

“Run-away from the Subscriber”: Resistance Against King’s College and Columbia Slave-owning Students and Affiliates from the Class of 1760 to 1805

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Jordan Brewington discussing “Run-away from the Subscriber”: Resistance Against King’s College and Columbia Slave-owning Students and Affiliates from the Class of 1760 to 1805: [video] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t5FhJ3IMDUo>

In mid-October of 1772, a fugitive named Mingo frees himself from bondage in the woodsy township of Morris County, New Jersey. For at least the second time in four years, Mingo had escaped yet another man who claimed to own him. Running by moonlight, “isolation, hunger, exposure, tracking dogs, and threats of violent capture and sadistic punishment” loom in his thoughts as he escapes the clutches of Samuel Ogden, affiliate of the Class of 1768, just the way he had a few years earlier when fleeing from Isaac Wilkins, Class of 1760.[1] Gripping his weathered wool hat in one hand, a sack filled with a change of clothes in the other, Mingo hastens through the night.[2] His sweat soaked through his oxemburg shirt, evaporating in the icy darkness.

No sounds but the surges of the wind, the panting, wheezing breaths, and the low, steady beating of a human heart. This is what it is to run for your life.

Mingo was not alone. Within his lifespan, from 1716 to 1783, 753 fugitives were reported in a runaway slave advertisement.[3] By the time of his escape, New York City held the third largest concentration of slaves in any North American city, after Charleston and New Orleans.[4] With 21,324 enslaved Africans recorded in the 1790 census, slaves made up 6.27% of the overall population, not including slaves who were recorded by the first census system and, of course, fugitives.[5] Fugitivity was one of the few means by which slaves in New York could resist against the daily atrocities they faced and it posed an immediate threat to white slave-owners. Their fear of fugitivity is cited as early as 1702, when New York lawmakers passed comprehensive legislation to establish the slave system, dedicating “a substantial portion” to “fugitive slaves and firmly identified flight with insurrection.”[6] Fugitivity in New York was in many ways a response to white fear and instability: the “harsh laws [which] sharply limited the potential for emancipation” and “repeated sales [which] diminished loyalty to master or mistress” were met by an “unending river of courageous opposition to slavery.”[7] While many fugitives were successful in their escape, many were recaptured and re-enslaved, and even more never experienced freedom in any capacity within their lifetimes. Understanding slavery in New York City, thus, not only requires conceptualizing how human beings were forced into bondage, but equally requires understanding the narrative of fugitivity, a narrative of resistance, which courses through its history.

Tracing those who freed themselves through escape necessitates investigating the best records of their flight: runaway slave advertisements. Prevalent in local newspapers and journals, runaway slave advertisements were submitted by slave-owning white Americans or their representatives in hopes of recapturing men and women who had managed to escape bondage. Most advertisements followed a similar template: a description including the slave’s “name”, any “remarkable features”, an obsessively descriptive illustration of their clothing and a promise of financial reward for the slave’s retrieval. Some featured a trite image of a black man in flight. Thus, from the founding of New York as a colony until 1827, when the city finally felt the effects of gradual

emancipation, newspapers such as the *New York Gazette*, the *New York Morning Post*, and the *Independent Journal*, published the offering of monetary rewards for the retrieval of human property next to advertisements for valuable farmlands, Irish linens, and sugar candy. Scholars, such as Graham Hodges, Alan Brown, David Waldstreicher and Jonathan Prude, have identified runaway slave advertisements as a valuable archive for understanding black agency outside of slave-owning narrators. One of the very few recorded narratives of slave activity during this time period, these advertisements “were among the only widespread description treating [slaves] as central characters.”[8] Nevertheless, despite the scholarly attention, few historians have used the ads for understanding black agency as a disrupter of white ignorance as well as an indicator of white consciousness to the brutalities they committed.

Founded in 1754, King’s College came into existence at a critical point in New York City’s development. With families like the Livingstons and the Jays as the “founding” members of the institution that would later become Columbia University, King’s College students and affiliates played a prominent role in the expansion of New York. Unlike other Ivy League students at more remote institutions, these students and affiliates were just as much a part of the social fabric of New York as they were enmeshed in the academic fabric of King’s College’s campus.

