used print ads to assert that the contract had been wrongfully violated—an attempt to negate the runaway's flight which implicitly stated that something was awry. While increasingly tough laws provided for the punishment of apprentices who broke their agreements, enforcement seems to have been lax, and at least among the existing states, master and apprentice alike understood that fleeing across the state line made prosecution nearly impossible.²⁸

Far more than with runaway slave notices, ads for runaway apprentices seem to have been motivated by spite as much as by the need for financial remuneration. The evidence for this motive is sometimes subtle, as with Isaac McCoy's ad calling for the return of Squire Davis, a slight eighteen-year-old who fled McCoy's wheelwright shop in

²⁶Waldstreicher, *Runaway America*, 6.

²⁷*The Indiana Gazette*, out of Vincennes, and its successor, the *Vincennes Western Sun*, both published by Elihu Stout, each charged fifty cents per initial advertisement, as seen on their title pages.

²⁸Rorabaugh, "I Thought I Should Liberate Myself," 202.

April 1809. McCoy waited several weeks to post the ad and offered only one cent for Davis's return,²⁹ giving the impression that McCoy was not desperately in need of the boy. Some postings were more blunt. Carpenter William H. Dunnica promised a "One Cent Re[w]ard & no Thanks" to anyone who returned his eighteen-year-old apprentice William Strickling. Similarly, William Salter noted that the return of apprentice Joshua Merryman would bring but one cent's reward: "I will pay no other expence; nor give one thank for so doing." John Van Nuys's offer of nine cents for the return of William Flin, about twelve years old, seems almost generous, given that Flin was "a noted Thief and Liar, and many other failings too tedious to enumerate." Sarcasm also pervades the offer for Philip Drum, a seventeen-year-old Dutchman who fled Robert McGennis of Columbus. Surmising that Drum's brother "inticed him away," McGennis noted, "Six pence worth of cucumbers will be given next December" for his return.³⁰

Despite such examples of anger and frustration, some craftsmen did offer reasonable rewards for the return of their absconded apprentices. One Cincinnati saddle-maker, for example, offered twenty dollars.³¹ In a broader sense, all runaway apprentice notices served greater social functions: to discourage apprentices from running away and to keep others from hiring such cheap labor in a labor-poor territory. Although wheelwright Paul Huston offered only twelve cents for the return of apprentice Robert Crawford, he added, "All persons are forbid from harboring him at their peril." When twenty-one-year-old book-binder's apprentice Andrew Weber fled from the press of the *Stanton Eagle*, in Stanton, Virginia, his master advertised at least as far away as the Indiana Territory. As Virginia by this time was the rare state that allowed apprenticeships to extend beyond age twenty-one, ten dollars reward was offered for his return. Because it looked as though Weber had "been persuaded to run away," another twenty dollars was offered if anyone were convicted "of so base a crime."³²

²⁹Waldstreicher, "Reading the Runaways," 247; *Vincennes Western Sun*, May 27, 1809.

³⁰Dunnica ad, *Vincennes Western Sun*, June 24, 1809; Salter, Van Nuys, and McGennis ads, *Western Spy*, April 3, 1805, July 30, 1799, and August 13, 1799.

³¹*Western Spy*, August 21, 1805.

³²Huston ad, *Western Spy*, March 23, 1803; Weber notice, *Vincennes Western Sun*, October 8, 1808; Rorabaugh, "I Thought I Should Liberate Myself," 202.

Frontier printers were particularly sensitive about their apprentices' flight, and the issue engendered a sense of common purpose.³³ William Maxwell, the editor of the *Centinel of the Northwestern Territory*, offered a dime for the return of nineteen-year-old Benjamin Stokes, and also noted that it was "unnecessary to describe his clothing, as he is a notorious villain and has probably changed them." Elihu Stout, printer of the *Vincennes Western Sun*, knew personally how hard it was to find good help—he ran ads for years seeking an apprentice boy for his shop, apparently finding little satisfaction. Probably because of this, he printed an ad from William Dickson, editor of the Lancaster, Pennsylvania, *Intelligencer*. Dickson addressed the ad "TO PRINTERS." He hoped for the return of James Donnelly, roughly fourteen, who despite "a peculiar habit of winking" and being "very talkative and imprudent," was quite skilled. "As this lad can do a man's work at setting types," he would most likely seek employment (and full wages) as a printer. "But it is confidently believed," Dickson continued, "that no one will employ him, and all persons are cautioned against harboring the runaway." Dickson further appealed to his colleagues by asserting that "[e]ditors of newspapers by inserting the above, will discourage the profligacy of apprentices, and oblige a brother."³⁴

