

The Promised Land: Just A Fraction Of Slaves Succeeded In Escaping, But Their Stories Are Compelling

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Review

THE PROMISED LAND

Just a fraction of slaves succeeded in escaping, but their stories are compelling

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Franklin, John Hope and Schweninger, Loren. *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation*. Oxford University Press, ISBN 195084497

Henry David Thoreau said that historians show us the present more than the past, and nothing illustrates his statement better than **Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation** by John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger. The book's thesis is that "violence and cruelty . . . were inherent in the slave system," and that slaves did not want to be slaves. This thesis should be a no-brainer, but according to Franklin and Schweninger, "Many people still believe that slaves were generally content, that racial violence on the plantation was an aberration. . . ."

Runaway Slaves begins with an overview of slave activity which the authors call "resistance." This includes "sabotage" of various kinds: pulling down fences, damaging wagons and other equipment, ruining clothing, and other vandalism such as that old favorite, swinging pigs. Slaves also stole "nearly anything that was not under lock and key." (It should be noted here that such behavior could as easily be interpreted by slaveholders as evincing criminality or moral deficiency in the transplanted Africans.)

Further, slaves sometimes worked slowly or sloppily, damaged crops while harvesting, stopped working, feigned illness, slipped away for a day, got drunk. (Again, such activity could be compared to similar behavior among slave labor in Nazi factories, or it could fuel racial stereotypes.) Sometimes open defiance was the result of a system which "by its very nature created a milieu for interracial conflict." Slaves would refuse orders, threaten overseers and masters, and inflict violence upon whites.

Such "resistance" was characterized by one overseer in terms which not only suggest origins for racial stereotyping but illustrate the nonsense of American slavery: "They would not work at all, he believed, if it were not for the whipping they would receive if they refused." Imagine that! Involuntary labor did not work voluntarily!

It is no surprise, then, that planters are also quoted as registering dismay over the *ungratefulness* of slaves. George Washington himself wrote that a girl who ran away from Mount Vernon had been "brought up and treated more like a child than a Servant." But of course, she was a "servant" -- a genteel word for "slave." People who failed to be grateful for their position as slaves sometimes ran away, and this phenomenon provides the main concern of Franklin and Schweninger's book.

Opportunity crucial to escapes

Slaves ran for a number of reasons. A master's death might change their situation: they might now be treated worse or sold. Slaves ran to escape the brutality of masters and overseers. They fled to avoid unwanted sexual advances -- some of which entailed the additional unpleasantness of bringing the ire of the plantation mistress down on the hapless black female. But the fact that "opportunity" was a crucial factor in escapes reminds us that slavery itself, not particular complaints or abuses, caused slaves to run. One cannot speak of "abuses" in a system which was itself fundamentally abuse.

In the course of the book, one learns a great deal about the "peculiar institution." Tens of thousands of slaves, for example, worked not on their farms and plantations, but were hired out -- rented out like machinery to factory owners or to anyone who wanted work done. It would be like walking into a Just Ask Rental and finding along one wall a row of naked people holding up their resumes, hourly charges posted above their heads. No wonder Northerners perceived the slave system's threat to free labor as being comprehensive.

But what really spoke to Northerners of the Victorian era was the cruel fact of family separation, as brought to light by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Franklin and Schweninger present numerous brief accounts of families being separated. A leading reason for running away was to get back to a family, a husband, a wife, even if only for a short time. (The authors show that most runaways were only temporarily, if at all, successful.)

Two examples: "Shortly after being sold, the South Carolina slave Sally . . . headed straight to Parker's Ferry and the plantation where her husband lived. Another slave, Nelly, owned by Isham Lowery, the captain of a coastal sloop running from Ashepoo to Charleston, left her master's plantation near Porotaligo and went straight to her husband, who concealed her for more than six months."

Runaway Slaves is filled with such cases. This method is both a strength and a weakness. Numerous vignettes humanize information by fixing names and personalities to it. On the other hand, such evidence can be called merely "anecdotal"; perhaps worse, the book causes frustration in that stories are constantly begun but seldom finished. But many quotations are singularly effective; e.g., Fanny Kemble describing the "inhumanity of allowing a man to strip and lash a woman, the mother of ten children; to extract from her, toil."

Imagine if that were done to a mother today, instead of, say, hiring her as an adjunct university professor at below subsistence wages, with no benefits and no possibility of full-time employment: the result would be outrage. The point is not whether slaveholders did regularly strip and lash mothers, but that the system sanctioned the possibility.

How many slaves ran off? Two tables show numbers of runaways from Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, South Carolina, and Louisiana in the years 1790-1816 and 1838-1860. These five states generated 2,011 documented runaways in the years cited. The reader must ask whether these figures support "tens of thousands" of runaways to Southern cities; moreover, do they bear out the book's further claim that runaways constituted a clear protest and a significant problem for the slave system?

The authors' claim suggests a "how many" question, yet the evidence does not yield quantifiable results. It was "unusual" for masters to keep records of runaways. Further, writings circulated in the South omitted mention of runaway problems because owners were reluctant to admit that they experienced failures in "managing their property." Hence "the exact number of runaways will never be known. . . ."

Does this lack of evidence mean that Southerners were afraid and ashamed, or that only a predictable number of malcontents absconded? The first possibility makes sense but is an argument from silence.

Therefore Franklin and Schweninger produce other evidence; much of it, though not quantifiable, is documentary. Advertisements and offers of rewards are gleaned from newspapers and handbills. Letters enumerate slave escapes; planters kept records of where their slaves' families lived for the obvious purpose of indicating where pursuers might look for absconders; expenses of those pursuers were detailed in planters' account books. Southerners bred, trained, and advertised "negro dogs" for chasing runaways. State governments spent a great deal of time and paper in writing fugitive laws. Men made livings as slave catchers. Jail records show captured slaves being held until claimed or sold. Petitions to legislatures and county courts dealt with runaways.

How many, then, do these sources suggest? Reading page after page of brief anecdotes, the reader begins to think that every black man and woman in the South, together with all their relations, was on the move trying to evade the benefits of Southern civilization. Therefore the "conservative" estimate of 4% on page 281 comes as a surprise. To decide whether such a figure clinches the argument, we need other numbers for comparison, such as what percentage of enlistees deserts from the U.S. armed forces.

In any case, the book does a good job of avoiding heavy irony and shrillness. An excellent example is the quotation, without comment, of a joint statement issued by slaveholders on why hired-out slaves in Richmond ran away: they were influenced by "Foreigners and poor and ignorant persons, who have no other idea of right and wrong than that which conforms exactly to their interest." Those Southerners thought that up all by themselves; it was not put into their mouths by Mark Twain.

Ultimately, the question of slavery does not rest on numbers. Either one child sold away from his mother is enough, or it is not. Either one drop of blood drawn by the lash requires one drawn by the sword, or it does not.

Runaway Slaves is a formidable corrective. But whatever the book tells us about slavery, its being written today tells us more than we want to know about ourselves. We have wished to believe that Lincoln was wrong when he said that the war had been caused by slavery and represented divine retribution on both South and North for a moral outrage. Slavery was evil; it was heartless and brutal, and slaves did not want to be slaves. Too bad we need to be told this again.

Kent Gramm is author of Gettysburg: A Meditation on War and Values, and contributor to The Gettysburg Nobody Knows and Giants in Their Tall Black Hats: Essays on the Iron Brigade.