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## 17. London precedents in New World contexts: the runaway advertisement in the colonies

While it is possible to trace the development of colonial laws against runaways, it is far harder to ascertain how escape from bound labour and the reactions that it prompted played out on a day-to-day basis. How did planters in the seventeenth-century southern and Caribbean colonies enforce local laws against escape? In the absence of printing presses and before the first colonial newspapers appeared, how was information about a runaway from one plantation conveyed to other plantations and communities, and how was information about the taking up of suspected runaways spread? It was one thing for the South Carolina Assembly to mandate the reporting and description of all incarcerated runaways, but in a sparsely settled frontier colony without good roads and easy communication it would not have been easy to enforce this law. It was not until 1732 that South Carolina gained its first printing press and newspaper, and the ability to distribute printed material around the colony. The same was true in the other plantation colonies: large planters would have attended meetings of the assembly or perhaps the Governor's Council, and many planters would have served on local courts and as militia officers, and presumably information about freedom seekers may have been spread on these occasions and through social interactions. But it was not until the first colonial newspapers in the early eighteenth century that published information about freedom-seeking enslaved runaways could be distributed widely in a standardized and recognizable format.<sup>1</sup> As we have seen, it was in seventeenth-century London, not the colonies, that newspaper advertisements and the existence of a network of merchants, ship captains and others invested in the colonial enterprise enabled slave-holders to create a system for the identification and recapture of enslaved freedom seekers.

The first newspaper in England's American and Caribbean colonies was the *New England Courant*, which appeared briefly in Boston in 1697, and the single surviving issue contains no advertisements. This was soon followed by the *Boston News-Letter*, first published in 1704. The *American Weekly Mercury* was Philadelphia's first newspaper, published from 1719, and in the same year the *Weekly Jamaica Courant* became the first newspaper in

<sup>1</sup> A. S. Salley, 'The first presses of South Carolina', *Proceedings and Papers of the Bibliographic Society of America*, ii (1907), 29–33.

the British Caribbean. Just over a decade later, in 1731, the *Barbados Gazette* appeared, followed one year later by the *South Carolina Gazette* and in 1736 by the *Virginia Gazette*.<sup>2</sup>

The earliest surviving runaway slave newspaper advertisement appeared in the *Boston News-Letter* on 26 June 1704:

Ran-away from Capt. Nathanael Cary, of Charlston, on Saturday the 17th Currant, a well set middle sized Maddagascar Negro Woman, called Penelope, about 35 years of Age: With several Sorts of Apparel; one whereof is a flowered damask Gown; she speaks English well. Whoever shall take up said Negro Servant, and her convey to her above-said Master, shall have sufficient Reward.

Cary did not specifically identify Penelope as enslaved, although that was probably her status. The newspaper's first advertisement to identify freedom seekers as enslaved was published one year later. William Pepperil of Maine advertised for 'a Negro Man-Slave named Peter, aged about 20, speaks good English, of a pretty brown Complexion, [and a] middle stature'.<sup>3</sup> Colonial advertisements like these were virtually indistinguishable from the English newspaper advertisements published in London over the previous half-century. As each new colonial newspaper appeared, so too did runaway advertisements like these.

The correlation and connections between London and the earliest newspapers in the plantation colonies of the lower South and the Caribbean are clear. A case in point is Robert Baldwin, who commenced publication of the *Weekly Jamaica Courant* in 1718. The earliest surviving issue from July of that year contained six runaway slave advertisements for seven men and boys and four women and girls. Above Baldwin's name at the foot of the newspaper's final page were advertisements including one for 'a lusty Ebroe [*sic*] Negroe-Man named Jack, or a pale Black complexion, part of his Nose cut off', perhaps evidence that he had already endured mutilation as a punishment for absconding. Jack had eloped from the estate of William Pusey in Vere, perhaps taking advantage of the death of his owner, for the advertisement noted that 'a lean Calamante Negroe-Boy named Darby' had escaped too. This was not the first escape by Darby, who 'used to conceal himself about the Town', but he could be identified by his late owner's initials WP branded onto his body. Daniel Plowman advertised for an unnamed 'Negroe Girl' who had eloped from his pen in St Catherine parish

