

National Park Service
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National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom
Midwest Region



Fugitives from Injustice: Freedom-Seeking Slaves in Arkansas, 1800-1860



Historic Resource Study

FUGITIVES FROM INJUSTICE: FREEDOM- SEEKING SLAVES IN ARKANSAS, 1800- 1860

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S. Charles Bolton

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Midwest Regional Office
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
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On the Cover: "St. Louis," steel engraving by Frederick Hawkins Piercy. From the Overland Trails Collection, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.

Foreword

Public Law 105-203, the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Act of 1988, directs the National Park Service (NPS) to commemorate, honor, and interpret the history of the Underground Railroad. The Underground Railroad—the resistance to enslavement through escape and flight, through the end of the Civil War—refers to the efforts of enslaved African Americans to gain their freedom by escaping bondage. Wherever slavery existed, there were efforts to escape, at first, to maroon communities in rugged terrain away from settled areas, and later across state and international borders. While most began and completed their journeys unassisted, each subsequent decade in which slavery was legal in the United States saw an increase in active efforts to assist escape. The decision to assist a freedom seeker may have been spontaneous. However, in some places, particularly after the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, the Underground Railroad was deliberate and organized. Freedom seekers went in many directions – Canada, Mexico, Indian Territory, the West, Caribbean islands and Europe.

Key to understanding this important movement in American History is an examination of its roots in the areas where people were enslaved. In the following work, Professor S. Charles Bolton examines runaway advertisements. These contemporary accounts shed light on who the freedom seekers were and demonstrate the value placed by owners in their human property. Collectively they begin to provide a window into these clandestine acts of resistance.

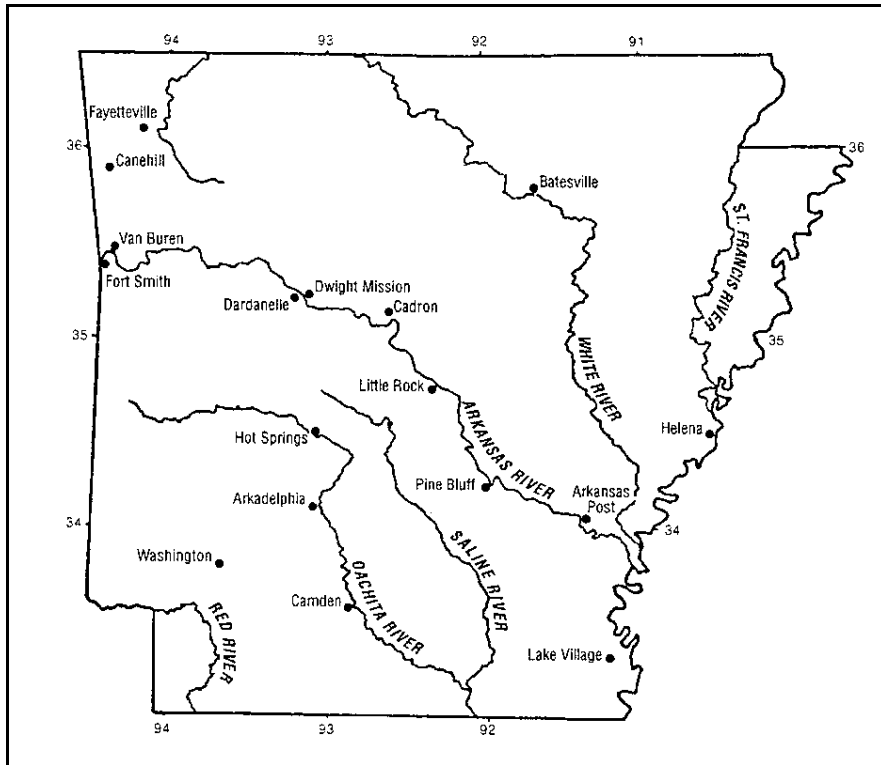
A grant from the Lower Mississippi Delta Initiative made this study possible. Public Law 103-433, directs the Secretary of the Interior to undertake a comprehensive program of studies on heritage in the Lower Mississippi Delta. This legislative initiative mandates NPS undertake a series of studies to identify resources and recommend methods to preserve and interpret the natural, cultural, and recreational heritage of this region.

The Organization of American Historians (OAH) facilitated this study, through a cooperative agreement with the NPS. The collaboration between the NPS and the OAH has been particularly fruitful in bringing cultural resource management and historical scholarship together. We would like to give special thanks to Susan Ferentinos, the Public History Manager for the OAH, who managed the project on behalf of the organization.

James Hill
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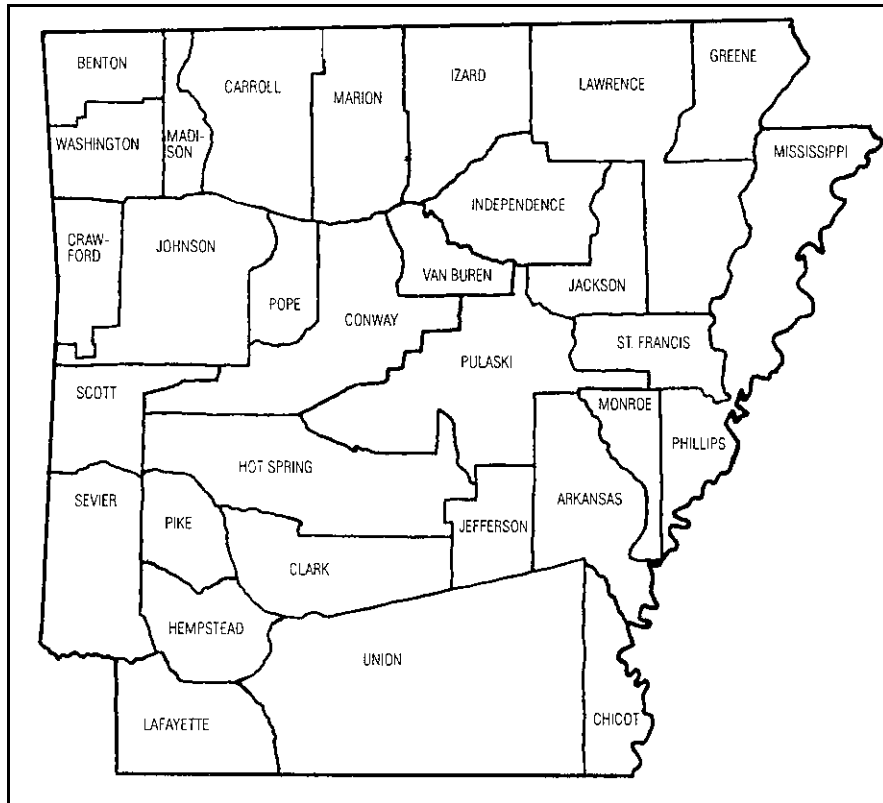
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Antebellum Arkansas

(Reprinted from S. Charles Bolton, *Arkansas, 1800-1860: Remote and Restless*, Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1998)



Counties in 1836

(Reprinted from S. Charles Bolton, *Arkansas, 1800-1860: Remote and Restless*, Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1998)



Counties in 1860

(Reprinted from S. Charles Bolton, *Arkansas, 1800-1860: Remote and Restless*, Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1998)

Introduction

The search for freedom by enslaved people through escape and flight was a common element of American slavery from its beginnings in the early seventeenth century down through the Civil War. In the eighteenth century, there was no safe haven in North America except for Spanish Florida, and freedom seekers often chose to flee to wilderness areas where they were able to set up small and usually short-lived maroon settlements in which they lived with fellow fugitives. Freedom seekers continued to hide in remote and inaccessible areas, but over time new opportunities appeared. The War of American Independence created temporary circumstances under which thousands of slaves fled to British lines, led to the gradual abolition of slavery in northern states, and created a population of free blacks in the South who had been manumitted by their masters. In the nineteenth century, it was possible for a runaway slave to reach permanent freedom in the North, or somewhat more safety in Canada beyond the reach of the federal fugitive slave laws, and with the development of the Abolitionist movement in the 1830s there was an increased possibility of being assisted along the way by friendly whites or free blacks.¹ Although the Civil War brought an end to slavery, large numbers of the enslaved did not wait to be emancipated and instead freed themselves by escaping to Union lines, some of them putting on blue uniforms and fighting their former owners.

The best known example of an antebellum flight to freedom was the perilous journey across the ice floes of the Ohio River from Kentucky to Ohio made by Harriet Beecher Stowe's fictional heroine Eliza, who was immediately helped by members of the Underground Railroad.² The plausibility of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, published in 1852, was demonstrated four years later when the enslaved woman Margaret Garner escaped across a frozen Ohio River in 1856. She later

¹ Freedom seekers is a vague but appropriate name for people who were historically called runaways and fugitive slaves. Runaway has a negative connotation reflecting the slave owner's view that slaves who fled were irresponsible and derelict in their duty. Fugitive is similarly negative, but in a legal sense. The slave was the property of the owner, and by fleeing he or she was committing a crime, stealing themselves as it were. Freedom-seeking is thus more suited to today's sense that slavery was a wrongful institution and that the rights of the slave should be seen as equal to those of his owner. Runaway and fugitive are historically authentic terms, however, and widely used today in a non-prejudicial manner. They will be used here interchangeably with freedom-seeking. The best survey of colonial slavery is Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

² Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, intro. Russell B. Nye (New York: Washington Square Press, 1973; orig. publ. 1852 by John P. Jewett & Company).

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killed her baby girl to keep the child from being taken back into bondage.³ Despite the reality and indeed the frequency of escapes across the Ohio River, many fleeing bondsmen never made it to that “chilly and cold” River Jordan or even headed in that direction. An example is Jim, the companion of Huckleberry Finn.

Mark Twain’s Jim was young, single, in a situation where escape was relatively easy, and it was the threat of sale that motivated him to take action. He traveled down the Mississippi River with Huck rather than making an immediate flight to the free soil of Illinois, and when he reached the mouth of the Ohio River he chose to go deeper into the South with his companion rather than north. Jim did not want to be a slave, but he was willing to focus on short term goals, exercising a degree of freedom by making up his own mind about what he wanted to do and where he wanted to go. Of course, Jim’s life as a slave in Hannibal, Missouri, with a kindly female owner was a far cry from that of a field hand on a Louisiana sugar plantation, and when his capture ends with news that he has been manumitted, the ending is a fairy tale compared with that of most freedom seekers.⁴ Jim is particularly significant for this study, however, because his life and his escape and flight are linked to the Mississippi River Valley.

A real-life example coming from that region involved two runaways held in the Pulaski County jail in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1836. Jo was “a black Negro” about 24-years-old, 6 feet tall and 200 pounds with an “intelligent countenance,” and Fielding was the same age, but a few inches shorter and also had an “intelligent and rascally” face. Both men claimed to be owned either by Hold and Spier or by Abraham and John Spier, both sets of partners living in Kentucky. The men were traveling downriver on a steamboat when they escaped at Chicot Point in the southeast corner of Arkansas. Somehow Jo and Fielding, along with another fugitive named Jefferson, had outfitted themselves with winter coats, cooking utensils, an old shotgun, a silver watch, and a silver spoon. To reach Little Rock they must have traveled overland in a northwestern direction. Jefferson had escaped from the jail, but this time headed southeast, or at least the jailor thought him to be “on the road between this place and the South.”⁵ Obviously we do not know much about Jo and Fielding, but it is clear that they were experienced travelers, having come from Kentucky and ridden a steamboat, which was still something of a

³ See Steven Weisenburger, *Modern Medea: A Family Story of Slavery and Child Murder from the Old South* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998).

⁴ Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986; orig. publ. 1885 by Charles L. Webster).

⁵ *Arkansas Advocate* [AA] (Little Rock), January 15, 1836.

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transportation marvel. It also seems likely that they had some other agenda than getting immediately to the North.

While many fugitives entered Arkansas, many also sought to leave, their numbers becoming greater as the enslaved portion of the population became larger, which it did in rough proportion to the growth of a plantation economy based on the production of cotton. They had their own stories. For example, one Arkansas runaway managed to take his wife and family with him. Henry, who was in his early thirties, five eight or nine and was described as “stocky” and marked on one shoulder by a scar from a stab wound and another on his back, perhaps from a burn. He escaped from Samuel and Creed Taylor of Jefferson County, which fronted the Arkansas River, in July 1831. The Taylors had recently acquired him from a Captain John B. Mosby. Henry took with him an extensive wardrobe: “1 pair of fine shoes, 1 black broadcloth, 1 ruffled shirt and 2 cotton shirts, 1 cassinette coatee, 1 pair coarse linen pantaloons, 1 pair black 30. and 2 pair cotton do., 1 black fur hat, &c.” After being at large until January of 1832, Henry carried off his wife and three children, who belonged to Thomas Massingill of the Maumelle settlement, a little upriver from Little Rock. The family took with them a large amount of clothing, a feather bed, and a canoe.⁶

Boston Blackwell, named after the Blackwell plantation south of Pine Bluff, had a different experience from that of Jo and Fielding or Henry because he escaped after the Civil War was well underway. Blackwell was working on the roof of a house in 1863, when an overseer accused him of trying to steal some putty and sent a slave boy “to cut ten willer whips” that he intended to “wear out” on Blackwell after breakfast. Instead Blackwell and the boy both fled: “We wade the stream for long piece. Heerd the hounds a-howling, getting ready for to chase after us. Then we hide in dark woods. It was cold, frosty weather. Two days and two nights we traveled. That boy, he so cold and hongry, he want to fall out by the way, but I drug him on. When we gets to the Yankee camp all our troubles was over.” Blackwell found shelter and plenty of food in Pine Bluff and eventually served the Union army as a wagon driver. Summing up the experience, he spoke for thousands of other Arkansas slaves: “Yessum, iffen you could get to the Yankee’s camp you was free right now.”⁷

⁶ *Arkansas Gazette* [AG], July 20, 1831; and two separate February 1, 1832.