RUNAWAY WIVES

Married women occupied an odd niche in the pantheon of unfree laborers. On the one hand, they presumably entered into their marriage contract more voluntarily than apprentices. Yet unlike an apprentice, wives "served" not a fixed term of years, but until the death of their spouse or themselves. Nor did wives learn a skilled trade with the understanding of future independence. Unlike a slave, a wife gained considerable personal, legal, and (assuming she was not left shackled by debt) financial freedom upon the death of her husband.

Eighteenth-century marriages have usually been understood, as Kathleen Brown writes, "as an economic partnership sweetened by companionship." Men had a distinct legal advantage in most cases if things

³³Ironically, Benjamin Franklin earned considerable revenues by printing ads for runaway apprentices and slaves. Waldstreicher, *Runaway America*, 24.

³⁴*Centinel of the North-Western Territory*, July 7, 1795; *Vincennes Western Sun*, December 7, 1811.

went sour—they controlled the property and held the rights to the home and children. Divorces, for reasons discussed below, were often difficult to come by. Yet women still had options. If physically abused or abandoned, they might “sue for separate maintenance [which required legal proof of the husband’s wrongdoing], seek refuge with sympathetic neighbors, friends, or relatives, or search for employment to provide their own living.”³⁵

Some gentry wives won enough in their separate maintenance suits to live by themselves. For most wives, though, separation proved a difficult decision, as their chances for financial survival alone were not good. Women might run a tavern or a small shop, or perform domestic work. Even meager independence, Brown asserts, “often represented an improvement over living conditions in which a husband humiliated her with his adultery, drank, or gambled away family resources.”³⁶

Some unhappy spouses found immediate relief by fleeing the situation, either alone or with a new lover. In cases where one spouse left the other, proving abandonment and securing legal redress was more straightforward for women than for men. When wives ran away, they might still use their husband’s name in legal and financial dealings, potentially racking up debts and sullyng his reputation. Men, therefore, “turned to the courts in these situations both to protect their estates and to level economic sanctions against their errant wives.”³⁷

By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, however, attitudes in America were shifting. The idea of a marriage based on love and passion, as well as finances, was taking root.³⁸ In the Anglo-American law codes, to be sure, a married woman was denied most of her legal status—a *feme covert*. Unlike a widow, a wife could not, in theory, enter into contracts, dispose of property, or conduct business generally, without her husband’s consent. As they strengthened their own position as citizens of the republic, American men denigrated women in the process. Or, as Linda Kerber writes, the “traditional identification of women with unreliability, unpredictability, and lust [had to] be

³⁵Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1996), 335-38.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 338.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 337.

³⁸Andrew Cayton, *Frontier Indiana* (Bloomington, Ind., 1996), 174-75.

emphasized. Women's weakness became a rhetorical foil for republican manliness."³⁹

Divorce was, by design, scandalous and difficult to effect. Modern concepts such as "irreconcilable differences" and "no-fault" divorces were completely alien. Poorly matched couples were expected to live unhappily ever after. But one of the key legal shifts in the nation after the Revolution was the possibility, if not the likelihood, of securing an absolute divorce. (Not coincidentally, this shift paralleled the growing belief in romantic marriage.) Prior to 1775, only the New England colonies had allowed for absolute divorce, but by the late 1790s all the states except South Carolina recognized it. The Northwest Territory also allowed for absolute divorce in some circumstances.⁴⁰

The Northwest Territory, as provided for in the Ordinance of 1787, could adopt appropriate laws from the existing states, rather than draft entirely new ones. For divorce, the territory adopted the Massachusetts code. Far more lenient, for example, than the Virginia code, it was nevertheless quite strict, allowing divorce only in cases of bigamy, adultery, or impotency, and requiring legal proof of one of the offenses. Legal separation—which did not allow for remarriage—was possible in cases of "extreme cruelty," although the code did not elaborate on what constituted the latter. If the court granted the couple a divorce and they had no children, the wife was legally entitled to the property she had brought to the marriage, as well as to "reasonable" alimony. If children were involved, the court would split the estate as it saw fit. All of this was assuming the husband brought suit.⁴¹

If the wife initiated proceedings, the court would decide how much, if any, of her former property and alimony she was entitled to. The territorial courts had ultimate authority in these matters.⁴² With fairly subtle wording, the law made it clear that as in most other matters, a married woman would remain subordinate to her husband. Married

³⁹Linda K. Kerber, "The Paradox of Women's Citizenship in the Early Republic: The Case of *Martin vs. Massachusetts*, 1805," *American Historical Review*, 97 (April 1992), 349-78, quote p. 351.