This paper will examine the runaway slave advertisements submitted by King’s College and Columbia students and affiliates over the course of the first 53 years of the University’s existence in order to demonstrate the active relationship these students and affiliates consciously maintained with enslaved human beings. From the Class of 1760 to the Class of 1805, 29 affiliates of the university submitted at least 44 ads to popular New York City papers to reclaim the enslaved humans they believed to be their property. Nearly every student or affiliate who did not submit advertisements, either because their slaves never escaped or because they only indirectly profited off of the slave trade, was featured in an article on the same page as, and often right above or below, a runaway slave advertisement. For each and every one of these students, the institution of slavery was not only visible, it was palpable. In the lower wards of Manhattan, King’s College’s neighborhood from founding to 1857, there were slaves

and free blacks working, living, and gathering around (and arguably within) King's College's campus.[9] Founding supporter of King's College, Philip Livingston, submitted a runaway slave advertisement only steps away from Robert Clark, a free man and head of a family of 6 free black people, and perhaps had the advertisement delivered to the New York Gazette by one of the two other enslaved people living in his household.[10] The white men who lived and learned at King's College submitted these advertisements not absentmindedly, but with active engagement and intent.[11] They were not blind to the injustices they committed, they consciously ignored the sufferings of the human beings they considered their property. Even those who considered themselves to be anti-slavery abolitionists almost always "forced their own version of antislavery upon those who tried to tell their stories of slavery" ignoring the daily "sufferings of enslaved bodies" who would never be relieved from bondage for palatable stories of "the escape of an individual slave".[12]

Fugitivity is by far one of the clearest indicators of resistance to slavery. Escape was arguably the most direct means of damaging a master's livelihood. His most valuable "property" was lost, and even if recovered, was irreparably damaged as "the worth of slaves was reduced" due to their propensity to escape.[13] Thus, the act of running away from a slave-owner must be acknowledged as something more than just an impulsive decision, but as an act with "political impact".[14] While the exact date or time of flight might not have been predetermined, enslaved people were, by nature of the institution of slavery, forced to reckon with their own condition every single day of their lives. Thus, while scholars such as Graham Hodges and Alan Brown in *"Pretends to Be Free": Runaway Slave Advertisements from Colonial and Revolutionary New York and New Jersey* argue that "a slave's disappearance could be both spontaneous or well planned," the decision to escape could not have been entirely impromptu.[15] To run away was "sabotage", a means of "undermining the system of subjugation" that was slavery, and in that way, was a means of resistance against white oppression.[16] To run away was to carefully crack the facade of a stable slave system, to shake the consciousness of those slave-owners who posted runaway ads, forcing them "to recognize the intimacy of their dependence upon their slaves when...flight disrupted the careful columns of profit and loss through which they measured their mastery".[17]

Thus, looking back on the historical relationship between slavery, King's College and New York, I seek to explore the complex involvement of King's College and Columbia students with the lived experience of slaves, revealing the ways in which the lives of University students and affiliates were completely intertwined in the institution of slavery. While the destruction and disappearance of many archival materials has in many ways erased these connections, runaway slave advertisements serve as a new link between the white, male students at King's and Columbia and the black men and women who supported their daily lives. By thematically looking at runaway slave advertisements submitted by these 29 students and affiliates, I seek to deconstruct the narrative of their unconsciousness to the enslavement of human beings, demonstrating how they were forced to recognize the humanity of their slaves and how they ultimately choose to ignore that on behalf of their own personal gain. Moreover, by close analysis of these ads, I seek to demonstrate a clear undercurrent of resistance to slavery which these students actively reckoned with.

Appearance

The appearance of a runaway might have aided in recapturing fugitives, but also allowed successful men and women to manipulate slaveholding Americans into believing they were who they performed to be. Appearance can be constituted as the languages fugitives spoke, the clothing they wore, as well as the complexions they bore. As David Waldstreicher illustrates in *Reading the Runaways: Self-Fashioning, Print Culture, and Confidence in Slavery in the Eighteenth-Century Mid-Atlantic*, many fugitives were “multilingual, well traveled, skilled in a trade, attuned to the possibilities of life on the margins of settlement, of mixed racial ancestry, and aware enough of appearances to contemplate going — or at least passes as — Native American or Moravian.”[18]