⁷ George E. Lankford, *Bearing Witness: Memories of Arkansas Slavery, Narratives from the 1930s WPA Collections* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 2003), 178.

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The purpose of this study is to describe and analyze the phenomenon of escape and flight as it involved the enslaved people of Arkansas. Of particular significance is the issue of how much aid they received and what form it took; for example were there elements of the famous Underground Railroad operating in Arkansas or perhaps unorganized “friends of the fugitive” as they have been called. A large part of the evidence used comes from a collection of runaway slave advertisements that includes all those extant from 1819, when the first Arkansas newspaper was published, through the end of the Civil War.⁸ It shows that, in general, enslaved Arkansans responded to their circumstances as did other slaves in the South, and that they were aided in a variety of ways. Sometimes this was done by thieves whose only motive was profit for themselves, but in other cases the evidence suggests the assistance was designed to benefit the enslaved person.

Resistance through escape and flight in Arkansas was not very different from what it was east of the Mississippi River, but it was influenced by the geography in which it occurred. The most important factor was the location of Arkansas on the southwestern border of the United States, which meant that for the first half of the nineteenth century it was a frontier region with a small population and that its western border was first wilderness and then territory assigned to the Native Americans removed from the East. This led to it being a destination for a significant number of runaways. Secondly, Arkansas lies along the lower Mississippi River, and fugitives moving up and down the river, particularly from Louisiana and Mississippi often made their way through Arkansas or ended their flights in Arkansas jails. The same geographic factors that affected freedom seekers from outside Arkansas also impacted local slaves who fled from their masters. It also seems that the journey that had brought them to Arkansas may have made them more capable of escaping from it, providing a geographical knowledge and perhaps a sense of the world that was not available to slaves who had worked on the same plantation all their lives.

Several recent studies of slavery provide important support for the interpretation presented here. One is Walter Johnson’s *Soul by Soul: Life inside the Antebellum Slave Market*, which shows the significance of the internal slave trade for the South generally and particularly for its impact on the slave population of the southwest. Tens of thousands of slaves were sold away from their homes and often their families in Virginia, Maryland, and the Upper South, and marched toward the new plantations in the rich cotton lands of the Gulf Coast. Many of them

⁸ The advertisements were collected as part of this study, and the texts are available from the author or the National Park Service.

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wound up in New Orleans, which was home to the largest slave market in the country, where they were sold to planters along the coast, in the lower Mississippi Valley, including Mississippi and Arkansas, and west into Texas.⁹ Owing to the recent settlement of the area, most of the enslaved people in Arkansas were immigrants. The largest number were probably brought by masters from the east, but a significant percentage were products of the slave trade who brought a different set of experiences that included traveling through a significant part of the South and getting to know a large number of other people who shared their conditions, including the indignities of the slave market that sometimes involved being raped by prospective purchasers. They had suffered much and gained little, but they did have a worldliness that went beyond that of slaves who lived on the plantation where they had grown up, or even those who migrated with the family who had owned them in a previous location.

A second study of great value in understanding freedom-seeking slaves in Arkansas is Thomas C. Buchanan's *Black Life on the Mississippi River*, which makes a convincing case for the importance of the river to both slaves and free blacks. Basing his estimate on an actual count of 93 steamboat crews that stopped at St. Louis in 1850 and extrapolating to the 700 to 1,000 crews he thinks were on the river at that time, Buchanan estimates that there were between 2,000 and 3,000 slaves working on the boats that year and between 1,000 to 1,500 free blacks. Given that the average age of the workers was 26 years, indicating a relatively large turnover, he thinks there may have been 20,000 African Americans who gained riverboat experience in the ten years before the Civil War. Most of the slaves on the river were hired out by their owners, the same situation of relative freedom that existed on a small scale in rural areas and to a much greater extent in the cities of the South. In addition, of course, the steamboat workers traveled from place to place, greatly expanding their opportunities in a number of ways but particularly with respect to freedom-seeking. At the same time, the large number of black people aboard meant that slaves who labored on land but attempted to escape on a steamboat had a better chance of avoiding being found out. As we shall see the steamboat loomed large in the history of freedom-seeking and the Underground Railroad in Arkansas.¹⁰

Chapter One of what follows begins with a discussion of the Underground Railroad as a concept, showing how historians have differed over the significance of the institution and even

⁹ Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

¹⁰ Thomas C. Buchanan, *Black Life on the Mississippi: Slaves, Free Blacks, and the Western Steamboat World* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), esp. 10.

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the meaning of the term, and how the activities associated with the Underground Railroad have gradually come to include those associated with the escape and flight that was always a part of the resistance to enslavement. It continues with another issue of background and introduction; namely, the information that can be derived from a study of runaway slave advertisements in the aggregate and what it tells us about the similarities and differences between freedom-seeking in Arkansas and in other parts of the South.

The remaining three chapters provide in-depth accounts of freedom-seeking in Arkansas. Chapter Two examines the large number of out-of-state escapees who showed up in Arkansas advertisements, discussing the frontier conditions that attracted them, their movement in and out of Indian Territory, and the north-south traffic of fugitives on and along the Mississippi River. Chapter Three describes Arkansas as a slave state and the people who attempted to escape from it, among them some well-known figures. Oral histories taken from former Arkansas slaves by the WPA provide rich anecdotal information about the freedom-seeking experience and its profound impact on the memory of those who were part of it. The subject of the final chapter is the Civil War and the chaotic conditions it created, in particular the disruption of plantation agriculture in eastern Arkansas and the mass exodus of enslaved people from their places of bondage to the lines of the Union Army. It also describes the efforts of the considerable number of former Arkansas slaves who joined the army and fought to end slavery.

Chapter One

The Underground Railroad and Runaway Slaves

The study of freedom-seeking enslaved people in the United States has fallen into two, somewhat separate, areas of study. One has to do with the Underground Railroad, which everyone agrees was an institution devoted to assisting runaway slaves, but whose nature and effectiveness has been the source of much scholarly dispute. The other is escape and flight as a means of resistance to slavery. The first part of this chapter discusses the way historians have treated these subjects over time and shows how they have gradually come to be seen as much the same thing, an assumption that underlies the remaining part of this study. The latter part uses quantitative data derived from runaway slave advertisements to compare freedom seekers in Arkansas with those in Kentucky and in the South generally. There are no major differences in the profile of the average runaway, although changes in the pattern of escapees suggest that Kentucky slaves may have received more assistance than those in other areas. Data on the geography of flight indicates that Arkansas attracted a large number of out-of-state runaways who were heading west or traveling north or south in the Mississippi Valley and suggests that long distance travel by fugitives was a common phenomenon.

The Underground Railroad

The earliest studies of freedom-seeking by American slaves in the nineteenth century focused on the activity of the Underground Railroad. The precise origin of the name is not known, but it involved a story something like the following. In 1831, a fleeing slave named Tice Davis swam across the Ohio River from Kentucky to Ohio, chased by his owner who was in a boat. After reaching shore, Davis vanished. His frustrated master then declared the fugitive “must have found an underground road.” In a later telling, the story was improved by changing road to railroad, a new and exciting form of transportation that provided the basis for an elaborate metaphor.¹ For what the slave was supposed to have found was a network of people

¹ Wilbur H. Siebert, *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1898; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1968), 45. For an alternative version of the story, see Larry Gara, *The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1996; orig. publ. 1961 by University of Kentucky Press), 14.

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who would provide assistance and sometimes transportation so that he could reach safety in some part of the North or in Canada, where he was beyond the reach of the federal fugitive slave laws.

For more than half a century the standard account of this institution was historian Wilbur H. Siebert's, *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom*, published in 1898.² Despite his title, Siebert was critical of writers who placed too much emphasis on the railroad theme: "It was not a formal organization with officers of different ranks, a regular membership, and a treasury from which to meet expenses." On the other hand, the concept was embedded in the evidence: "One hears of station-keepers, agents, conductors, and even presidents of the Underground Railroad." There were also secret signals, passwords, and other means of communication that came to be called "the grape-vine telegraph." Formally organized or not, the network Siebert described was large. The most active areas "extended from Kentucky and Virginia across Ohio, and from Maryland through Pennsylvania, New York and New England through Canada," but there were also routes of assistance in "the Middle States and all the Western States east of the Mississippi" and even some activity in Kansas. Siebert's view of the importance of his subject is indicated by the last sentence of the book: "The Underground Railroad was one of the greatest forces which brought on the Civil War, and thus destroyed slavery."³

Underground railroad operators engaged in a variety of activities, including the kidnapping of slaves from the South, but their basic purpose was to assist runaways: "After reaching the initial station of some line of the Underground Road the fugitive found himself provided with such accommodations for rest and refreshment as circumstances would allow; and after an interval of a day or more he was conveyed, usually in the night, to the house of the next friend. Sometimes, however, when a guide was thought to be unnecessary the fugitive was sent on foot to the next station, full and minute instructions for finding it having been given him."⁴

Siebert believed that this type of activity occurred a lot. The Census of 1850 provided a figure for the number of escaped slaves in all southern states still at large after a year, the

² On Siebert's influence, see Gara, *Liberty Line*, 1; Henrietta Buckmaster, *Let My People Go: The Story of the Underground Railroad and the Growth of the Abolition Movement* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941; Beacon Paperback, 1959), xi; and John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans*, 3rd edition (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), 257.

³ Siebert. *Underground Railroad*, the quote is from p. 358, see also 56, 67, 118-120.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 54-55.

evidence coming from statements by their owners. The figure for that year was 1,011, and in 1860 it dropped to 803. Siebert appears to have equated the “at-large for more than a year” definition with the number of escapees who reached the North, and he believed that it was significantly higher. His estimate began with a one year total of forty-seven slaves counted on one of twelve Ohio routes and extrapolated from that to a figure of 40,000 slaves moving through Ohio between 1830 and 1860, an average of 2,000 per year in that state. He also cited evidence from the Pennsylvania Vigilance Committee that it had aided about 9,000 slaves during the same period, which added another 300 annually. Although it is clear he thought the total number was more than 2,300 per year, Siebert did not give an upper estimate.

Siebert said little about the role of slaves in freeing themselves or the contribution made by free blacks to the success of the Underground Railroad. Instead he focused on the white operators of the Underground Railroad, who were mostly “of Anglo-American stock, descendants of the Puritan and Quaker settlers of the Eastern states” or were southerners whose opposition to slavery had brought them to the North.⁵ His attitude toward these people and the way in which their activities dominated his account, eclipsing those of the enslaved, is illustrated by historian Albert Bushnell Hart in his introduction to the first edition of Siebert’s book: “Above all, the Underground Railroad was the opportunity for the bold and adventurous; it had the excitement of piracy, the secrecy of burglary, the daring of insurrection; to the pleasure of relieving the poor negro’s suffering it added the triumph of snapping one’s fingers at the slave-catcher; it developed coolness, indifference to danger, and quickness of resource.”⁶

Inattention to the contributions of African Americans, of course, was characteristic of white Americans, historians included, in Siebert’s time and for many years after. For three decades after its appearance in 1918, the major source on American slavery was Ulrich B. Phillips’s *American Negro Slavery*, a thoroughly researched and well-written volume that was marked by the eminent historian’s underlying assumption that the institution was well-suited to the limited capabilities of African Americans. Phillips’s prejudices, however, did not prevent him from understanding an important aspect of slave escape and flight, namely that it did not always involve an attempt to find freedom in the North. Instead, many blacks fled for short

⁵ Ibid., 90.

⁶ Ibid., ix

periods and stayed in the vicinity in order to send a message to their masters similar to “wage-earning laborers who go on strike for better conditions.”⁷

Phillips’s value judgments were challenged by other historians, notably John Hope Franklin in *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans*, first published in 1947, who devoted seven pages to the underground railroad, basing his account on Siebert, but emphasizing the role of free blacks.⁸ Not until the Civil Rights movement changed the attitudes of the nation, however, was there a full-scale treatment of slavery on the order of Phillips’s, but with a different perspective on race. Kenneth Stampp’s *The Peculiar Institution*, published in 1956, as he put it, “assumed that the slaves were merely ordinary human beings, . . . nothing more, nothing less.”⁹ His treatment of the runaway phenomenon contained many generalizations that would be validated by the work of later scholars. Most fugitives were young men who fled alone or in small groups. They were motivated by various reasons; among them were the threat or infliction of severe punishments, work assignments that were more demanding than the norm, the desire to be near loved ones, and the fear of being sold, which was often accompanied by the separation of families. The bulk of the runaways were caught in a short time, but some, particularly those in the Upper South, were able to reach freedom in the North. Stampp believed that fleeing slaves were most likely to receive aid from other bondsmen, but he also gave credit to the operators of the “famed Underground Railroad.”¹⁰

Four years later, in 1960, Larry Gara published a forceful attack on the traditional interpretation of that institution. The title of his book was *The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad*, and “legend” was the operative word. Gara argued that the work of Siebert and others was based on a series of exaggerations, some of them made in the decades before the Civil War by partisans on both sides of the conflict over slavery. Opponents of the institution used tales of cruel treatment, dramatic escapes, and heroic rescues to heighten anti-slavery attitudes in the North; and Southern spokesmen denounced abolitionists for their fanaticism and charged the federal government with failing to provide the security for slave property that was guaranteed in the Constitution. The legend continued to grow after the war

⁷ Ulrich B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1918; reprint, Louisiana State University Press, 1966), 304.

⁸ Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 253-260.

⁹ Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Random House, 1956), viii.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 109-122.