⁴⁰Norma Basch, *Framing American Divorce: From the Revolutionary Generation to the Victorians* (Berkeley, Calif., 1999), 20-22.

⁴¹*Laws of the Northwest Territory*, 258; *Journals of the General Assembly of Indiana Territory 1805-1815*, Gayle Thornbrough and Dorothy L. Riker, eds. (Indianapolis, 1950), note p. 130.

⁴²*Laws of the Northwest Territory*, 258-59.

men received an extra layer of protection, even if their wives sued them, because the process had to be sanctioned by other men. Of course, women's divorce suits were occasionally granted in cases of truly despicable behavior by husbands. But the husband commanded a benefit of the doubt denied his wife. At its core, the law was about paternalistic control, not equity.

The difficulties and high costs of securing a divorce encouraged many people in bad marriages simply to flee. For wealthier couples in England and America, unhappy unions might practically (if not technically) be sundered by a permanent separation, where the wife was allowed enough alimony for her support. Men and women from the lower economic classes seemed to prefer bigamy and serial monogamy to the social and financial costs of seeking a legal divorce. Cases of bigamy were not often prosecuted, unless one of the parties later became wealthy.⁴³

Most "runaway wife" advertisements followed a basic pattern. They served as a public avowal that the wife had fled—usually "without provocation"—and a warning to businessmen that the abandoned husband had no intention of honoring any purchases or contracts she now made. The following, from the *Centinel of the Northwestern Territory*, was typical:

Notice. To All whom it may concern, Not to credit my wife Elizabeth Meeker, on my account as she has absconded from my bed and board without any Provocation; therefore I am determined not to pay any debts of her contracting, from this date.
John Meeker, Columbia, Mar. 3, 1794.⁴⁴

Posting a notice about one's absconded wife was a dicey proposition: Most men, doubtless, did not relish the public embarrassment that such an ad would bring. Nor would any husband have welcomed the invitation for others to speculate: Was he a bad provider? Was he

⁴³Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches*, 335-38; Hendrik Hartog, *Man and Wife in America: A History* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000), 87; Marylynn Salmon, "Republican Sentiment, Economic Change, and the Property Rights of Women in American Law," in *Women in the Age of the American Revolution*, Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert, eds. (Charlottesville, Va., 1988), 448.

⁴⁴*Centinel of the Northwestern Territory*, April 12, 1794.

abusive? Were there troubles in the bedroom? Did his wife leave him for someone more alluring? But men did choose to risk public speculation, as they clearly feared financial ruin would be even more bruising to their honor. In the face-to-face economy of small towns and farms, honor and finances were often linked.⁴⁵

As with other runaway ads, self-fashioning and revenge seem to have been motivating factors as well. But, unlike the other ads, runaway wife notices rarely called for the woman's return. From a sample of thirty-six ads, only one, from Archibald McDonald of Cincinnati, sought a reunion with his wife.⁴⁶ Perhaps Archibald called for Rhodah's return because she carried with her their eighteen-month-old son. Also atypical of these ads, McDonald offered a reward—\$5—for the safe return of wife and child.⁴⁷

Most runaway wife ads adhered to a form, but there were individual touches as well. The husband might allege adultery, and even name his wife's lover, or he might throw in an attack on his absent wife's character. Peter Davis of Cincinnati noted that his wife Elizabeth "absented from my bed, and has since taken up with another man." Robert Armstrong, a soldier at Fort St. Clair, asserted that his wife, also named Elizabeth, "has proved false to my bed and board." When David J. Poor's wife Rachel left him, he tried to reclaim a sliver of his bruised masculinity, addressing the ad not just to Rachel, but to women in general. He further sought to embarrass not only his wife, but also her alleged lover, when he posted the following:

A Warning to Women!!! Whereas I have this day caught William Griffin and Rachel my wife in the very act of ADULTERY; I therefore forwarn all persons of trusting or harbouring her as I am determined to pay no debts of her contracting after this date.