<sup>2</sup> C. S. Brigham, *History and Bibliography of American Newspapers, 1690–1820* (Worcester, Mass., 1947), i. 322–3, 327–9, 890–1, 1037–8, 1158–9; H. S. Pactor, *Colonial British Caribbean Newspapers: a Bibliography and Directory*, Bibliographies and Indexes in World History 19 (New York, 1990), pp. ix, 57, 18.

<sup>3</sup> 'Ran-away from his Master ... Peter', *Boston News-Letter*, 10 Dec. 1705.

three months earlier and who was identified by his brand on her breast marking her with a 'D. a hart and P'.<sup>4</sup>

Although the earlier details of his life are uncertain, it appears that Robert Baldwin had been a Stationers' Company apprentice in London who completed his apprenticeship in 1716, and he may well have been a member of the Baldwin family, who were well-known London printers and book publishers. One member of this family, Richard Baldwin, had published the *Post Boy and Historical Account* and then the *Post Man and The Historical Account* near the Oxford Arms in Warwick Lane, London. The former newspaper had published at least one runaway slave advertisement, for a 'Negro Man or Blackamore' named Caesar who had spent time in Barbados but then eloped in London in July 1695.<sup>5</sup> When Baldwin began publishing Jamaica's first newspaper he would have been very familiar with London's half-century of runaway slave advertisements.

It was not until 1731 that Samuel Keimer began working the first printing press in Barbados, and in that year the *Barbados Gazette* became the colony's first newspaper. Very few of the earlier issues of this newspaper survive: one exception is the fifth issue, dated 6 November 1731, which contained two advertisements. Neither of these was for freedom seekers, although runaway advertisements were soon evident in subsequent issues.<sup>6</sup> Keimer had been born in Southwark in London in 1689. He was apprenticed and then worked as a printer in London, and founded the *London Post* which he published in 1715–16 from King's Arms Court on Ludgate Hill. After moving to Philadelphia, Keimer established the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, in which he published numerous advertisements for indentured servants who had eloped: at this time bound White servants outnumbered enslaved

<sup>4</sup> 'RUN away from the Estate of William Pusey' and 'RUN away from Mr. Daniel Plowman', *Weekly Jamaica Courant*, 30 July 1718. This is the tenth issue of the *Weekly Jamaica Courant* (Kingston), and is the oldest surviving edition. It is held in the Burney Collection, British Library: all of the advertisements cited in this paragraph are from this issue. See also F. Cundall, 'The press and printers of Jamaica prior to 1820', *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, xxvi (1916), 290–354, at pp. 292–3; W. S. Reese, 'The first hundred years of printing in British North America: printers and collectors' (1990) <<https://www.aba.org/member-articles/the-first-hundred-years-of-printing-in-british-north-america-printers-and-c>> [accessed 19 Dec. 2019]; Pactor, *Colonial British Caribbean Newspapers*, p. 57.

<sup>5</sup> 'Run away from James Thomas ... Caesar', *Post Boy and Historical Account*, 13 Aug. 1695; R. Cave, 'Early printing and the book trade in the West Indies', *Library Quarterly*, xlviii (1978), 163–92, at p. 171; A. M. Fraas, 'The Calve's Head and early printing in Jamaica', *University of Pennsylvania Scholarly Commons*, June 2012 <<https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1002&context=uniqueatpenn>> [accessed 20 Dec. 2019].

