Runaway Slave Women of New Orleans: An Urban Perspective in the Antebellum South

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The Runaway Slave Women of New Orleans
An Urban Perspective on the Antebellum South
by Tara Garbutt

Abstract
While working on a project collecting runaway slave ads, it became apparent that female slaves were less likely to run away than men. So what can we learn from looking at those women who did run? Our team of researchers is working with the New Orleans Times-Picayune. These runaway slave ads provide fascinating detail about the fugitives: how they looked, spoke, with whom they traveled, and where they were going. This poster provides insights and new research project.

Introduction
Antebellum slavery was a brutal institution. Enslaved people were told to do so much for very little. There were added pressures and expectations for female slaves. They were beaten, raped, and some were described in the slave market as “breeders.” In this light, the thought of female slaves running away might be an obvious one. But, how practical would it have been for a woman in 1839 to run away, possibly by herself or with family? Was there a difference between running away in a rural Mississippi and an urban area like New Orleans? Those are the questions we will be answering in this research project.

Results
There were more runaway advertisements per issue in New Orleans than in rural Mississippi. Also, in New Orleans runaways were often fluent in more than one language, unlike those in Mississippi. The advertisements collected for Mississippi for the year 1839 were spread across multiple newspapers. The slaves in the rural areas typically ran away close to the border of the state. Some of the slaves in the city, on the other hand, were suspected to be in places where they could hide in plain sight. Some of the New Orleans advertisements also stated that fugitives might try to pass as women of another race. Female runaways in both the city and rural areas often ran away with a male family member. Other advertisements, in both locales, mentioned a relative or a spouse’s location as a possible destination.

Methods
Using America’s Historical Newspapers, our team reads the New Orleans Times-Picayune year by year and page by page, from 1837-1861. When we find an ad for a runaway, we follow a set rubric for scanning the ad, giving it a file name, transcribing it, and recording the names of the enslaved, the owner, the advertiser, and the address of the owner.

Conclusion
In conclusion, from the research gathered so far, there were more women that ran away in the urban area (New Orleans). It seems as though the city had more of an opportunity for fugitives to hide in plain sight, perhaps even in close proximity to their owners. The fact that a number of the runaway’s spoken different languages also made it easier for them to get around the city and blend in where they could. There were also large numbers of free people of color in New Orleans, which made blending in easier as well. It was much harder to run away in a rural area because of the great distance between towns, large tracts of cleared land, and a relatively sparse rural population. Rural runaways were trapped by land, but may have been more likely to run away from the state border than the interior part of the state.

Sources
America’s Historical Newspapers http://infoweb.newsbank.com.ezproxy.uno.edu

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