Thomas Harden of Indiana Territory also refused responsibility for any of his absconded wife Mary's debts, making a point to add that she

⁴⁵See Mary Beth Norton, "Gender and Defamation in Seventeenth-Century Maryland," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 44 (January 1987), 3-39.

⁴⁶From the *Centinel of the Northwest Territory*, 1793-1796, the *Western Spy*, 1799-1807, and the *Vincennes Western Sun*, 1807-1811.

⁴⁷*Centinel of the Northwestern Territory*, August 15, 1795.

NOTICE.

WHEREAS my wife Mary Harden has absented herself from my bed and board, and deserted her infant children, this is therefore to forewarn all persons from harboring her, or dealing with her, in any wise, as they are assured it is not my intention to discharge any debts of her contracting until she returns to her duty.

Thomas Harden.

October 9, 1811.

Advertisement for a runaway wife from the *Vincennes Western Sun*, January 12, 1812
 Notices such as this one were intended to prevent a husband's financial loss and preserve his standing in the community.

had “deserted her infant children.”⁴⁸ In adding that line, Harden was not simply insulating himself from financial loss, but safeguarding his honor by asserting that his erstwhile wife was no good.

Those sentiments were echoed by Sergeant John Bentley of the 5th U.S. Regiment at Fort Wayne. When he announced that his wife had left him for the arms of one Silvanus Reynolds, he prefaced the account with “INJUSTICE.” He further warned others against contracting with her, or (echoing apprentice ads) even harboring her. Perhaps most anguished was Uriah Gates, who posted about his wife Rebecca on Christmas Eve, 1800. Apparently she did come back, but by early 1807, the hapless Gates again notified the public of her desertion, this time with the preamble “O!O!O! Woman!” Few ads were clearer, or nastier, than that posted by Garret Cavenagh about his wife Nancy. Nancy, he alleged, had

⁴⁸Ibid., June 21, 1794, July 11, 1795; Poor ad in *Western Spy*, January 2, 1802; Harden ad in *Vincennes Western Sun*, January 12, 1812.

run off with an ex-soldier, and the two of them had stolen all of the household furnishings, and even Garret's spare clothing. Nancy also pilfered the deed for two land lots in Columbia, which Garret had already sold. Cavenagh warned the public not to trust her, or to make any contracts with her on his behalf, as she was a "Whore, a Thief, a Drunkard, a Lyar, and a Perjured Wretch!!"⁴⁹

Men posting such ads gambled as to how their friends and neighbors would interpret their tales of woe. They also risked retaliation in kind from their absent spouses. While not common, several women did take the time and expense to publicly defend their honor in print. Thomas Jackson may well have regretted broadcasting his wife Flora's absence, when he saw her response:

Notice. AS THOMAS JACKSON advertised that I left him, without any just cause, and warned any person or persons from harbouring me—I am obligated to inform the public that he threatened taking my life, and abused me most shamefully, which was the reason of my leaving my late place of residence. N. B. As Thomas Jackson's master has promised to keep a servant from troubling me, I wish he would fulfill his promise and keep him at home. Flora Jackson, Cinn., April 8, 1806.⁵⁰

Rachel Cooper sought to counter an ad placed by her husband Christian. She had not left him, she insisted, but in fact he had "eloped from me." Furthermore, as he had taken property rightfully given her, leaving her nothing, she warned that "all persons are cautioned not to trust him as they will be sure of never being paid."⁵¹

One of the more detailed and cutting responses imaginable came from Betsey Hendrickson regarding her husband:

WHEREAS my man Henry Hendrickson, has paid me the compliment of putting my name in the public newspapers, I think it

⁴⁹*Western Spy*, November 12, 1799; Gates ads December 24, 1800 and January 6, 1807; Cavenagh ad in *Liberty Hall and Cincinnati Mercury*, August 27, 1796.

⁵⁰*Western Spy*, April 15, 1806.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, September 12, 1804.

a duty I owe to myself to return the compliment—he has stated that I left his bed and board without just cause, which is a lie in two respects—first I can prove that he forced me away; secondly, I had occasion to go away if he had not sent me away.