Language is a common factor in many runaway slave ads, including fluency in African, English, Spanish, French, Indian, High, Low, and Negro Dutch.[19] Mingo spoke “good Dutch and English”, along with Robin, the slave of Samuel Bayard, Class of 1760, Sarah the slave of Jacob Schoonmaker, Class 1799, and Mayor, the slave of John

Stites, Class of 1765.[20] In contrast, a “nameless slave” of Philip Livingston’s “[could not] speak a word of English or Dutch, or any other language but that of his own Country.”[21] Language was mentioned in only 5 out the 44 slave advertisements, revealing the particular attention slave-owners gave if their slaves were multilingual. This skill would be significant to slave-owners, as it demonstrated the ease with which fugitives could navigate society and perform as free, even non-American, people. As Walter Johnson explains in *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market*, “those who spoke multiple languages or dialects or could write had the most success running away.”[22] Thus, the usage of language was an important tool for resistance through escape. While almost all the slaves owned by King’s College and Columbia students spoke languages common to the region — Dutch and English — the slave of Philip Livingston is a key demonstration of how King’s College students were forced into awareness into the humanity of their slaves. The fact that Livingston’s slave did not speak English or Dutch, but only the language “of his own Country”, deconstructed the notion that enslaved people forced to work in New York came without an existing culture or language. The idea that there was a language of “his own” country demonstrated how this “slave” was a human being of his own society, a human being who had enjoyed the same level of autonomy in his own country as Philip Livingston had in America. The amalgamation of his recorded characteristics – that he was unable to speak English, unfamiliar with the territory, and would rather risk his life in “the woods near Harlem” than be succumbed to enslavement – *clearly* demonstrates the brutality Philip Livingston succumbed this human being to — a brutality Livingston could not possibly be blind to.

Clothing, by far, is the most extraordinarily detailed aspect of most, if not all, runaway slave advertisements as “the average number of clothing items mentioned for each runaway was more than twice the average number of physical characteristics cited.”[23] Looking at a typical advertisement, the description of clothing takes up a majority of space. On a practical level, advertisements described clothing in detail because “few people had an extensive wardrobe” and thus “describing the clothes was as good as describing the man or woman.”[24] Except for a few “privileged servants”, slaves wore ordinary, usually homemade clothing.[25] The apparel that drew the most attention was

“particularly fine” and fugitives often wore or appropriated finer clothing as it “increased the chances of passing for free or being unrecognized.”[26] In the advertisements submitted, clothing appeared in nearly every single article. From the “dark waistcoat with red and green spots” “Prince” was last seen in, to the “double breasted Coat of fine blue Bread Cloth with Mohair Buttons” last seen on the slave of John De Lancey, Class of 1761, to the “green pea jacket and long tarry trousers” belonging to “York”, there is a clear indication that clothing was important to the slave-owners submitting these ads.[27] Analyzing these ads more critically, it appears that the importance of clothing stems from a place far deeper than just description needed to retrieve runaways. “Social stability” itself was “risked when common people inappropriately aped the dress of their betters.”[28] Wearing the clothes of white people as a black body destabilized the entire structure of racialized slavery itself. If one’s slave appeared white or appeared financially and socially superior, little was left to distinguish between white slave-owners and the men and women they claimed to own. Fear of destabilization was definitely present in these ads, as asserting the inherent subjugation of enslaved people who support your daily life becomes increasingly difficult if nothing really delineates you from those that serve you. These fears are endemic of a larger underlying psychology of slave-owners at the time, as “those who were making themselves out of slaves must have realized that they might also be unmade by slaves.”[29] One of the most powerful demonstrations of this was the advertisement documenting a female slave, “Vilet,” of Elbert Herring, father of Elbert Herring, Class of 1795, who was seen “dressed in Man’s Clothes...a Pair of Boots, and a blue Coat.”[30] Here, passing as a method of destabilizing the system took on an even deeper level, as Vilet not only destabilized the social and political structure of slavery but also the social constructions of gender in eighteenth century white American society. Her “hair shaved back on her Forehead” did more than aid flight, it aided in deeply undermining the security of the white world which sought to recapture and restrain her.[31] Thus, a slave’s ability to pass as free or to be unrecognized because of the clothes they wore denoted another crack in the facade of slave society. “Masters” neurotically detailed these clothes because they “hoped to get both the clothes and the slaves back”, not only in the literal sense but equally in the

psychological sense: they “sought to return these items and the runaways themselves back to the controllable world of goods.”[32]

