

Working with Primary Sources: Local Runaway Slave Advertisements

Grades 9-12

Lesson

Students will read selected runaway slave advertisements for Hillsborough/Orange County and answer the corresponding questions. Students will then use the Runaway Slave Advertisement Database for North Carolina to find an advertisement of their own to compare slavery in Orange County to the rest of the state. Students will be asked to analyze primary sources and think critically about what the advertisements tell us about antebellum society in Orange County. Students can work individually, in a group, or as an entire class. If working as an entire class, students can answer questions in a Google Document, so that they can share and respond to each other's answers.

North Carolina Standards

I.1.4 Developing Claims and Using Evidence

- Analyze Data From Charts, graphs, timelines, and maps.
- Analyze Visual, literary, and musical sources.
- Examine Change And Continuity Over Time.
- Analyze Causes, effects, and correlations.
- Determine the relevance of a source in relation to the compelling and supporting questions.

AH.B.1.3 Critique multiple perspectives of American identity in terms of oppression, stereotypes, diversity, inclusion, and exclusion.

AH.B.1.6 Explain how the experiences and achievements of minorities and marginalized peoples have contributed to American identity over time in terms of the struggle against bias, racism, oppression, and discrimination.

AH.B.1.7 Explain how slavery, xenophobia, disenfranchisement, and intolerance have affected individual and group perspectives of themselves as Americans.

AH.C&G.1.4 Explain how racism, oppression, and discrimination of indigenous peoples, racial minorities, and other marginalized groups have impacted equality and power in America.

Background

Runaway slave advertisements were paid classifieds for slaveholders to attempt to track down a missing person, usually by offering a monetary reward, through detailed physical description and commentary on specific skill sets. These advertisements were used in both the Colonial and Antebellum eras. Studying advertisements for self-emancipated slaves gives deeper knowledge of slavery in the United States and North Carolina, as well as understanding material life and demographics of enslaved people.

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Learning Objectives

- Students will analyze primary sources referencing runaway slaves in North Carolina
- Students will think critically about primary source material, such as inferring messaging and bias in primary sources
- Students will become familiar with finding their own primary sources using a digital database
- Students will think critically about how primary sources contribute to understanding of an assigned time period

Warmup Question

Ask the entire class how they think that runaway slave notices played a role in slavery in the antebellum era in North Carolina.

Activity

Start with reading the following information about runaway slaves in North Carolina:

<https://dlas.uncg.edu/notices/history/#:~:text=The%20woods%20and%20swamplands%20of,be%20weary%20of%20slave%20patrols.>

Tips on how to read a runaway slave advertisement:

<https://www.colonialwilliamsburg.org/learn/deep-dives/how-read-runaway-ad/>

Analyzing Runaway Slave Advertisements for Orange County:

<https://museum.unc.edu/exhibits/show/slavery/item/1132>

<https://dlas.uncg.edu/notices/notice/3796/>

Questions to answer:

1. Describe the advertisement: what information is listed, how does it describe the person who has run away, what information is missing?
2. Is it surprising that James had a horse with him? How do you think he got an animal? Why would he go towards Norfolk or Richmond and not the North Carolina coast? What was the Colonization Society and why was it assumed that James was looking for one?
3. What does James' advertisement tell us about his association with the University? How does it differ from the description of Ben and Lewis?
4. The advertisement about Ben says that he is likely around Hillsborough because his wife lives there. What does that tell us about the family life of the enslaved?
5. How do these advertisements describe life in Hillsborough in the antebellum era?
6. One advertisement is from 1829 and the other is from 1842. How did the laws in North Carolina regarding runaways change between that time? How do those laws impact how the advertisements were written?

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Analyzing Runaway Slave Database for North Carolina:

<https://dlas.uncg.edu/notices/>

Using the database, find a runaway slave advertisement from another county in North Carolina.

Questions:

1. Describe the advertisement: what information is listed, how does it describe the person who has run away, what information is missing? What is the date that the advertisement was published? What county is the advertisement located?
2. How is the advertisement that you found different from the advertisements from Orange County?
3. What does the advertisement tell us about North Carolina and slavery at the time?
4. What were the runaway slave laws in North Carolina at the time that the advertisement was written?

Questions to discuss

- What do the runaway slave advertisements tell us about society in North Carolina? What do they tell us about slavery in the state? Does it change?
- Why do all of the advertisements include such attention to physical appearance? Do these descriptions indicate the status of the enslaved?
- Looking at the advertisements, how do the descriptions change over time?
- Are there any differences in content or descriptions in one region or another? Time period?
- How did runaway slave laws change over time throughout the antebellum era in North Carolina? Were runaway slave laws different in other states?
- Slaveholders frequently claimed that enslaved people were ignorant and uneducated, how do the descriptions in the advertisements counter that claim?
- What do runaway slave advertisements tell historians about self-agency amongst the enslaved?

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