For unspecified “reasons to dilicate [sic] for me to relate,” Henry had moved to Cincinnati, and sent for Betsy on numerous occasions. Finally, “thro’ much hardship,” she made the trip. “[B]ut alas, what did I find, his constant practice was hugging and kissing Dick Willey’s wife.” Betsy then alleged that much more could be proven against Henry, and that she meant to do so in court.⁵²

As with the runaway wife ads, divorce suit notices were posted in the papers, and, while prescribed by law, also offered an opportunity to strike back at one’s spouse. Both men and women made such use of them. William Hardin posted a notice announcing his suit against his wife Amelia, adding that he was “praying a divorce from the said Amelia for cause of adultery.”⁵³

In modern tabloid fashion, Alexander Simpson posted the results from his recent divorce trial. As the case was already decided, the ad served more to vent spleen than to disseminate information:

At the Supreme court, which rose on Saturday last, a divorce was decreed between Alexander Simpson and Rebecca his wife, without allowing her any of his property, he having proven that she was caught at two different times with two different men, who were brothers, by the names of Reuben Doty and John Doty.
ALEXANDER SIMPSON. Sept. 19, 1804.⁵⁴

Martha Bird addressed her notice “to the public generally, and to John Bird . . . who has long since absconded, in particular.” Martha identified herself as the daughter of Samuel Moore of South Bend (Ohio), and also “the woman the said John Bird married, (and soon after without

⁵²*Western Spy*, December 7, 1811.

⁵³*Vincennes Western Sun*, September 22, 1812.

⁵⁴*Western Spy*, October 3, 1804.

cause abandoned and married Abigail Atter).” She gave notice that she had already filed papers against John in the office of the Ohio State Supreme Court to have the marriage dissolved in the next court session.⁵⁵

While petitioners for divorce had no choice but to look to the legislature or the courts, Americans on the frontier of the Early Republic often relied upon the community for general law enforcement. Without a professional police force and with only a few sheriffs, deputies, and justices of the peace, communities developed a law enforcement strategy that was somewhere between a neighborhood watch and outright vigilantism. While such a system respected the republican desire to be free from excess government and taxes, its results must often have been discouraging. When criminals could be located and arrested, there was little guarantee that the local jail could hold them until the trial.⁵⁶

Newspaper ads for runaways in the Ohio Valley, then, performed numerous functions for the citizenry. The ads were meant to safeguard men’s investments—financially, as well as emotionally and socially. By alerting the public to the presence of runaways, masters/husbands sought to diminish the absconded’s chances of getting a better “contract” elsewhere—as a free laborer, artisan, or spouse—by implying that those who fled did so from impure or unjust motives. The advertisements aided the greater patriarchal order’s system of unfree labor by seeking to delegitimize any justifications for running off. At the same time, the ads served masters’ needs to fashion their images and defend their public honor to the community at large, by insisting that they were blameless in any broken contract. Along with these reasons, I would argue that

⁵⁵Ibid., July 3, 1805.

⁵⁶Jailed criminals appear to have had a laughably easy time escaping. At the Hamilton County jail in Cincinnati, for example, in a survey of the *Centinel of the Northwestern Territory* of less than two years (September 28, 1794- May 28, 1796), at least forty-five men escaped either the jail or the custody of deputies. Certainly the jail was shabby, a conglomeration of poorly fitted wood planks, with no concrete and a weak foundation. But note that the vast majority who escaped were not violent criminals, or even thieves, but debtors. Quite possibly, the frontier community at large was sympathetic toward debtors, because the local economy was often precarious. They may have been loath to track down, or even complicit in the escape of, men who differed from them only in luck. Further, the threat to the community posed by at-large debtors did not justify, for most settlers, the perceived ills of a more professional police force.

many runaway ads served a personal need for vengeance by allowing the offended master “the last word,” if only in print.

Men of property faced a difficult situation on the frontier of the Early Republic. Having overthrown a strong, centralized government in the Revolution, they had to balance their hard-won liberty with real-world concerns about the nature of power and control in their society. In general they wanted order and justice, yet in many instances they lacked the technology or funding necessary to see to the enforcement of their own laws. Rather than pay for such instruments through taxation, or risk possible oppression from law officers, they opted to rely upon friends and neighbors by throwing certain legal concerns into the public arena. The frontier newspapers were vital to this process. They allowed the propertied citizenry to seek lost spouses, apprentices, and slaves, to vent frustrations, to search for criminals, and to enjoy petty revenge, all for a few pennies per week—a small price to pay for their liberty.

