

# Runaway Slave Ads: Witnessing African American Agency

an in-archives exercise by Kimberly Faith Jones

featured on [TeachArchives.org](http://www.teacharchives.org) at <http://www.teacharchives.org/exercises/runaway-slave-ads/>

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**Students examine documents related to runaway slaves and compare their findings to a secondary source on the same subject**

## Introduction

This activity is part of a world history unit in which students learn about slavery and resistance in the Americas. It pairs archival materials which document individual runaways with a secondary source on the topic. Students read and discuss chapter 9, “Profile of a Runaway” from *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* by John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger. These authors developed a profile to the typical runaway slave based on a statistical analysis of over two thousand runaway slave ads from southern states. This chapter provides students with a framework to analyze the documents they will encounter in the archives. It also serves as a model for the kind of scholarship that can come out of primary source research.

Although the majority of the students in the course are not history majors, in general students performed relatively well on the exercise. For example, many of my pharmacy students expressed how the development of their critical analysis skills had helped them in the courses required for their major.

## Objectives

Students should be able to:

- Distinguish between secondary and primary sources
- Analyze runaway slave advertisements using the secondary source “Profile of a Runaway”

## Context

Before visiting the archives, I give lectures on slave resistance in the Americas in general and in the United States specifically.

In the Franklin and Schweninger reading assignment mentioned above, students learn about a typical runaway: a young male field hand in his late teens and twenties who ran away at night, on Saturday afternoon or Sunday, or on holidays: as these were times when their absence would be noticed immediately. These young men usually ran away during the summer, winter or spring. They rarely ran away in the fall because this was harvest season and their absence would be readily noticed.

## Visit

Number of Visits: 1

Duration of Visit: 50 minutes

### Agenda

5 minutes	<a href="#">Standard introduction after a pre-visit</a>
10 minutes	Short lecture review
20 minutes	Small group work
10 minutes	Wrap up

This class visit begins with a review of the Franklin and Schweningen chapter, as well as a reminder about the key points of [the 1799 New York State Gradual Manumission Act](#).

Groups of 6 – 7 students then spend twenty minutes completing task-oriented handouts at one of the following stations:

#### **Northern Slavery Station**

These students look at two New York newspapers featuring runaway slave ads. See handout [here](#).

#### **Southern Slavery Station**

These students review clipped runaway slave advertisements from Louisiana. See handout [here](#).

#### **Baxter Journal Station**

These students read journal entries of a Long Island man describing runaways. See handout [here](#).

### Wrap Up

Students reconvene to present the findings prompted by their handouts. They present the story of the individual runaway(s) they studied, and they explain how these examples fit (or do not fit) within the template established by Franklin and Schweningen.

## End Products

Two weeks after the visit to the archives, students turn in a 3 – 5 page analysis paper analyzing how the runaways they witnessed in their document stations do or do not conform to the profile established by Franklin and Schweningen.

I use the students' analysis papers as a measure of whether or not they met the learning

objectives. Students are graded in four areas: content, organization, grammar, and style. Each category is worth 25 points; thus resulting in a score out of a total of 100 points (10% of the final course grade).

## Archival Material Used

### Northern Slavery Station

The Corrector, Sag Harbor, Long Island, vol. IV, no. 6 (whole no. 150), June 4, 1825, 1975.1391; Broadside collection, box 3; Brooklyn Historical Society. [click for image](#)

The Long Island Star, Brooklyn, New York, January 10, 1822; Historic newspapers microfilm collection, reel 3; Brooklyn Historical Society. [click for image](#)

### Southern Slavery Station

Runaway slave advertisements in Black Code of the State of Louisiana, circa 1835; Slavery pamphlet collection, PAMP Black-1; Brooklyn Historical Society. [click for image](#)

### Baxter Journal Station

Typescript, Journal of John Baxter of Flatlands, Long Island, 1790-1826. Indexed by Edna Huntington, 1955; Main Collection F129.B7 F53 1955 c.1 v.1 and v.2; Brooklyn Historical Society. [click for image](#)/[click for image of original](#) (original not used by class)

## Further Reading

“An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery.” In *Jim Crow New York, A Documentary History of Race and Citizenship 1777-1877*, eds. David N. Gellman and David Quigley, 52-55. New York: New York University Press, 2003.

*The New York State Archives has a zoomable version of the original document [online](#).*

Franklin, John Hope and Loren Schweninger. “Profile of a Runaway.” In *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation*, 209-233. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

## This Exercise Was Used In

**History 2: World Civilizations Since 1500** A survey course all students take to fulfill a core curriculum requirement. With colleagues in English, I taught this as part of a learning community called “Pathways to Freedom.”

## Adaptability

This can also be used in a more specific advanced level course such as African American History.

## Course Materials (included)

Group 1 Handout

Group 2 Handout

Group 3 Handout

## Cite This Exercise

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- Although the two slaves have run away in the North, do the dates they chose to run away fit the profile the authors John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger established for southern runaway slaves?
- b. List the characteristics the slave owners used to describe their slaves in the runaway slave ads they placed in *The Corrector* and *The Long Island Star*.
- How closely do these descriptions compare to those offered by Franklin and Schweninger?
  - What are the differences and similarities between the ads placed by the two slave owners?
4. As a group, create an informal profile of the two runaway slaves and their slave owners in the New York area using the information you have gathered.

### **Presentation**

At the end of the visit to the archives, your group will introduce your documents and will present a profile of the New York area runaway slaves based on the information you have gathered.



- Do these dates fit the profile the authors John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger established for southern runaway slaves?
- b. List the characteristics the slave owners used to describe their slaves.
- How closely do these descriptions compare to those offered by Franklin and Schweninger?
  - Are there any aspects of the Louisiana runaways or the ads that you might consider unique to Louisiana?
4. As a group, create an informal profile of the Louisiana runaway slaves using the information you have gathered.

### **Presentation**

At the end of the visit to the archives, your group will introduce your documents and will present a profile of the New York area runaway slaves based on the information you have gathered.

# In-Archives Handout

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Part of an in-archives exercise at <http://www.teacharchives.org/exercises/runaway-slave-ads>

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## Baxter Journal Station

Runaway slave advertisements in Black Code of the State of Louisiana, circa 1835; Slavery pamphlet collection, PAMP Black-1; Brooklyn Historical Society.

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To be completed as a group. You may want to photograph documents so each person will have a copy for the activity and the later assignment.

1. Write down any entries about runaway slaves you find on the following pages:

Volume 1: page 116

Volume 2: pages 21 and 133

2. Do the dates of Baxter's entries fit the profile authors John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger establish in their "runaway slave profile"?
3. How does Baxter describe his runaway slaves in his journal entries? What is his tone?

- b. Are there any entries that stand out from the others?
  
4. What change occurs in the number of entries Baxter makes in his journals over time?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. Read aloud the *Act for the gradual abolition of slavery*
  - b. Discuss and summarize the meaning of the document.
  - c. What is a possible relationship between this document and the change in the number of runaway slave entries in Baxter's Journal?

## **Presentation**

At the end of the visit to the archives, your group will introduce your document and discuss:

- whether or not Baxter's runaways fit any aspect of the Franklin/Schweninger "runaway slave profile"
- the manner in which Baxter mentions his runaway slaves in his journal entries
- the change in the number of runaways that occurred over time
- the historical context in which this change in the number of runaways occurred