In terms of appearance, complexion played one of the largest roles in aiding enslaved people to pass as another race, allowing particularly “mulattos sufficiently fair skinned to pass as Caucasian” to dupe the white slaveholding majority in plain sight.[33] An account in Johnson’s work demonstrates just how feared light complexion was by white slave-owners, as “some slaves were ‘too white to keep’.”[34] Henry Bibb was kept from being sold due to suspicion “that I was too white...and would [thus] never serve as a slave but run away.”[35] Out of the 44 ads, 16 described complexion, and out of those, 12 described lighter-skinned or even white-passing individuals who had managed to escape. With unclear descriptions such as “smooth-skin’d”, “very black”, and “not very black”, racial classification was clearly still muddled in terms of comprehensive categorization. The fact that almost all of the advertisements that described complexion were describing lighter skinned runaways demonstrates how the existence of lighter skinned black people awakened the consciousness of white slave-owners to something which threatened the stability of their society. Fugitives that were able to “capitalize upon the ambiguities in the dominant racial classification system” could gain a kind of freedom by changing their visible identities, and on a deeper level, were resisting against the racial classification system *as well as* the slave system in their flight.[36] What made “lightness” special if black people could exhibit it too? Thus, Isaac Wilkins, Class of 1760, a judge and political figure in Nova Scotia, was forced to recognize Mingo’s craftiness in utilizing his “not very black” complexion to perform as the freeman he desired to be.[37] Daniel Ludlow, Class of 1768, knew that his fugitive “[passed] for a free fellow” and seemed threatened by the way in which Jack could “wear his hair bushy [but] sometimes cued and curled.”[38]

Arguably one of the key distinguishers of the humanity of enslaved people were their skills and personality traits. The few described in these ads certainly stand out, especially when attempting to understand the perspective of slave-owners who sought to negate the humanity of their slave. By nature of their role as laborers, “most slaves possessed general skills as domestics and laborers.”[39] Yet masters more often than

not “preferred to insist that a slave would ‘pass for a currier’” or “pretends to be a Tanner” rather than grant them the status of artisan.[40] Within the ads submitted by King’s College and Columbia students and affiliates, skills were mostly mentioned in advertisements *selling* slaves. The only skill any runaway slave advertisements would address was the ability to play on the fiddle, not surprisingly “the most frequently listed skill” in most advertisements.[41] Thus, skills that denoted tactful or practical abilities were left out, while skills that served as entertainment to white society were usually noted. Moreover, the only other mention of skill in the ads themselves was in relation to the bodies of the men and women who had escaped. Referring to them as “handy”, “likely”, “lusty”, “stout made”, slave-owners aimed for the reader to focus on only one thing: that the body of a slave was made for physical use, not to cultivate a mind capable of craft. The personality of these fugitives is even less often discussed but occasionally emerged in a few advertisements. “Prince” the slave of Peter Allaire, Class of 1805, is described as more resistant, “very talkative and smart”, while a slave being sold by James Barclay, Class of 1766, is only described as being “a sober honest fellow.”[42] “Observations about verbal qualities alluded to degrees of sincerity” that slave-owners felt their slaves displayed.[43] While “many fugitives were smooth-tongued, bold, convincing or artful” meaning they were more threatening or non-compliant, those slaves who were “respected” by their slave-owners were “slow, serious talkers”, less-threatening and more easy to control.[44] Slave-owners’ descriptions of their slaves’ personalities also provide key insight into how deeply they felt the forces of resistance demonstrated by their slaves. Historians have identified the ways that the described stance of fugitives can be indicative of how they were perceived by white slave-owners. Those who were “down look” fit the “conviction that plebeian types should never stand erect nor stare back,” while those who “displayed a brazen look” were the ones who “had looked directly back at those now describing them”, a small but definitively significant act of resistance.[45] Thus, a slave like Lew belonging to Hubert Van Wagenen, Class of 1802, who was described as “apt to be noisy and quarrelsome” demonstrates even the most finite levels of resistance actualized by fugitives.[46] This was a man who “looked back”, who directly challenge to the conditions Van Wagenen relied upon, who caused his “master” to come face to face with the brutality of slavery