<sup>6</sup> Issue 5 of the *Barbados Gazette* (Bridgetown) is held in the British Library's Burney Collection. See also Reese, 'The first hundred years of printing in British North America'; Pactor, *Colonial British Caribbean Newspapers*, p. 18.

workers and were the essential labour force for the young colony. Keimer then sold the newspaper to a young Benjamin Franklin and moved on to Barbados, where he published the *Barbados Gazette* between 1731 and 1738. In this newspaper Keimer introduced runaway slave advertisements to Barbados, such as one for ‘a young Barbadian Negro-man named Tom’.<sup>7</sup>

Thomas Whitmarsh published the first newspaper and earliest runaway slave advertisements in South Carolina. He had known Benjamin Franklin in London and was taken on by Franklin as a journeyman printer in Philadelphia in the spring of 1730. A year later Franklin and Whitmarsh decided to take advantage of the financial incentives offered by the South Carolina Assembly to induce a printer to begin operating in Charleston. Whitmarsh travelled south and established the *South Carolina Gazette*.<sup>8</sup> One of the earliest issues of the *South Carolina Gazette*, published on 5 February 1732, contained several advertisements including one for the sale of ‘Forty-two choice Negroes’ and other chattel from the estate of John Godfrey.<sup>9</sup> Two weeks later the newspaper published South Carolina’s first runaway slave advertisement:

RUN away from her Master’s Service, since Christmas last, a Pawpaw Negro Woman named Jenny, formerly belonging to the Estate of Mr. Giles Cooke, Deceased, being a lusty Woman about 30 years of Age, having blue Bays Clothes. Whoever brings the said Negro to her Master, in order for Sale, shall have 40s. Reward, and reasonable Charges paid, by John Mortimer in Christ Church Parish.<sup>10</sup>

Colonists with or without enslaved servants travelled regularly to London and England during the second half of the seventeenth century, and London’s newspapers were shipped to North America and the Caribbean, where they were read and exchanged by colonists. When newspapers

<sup>7</sup> ‘A likely Young Negro Man’, *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 2 Jan. 1729; *Barbados Gazette*, 3 May 1735. See also S. Keimer, *A Brand Pluck’d from the Burning; Exemplify’d in the Unparalleled Case of Samuel Keimer ...* (London, 1718), pp. 3, 75–7, 85, 88; C. Winton, ‘Samuel Keimer’ (2004), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/15258>> [accessed 19 Dec. 2019]; and J. A. Harris, ‘Order, disorder, and reorder: the paradox of creole representations in *Caribbeana*’, in *Literary Histories of the Early Anglophone Caribbean*, ed. N. N. Aljoe, B. Carey and T. W. Krise (London, 2018), pp. 81–106.

<sup>8</sup> L. Lemay, *The Life of Benjamin Franklin: ii, Publisher, 1730–1747* (Philadelphia, Pa., 2006), pp. 26–8.

<sup>9</sup> ‘On Wednesday the First of March ensuing, will be exposed to sale’, *South Carolina Gazette*, 5 Feb. 1732. The *South Carolina Gazette* (Charleston) was South Carolina’s first newspaper, printed from 1732 by Thomas Whitmarsh, the colony’s first printer. See Salley, ‘The first presses of South Carolina’, pp. 28–32.

<sup>10</sup> ‘RUN away from her Master’s Service ... Jenny’, *South Carolina Gazette*, 19 Feb. 1732.

finally appeared in the colonies many were printed by men who had lived and trained in London. Runaway slave advertisements would develop a distinctive form in the Caribbean and mainland North American colonies, but it is abundantly clear that a half-century of enslaved and bound people of colour who had sought freedom in London had initiated the creation in that city of the first runaway slave advertisements. It is not just that the London advertisements provided the templates for the first runaway notices in the earliest colonial newspapers. Rather, it is that London's runaway advertisements were essential for the regularization of ideas and practices that turned bound and enslaved people of colour into criminal fugitives and property. Where colonial slave laws had codified measures for the prevention and punishment of resistance by escape, the bids for freedom by enslaved people in London, many of them little more than children, had prompted the creation of the runaway slave advertisement and all that it represented. London's runaway advertisements had regularized the treatment of enslaved people as property to be taken up when they dared to challenge their status by escaping, creating a public discourse of slavery, escape and capture within the pages of the city's newspapers.