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as those involved wrote about their experiences, often remembering more activity than had actually occurred and telling their stories with a superabundance of drama. In all this smoke, he found very little fire: “Evidence for a nationwide conspiratorial network of underground railroad lines is completely lacking”¹¹

Gara argued that many abolitionists were more interested in the propaganda value of slave escapes than the welfare of the escapees, and he pointed out Siebert’s emphasis on the role of whites. He found the limited attention given to the escapees and to the role of free blacks particularly striking because William Still, the black abolitionist who played a central role in the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee, had documented both in his voluminous account, *The Underground Railroad*, which was based on the records of the Pennsylvania organization.¹² Gara also approached the subject of slavery with a greater sophistication than Siebert, informed by the work of Phillips, Stamp, and others. While Siebert postulated that “the desire for freedom was in the mind of every enslaved Negro,” Gara argued that the choice for most slaves was more complicated than simply slavery or freedom. Many of the enslaved knew little about the North and had no plans to go there; instead they remained in the vicinity of their captivity or traveled to other parts of the South.¹³

Gara did believe that there was an important element of truth at the heart of the Underground Railroad legend, most of it based on the activities of courageous people whom he preferred to call “friends of the fugitive” rather than conductors or some other railroad-inspired term. William Still was one of these, and the Philadelphia organization of which he was a critical member assisted a large number of fleeing slaves. Thomas Garrett of Wilmington, Delaware, was very open at the time about the aid he provided, so much so that he was sued by several slave owners for giving illegal assistance to fugitives they owned. Garrett also operated a network of sorts, sending freedom seekers on to Quaker families in Chester County, Pennsylvania. Levi Coffin, sometimes known as the President of the Underground Railroad,

¹¹ Gara, *Liberty Line*, 18. Gara provides an extensive account of both the antebellum and post bellum literature in chapters 7 and 8. Among the most influential of the postwar memoirs was that of the reputed “President of the Underground Railroad,” see Levi Coffin, *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin* (New York: Arno Press, 1968). See also Calvin Fairbank, *Rev. Calvin Fairbank during Slavery Times: How He ‘Fought the Good Fight’ to Prepare ‘the Way’* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969); R. C. Smedley, *History of the Underground Railroad in Chester and the Neighboring Counties of Pennsylvania* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1968); and William Still, *The Underground Railroad* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, 1970).

¹² Gara, *Liberty Line*, 18, 175-177. See also William Still, *The Underground Railroad*.

¹³ Gara, *Liberty Line*, 19-30.

aided a large number of fugitives from his home in Cincinnati, Ohio, and was at the center of a large abolitionist movement in that state whose members also gave assistance to the runaways.¹⁴ While acknowledging these activities, Gara did not believe that the number of slaves assisted by the Underground Railroad was much higher than the Census of 1850 indicated, and he pointed out that many abolitionists felt the same way.¹⁵

In the last four decades of the twentieth century, there was a vast outpouring of scholarship dealing with slavery. Among the more important works dealing with fugitive slaves was Stanley W. Campbell's *The Slave Catchers: Enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, 1850-1860*, which supported Gara's viewpoint by arguing that there was much less opposition in the North to the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 than earlier writers had suggested.¹⁶ Another noteworthy volume was Gerald W. Mullin's *Flight and Rebellion: Slave Resistance in Eighteenth-Century Virginia*, published in 1972, which demonstrated the value of runaway slave advertisements as a form of evidence. Concerned to have their property returned, slave owners described the runaways in detail, crediting them with far more intelligence and accomplishments than did the southern apologists for slavery. John W. Blassingame also made use of such advertisements to make the argument that slaves were not the docile Sambo characters as they sometimes had been portrayed.¹⁷ Eugene Genovese, the most influential of historians writing on slavery during that period, claimed that excessive punishment, especially whipping, was what pushed most slaves in escaping, while the desire to see loved ones was the most important pull. Treating slavery as a function of social class, he noted that most runaways received help from other slaves and that they "made an inestimable contribution to the people they left behind" because they "most clearly repudiated the regime" and "never let the others forget that there was an alternative to their condition."¹⁸

A revival of interest in the Underground Railroad began in 1984 with the publication of an article by Charles L. Blockson in *National Geographic*. The author's interest stemmed from

¹⁴ Ibid., 93-99.

¹⁵ Siebert, *Underground Railroad*, 342-347; Gara, *Liberty Line*, 36-39.

¹⁶ Stanley W. Campbell. *The Slave Catchers: Enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, 1850-1860* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1968).

¹⁷ Gerald W. Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion: Slave Resistance in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972). John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University, 1979; revised edition of the original published 1972), 201-206. The Sambo argument was made by Stanley Elkins in *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Cultural Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959).

¹⁸ Eugene D. Genovese. *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Random House, 1976; orig. publ. 1972), 648-657.

the fact that his great-grandfather escaped from slavery with the aid of the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee and was mentioned in William Still's book. Blockson had traveled the United States and Canada following routes and visiting sites associated with flights to freedom, and he presented the subject with an effective combination of enthusiasm and knowledge. He repeated many stories from the traditional accounts, but noted the racism of some conductors and made it clear that much about the institution was "uncertain," for example, the number of successful escapes between 1830 and 1860, which he said could be as low as 30,000 or as high as 90,000.¹⁹ That is an average of from 1,000 to 3,000 per year. Two other books have also focused attention on the Underground Railroad. Randolph Runyon's *Delia Webster and the Underground Railroad* was a biography of a major figure in the institution and also provided a substantial amount of information on her partner, Rev. Calvin Fairbank, who was jailed in Kentucky for attempting to help slaves escape from bondage.²⁰ *Modern Medea: A Family Story of Slavery and Child Murder in the Old South*, by Steven Weisenburger, was a well-researched and fascinating story of Margaret Garner, the desperate escapee who killed her child rather than have her returned to slavery. Weisenburger made frequent references to the Ohio Underground Railroad and provided a detailed account of John Jolliffe, the abolitionist lawyer who defended Garner.²¹

On the other hand, an implicit but massive assault on the Underground Railroad was contained in *Runaway Slaves: Resistance on the Plantation*, published in 1999 by John H. Franklin and Loren Schweningen. The term "underground railroad" appears on only two of its two hundred and ninety-four pages of text and each reference includes a statement about the small number of slaves that it helped. The authors simply ignored the anecdotes of early writers on the Underground Railroad, arguing instead that the only reliable sources of evidence on runaway slaves were newspaper advertisements and petitions to legislatures and county courts.²²

For Franklin and Schweningen, running away was a form of resistance to slavery, individual incidents of which existed at different points on a continuum that began with slowing

¹⁹ Blockson, Charles L., "Escape from Slavery: The Underground Railroad," *National Geographic* (July, 1984), 3-39, quote is from 9. See also Blockson's *The Underground Railroad* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1987) and his *Hippocrene Guide to the Underground Railroad* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1994).

²⁰ Randolph Paul Runyon, *Delia Webster and the Underground Railroad* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1996).

²¹ Weisenburger, *Modern Medea*.

²² John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweningen, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 116, 119, 295.

down on the job, moved on to stealing or damaging property, then to individual violence, and ended with organized rebellion.²³ Most runaways were simply absentees, taking a few days off, others were guilty of “lying out,” staying away but remaining in the vicinity for weeks or even months at a time, in both cases the motive was often the hope of winning concessions from their masters. Others fled to distant parts of the South to be with friends or relatives, to rugged areas where they might hide out, or even to Mexico where they could be free. Cities offered special attractions, particularly the opportunity to enjoy and blend with a black culture created by enslaved persons who were much less supervised than were rural bondsmen and often were hired out under circumstances that allowed them to make money for themselves. Of escapees, only “a few were able to find assistance from conductors of the Underground Railroad, Quakers, and anti-slavery whites,” and “a few others, traveling at night or hiding aboard sail boats and steamboats, made it to the North” on their own. Put simply, “the chances of fugitives making it from the slave states to New Jersey or Pennsylvania or across the Ohio River were remote.”²⁴

Franklin and Schweninger took issue with the Census of 1850, not because it undercounted the number of slaves who made permanent escapes, but because it ignored the massive number of temporary fugitives. They estimated that by 1860 an annual 50,000 slaves were escaping from their owners and remaining at large for various amounts of time. Most came home or were captured even before an advertisement was put in the papers, and the small rewards that were offered in the ads suggest that most owners expected to get their property back. On the other hand, a great deal of time and effort was expended throughout the South in maintaining the system of patrols and other mechanisms that made escape so difficult. A still more important negative for the master class was that “runaways symbolized the very aspect of bondage that they could not reconcile with their belief that slavery was beneficial for both master and slave.”²⁵

Runaway Slaves influenced J. Blaine Hudson’s *Fugitive Slaves and the Underground Railroad in the Kentucky Borderland*, published in 2002, which nonetheless made a strong case for the existence and effectiveness of the institution. Kentucky, of course, was a good place to look for Underground Railroad activity, and Hudson did make use of the traditional accounts.

²³ Ibid., 2-16.

²⁴ Ibid., 98-116, 125-129, quote on 116.

²⁵ Ibid., 281-282, 290-291, quote on 291.

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He also did extensive new research, however, including work in the same sort of newspaper and court records that were used by Franklin and Schweninger. As a result, Hudson provided a convincing account of escapees, the various routes they traveled, and the people who assisted them, both in Kentucky and in the free states across the river.²⁶ Hudson estimated that by the end of the antebellum period there were an annual 1,200 to 1,600 escaped slaves in Kentucky, about 20 percent of them from Tennessee and other states to the south, and perhaps 800 of the total eluded capture in Kentucky and crossed the Ohio River into Ohio and Indiana.

Hudson attempted to find a middle ground between Siebert's interpretation and that of Gara and of Franklin and Schweninger. Part of the problem he thought was definitional: "Under the most liberal interpretation, any assistance rendered to fugitive slaves, however random and even passive, constituted the 'Underground Railroad.' Under the most conservative, nothing short of a far-flung formal organization—with a board of directors, officers, a budget, a building, a shingle and stationary would suffice." He argued for a developmental view based on the experience of the Kentucky borderland. Individual white and black "friends of the fugitive" were active from an early period, but the "deepening divisions over slavery in the late 1840s and through the 1850s . . . wove isolated local efforts . . . into a more organized social movement," although only in a few places, Cincinnati in particular, did a formal organization come into being.²⁷

Hudson suggested a regional approach to understanding escape and flight, defining four "zones of fugitive slave activity." One of them was the interior of the South, where he accepted the view of Franklin and Schweninger that the bulk of the runaways were involved in a temporary resistance that did not take them far from home, or at least seldom took them north to freedom. The remaining three were border areas where more slaves were able to escape from the South. The first was east of the Appalachian Mountains, from where fugitives traveled north to Pennsylvania and on to Canada through New York or New England; the second was the Ohio River region that he studied, from which slaves escaped to Ohio and Indiana and on to Canada via Detroit or Cleveland. The last, particularly significant to Arkansas, was "the border west of the Mississippi River, with escape routes leading sometimes into the Ohio River border region or farther west or into Mexico."²⁸

²⁶ J. Blaine Hudson, *Fugitive Slaves and the Underground Railroad in the Kentucky Borderland* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2002), 8-10.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 158-9.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

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Hudson's approach to the Underground Railroad fit with a growing scholarly consensus on the subject. In the introduction to a 1996 reprint edition of *Liberty Line*, Larry Gara wrote that "were I to write this book again, I would give more recognition to the abolitionists," and a recent U.S. History textbook contains a map of "The Underground Railroad," including an estimate that there were "3,000 members who, by 1861, helped 75,000 slaves find freedom."²⁹ In *Generations of Captivity: A History of African American Slaves*, published in 2003, Ira Berlin, among the foremost of contemporary historians of slavery, paid homage to the Underground Railroad and claimed that it had an effect on the deep South as well as the border states.

"During the middle years of the nineteenth century, agents of the Underground Railroad reached deeper and deeper in the slave states, and the network of co-conspirators thickened. So-called conductors were aided by the new means of transportation from which the Underground Railroad took its name. Whereas escape had previously been limited to those on the periphery of the South, by the 1830s steamboats and railroads provided many more slaves with a channel to freedom. . . . With every escape, slaveholders discovered some new route by which slaves had exited bondage and added to the list of those who aided them."³⁰

In a recent collection of essays, *Passages to Freedom, The Underground Railroad in History and Memory*, David W. Blight took a position much like that of Hudson. "The Underground Railroad was the process—sometimes organized into a network but more often not—by which slaves escaped northward to the free states, to Canada, or to points south, west, and out to sea."³¹

In its National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program, the National Park Service has taken a still-broader approach, including all "resistance against the institution of slavery in the United States through escape and flight."³² This definition eliminates the provision that a slave had to be trying to reach someplace outside the slave states. It includes freedom seekers who were truants for a day or two and those who sought a temporary or limited freedom by visiting distant family and friends, returning to a locale that was familiar to them, or reaching a southern city—that is those who, according to Franklin and Schweninger's *Runaway Slaves*,

²⁹ Gara, *Liberty Line*, xii; Jacqueline Jones, Peter H. Wood, Thomas Borstelmann, Elaine Tyler May, Vicki L. Ruiz, *Created Equal: A Social and Political History of the United States*, vol. 1 (New York: Longman, 2003), 459.

³⁰ Ira Berlin *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 241. See also Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery, 1619-1877*, rev. ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003), 157-8.

³¹ David W. Blight, ed., *Passages to Freedom: The Underground Railroad in History and Memory* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2004), 3.

³² The phrase comes from a pamphlet titled "Underground Railroad," published by Network to Freedom, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. For a description of the Network to Freedom program, see Diane Miller, "The Places and Communities of the Underground Railroad: The National Park Service Network to Freedom," in *Passages to Freedom*, ed. Blight, 279-288.

were the vast majority of escapees. In the interest of clarity, this study will use the phrase Underground Railroad to mean the institution discussed by Siebert, Gara, Blockson, and Hudson, but its subject will include the tens of thousands of enslaved whose escapes and flights are of the type described in *Runaway Slaves*. No freedom seeker will be excluded.