and to reckon with his own despicable role in it. Anthony Rutgers, Class of 1761, demonstrates the response King's College and Columbia students chose to give to resistance. Claiming his runaway slave "Jack" is "a well looking complaisant fellow," Rutgers in his advertisement illustrates the ways in which King's College students actively chose to ignore the role they played as slave-owners.[47] To insinuate that a slave who had successfully escaped with no intention of returning was somehow complacent with the system is a major logical disconnect. This was a disconnect slave-owners desperately relied upon, for recognizing a slave's non-complacency meant coming to terms with the fallacies within the own system, namely to "acknowledge that the 'pleasing' demeanor they typically ascribed to slaves was probably an act...[that] the 'countenances' of slave laborers were masked in an 'eternal monotony' that disguised their real emotions behind an 'immoveable veil of black'." [48]

Overall, personality was rarely discussed in most of the ads King's College students submitted, most likely because to do so would be to directly reckon with the humanity of their own slaves. This inability to reckon with slave humanity coupled with the "necessity" of submitting ads is explored in Waldstreicher's work, as he notes how "the longer the advertisement — the more there was to say — the more likely that escapee's own web of words, his or her confidence game, had already undermined the master's security, or confidence, in ownership, much less in visible makes of racial different." [49] In understanding the psychology of the slave-owner, the runaway advertisement demonstrates an undermining of the power of the slave system. This is a result of the two warring psychological aspects of submitting a runaway slave ad. The slave-owner is forced to submit the ad, because they need their "property" back in order to continue living their stable lives. Yet as Johnson states in his work, "when slaves ran off...the smooth surfaces of slaveholders' lives were ruptured by the unfathomed frailties and motivations of their slaves." [50] To publish an ad is in many ways an embarrassment, an admittance of these ruptures in the surface, as someone who you claim is psychologically, spiritually, and socially inferior to you has somehow duped you enough that they managed to escape. In the same way, when Isaac Wilkins, Class of 1760, mentioned how Mingo "is an insinuating fellow and can tell a plausible Story," it was to admit Mingo's mental prowess, one that outshined his own as slave-owner and as a

white man. His usage of the word “insinuating” in particular denotes a kind of negative, evil aspect to Mingo’s smarts, an effort to demonize for the embarrassment of having been duped. This is a common thread throughout most, if not all, runaway slave advertisements. The underlying desire of embarrassed white slave owners to embarrass the slaves’ body, either by grotesque or demonizing description, is a product of white consciousness to the humanity of their slaves. As Jonathan Prude explains in *To Look Upon the “Lower-Sort”: Runaway Ads and the Appearance of Unfree Laborers in America*, the submission of runaway slave advertisements was very much wrapped up in power politics. As white slave-owners, “power could involve *both* politely ignoring social inferiors” — like ignoring the practical skills slaves had or their personalities — “*and* impolitely focusing directly on them.”[51] The advertisements submitted by King’s College and Columbia students and affiliates, demonstrate this, revealing an actual destabilization of power they directly felt when publishing these ads. This destabilization of power both reveals the clear awareness slave-owners must have had in terms of the wretched institution they profited from as well as the clear undercurrent of resistance that they undoubtedly felt.

Signs of Brutality/Violence

The power play of “impolitely” focusing on enslaved people is arguably best exemplified in the graphic depiction of brutality against slaves overwhelmingly prevalent in runaway slave advertisements. As Prude states, “highlighting the particular, the ads effectively functioned as written caricatures...by doing so produced descriptions that were implicitly degrading of their subjects.”[52] The incorporation of scars, brandings, and mental or physical disabilities of fugitives in these advertisements is arguably the most explicit picture of both the physical and psychological trauma slaves endured at the hands of white slaveholding Americans. With physical disfigurements so recognizable that they could be used to detect runaway slaves, it would have been entirely impossible for any human being, white or black, to ignore what a brutal life slave-owners created for their slaves. Moreover, slave-owners’ discussion of scars revealed far more disturbing realities than simply physical brutality. Scars were often “cited...in places normally

covered by clothing”, an indication of the inhumane physical examinations slave-owners succumbed their slaves to.[53] Even more, ads also detailed physical deformities “that remained vivid despite passing time,” which indicated repeated injuries from the hazards of the labor tasks or cruelty so abusive that it often left permanent marks.[54] Furthermore, to publish the evidence of this brutality in something as pedestrian as a local newspaper demonstrates how slave-owners did not just ignore the brutality they collectively inflicted but actively utilized it for their own gains. As Hodges and Brown explain, “the comments masters made about physical characteristics are testimony to the injury, disease, and rough usage of slaves.”[55] These “physical characteristics” included “broken legs and arms, missing teeth, lameness, partial blinds or verbal tics such as stuttering.”[56] These markers of violence, on the same page as advertisements for cloth and linen, were the daily torture of slaves and the daily tool of slave-owners, so much so that they became “traditional marks of bondage.”[57]

Out of the 44 advertisements King’s College and Columbia students posted, a staggering 21 advertisements discussed deformations. Samuel Bard, Matriculant Class of 1763 and doctor and founder of Columbia’s College of Physicians and Surgeons recalled on page 3 of the *New York Gazette* how the “whites of his [slave’s] eyes [were] remarkably red, and his Face full of Eruptions”. A physician, Bard was particularly attuned to manifestations of illness or maltreatment and yet utilized those exact deformities as a tool for exercising power over a man he believed he owned. Cato, the slave of Charles Doughty, Class of 1768, had “lost his upper teeth before”, a deformity which not only affected his appearance, but also his ability to perform daily functions such as eating and talking.[58] Elbert Herring, the father of Elbert Herring Jr., Class of 1795, discussed the brutal wounds inflicted on his slaves in each one of the 5 advertisements he submitted. For Vilet, Herring could recall little to nothing about her personality yet recalled how she “squints with one Eye.”[59] For Cuff, Herring could not remember his distinct age or his skill-set, yet vividly pictured the “Marks of the Small pox on his Face.”[60] And signs of brutality were far deeper than skin. Robert G. Livingston, Class of 1767, recognized Ben was working in conditions which caused him to “walk as if he had lost his toes.”[61] Hubert Van Wagenen, Class of 1802, enslaved a human with similar disabilities: “toes [so] tender from the front, which causes him sometimes to

wear his shoes split.”[62] James Ricketts, Class of 1774, searched for a teenage boy whose ability to serve him was more important than the boy’s “great impediment in his speech.”[63] Similarly, John W. Watkins, an Honorary Graduate from Class of 1789, enslaved Sam whose “hesitation in his speech” was prevalent enough to be mentioned.[64] Henry van Dyck, Class of 1761, unintentionally demonstrated the acceptance of violence against black bodies in pointing out how “likely” and “well-proportioned” in “every way” Titus was, revealing how abnormal it was to see a slave free of physical or mental wounds.[65] Arguably most reprehensible was Henry Izard, Class of 1789, who himself had “branded [a fugitive] on the left cheek with the letters IZARD” like livestock.[66] Slave-owners like Izard, Van Wagenen and Ricketts knew the brutality they forced their slaves to experience. Writing about the marks one’s slave bores constitutes recognizing that you or someone like you inflicted those marks and directly caused that distress. Furthermore, not only did they directly discuss scars and other signs of brutality in the advertisements, but directly discussed them among *one another*, as they were “criticized with the knowing air assumed by horse dealers, and pronounced to be the result of flogging, vermin or scrofula.”[67] Thus, slave-owners like Izard were not blind to their slaves’ humanity, but rather sought to exploit that humanity to the fullest extent — to force them into brutal labor and later to utilize the markers of that brutality to identify them after they had escaped such a brutal life. Nevertheless, while Livingston and Watkins had no intention of doing so, their slave advertisements also demonstrated the underlying threat their slaves presented through the resistant behavior which might have lead to their physical abuse. To clarify, while certain abuses were demonstrative of the brutal living conditions of slaves as well as the purely evil intentions of certain sadistic slave-owners, some accounts of scars indicate a response to the rebellion some slaves would exhibit which threatened the system as it was. The most poignant example of this is undoubtedly the case of Henry Izard’s fugitive. Branding the words IZARD on her face, Izard sought to both physically and psychologically break the resistant force deep within Charlotte. With a scar positioned in as visible a place as her face, Charlotte was clearly a threat, someone who could escape so easily that it needed to be painstakingly clear that she “belonged” to someone else. Nevertheless, with the name of the man who claimed to own her

stamped across her very face, Charlotte, along with her husband and child freed themselves and continued to poke holes in the illusion of a secure slave system.