Arkansas

Turning to Arkansas, we may begin by observing that it does not loom large in the major studies we have discussed. Wilbur Siebert describes the escape of a slave named William Minnis from Little Rock that was engineered by the abolitionist hero Rev. Calvin Fairbank in 1843, but that is his only mention of the state.³³ Gara quotes Arkansas Congressman Thomas Hindman who denounced John Sherman, a Republican candidate for Speaker of the House, as “a practical encourager of negro-stealing and an assistant of the underground railroad,” but says nothing else about the state.³⁴ Franklin and Schweninger mention a Tennessee runaway slave whose owner thought he might have fled to Arkansas where he had once lived. They also use the Arkansas legal code as an example of southern laws on slavery. More importantly, the five-state sample used in *Runaway Slaves* includes Louisiana, whose slaves play an important role in the Arkansas story.³⁵ Hudson found two Arkansas advertisements in his Kentucky newspapers.³⁶ More important, as we have seen, he recognized the existence of runaway activity west of the Mississippi that involved escapes to the frontier. Newer Underground Railroad maps also show freedom seekers heading north from Arkansas, east and west from Missouri, and south from Texas into Mexico.³⁷

Students of Arkansas history have also studied enslaved people who sought freedom. In his comprehensive *Negro Slavery in Arkansas*, published in 1958, Orville Taylor provided a good summary of the subject. Of particular significance is his discussion of fugitive slaves going to and coming from Indian Territory. Roman J. Zorn wrote an excellent account of the saga of Nelson Hacket (sometimes Hackett), a slave who fled from northwest Arkansas in 1841, made his way to Canada via Kentucky, and then was captured and brought home. Hackett’s case, which

³³ Siebert, *Underground Railroad*, 65, map faces p. 113.

³⁴ Gara, *Liberty Line*, 155.

³⁵ Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 69, 375n3.

³⁶ Hudson, *Kentucky Borderland*, 35.

³⁷ In addition to the Jones, Wood, et al. textbook cited above, see Blockson, “Underground Railroad,” 6-7.

appears to have been ignored by other writers, is particularly interesting because he was extradited to Arkansas after his owner brought up criminal charges based on Hackett's theft of a horse, a gold watch and some clothing. Finally there is an article by Paul E. Lack on freedom-seekers in Little Rock that documents the concept of running away as a means of negotiation and the magnetic quality of southern cities for freedom-seeking slaves.³⁸

Both Taylor and Lack use runaway slave advertisements, a form of evidence long recognized as important to the study of slavery and vital to the understanding of freedom-seeking. Perhaps the most important aspect of advertisements as evidence is the vested interest of the owner in providing an accurate description of escapees in order to maximize the possibility of their capture and return. Often they describe the runaways as capable, intelligent, and skilled, characterizations that are at odds with those of southern apologists for slavery who argued that African Americans were an inferior race lacking in those qualities. Freedom seekers as a whole were probably more gifted than those who remained behind, but the slave advertisements still provide an important correction to the descriptions of the enslaved that their owners would have outsiders believe.

In addition to determining the characteristics of the freedom seekers, this study uses advertisements to understand the geography of their flights, where they escaped from and where they intended to go. This approach is somewhat more problematic. If the ad is placed by the owner of the slave, as about two-thirds of the Arkansas ones are, the place of origin is usually clear, information on the destination, however, is generally based on an estimate made by the owner. Almost always these are informed guesses, based on information about the background of the slave or gleaned from other bondspeople or sometimes from sightings reported to the owner. The other third of Arkansas advertisements were placed by county jailors who had the runaways in custody and were trying to find their owner. In this case, the location of the jail is a fixed point, but information about the name of the owner and the place where the escape took place is usually provided by the captive slave. Jailors appear to believe it is accurate most of the time, because sometimes they indicate doubts. Whether the slaves were coerced into providing the information is unknown, but it may be they cooperated because they preferred the known

³⁸ Orville W. Taylor, *Negro Slavery in Arkansas* (Durham, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1958; reprint, Fayetteville: University of Arkansas, 2000), Roman J. Zorn, "Arkansas Fugitive Slave Incident and Its International Implications," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (Summer 1957): 139-144; Paul E. Lack, "An Urban Slave Community: Little Rock, 1831-1862," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (Autumn 1982).

evil of returning to the owner to the unknown one of being sold to someone else or the possibility of long-term imprisonment. Both types of advertisements are treated with caution in this study, but an underlying assumption is that the aggregate information gathered from all of them reflects a real pattern.

The evidence comes from Arkansas Runaway Slave Advertisements, a collection that includes all advertisements in Arkansas extant newspapers from 1820 through 1861 and contains information on 718 individual runaways.³⁹ Three-quarters of the ads are in the *Arkansas Gazette*, the state's main newspaper, which was printed continuously from 1820 through the Civil War. Other papers include the *Arkansas Advocate*, which was also published in Little Rock but only from 1835 to 1844; the *Washington Telegraph*, published in the town of Washington, located in the southwestern corner of the state near the border with Texas, beginning in 1840 and continuing through the Civil War; the *Southern Shield* published in Helena, also beginning in 1840 and continuing through 1865; and several other short-lived Helena papers. For comparative purposes here, the advertisements are divided into those from an early period beginning in 1820 when the *Gazette* began and ending in the summer of 1836, which includes the years in which Arkansas was a separate territory, and a late period from 1836 to 1861 during which it was a state.

This Arkansas data can be compared with information both from Franklin and Schweningen's *Runaway Slaves* and from Hudson's *Kentucky Borderland*. Franklin and Schweningen use what they call the Runaway Slave Data Base or RSDB, which is a sample consisting of 2,011 slaves found in advertisements taken from newspapers in Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Louisiana during two chronological periods, 1790-1816 and 1838-1860, "with emphasis" on the years from 1800 to 1809 and 1850 to 1859.⁴⁰ Hudson's study is supported by what he calls the Kentucky Fugitive Slave Data Base, which contains references to 1,196 fugitive slaves, 668 of them from runaway advertisements and the rest from newspaper articles, court reports and jail notices. They are divided into two chronological periods: 472 coming before 1850 and 724 from 1850 through 1861.⁴¹

The quantifiable variables used in all three cases are the ages of the runaways, their gender, the proportion who were mulatto, and whether they fled as individuals or in groups.

³⁹ There are also 94 runaways from the war years who are not included in this analysis.

⁴⁰ Franklin and Schweningen, *Runaway Slaves*, 328-329.

⁴¹ Hudson, *Kentucky Borderland*, 32.

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(See table 1.) According to Franklin and Schweninger, whose sample is an excellent approximation of the South as a whole, there was a great diversity among runaways, including “young and old, black and mulatto, healthy and infirm, female and male, skilled and unskilled, urban and rural,” but the largest number were “young field hands in their late teens and twenties.” And there was continuity over time: during the more than sixty years of their study, the “profile of the runaway, with few exceptions remained virtually unchanged.⁴² One of the exceptions was an increase over time in the percentage of mulattoes. In both periods, mulattoes were much more numerous among fugitives than they were in the general slave population, where they made up about ten percent. The percentage among runaways rose from about thirty percent to about forty percent.⁴³ Another change was an increased percentage of individual rather than group escapes, which the authors attribute to the fact that native African slaves were more apt to flee in groups than were the creoles born in the United States, who were a larger and larger proportion of the population over time.⁴⁴

⁴² Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 210.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 214.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 229.

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Table 1
Comparison of Selected Variables

Runaway Slave Data Base⁴⁵

Period	1790-1816	1838-1860
Mean Age	25	27
Percent 1-12 Years	5	4
Percent 40 and older	5	6
Percent Female	19	19
Percent Mulatto	ca. 33	43
Percent Individual Escapes	60	72

Kentucky Fugitive Slave Data Base⁴⁶

Period	Pre-1850	1850-1861
Mean Age	25.0	24.6
Percent 1-12 Years	No data	No data
Percent 40 and older	No data	No data
Percent Female	20.0	27.7
Percent Mulatto	54.7	46.5
Percent Individual Escapes	78.4	54.6

Arkansas Runaway Slave Advertisements

Period	1820-1836	1836-1861
Mean Age	25.8	27.1
Percent 1-12 Years	8.6	2.0
Percent 40 and older	9.7	8.0
Percent Female	18.2	7.5
Percent Mulatto	24.0	40.0
Percent Individual Escapes	49.3	70.7

⁴⁵ Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 211-212, 214, 229. Numbers in age groups were calculated from pages 331-332, where data was given separately for males and females.

⁴⁶ Hudson, *Kentucky Borderland*, 33, 36-37, 40.

Hudson's Kentucky data shows some significant variations from the pattern found by Franklin and Schweninger. The mean age of Kentucky freedom-seekers was about the same as the five state sample, but the author indicates that there were actually more children and older slaves, although he does not present actual numbers. The percentage of females was about the same in the period before, but it increased from one in five escapees in the period prior to 1850 to more than one in four in the last decade before the war. The percentage of mulattoes was always higher among the Kentucky slaves, but unlike that of the RSDB it dropped in the period after 1850. The most telling variable is the percentage of individual escapes: in the South as a whole, it increased over time, but in Kentucky it dropped precipitously from a high of seventy-eight percent prior to 1850 to a low of fifty-five percent after. Explaining their own data, Franklin and Schweninger claim that escaping in a group was a characteristic of African-born slaves and that the decrease over time was related to the decreasing proportion of them among the enslaved. They also claim that young males fleeing as individuals had the best chance of escaping, which provides a better explanation for what was happening in Kentucky. The larger percentage of females and of groups among the runaway population suggests that flight was easier in the 1850s than it had been before. Thus the comparison between the Kentucky area and the South as a whole provides evidence to support Hudson's contention that the Underground Railroad became effective in the period just before secession, providing some quantitative backing to the lament of the *Louisville Courier* that "negroes are daily and nightly escaping from their owners in startling numbers. They go off one, two, three, or a dozen at a time."⁴⁷

The profile of Arkansas runaways is more like the southern sample described by Franklin and Schweninger. In fact, in the closely comparable periods in which the RSDB covers the years from 1838 to 1860 and the Arkansas advertisements date from 1836 to 1860, the only significant difference is that women were nineteen percent of all-South runaways and only eight percent of those in Arkansas. The contrast with the Kentucky pattern is particularly striking with respect to individual escapes, which rose by twenty-one percent in Arkansas while they fell by twenty-four percent in Kentucky.

If the Kentucky slave profile suggests that escape was getting easier in the years before the Civil War, this data may mean that it was getting harder in Arkansas and in the lower Mississippi Valley, in general. More evidence for the same phenomenon comes from the distribution of advertisements. Of the 639 enslaved people in Arkansas newspaper

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 50.

advertisements, 280, or 43.8 percent, fled in the 1830s as compared with 139 or 21.8 percent in the 1850s. While this number may reflect the distribution of extant newspapers (the large number of missing ones for Helena, for example), it may also indicate that the best time for fleeing from Arkansas was not on the eve of the Civil War, but in the turbulent period two decades earlier when a wilderness was being rapidly settled and enslaved persons were arriving into an as yet unformed society.

The most significant difference between Arkansas and the other states has to do with its role as a destination for escaped slaves. Given that their data comes from five separate states, Franklin and Schweninger have little systematic information about slaves who came from out of state. They do cite one example from the *Tennessee Republican Banner*, published in Nashville during the years 1840 to 1842, in which thirteen of fifty-two advertisements, exactly twenty-five percent, came from owners outside of Tennessee. These owners were split rather equally among Kentucky, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi, all contiguous states.⁴⁸ Strangely enough, Hudson's sample shows that only 19 percent of the slaves came from outside Kentucky, although he feels that the figure is too low.⁴⁹ By contrast, Arkansas advertisements indicate that during the whole period between 1820 and 1861 nearly half (forty-seven percent) of the 615 slaves for whom the state of origin is given are not from Arkansas.

Table 2 shows the state of origin for the territorial and statehood periods. In the early period, well over half the runaways were from outside of Arkansas. The largest number, 19.6 percent, were from Mississippi, which might indicate that the fugitives were headed west or that they had crossed into Arkansas to travel north through a less settled area. Runaways from Alabama, Kentucky, Missouri, Tennessee, and Indian lands in the east, which together made up another 21.6 percent, were clearly headed west, southwest or south and some, presumably, were looking for freedom in Arkansas or beyond. After 1828 when the Arkansas Cherokees were moved into Indian Territory, a few slaves escaped and fled west from Indian lands in the east, but almost as many left Indian Territory to return to the East. Runaways from Louisiana made up 13.2 percent of the total, presumably seeking freedom somewhere in the North.

⁴⁸ Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 320-321.

⁴⁹ Hudson, *Kentucky Borderland*, 35.

Table 2
Sources of Runaway Slaves in Arkansas Newspapers, 1820-1861

Location	Territorial Period		Statehood Period	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Alabama	15	7.4	4	1.0
Arkansas	88	43.1	238	57.9
Georgia	0	0	4	1.0
Indian lands in East	6	2.9	4	1.0
Indian Territory	5	2.5	7	1.7
Kentucky	9	4.4	7	1.7
Louisiana	27	13.2	69	16.8
Missouri	4	2.0	7	1.7
Mississippi	40	19.6	51	12.4
Tennessee	10	4.9	13	3.2
Texas	0	0	7	1.7
Total	204	100	411	100.1

During the statehood period, the percentage of slaves advertised as fleeing from Arkansas rose from 43.1 percent to 57.9 percent, which reflected the growing population of the state and the spread of plantations in the lowlands of the south and east rather than a decline of out-of-state runaways, who continued to show up in Arkansas advertisements at the rate of about eight per year. The other significant change was an increase in the percentage of fugitives from Louisiana and a corresponding decrease in those from Mississippi, which may be related to an increasing use of the Mississippi River as an escape route. The possibility is supported by the fact that advertisements for runaways in the Little Rock *Arkansas Gazette* declined significantly in the 1850s and were more likely to appear in newspapers published in the Mississippi River town of Helena. Only a few runaways from Texas were advertised in Arkansas, probably because most Texas slaves fled south into Mexico. Despite the changing pattern during the statehood period, 9.6 percent of the freedom seekers advertised for in Arkansas during those years came from areas north of Arkansas or east of Mississippi.