Selling Slaves

While advertisements for selling slaves are not within the direct scope of runaway slave advertisements, they powerfully illustrate just how active King's College and Columbia students and affiliates were in the slave trade, how directly they profited from slavery, and how they were indisputably aware of the fact that they were profiting off of human life. Among the 29 students and affiliates uncovered, 4 students purchased and sold human beings. Most consistent in this trade was James Barclay, Class of 1766. His auction room, only blocks away from the major slave markets of Wall Street, was constantly being published in the papers. Particularly from 1783 to 1787, but very likely long before and after that, Barclay featured advertisements in the papers that included, and sometimes were exclusively focused on, the sale of enslaved Africans. The selling of slaves was arguably the most direct manner by which a free white man could witness how shameful the trading of human beings really was. The slave auction room, or the slave pen, was the site in which slaves would once again experience "alienation from their own bodies."^[68] This was the site in which slaves were forced to dance to "a merry fiddle" while "their cheeks were wet with tears", where slaves were examined like animals with complete disregard to their humanity.^[69] Here, a slave trader could hear the cries of a child being ripped apart from their mother. Clutching the dollars he had earned from splitting families apart, slave traders like Barclay most directly and consciously profited off of human bondage. Nevertheless, Barclay viewed the slave market as a gateway to opportunity. As Johnson explains, men like Barclay "imagined who they could be by thinking about whom they could buy" and equally, whom they could sell.^[70] In multiple advertisements, Barclay sold enslaved people in the same sentence as tobacco boxes, worsted stockings, and iron pots. Little to nothing is described of the slaves he sold, often he gave them less than an entire line of description. Any commentary had to do with the age of the person and how they were either "well recommended" or "sold for no fault". In contrast to the lengthy runaway slave

ads that aim at retrieving slaves, selling slaves had nothing to describe because the less that was said about the brutality they had undergone and about how smart and skillful they were — all things which emphasize their humanity — the more easily they were sold. In a 1786 issue of the *Independent Journal*, Barclay dedicated an entire advertisement to one family — a mother and her three children. The mother's only attributes are how she "is a complete Cook, understands all Housework." Her daughter, only 14, is "particularly handy in the care of Children", and her two sons, who are 5 and 3 respectively, are also mentioned. Most chilling about this advertisement is the fact that Barclay seems to be selling this family separately, revealing the instances in which King's College and Columbia students and affiliates singlehandedly separated families for monetary profit. Other students also partook in slaving. Ichabod Best Barnet, Class of 1771, sold three enslaved women in order to pay another man's debts and Edward Nicoll, Class of 1766, sold a 10-year-old boy for his own personal profit.

Repeat Runaways/Returning Slaves

The most poignant demonstration of both King's and Columbia student consciousness and the constant resistance they experienced are the instances of repeatedly submitted runaway advertisements describing slaves who persevered in their efforts to escape. To submit a slave advertisement even once was not a simple task. As Jonathan Prude describes, most fugitives who successfully escaped "were described in notices that appeared weeks after the escape (reflecting the difficulties and expense of placing ads and the common notion that some fugitives would return voluntarily)."[71] To flee more than once absolutely forced your slave-owner to reckon with himself. The glass facade he had constructed for himself, the "expectation that they would have the same things and the same right over those things when they woke as they had when they went to bed", was shattered in a way that could arguably never be repaired again.[72] Slaves who were known to be returning to a place in their past further disrupted the façade, as their memory and emotional connection to a space and to people further revealed their humanity. To flee more than once also demonstrated an undying form of resistance and an actualization of one's humanity that arguably very few white Americans, let alone