Conclusion

The extent and significance of the Underground Railroad was greatly exaggerated by admirers, detractors, and participants from the 1830s through the rest of the nineteenth century. Historian Wilbur Siebert's professional assessment in 1898 did much to continue the "legend" down to 1961, when historian Larry Gara published a devastating critique. The most thorough study of freedom-seeking slaves, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation*, published by John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger in 1999, also discounts the influence of the institution. On the other hand, there is a strong historiographic movement in the other direction, the outstanding example of which is J. Blaine Hudson's *Fugitive Slaves and the Underground Railroad in the Kentucky Borderlands*. All these studies, and works dealing with slavery in general, support the importance of escape and flight as an aspect of resistance and self-assertion on the part of the enslaved.

Quantitative data from large collections of runaway advertisements make it clear that throughout the entire South runaway slaves were apt to be men in their late teens and early twenties, more likely to be mulatto than was the enslaved population in general, and that they usually fled as individuals rather than in groups. Advertisements from the Kentucky region in the 1850s reveal a different pattern in which more women fled and group escapes were more common, suggesting that assistance from the Underground Railroad played a significant role.

The most striking aspect of Arkansas slave advertisements is the large number of them involving out-of-state fugitives, which suggests that the state was a destination for some freedom-seekers and a crossroads for others traveling east, as well as west, and down, as well as up, the Mississippi River.

Chapter Two

Seeking Freedom on the Arkansas Frontier

Freedom-seeking slaves often fled to wilderness areas, and Arkansas was one of them. The future state was so sparsely populated at the time of the Louisiana Purchase that President Thomas Jefferson attempted to make it a new home for Native Americans removed from the East. People escaping from bondage came to Arkansas throughout the territorial and statehood years, sometimes in the company of whites who may have stolen them or may have been assisting them in a flight to freedom. Some fugitives went further west to the Indian Territory that became the exile home of the Five Civilized Tribes, but acculturated Native Americans also owned slaves, and Indian masters sometimes advertised for black people who sought freedom by fleeing east. Large numbers of escapees moved north and south through Arkansas as well, some of them coming directly north from Louisiana and others crossing the river from Mississippi, probably attracted by the unoccupied swamp land on the west bank. The steamboat revolutionized the north-south flight of enslaved people as much as it did the commerce of the West, and freedom seekers hid themselves among the cotton bales on the decks of the boats or mingled among the black crew members. Thus the enslaved people who fled to Arkansas or passed through there were taking advantage of the special opportunities provided by the frontier in much the same way as their enslavers.

The Arkansas Frontier

When it became part of the United States, much of the middle and lower Mississippi Valley was in the midst of significant development. To the south, major economic growth was taking place as sugar became a staple crop as far north as Baton Rouge and cotton plantations emerged in the vicinity of Natchez. In order to make this possible, Louisiana planters imported large numbers of slaves, perhaps two-thirds of them born in Africa. New Orleans was a dynamic center of trade and government where an Americanized version of French and Spanish culture was enriched by significant African influences. The entire area of what would eventually become the state of Louisiana contained about 15,000 white persons, 11,000 slaves, and 1,500 free black persons; and about 8,000 of the total, including most of the free African Americans, lived

in the capital city.¹ In Upper Louisiana, principally along the Mississippi River between the mouths of the Missouri and Ohio Rivers, there were another 9,500 non-Indian persons, among them 1,500 Negroes, most of whom were slaves. The focus of this society was St. Louis, the fur-trading center founded by the Chouteau family in 1764. By 1803 the original French inhabitants of this area had been joined by a large number of Americans from the Ohio River region who were attracted by the liberal land policies of the Spanish government, and, after the United States acquired Louisiana, this upper region grew rapidly.²

By contrast, the region between these two population centers, which would become the state of Arkansas, had changed little in the eighteenth century except that its Indian population had grown considerably smaller. The center of European political and economic activity was the village of Arkansas Post, located some thirty miles up the Arkansas River, where a tiny garrison and a small number of merchants and farmers tended to the needs of vessels plying the Mississippi and carried on a successful trade in pelts and hides, some of it arising from the efforts of white hunters who lived at the post for part of the year. There were also French settlers scattered at various locations along the Mississippi, Arkansas, White, and Ouachita Rivers, but altogether the colonial population, which included a few Americans, was well under 500 people, more than 10 percent of them African American slaves.³ Before their contact with the French, with whom they became allies and friends, the Quapaw Indians may have numbered 12,000 persons, but disease, war, and alcohol had winnowed them down to perhaps 700 by 1803. The Caddoes, who had lived in southwest Arkansas, had moved south into what is now Louisiana before the end of the century. The formidable Osages, who had driven out the Caddoes and attacked both Quapaw and French hunters from time to time, hunted in Arkansas and traded at the post, but lived in villages on the Osage River in Missouri and on the Arkansas River near the mouth of the Verdigris River in what is now Oklahoma. Newcomers to the area were

¹ Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1998), 333, 342-344; Peter J. Kastor, *The Nation's Crucible: The Louisiana Purchase and the Creation of America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), 30.

² The population figure is based on Amos Stoddard to the Secretary of War, April 7, 1804, Clarence Edwin Carter, *Territorial Papers of the United States* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1940) 13-18; on the circumstances of Upper Louisiana generally, see William E. Foley, *The Genesis of Missouri: From Wilderness Outpost to Statehood* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1989), 57-121.

³ Morris S. Arnold, *Colonial Arkansas: 1686-1804: A Social and Cultural History* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 1991), 17-24, 61-66.

several hundred Cherokees who had left their homes in the East and voluntarily migrated to the St. Francis River valley.⁴

President Jefferson's efforts helped to convince 3,000 to 5,000 eastern Cherokees to migrate to Arkansas by the time it became a territory in 1819. They lived principally in the western portion of the Arkansas River valley and received title to the western part of Arkansas north of the Arkansas River in 1817. The territorial government was adamantly opposed to sharing space with the removed Indians, however, and a second treaty in 1828 moved the Cherokees west of a line running north from Fort Smith to the Missouri border, which became the permanent boundary between Arkansas and Indian Territory. Similarly, a treaty with the Choctaws in 1820 gave them an extensive area of land in what is now southwest Arkansas, but in 1825 they agreed to move west of a line from Fort Smith south to the Red River, which again became a permanent boundary. Meanwhile, the Quapaws signed one treaty in 1818 that limited them to an area south of the Arkansas River and then another in 1824 that forced them out of Arkansas altogether.⁵ Eventually the land west of Arkansas Territory became known as Indian Territory, and its population grew rapidly after the Removal Act of 1830 led to the forced migration known as the Trail of Tears. While they lost their land in the East, many members of the Five Civilized Tribes were able to bring slaves with them to the West. The census of 1860 enumerated more than 8,000 enslaved persons living among the 59,000 people in Indian Territory, including 2,500 among the Cherokees and Choctaws along the Arkansas border.

The white settlement of Arkansas was deeply affected by the new boundaries and jurisdictions created by the United States. In 1804 Congress created a Territory of Orleans for the southern portion of the Louisiana Purchase that extended north to thirty-three degrees of latitude, the present boundary between the states of Louisiana and Arkansas. The vast area north of this was designated as the District of Louisiana and came under the administrative authority of the territorial government of Indiana located in Vincennes. Following loud protests from St. Louis, which had been the administrative center of Upper Louisiana under the Spanish regime, Congress created a Louisiana Territory in 1805 and made that city its capital. Arkansas,

⁴ On the Native American population of Arkansas at the time of the Louisiana Purchase, see Kathleen DuVal, "Choosing Enemies: The Prospects for an Anti-American Alliance in Louisiana," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, 42, no. 3 (Autumn 2003), 233-252; S. Charles Bolton, "Jeffersonian Indian Removal and the Emergence of Arkansas Territory," *Ibid.*, 264-268; and Joseph Patrick Key, "'Outcasts Upon the World,' The Louisiana Purchase and the Quapaws," *Ibid.*, 272-276.

⁵ Bolton, "Jeffersonian Indian Removal," 268-271, and *Arkansas, 1800-1860: Remote and Restless* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 67-82; Key, "'Outcasts Upon the World,'" 276-288.

which had been governed from New Orleans in the colonial era was now part of the District of New Madrid, the southern-most portion of Louisiana Territory. In 1812 the Territory of Orleans became the State of Louisiana and the former Louisiana Territory became Missouri Territory. In 1819 as Missouri Territory prepared for admission to the union as a state, it requested a southern boundary that excluded what were by that time three counties covering what is now Arkansas. In response to requests by the people there, Congress created Arkansas Territory, which had its capital at Arkansas Post and included the area between 36 degrees 30 minutes on the north and the Louisiana line at thirty-three degrees and extended west to the Rocky Mountains.⁶

American citizens did not begin to arrive in significant numbers until after the War of 1812. The Census of 1810 covered only the areas of eastern Arkansas that were inhabited by the colonial population in 1803 and tallied only a few more than 1,000 persons. Southeastern Missouri was growing rapidly, however, and pioneers from Kentucky, Tennessee and the Ohio region generally began to move down the Southwest Trail that ran diagonally across Arkansas, crossing the White River at what soon became the town of Batesville and the Arkansas River near the later capital at Little Rock, and continuing on through the headwaters of the Ouachita River and eventually to the Red River, leaving small communities along the way. This new immigration shifted the population center well to the west of Arkansas Post and soon supplanted the influence exercised by the French settlers and the American newcomers in eastern Arkansas.

The growth was hardly spectacular, however, bringing the American population of the new Arkansas Territory up to only 14,000 persons in 1820. By 1830 it had increased to 30,000, and then as the western expansion of the United States became a floodtide, it rose to 52,000 in a special census done on the eve of statehood in 1835 and nearly doubled to 98,000 over the next five years. Population growth was related to the gradual emergence of Arkansas as the northwest frontier of the Cotton Kingdom, and that helped to double the number of people in the state during the 1840s and double it again in the 1850s. By 1860 Arkansas was home to 435,000 Americans, 111,000 of them enslaved African Americans. Spread across the state, however, there were only eight people per square mile, half the density of Louisiana and

⁶ Lonnie J. White, *Politics on the Southwestern Frontier: Arkansas Territory, 1819-1836* (Memphis, TN: Memphis State University Press, 1964), 3-17.

Missouri, a third of that in Tennessee, and only slightly over what the United States Census defined as a frontier.⁷

Indeed frontier, or even wilderness, was a description that fit much of Arkansas as late as the Civil War. Frederick Gerstaecker, a young man from Germany, traveled all over the state in the early 1840s and wrote about his experiences shooting deer, bear, and all manner of fowl.⁸ Many Arkansans, particularly those in the Ozark Mountains, remained hunters and subsistence farmers. From the late 1830s to the late 1850s, Charles Fenton Mercer Noland, an Arkansas politician, avid hunter, and gifted writer, sold stories about life in Arkansas to the New York journal *The Spirit of the Time*—realistic fiction featuring bear hunts, eye-gouging brawls, and rustic Jacksonian politics.⁹ What Noland made bucolic and amusing, however, shocked Union soldiers accustomed to the prosperous and orderly farmland of the Midwest.

We are marching through a region where the sound of the church bell is never heard, where a large portion of the land is a wilderness, and the inhabitants of the small and narrow valleys are far separated from each other and, following a rude and primitive method of agriculture, they give but little attention to religion or education. The farm houses are nearly all built of logs, and half of them at least, are of the poorest description, with chimneys built on the outside, of sticks and mud, a yard with a rude fence, and all manner of animals occupying the enclosed space, but not a tree or shrub or spot of green grass for the eye to rest upon.¹⁰

Well suited for hunting, Arkansas was also a good environment for violence and crime. George Featherstonhaugh, an English traveler in Arkansas in the mid-1830s, was more critical than was justified, but there was truth to his assertion that white society included “Gentlemen who had taken the liberty to imitate the signatures of other persons; bankrupts who were not disposed to be plundered by their creditors; homicides, horse-stealers, and gamblers.” All of whom, according to him “admired Arkansas on account of the very gentle and tolerant state of public opinion which prevailed there in regard to such fundamental points as religion, morals, and property.”¹¹ Among the various illegal activities that flourished, the stealing of slaves was prominent.

⁷ S. Charles Bolton, *Territorial Ambition: Land and Society in Arkansas, 1800-1940* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 1993), 20-24, 28-29, and *Remote and Restless*, 19.

⁸ Bolton, *Remote and Restless*, 91-98.

⁹ Bolton, *Territorial Ambition*, 35-36.

¹⁰ William L. Shea, “A Semi-Savage State: The Image of Arkansas in the Civil War,” in *Civil War Arkansas: Beyond Battles and Leaders*, ed. Anne J. Bailey and Daniel E. Sutherland Bailey (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 2000), 90.

¹¹ Bolton, *Territorial Ambition*, 30-37; Walter Moffatt, “Out West in Arkansas, 1819,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 17 (Winter 1958): 46-54.

Seeking Freedom

The most notorious slave stealer in the Arkansas region was John Murrell, who supposedly led a gang of thieves operating in the middle Mississippi Valley. Historian James L. Penick has demonstrated that Murrell's significance was greatly exaggerated, but the practice of stealing horses and slaves was widespread. "Outlawry thrived in the marshes, sloughs, and canebrakes along the Mississippi and its navigable tributaries. The greatest centers of activity were in the newly settled regions of west Tennessee, the Indian cessions, the Delta of Mississippi and, above all, in Arkansas, which in the mid-1830s was experiencing a great emigration . . . [including large numbers of enslaved persons.]"¹² The swampland of northeast Arkansas "was the seat of the most notorious gang of thieves."¹³

Seeking Freedom in Arkansas

Many slave owners who advertised their runaways in the *Arkansas Gazette* in the early years of the territory had no evidence that the escapees were headed there, but they must have thought there was something about the area that would attract them. For example, an owner in Haywood County, Tennessee, offered \$150 for Harry, "a blacksmith by trade, but not of the first order," without any clear sense that he had crossed the Mississippi River.¹⁴ James Esselman, formerly of Jackson, Missouri, but then living in Tennessee, thought that his escaped bondsman might be headed back to Missouri, or to Arkansas or to a free state. Squier, who was 30-years-old and 6 feet 6 inches tall with brown skin and a scar on his temple, escaped wearing "a white hat, checked shirt, [and] cassinet [*sic*] pantaloons had been hired out and was working at an iron works at the time." Squier's skill probably explains why Esselman offered a \$100 reward.¹⁵

Some fugitives clearly seem to have been going to Arkansas. One was the escapee Phill, a mulatto who left a plantation at Natchez in the fall of 1826. He was one of relatively few slaves in Arkansas newspaper ads who had severe marks of punishment, "branded on both cheeks, an S on the one and a C on the other, [and] also marked with notches or slits on both ears," and was wearing "an iron on his neck and one on his leg when he went off." The owner, Pennington Tucker, thought Phill might be going to Little Rock or perhaps to Davidsonville in northeast

¹² Penick, James L., *The Great Western Land Pirate: John A. Murrell in Legend and History* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1981), 55.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁴ *AG*, July 29, 1829.

¹⁵ *AG*, January 26, 1836.

Arkansas because “he was once stolen, taken to that place and sold.”¹⁶ Another runaway anxious to get to Arkansas was captured in 1826 and turned over to the circuit court of Independence County, where Batesville was the county seat. Henry, who was thirty-years-old, had been owned by Asa McFelch of that county but sold to M. Foche, who lived some twenty-five miles north of New Orleans. Apparently northern Arkansas had some attraction for Henry, perhaps because of friends in the area or maybe because he found that the highland area of Arkansas was better for enslaved persons than the sugar-producing region of Louisiana.¹⁷

Jesse, “five feet two inches high, square made, black complexion” also wanted to be in Arkansas, or perhaps beyond it to the west. In May 1828 he fled from Joseph Cotton of Lawrence County, Tennessee, about fifty miles east of Memphis. In July he was captured in Greenock, on the other side of the Mississippi River, but he escaped from the Crittenden County jail, apparently in a stolen skiff. In a March 1829 advertisement, Cotton claimed to have information that Jesse had surrendered himself somewhere along the Arkansas River some seventy-five miles above Little Rock. Cotton also understood that his slave had left Memphis with another runaway who was later shot in the vicinity of Little Rock. The planter offered a reward of \$50 for Jesse, hoping whoever had him would bring him to Memphis.¹⁸

Another westward traveling fugitive was the resourceful Black Solomon, a 22-year-old man about five-eight and described as “stout” from Columbia, Murray County, Tennessee, who used a number of aliases, including Jim. He was lodged in the Pulaski County jail on July 28, 1841, but escaped about two weeks later. Recaptured, Jim was apparently sold to John Walters of Jefferson County, Arkansas, who reported that he had fled again in December 1841. Three months later he was still at large.¹⁹

A number of runaways came a long way to get to Arkansas. Silas, who was being held in the St. Francis County jail in July 1837, claimed to have fled from Franklin County, Alabama.²⁰ In 1857 the Pulaski County sheriff advertised for the owner of two incarcerated runaways who claimed their owner was a man living in Sparta, Georgia.²¹ The fugitive John, lodged in the Phillips County jail in 1842, had attempted to continue a westward migration he had begun with

¹⁶ AG, November 14, 1826.

¹⁷ AG, June 6, 1826.

¹⁸ AG, July 16, 1828; *Ibid.*, March 4, 1829.

¹⁹ AG, July 28, 1841; *Ibid.*, August 16, 1841; *Ibid.*, December 8, 1841; *Ibid.*, March 2, 1842.

²⁰ AG, July 11, 1837.

²¹ AG, March, 14, 1857.

his master. He had been brought from Virginia to the vicinity of Nashville before he escaped and fled to Arkansas.²²

One out of four out-of-state owners who placed ads for slaves in Arkansas newspapers believed their slaves had been stolen, either taken outright or more often “decoyed off.” Some of these alleged thefts were probably the result of wishful thinking on the part of men who felt they were kind masters from whom no slave would want to leave. Others appear to have been carried out by whites who stole slaves as they might have stolen cattle or horses, but in some cases it appears that the assistance was provided to help the enslaved person find freedom.

In 1820 E. Montgomery of Tensaw, Alabama, offered to pay the very large sum of \$200 for the apprehension of Basil and Ned, who had fled from his plantation, on May 10, 1820. Basil was about 50-years-old and six feet tall, “a plausible fellow at telling a story,” and spoke French as well as English. Ned was about fifteen years younger and “very shrewd but will hesitate when closely questioned.” Montgomery began his ad claiming that the two men “ran away,” but later suggested they had been “stolen” by Stephen Stapleton who left the area the same night. Stapleton had “left his wife and children in distress and absconded with another women,” taking two small slaves with him. Montgomery thought the group had gone either to Tennessee or to the Red River area of Louisiana. He ran the ad in Nashville and Natchez as well as Arkansas.²³

Three years later, James, a “Negro Man” escaped from Scott County, Kentucky, where his owner had rented him to someone else. He was carefully described as “being about 30 years of age, quite black, thick lips, shows his teeth very much when spoken to, his upper fore-teeth are quite open.” He was about 5 feet 10 inches tall and 180 pounds. When he left, he was wearing “a green cloth coat, black pantaloons, and a wool hat.” Daniel Cooper, guardian of the heirs of J. Cooper, who were the owners of James, believed that he was in a group with two or three other escaped slaves. “It is supposed he was persuaded away by a worthless white man,” a heavy-drinking blacksmith, who had been to Arkansas and would probably return there.²⁴

Thomas A. Russell of Lexington, Kentucky, who used the services of the *Arkansas Gazette* in January 1827, was not sure whether his missing slaves had fled, been stolen, or were assisted in getting to the North. The two absconders were Henry, a “black” man, “heavy and awkwardly made [and] round shouldered,” who “had a down look when spoken to,” and Jerry,

²² *Southern Shield* (Helena, AR), July 23, 1842.

²³ *AG*, August 11, 1821.

²⁴ *AG*, June 23, 1823.

a “Yellow boy” about seventeen, who was also “awkward” and had the same response to white interrogation. Russell felt the men had left “with no known provocation,” which made him feel that William M. Abrams “had decoyed them off.” Abrams was a white man in his mid-twenties, who had worked as an overseer for Russell for a few months. Abrams claimed to be from Maryland originally but most recently had been working in New Orleans “at the Hatter’s business, from where he had left in bad health and was returning to Ohio to recover.” The slave owner claimed that the ex-overseer had been seen with a large amount of bank notes and was probably “connected with a band of counterfeiters, horse thieves, or mail robbers.” He thought that Abrams might have taken Henry and Jerry south in order to sell them or that the trio had gone to a free state, although “there seems to be no inducement for him to do so.”²⁵

In July 1834, a 25-year-old Negro named Faro escaped from a man who had hired him in Jackson, Mississippi. The owner and the renter jointly offered a \$100 reward despite the fact they believed Faro was “quite a dull, weak-minded negro (he cannot count 20).” They also thought he “was stolen and run off” by a young man named Marsh who was from Arkansas. If so, Faro had had time to pack, because he took with him “one pair of white jean pantaloons, one pair of green Manchester cord pantaloons and roundabout of the same, one or two shirts, a black fur hat, and a pair of square toed brogans.”²⁶

In March 1828 Calvin J. King of English Springs, Limestone County, Alabama, advertised for six slaves that he believed “were stolen or decoyed off,” apparently because it was unlikely they could have escaped alone. King, however, appeared to have no idea who was responsible: “From the manifest appearance of there being several coadjutors in this villainy, the person conveying them cannot be signalized.” The slaves included Mima, a woman of about forty, “very thick, heavy built, quite bow-legged, and when walking, her toes turn very much in, very wide and open teeth, very bushy head of hair, with many white hairs just above the forehead.” With her were five children, Orry, “a girl about 13 or 14 years old, stout and well made; Alfred, a boy about 14 or 15 years old, quite a likely boy;” Isaac, described as ten or twelve, “of very stupid and obstinate appearance,” with a scar on his breast; and finally Wesley and William, who were 6- or 8-years-old and often mistaken for twins. The entire group was wearing “cotton clothes of white warp and dark filling, except the girl, who had on a striped copperas coat with buttons behind,” all these being very worn and dirty. The older boys had white caps and the younger

²⁵ AG, January 9, 1827.

²⁶ AG, July 29, 1834.

ones black caps. All the slaves had “quite black skin.” Like many escapes, this one had occurred during a time of stress for the owner, and King used the circumstances to illicit sympathy: the runaways, he wrote, were “depriving a disconsolate widow, and many helpless and innocent children, of that which an honest and industrious husband and father had acquired for them.”²⁷

A family in Jackson County, Tennessee, was involved in a situation that may have involved love as well as theft. Dale Carter claimed that Richard Carter, 34-years-old and well armed, had stolen a 19-year-old mulatto named Jemima from Permelia Carter and was taking her to Arkansas or someplace else on the frontier with the intention of selling her. He also indicated that Jemima was “now in about the middle state of a pregnant situation,” but if there was a relationship between Richard and her, Dale was unmoved by it. He offered a reward of \$100 to get Jemima back and another \$100 if Richard were captured so he could stand trial.²⁸

Among the many other masters who felt themselves victimized by thieves was A. S. Bailey of Fayetteville County in Tennessee. According to him, W. L. Moon, “a small man of sprightly appearance and good address,” who sometimes assumed the title of Doctor, took away eight Negroes belonging to Bailey, carrying them in a wagon. He had heard that Moon had crossed the Mississippi and surmised that he was taking the slaves to Texas where he would sell them.²⁹ Phebe Nash of Lafayette County, Arkansas, did not suggest that the possible perpetrator was a thief when she described the three Negro men who “ran away” from her plantation in 1850: “It is suspected they have been decoyed off by some white person.”³⁰ John D. Locke of Chariton, Missouri, advertised in 1840 for Lewis, a “Negro man,” who had been mortgaged to Locke by John Sinnert for a debt of \$11.50. Locke described Sinnert as a white man, “23 years of age, 5 feet 4 or 5 inches high, dark skin, hair and eyes, down look when spoken to, and easily confused; he wore off a dark steel mixed overcoat, black Russia rabbit hat, calf skin boots, and silk velvet vest . . . [and] rode a small brown mare, well gaited, no marks or brands recollected.” Lewis also had a horse, and the two men “were well equipped for traveling.” Locke thought they were heading south, perhaps to the Republic of Texas.³¹

Some captured runaways claimed to have been stolen. After he was turned over to Miller Irvin, the Phillips County jailor in Helena, Daniel, a 25-year-old man who could read and

²⁷ AG, May 7, 1828.

²⁸ AG, March 14, 1837.

²⁹ AG, October 24, 1838.

³⁰ AG, September 27, 1850.

³¹ AG, December 8, 1840.

write and appeared very intelligent, claimed that he belonged to Judge Stamps of Port Gibson, Louisiana, but had been stolen by a “horse trader” named Frank Clark who took him to Lake Providence and put him on the steamboat *W. L. Robinson*, whose captain had turned him over to Irvin. Why a thief would steal a slave and then buy him a steamboat ticket is unclear, which suggests that Daniel may have made up the theft story to escape punishment for his escape.³² Another perhaps too-convenient story was told by Nathan, a 37-year-old man, also “quite intelligent,” to the sheriff and jailor of Arkansas County. Nathan claimed that his owner, Samuel Gunn of Clinton, Mississippi, had sent him to collect some cattle from a Mr. Bois on Island No. 100 on the Mississippi River. Nathan had gotten aboard the steamboat *Paul Jones* in pursuit of his objective, but was stolen by a white man not far from the Bois plantation. How he came to be captured by a justice of the peace in Arkansas County and taken to Arkansas Post was not indicated.³³

To and From Indian Country

While Negro slaves acculturated rather easily to Indian society and were treated better on average than among the whites, Indian slavery was often harsh. In 1839 the Cherokees passed a slave code that that was not dissimilar from that of Arkansas—creating a slave patrol, for example, to discourage “strolling about,” preventing slaves from being taught to read and write, and providing punishment for sexual activity between Indians and blacks, whether the latter were slave or free.³⁴ Thus, it is not too surprising that the number of freedom seekers heading to the west of Arkansas was not too different from those that were escaping to the east.

Well before the 1830s, the Indians in Arkansas contributed to the flow of slaves through Arkansas. Austin, “a keen, sensible [intelligent] fellow,” escaped from his owner on April 7, 1821, apparently while they were traveling down the Arkansas River toward New Orleans. William Watson’s advertisement stated that Austin had been owned by the Rogers, a well-known Cherokee family, and lived in the eastern nation. Apparently they had taken him to Arkansas,

³² *Helena Constitutional Journal* (Helena, AR), April 6, 1837.

³³ AG, October 24, 1837.