black Americans, ever truly experienced. Cuff, in 1763, escaped the restraints of Elbert Herring, father of Elbert Herring Jr., Class of 1795.[73] Herring, desperate for the labor which supported his and his family's life, promised 4 dollars for Cuff's return.[74] Yet, only months later, Herring found himself resubmitting yet another advertisement for Cuff.[75] Recycling the same descriptions he had used in his last ad, he admitted the man he deemed to be "property" had "been apprehend'd and brought back; but immediately run away, a second Time." [76] He increased Cuff's price to *five dollars*, a clear indicator of Herring's desperation and added a nota bene which nearly begs ship captains and other free whites not to accept Cuff, either as their own property or as what he really was — an independent human being.[77] 5 years later, Cuff, now 25, managed to escape again.[78] Herring, having waited "about 5 weeks" to submit the ad, bent again at the agency of his own slave as he so depended "upon [his] property to help keep [himself] constant over time." [79] As his price of return sky rocketed from "20 shillings if taken in the city and 40 shillings if in the country", Cuff, through fugitivity, dismantled the weak foundations upholding his enslavement with every retreating step. He was not something to be cavalierly purchased and sold, he was the desperately needed brace on which every aspect of Elbert Herring's life rested. In 1769, having faced the wrath of being rediscovered, pushed to the physical and psychological limits of his body and mind, Cuff escaped yet again, never reported in the newspapers again.[80] Robert R. Livingston, Class of 1765, no longer even the rightful "owner" of his slave, was mentioned in the *New York Gazette* in 1761 for a fugitive who had successfully escaped, seemingly in the transition from one slave-owner to another. Tom, only about 22, took action that prompted the desperate response of two slave-owners. His running away signaled a message directly to Robert Livingston: I am not something to be sold. I refuse to be "alienated from [my] own body" by allowing myself to be commodified.[81] Self-actualizing his humanity to the greatest extent, Tom took ownership over his own soul, recognizing how it "was equally impossible to sell the slave without also selling the soul." [82]

Tom was not the only one who forced two white slave-owners to reckon with themselves. Isaac Wilkins and Samuel Ogden both submitted advertisements within 4 years of one another on behalf of Mingo. In 1771, the two sat together and wrote a

longer advertisement in the *Philadelphia Chronicle*. Perhaps a quill and paper in hand, or orating as a pair in a newspaper office, Wilkins and Ogden worked tirelessly to piece together the information they could about the man they both, at separate times, had claimed to be theirs. And where was “their” “Mingo”? Divulging his real name, Jem, they forsook even more of the power they claimed over him by succumbing to the recognition of his true identity. Reporting him to be 10 years older than in any other ad, it can be argued the directness of Mingo’s agency even caused them to attribute years to his lifetime. An advertisement longer than any other submitted by King’s College and Columbia students and affiliates, Mingo’s final escape stands out, as “the lengthier, more descriptive advertisements often connect the runaway’s deceit to their most valuable and human characteristics.”[83] It is almost desperation, rather than annoyance, which seeps from the page. Each praise for Mingo, his ability to “play tolerably well upon the Fiddle” is attempted, with failure, to be masked by the demonization of his character as “an insinuating Fellow [who] can tell a plausible story.”[84] Each word they write, a reminder that Mingo or Jem or Mink or James is a human being who is making a conscious effort to escape them. Each day of his passing, an indicator that the actions they are committing must be something morally reprehensible.

And Mingo running through the woodsy terrain of Harlem, perhaps stumbling across the patch of land that would one day become our Morningside Heights campus, not desiring to be a symbol of resistance, or of white consciousness but just to be a man and to be alive. His narrative, used for every slave, would be “by definition [an] incomplete account.”[85] His story is that “of the escapees and survivors of an institution that gave up very few of either.”[86] Voiceless by the standards of written record, the documentation of his flight provides a voice in ways it was never intended to. Our final image of Mingo is both similar to and absolutely nothing like the stock image accompanying his advertisement: a freedom more powerful than anything the “Founding Fathers” could have penned, a bondage millions never found escape from. Focused on the path ahead, pledging never to return, he is running, hurtling, throwing himself wretchedly into the liberation only the woods could guarantee.

Endnotes

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[12] *Ibid.*, 10

[13] Graham R. Hodges and Alan Edward Brown, *"Pretends to Be Free": Runaway Slave Advertisements from Colonial and Revolutionary New York and New Jersey* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994), xiv.

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[15] *Ibid.*, xxv.

[16] *Ibid.*, xiv.

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[search/we/HistArchive/](http://infoweb.newsbank.com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/iw-search/we/HistArchive/); Jacob Schoonmaker, "Five Dollars Reward," *Public Advertiser*, April 31, 1811, accessed May 6, 2016,

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- [45] Jonathan Prude, *To Look upon the "Lower Sort": Runaway Ads and the Appearance of Unfree Laborers in America, 1750-1800* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 141 and 154.
- [46] Hubert Van Wagenen Newspaper

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[53] *Ibid.*, 141

[54] *Ibid.*, 141

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