³⁴ Celia E. Naylor-Ojurongbe, “‘More at Home with the Indians’: African-American Slaves and Freedpeople in the Cherokee Nation, Indian Territory, 1838-1907,” PhD. diss., Duke University, 2001), 76-82, 304. The classic study, which treats the whole period of interaction between Cherokees and African-Americans is Theda Perdue, *Slavery and the Evolution of Cherokee Society, 1540-1866* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1979).

for he was later sold by Major Elmurry who was settled at Cadron, a community on the river a few miles above Little Rock. Watson thought Austin would go back to the Cherokees, “either in Tennessee or on the Arkansas river.”³⁵ In October 1823 Celia, “a large likely woman, inclined to be fat,” broke out of the Pulaski County jail, along with two other Negroes. They all belonged to Walter Webber, a member of the Western Cherokee nation, and the sheriff thought they would head back there.³⁶

Richard Haughton, who lived near Huntsville, Alabama, advertised in January 1833 for two slaves who fled more than a year earlier. He believed that Shadrack and Isham, both in their thirties, had been stolen and taken to the Choctaw Nation in Mississippi where they were sold and perhaps taken to Arkansas “with the Emigrating Indians.”³⁷ Ben, who broke out of the St. Francis County jail along with three other men in December 1833, was probably looking for his wife, who was owned by a man who had lived with the Choctaws and immigrated west with them.³⁸

Colin and David, two mulatto slaves living near Tuscumbia, Alabama, apparently thought that Indian removal offered them a chance for freedom. Both brothers were between 25- and 30-years old, Colin was tall and thin, over six feet and 175 pounds, while David was an inch or two taller and about 190 pounds. They were both pleasant spoken, very intelligent, and artful. In December 1833 they set off down the Tennessee River in a canoe, dressed as Indians. They could both speak a little Chickasaw, and their owner had been told that “their disguise is so complete that it will be difficult to detect them, unless their hair is examined, and their hands, which are harder than those of Indians.”³⁹

Bill a “black” man of twenty-two years, escaped from Newberry, Mississippi, in the Chickasaw nation in September 1830, taking with him a Negro woman of the same age, and two children, a four-year-old girl and a one-year-old boy. Both the woman and the girl spoke Chickasaw. They took with them a black stallion that was blind, a small grey mare, and an “old rifle gun.” Benjamin Reynolds, an Indian agent who placed the ad, claimed that there was good

³⁵ Watson put the ad in the *Arkansas Gazette* the day of the escape; see *AG*, April 7, 1821.

³⁶ *AG*, October 14, 1823.

³⁷ *AG*, February 27, 1833.

³⁸ *AG*, December 18, 1833.

³⁹ *AG*, February 18, 1834.

reason to believe that they had been “run from the Nation” by a white man, by which he meant “thieves.” Where they went was not clear.⁴⁰

Formerly-enslaved persons on their way out of Indian Country included Joe, who ran away in 1831 from his owner, James Wand, who lived near Dwight Mission, which had been founded by the Reverend Cephas Washburn in 1820 and originally served the Cherokees in the Dardanelle area of Arkansas. Wand described Jerry as being 35- to 40-years-old and a few inches under five feet and having “the features of a monkey.” His “voice . . . [was] very small, . . . [but] he spoke “very proper and distinct.”⁴¹

In March 1833 an ad appeared in the *Gazette* from Joseph Doak of Doaksville in the Choctaw Nation, offering \$25 for Eaf or Ephraim, who had run away from Ne-ta-ki-jah, a Choctaw chief living on the Red River. Eaf was 5 feet 6 or 7, between twenty-five and thirty, “very talkative, fond of drinking and gambling, has a strong propensity to be roguish, and is a pretty shrewd fellow.” He had been owned by a man in Conway and another in Little Rock, who had sold him to the chief. Since escaping he had been seen in Little Rock and then captured south of there on the Saline River, but escaped again. Doak had bought Eaf before the escape from Ne-ta-ki-jah and apparently did get him back or perhaps sold him while he was gone. In any case, in May, Samp. M. Rutherford was offering \$100 to anyone who would bring Ephraim to him at Little Rock.⁴²

Joseph Blair of the Western Creek Agency advertised for a slave that had escaped from the Creek chief Spook-eke Haryo in April 1834. His name was Harry, he was between 40- and 50-years-old, deaf, and had severe speech problems, “making a kind of stuttering noise when trying to talk.” Harry was prepared for a new life, however, having taken with him “a rifle gun, ten beaver traps, one falling axe, and a canoe.”⁴³ Spencer, a tall, bearded man about 29-years-old, described as a “shrewd active boy,” fled from William Hall at the Choctaw Agency in 1836. Hall assumed that Spencer was headed back to Sumpter County, Alabama, where he had lived when Hall purchased him and that he would follow the same route through Memphis they had traveled then.⁴⁴ Similarly B.L.E. Bonneville at Fort Coffee also assumed that Simon, who rode away from him on a “light cream-colored mare” would go back to Alabama where he had been

⁴⁰ AG, October 12, 1831.

⁴¹ AG, September 19, 1832.

⁴² AG, March 6, 1833; *Ibid.*, March 22, 1833.

⁴³ AG, May 6, 1834.

⁴⁴ AG, September 6, 1836. For another fugitive from the Choctaw Nation, see AG, December 5, 1837.

purchased by Winey, a Creek woman who took him west with her. Simon had been seen on the road to Little Rock, and Bonneville thought he would follow the route of Creek migration. Another homesick slave was Edmond, “a blacksmith by trade,” who left Beatties’ Prairie in the Cherokee Nation in June 1839, and was assumed to be returning to Tennessee.⁴⁵

According to Charles Rogers, who lived at Finley’s Springs in the Cherokee Nation, “a very bright [light-skinned] mulatto male child” was stolen from him by J. Wesley, a soldier who deserted from the Cantonment Gibson in the same area. In this case, it is clear that the child did not leave on his own, but one wonders if Wesley was not making off with his son.⁴⁶

Perhaps the best prepared group of slaves that ever fled through Arkansas was the four men sought by Pierre Juzan, of Doaksville. In February 1839 Juzan advertised for Billy, Washington, Hart, and Will, “four negro men” who had fled with four horses, which he described in detail. The freedom seekers also took with them a rifle, a shotgun, and enough provisions to get them to Lauderdale County, Mississippi, where Juzan thought they were headed. He offered a reward of \$40 for each of the slaves and \$10 for each of the horses.⁴⁷

Fleeing Through Arkansas

The first slave advertisement that appeared in the *Arkansas Gazette* ran in the issue of August 12, 1820, and sought Phil, whose owner was Bartlett Collins of East Feliciana Parish, Louisiana, an area dominated by sugar plantations. Phil was “of light-complexion,” had “a broad flat nose and large mouth, lips turning out,” was five feet ten inches, and spoke “rather through the nose.” He may have been a preacher, since, as Collins put it, he “speaks free [easily],” was able to read, and might be carrying a Bible and a book of psalms. He also had made some preparations before leaving, stealing “two silver and one gilt watch, the latter an old one,” and had a knapsack with two “ruffled shirts” with the name J. Miller on them. Most important, he had a forged or stolen document, “a free paper” made out in the name John Wilson.⁴⁸ Collins did not indicate where he thought Phil might be going, but presumably north toward Arkansas and beyond was a possibility.

⁴⁵ AG, July 3, 1839

⁴⁶ AG, July 1, 1829.

⁴⁷ AG, March 13, 1839.

⁴⁸ AG, August 12, 1820.

Seeking Freedom

Another enslaved person attempting to travel north was John Bird, a 27-year-old mulatto slave who escaped from a flatboat on the Mississippi River at “Grand Cut-Off,” probably located at the mouth of the Achafalaya River in Louisiana, in September 1821. Like many of the fugitives searched for or captured in Arkansas Territory, Bird had recently been purchased and carried away from his original residence. His current owner, Frederick Lewis of New Orleans, had purchased him from a man in Kentucky, and thought Bird might be attempting to return there. “He took with him an olive colored surtout of superfine cloth, half worn, a pair of dark velvet pantaloons, and a rifle.” Lewis had heard that Bird had been captured near the White River and was willing to pay \$50 to anyone who would bring Bird to New Orleans or confine him in a prison on the Mississippi River where Lewis could get him.⁴⁹

Most of the Louisiana slaves advertised in Arkansas were supposed to be headed up the Mississippi River, either by land or water, and many of them wound up in the Chicot County jail in Columbia. W. Disharoon of Grand Gulf, Louisiana, thought that his bondsman, Stephen, might be headed back to Tennessee, which was his original home.⁵⁰ Walter, or Walton, seems to have had a good chance to get from Claiborne Parish, from where he escaped in 1840, north to Trimble County, Kentucky, or a free state, two places where his owner thought he might be going. He was a twenty-four-year-old mulatto, “quite intelligent, converses, reads, and writes well,” and he prepared himself for the trip, taking “a good supply of clothing . . . a large brown mule, saddle and bridle, and double barrel shot gun [*sic*].”⁵¹

Steamboats played a large role in runaway slave advertisements in Arkansas newspapers during the statehood period. While we have little evidence that fugitives were able to make successful escapes and lots of advertisements indicated that they were found out and turned over to jailors, it is clear that the steamers were often used for attempted getaways. Doubtless slaves contemplating escapes believed that the advantage of rapid transportation to a distant place outweighed the dangers of being found out. In 1838 the captain of the *New Albany* dropped off in Helena, Dan, who admitted escaping from his owner who lived near Baton Rouge. Also committed to the Phillips County jail in Helena was Joshua, who told a more complicated story, again involving a possible theft, claiming his owner was John R. Scott of New Orleans, but that he had been brought up river by a man who claimed to have purchased him.⁵²

⁴⁹ AG, September 15, 1821.

⁵⁰ AG, October 17, 1838.

⁵¹ AG, September 2, 1840.

⁵² AG, May 30, 1838.

Stepito, a 50-year-old man, may have been heading for New Orleans on board the steamer *Diana*, since he claimed his owner was a Mr. Skinker in St. Louis and he was entrusted to the Phillips County jail.⁵³ The youngest slave advertised for in this period was from New Orleans and fled on a steamboat. Harry was eleven-years-old and stood only four feet five inches high. He was discovered on the boat and left at the jail in Chicot County.⁵⁴

Most runaways on their way through Arkansas went by themselves or with one or sometimes two others. There were, however, a number of advertisements related to large groups of fugitives. One of the most impressive group escapes ended on April 18, 1831, when an unnamed individual or individuals brought five freedom-seeking slaves to the sheriff of St. Francis County in Arkansas Territory. The leader of the group was apparently Ben, a large bearded man of about fifty years with a slight speech impediment. With him were his wife, Hetty, about twenty-two years and “of a yellow complexion;” Bill, a stoutly built man of twenty-three or twenty-four; Bill’s wife, Haney, perhaps a year older; and Hetty’s sister, “stout built, and thick lips,” and about eighteen. They had been on the road since the middle of December, making their way north from the home of their owner, Julius Bettis, which was on the Mississippi River at Bayou Fidelle, about thirty-five miles above Grand Gulf. During their four months of travel, they were sustained by a rifle and shotgun stolen from Bettis along with \$10 and another “rifle gun and shotbag, two axes, [as well as] sundry bed clothing and wearing apparel” that they had stolen along the way. Another slave had been with them for a while, but went on his own near Arkansas Post.⁵⁵

Texas slaves had a propensity to run off to Mexico, but there were a number who fled north through Arkansas.⁵⁶ One was Lewis who left the Texas Republic in 1841 and made it as far as Crittenden County, which ran along the Mississippi River to the north of Helena.⁵⁷ W. H. Boyce, of Clarksville, Texas, on the Red River, heard that his escaped slave, John, had been seen first at Caddo Gap, then Hot Springs, and then Little Rock. He also had information that John was “assisted by white men in spending his time at the above places.”⁵⁸ Several of the fugitives from Texas had been brought there from other parts of the South, a situation common to many

⁵³ *Arkansas State Democratic Herald* (Helena, AR), May 15, 1840.

⁵⁴ *AG*, September 26, 1832.

⁵⁵ *AG*, June 1, 1831.

⁵⁶ Randolph Campbell, *An Empire for Slavery: The Peculiar Institution in Texas, 1821-1865* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 62-64.

⁵⁷ *Southern Shield* (Helena, AR), October 8, 1841.

⁵⁸ *AG*, February 8, 1850.

runaways from Arkansas. One of them is worth mentioning, since he wasn't, strictly speaking, a runaway: Bartlett, who had lived in Memphis before being taken to Texas, was forty-years-old and afflicted with rheumatism. He made a flight to freedom while walking with crutches.⁵⁹

Conclusion

It is well to remember that the pattern of freedom-seeking travel described here is based on less than 300 people over a period of forty years and also that the information they provide is difficult to prove. On the other hand, there is enough consistency in the advertisements to indicate that the pattern is a real one, and that it is significantly different from both the largely in-state travel described by Franklin and Schweninger and the northern flights of Kentucky fugitives. By contrast Arkansas seems to have been both a destination for westward traveling fugitives seeking a frontier environment and a crossroads for those traveling up and down the Mississippi River. Many escaped slaves did stay close to home, but others traveled considerable distances, among those were followers of the North Star and others who headed toward the setting sun.

⁵⁹ AG, December 30, 1844; see also the unnamed runaway advertised by the sheriff of Desha County in the July 18, 1842, issue of the *Arkansas Advocate*.

Chapter Three

Arkansas Slaves Seeking Freedom

Much of Arkansas remained a wilderness down to the Civil War, but by 1860 it was also home to half a million people, among them a hundred thousand enslaved African Americans. There were also a significant number of successful cotton planters in the lowland river valleys of the southern and eastern portion of the state, and, as was common throughout the South, they dominated society and government and made laws to manage and protect their human property. Freedom-seeking slaves came into the state and passed through it, but local African Americans were no more happy with their bondage than were other enslaved people, and they also resisted, often by running away. Arkansas fugitive slaves had the same characteristics as those throughout the South, except that their personal experience usually included migration from the East and thus a knowledge of geography. They were also able to take advantage of opportunities provided by the Mississippi River.

Arkansas and the South

The population growth of Arkansas Territory was accompanied by economic development. In the first two decades after the Louisiana Purchase, hunting, trading in furs and skins, and subsistence agriculture were the main forms of gainful activity. In the 1820s, however, immigrants from the South began to exploit the potential for cotton culture in the southern and eastern part of the territory, and a plantation culture slowly emerged. By 1840 it included the Red River counties of Hempstead and Lafayette, the Ouachita River bottom lands of Union County, the eastern bank of the Mississippi River that included Chicot and Phillips counties, and Arkansas and Jefferson counties on the lower Arkansas River. The per capita production of cotton in 1840 was only ten percent of that of Mississippi, but it provided a substantial amount of wealth for the planter minority. While the lowland areas began to focus on the production of a staple crop, the highland areas dominated by the Ozark Mountains in the north and the Ouachita Mountains in the west were fast becoming a region of family farms and small communities. By 1840 the average Arkansan owned more livestock than his counterpart in Missouri or Tennessee, and per capita production of corn was roughly the same as in those

states.¹ From 1840 to 1860 the per capita production of cotton rose from fourteen bales to eighty-four bales, and the institution of slavery expanded in tandem with the cultivation of the staple crop.

Enslaved people were only thirteen percent of the American population in eastern Arkansas in 1810, and they dropped to eleven percent in 1820 as American hunters and yeomen farmers entered the region. The northern Congressmen and Senators who wanted to exclude slavery from the State of Missouri felt the same way about Arkansas Territory and were nearly successful. Gradually, however, they accepted the geographic logic that made Arkansas part of the South and led to the use of 36 degrees 30 minutes as the division between slave and free states in the Louisiana Purchase. The percentage of slaves in the American population of Arkansas grew to fifteen percent in 1830 and twenty percent a decade later. Between 1840 and 1860 it rose from twenty percent to twenty-six percent, still well below the fifty-five percent for the South as a whole, but most of the slaves were located in the southern and eastern portion of the state where they were almost as numerous as the white people.² On the eve of the Civil War, the black populations of Lafayette and Chicot Counties were over seventy percent, and in other counties along the Louisiana border and in the Mississippi River Delta they were above forty percent.³

Chicot County in the southwest corner of Arkansas was not unlike the Deep South. In 1860, its eighty planters (defined as those with twenty slaves or more) were nineteen percent of all householders and owned an average of 58 slaves and 1,800 acres of land. Elisha Worthington, Arkansas's largest slaveholder, owned four of the plantations, 543 of the slaves, and 12,000 thousand acres of the land. Slaves were seventy-eight percent of the population in Chicot County, and their efforts produced almost all of the 41,000 bales of cotton marketed in 1860. Further north on the Mississippi River, in Phillips County there were 128 plantations with an average of 38 slaves and 1,300 acres of land whose owners were nine percent of the households. There were four times as many people in Phillips County than in Chicot, in part because of the bustling port of Helena, and the slave population made up only thirty-seven percent of them. Phillips, however, was the third largest cotton producer in the state with 27,000 bales. Jefferson

¹ Bolton, *Remote and Restless*, 38-47.

² Donald P. McNeilly, *Old South Frontier: Cotton Plantations and the Formation of Arkansas Society, 1819-1861* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 2000), 35-35; Bolton, *Remote and Restless*, 17-19, 61-62. The percentage of slaves in lowland counties varies somewhat in these accounts because the authors divide the counties into highland and lowland in slightly different ways.

³ Bolton, *Remote and Restless*, 125-127.

County, located along the Arkansas River below Little Rock, made 28,000 bales in 1860, with a large population forty-five percent of whom were slaves. Along the southern border of Arkansas, the climate was well suited for cotton, but the soil was less rich except for the bottom land of the Ouachita and Red Rivers. Union County, which straddled the Ouachita, had a slave population of forty-six percent and produced 17,000 bales of cotton while Lafayette County, sixty-four percent of whose population was enslaved, sent about the same amount down the Red. A good indicator of the growth of this plantation culture was the increase in overseers from 257 in 1850 to 1,071 in 1860.⁴ Plantation owners, however, made up only three percent of all the taxpayers in Arkansas in 1860, while smaller slaveholders, most of whom owned only one or two, were seventeen percent. Thus at any given time, four out of five taxpayers owned no slaves at all.⁵

Most of the early political leaders in Arkansas came to the territory with eastern connections and experience in the War of 1812. Individual competition was intense, as for example in 1827 when Robert Crittenden, the territorial secretary, shot and killed Henry W. Conway, the territorial delegate to Congress, in a duel resulting from an election quarrel. Gradually, however, there emerged a small faction known as “the Family.” Its origins lay in the wholesale nepotism of William Rector, surveyor general of Missouri Territory, who provided public jobs in newly-created Arkansas Territory for five of his brothers and two of their cousins. Conway was one of the latter, and after his death the other, Ambrose Sevier, son of the renowned Kentucky Indian fighter, John Sevier, was elected territorial delegate and served until statehood. He married the daughter of Benjamin Johnson, a justice of the Superior Court of the territory and the brother of Richard Mentor Johnson, later Martin Van Buren’s vice-president. In addition to Rectors and Conways, Sevier and Johnson, the Family also included William Woodruff, who provided political advice and the editorial support of the *Arkansas Gazette*, and the wealthy attorney and land speculator, Chester Ashley.⁶

After the election of Andrew Jackson as president, the Family became the leaders of the Arkansas Democratic Party and gradually earned a new title as the Dynasty. Two of the late

⁴ Carl H. Moneyhon, *The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas: Persistence in the Midst of Ruin* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), 38,51; McNeilly, *Old South Frontier*, 126, 132, 136.

⁵ Bolton, *Remote and Restless*, 99; see page 192 for the sampling technique that produced the numbers.

⁶ This summary and the interpretation comes from Bolton, *Remote and Restless*, 23-47; but a detailed account of territorial politics is Lonnie J. White, *Politics on the Southwestern Frontier: Arkansas Territory, 1819-1836* (Memphis, TN, Memphis State University Press, 1964).

Henry W. Conway's brothers, James S. (his middle name was Sevier) and Elias N., served as governors of the state, Ambrose Sevier was a U.S. Senator from 1836 to 1848, and Benjamin Johnson's son, Robert W. Johnson (Sevier's brother-in-law) was a U.S. Congressman from 1847 to 1853 and a Senator from 1853 to 1861. Chester Ashley also served in the Senate. Archibald Yell, a friend of Jackson's who became a federal judge in northwest Arkansas, was probably the state's most popular politician. He was elected governor and then Congressman with Family support, serving in the latter position until he died in the Mexican War leading a charge at Buena Vista. The only successful anti-Family state politician was Thomas H. Hindman, who moved to eastern Arkansas from Mississippi, opened a newspaper in Helena to support his positions, and was elected to the Senate in 1860. Further evidence of Dynasty power comes from the national elections in which the Democratic candidates usually ran about ten percent better in Arkansas than they did in the nation.

State elections revolved around personality issues as most candidates and their pseudonymous supporters who wrote essays in the press shared much the same ideology, the central aspect of which was economic opportunity for the common man based on access to land and the potential profit that could make a farmer into a slaveholder and a slaveholder into a planter. Aside from an early and disastrous experiment with a banking system that allowed the planters to use their land and crops as collateral for loans that were backed by the state, the Democrats did little to address the problems of the state, leaving it with few improved roads, a small number of bridges, and no system of public education. Lowland planters dominated state government, supported by the small farmers who shared most of their economic interests and hoped to emulate their success. When North-South sectionalism became bitter, Arkansas never wavered from her regional loyalty. Robert W. Johnson and Thomas H. Hindman were adamant, perhaps "fire-eating," supporters of states rights, southern nationalism, and secession. The northwest required some convincing, but Arkansas left the Union along with the rest of the upper South after Fort Sumter and Lincoln's call for volunteers to fill a northern army.⁷

The first slave code applicable to Arkansas was adopted in 1804 by the territorial governor and judges of Indiana. Its only reference to runaway slaves was directed to the problem of lying out, when an escapee remained in the immediate area and "lie hid and lurking

⁷ Again, see Bolton, *Remote and Restless, 167-186*; the treatment in McNeilly, *Old South Frontier* is especially good on the relationship between southern planters and their yeoman neighbors; while a full scale treatment of politics is James M. Woods, *Rebellion and Realignment: Arkansas's Road to Secession* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 1987).

in swamps, woods and other obscure places, killing hogs and committing other injuries to the inhabitants of this district.” When there was information that at least two slaves were lying out, two justices of the peace could order the county sheriff to apprehend and jail them. In 1817 the Missouri legislature set up a system by which private citizens could capture runaways and be assured of a five dollar reward and travel expenses from a justice of the peace if they returned them to the owner. If the owner had offered a reward of at least ten dollars, then the public money was not paid.⁸

Arkansas Territory adopted almost all of the Missouri slave code and added additional laws. An important institution was the patrols designed to police the activities of slaves when they were not under their owners’ immediate control. Any circuit court could create a patrol consisting of a captain and four deputies on the request of twelve householders in any judicial district. The patrol was to be on duty at least twelve hours a month and to “visit negro quarters, and other suspected places of unlawful assemblies of slaves.” Slaves found at such assemblies “or who shall be found strolling about from one plantation to another, without a pass from his or her master, mistress or overseer,” could be given up to ten lashes by the patrol and up to thirty-nine if taken before a magistrate.⁹ While the primary purpose of the patrol was to strengthen control over the slave population in general, it was a danger to runaways, who by definition were “strolling about” and often took refuge with the sort of people and places associated with “unlawful assemblies” of slaves.

The newspaper advertisements describing jailed runaways grew out of a system that encouraged citizens to capture them. “Any person may apprehend any negro or mulatto, being or suspected of being a runaway slave, and take him before a justice of the peace.” The capturer would receive a \$15 fee and 10 cents for each mile that he traveled. The slave would be placed in the custody of the county sheriff who would advertise for his owner immediately and then again in two months if necessary. At the end of twelve months, he was to sell the slave at the jail house door and submit the proceeds to the county court, minus the expenses incurred in the capture and imprisonment. Anyone who appeared to claim the slave had to provide proof of ownership

⁸ *Laws of a Public and General Nature, of the District of Louisiana, of the Territory of Louisiana, of the Territory of Missouri, and of the State of Missouri, up to the Year 1824* [i.e. 1836] / *Published under the Authority of the State of Missouri...* (Jefferson City, MO: W. Lusk & Son, 1842), 27, 96-97, 500.

⁹ Steele, J. and J. M’Campbell, *Laws of Arkansas Territory, Compiled and Arranged by J. Steele and J. M’Campbell ... Under the Direction and Superintendance [sic] of John Pope Esq., Governor of the Territory of Arkansas* (Little Rock, AR: J. Steele, 1835), 530-531.

and also pay the expenses.¹⁰ In the 1850s the fee for capturing runaways was raised to \$25. The sheriffs only kept slaves for six months after which they were sent to the state penitentiary where they were advertised one more time. Six months after that they were incarcerated for life.”

The severity of the Arkansas slave code and the impact it might have on escape and flight is illustrated in case of *Spencer v. Pyeatt*, decided by the state supreme court. Spencer had purchased a slave named Sophia from Pyeatt in 1839, but later claimed that she had been “unsound, unhealthy, and mentally deranged” at the time of sale and that Pyeatt had known it. Among the evidence was a statement that “a few days after Spencer bought the slave, he was found whipping her. He had her stripped, and staked down on the ground; her feet and hands extended, and fastened to stakes; and her face downwards. He appeared calm and deliberate, and was whipping her at intervals, using a cowhide, with a plaited buckskin lash about fifteen inches long. Spencer had drawn some blood, but not a great deal. He took salt and a cob, and salted her back.” The witness to this event thought that Sophia was “deranged. He had never seen her before, but has often seen her since, and she is deranged and valueless.”

Spencer was punishing Sophia for running away, and it was chronic behavior for her. When owned by Pyeatt she had been found in the woods by a man who testified that “she was obstinate, walked very slow, and when he threatened to whip her, or she feared she would be ridden against, she walked faster, and looked wild, as negroes usually do, when threatened. She said that she had run away because she wanted to go to her children.” Another witness agreed that “she was obstinate and disagreeable, because she wanted to go to her children,” adding that “she seemed much devoted to her children, and when her mistress gave her time, would make clothes, and knit for them.”

All of this was too much for the court, which overturned the decision against Pyeatt on the grounds that the evidence was inconsistent, but went beyond that to condemn Spencer’s behavior. “It is with pain and sensibility, [*sic*] that the court feels itself constrained to remark, that whatever seeming wildness and aberration of mind might be perceived in the slave, it is but reasonable to suppose, was caused by grief, and the excessive cruelty of her owner.”¹² This is not

¹⁰ William McK Ball and Samuel C. Roanne, *Revised Statutes of the State of Arkansas, Adopted at the October Session of the General Assembly of Said State, A.D. 1837...* (Boston: Weeks, Jordan, 1838), 712-715.

¹¹ Josiah Gould, *A Digest of the Statutes of Arkansas, Embracing All Laws . . . in Force at the Close of the Session of the General Assembly of 1856* (Little Rock, AR: Johnson & Yerkes, 1858), 1026-1028.

¹² *Pyeatt v. Spencer*, 4 Ark. 563 (1842).

to suggest that the Arkansas Supreme Court was soft on slavery. In one case, for example, it disregarded the generally-held definition of a mulatto as a person who was at least one-quarter African American and ruled instead that the term included “all persons of an intermixture of white and negro blood, without regard to grades.”¹³

The concern of the Arkansas planting class about the freedom-seeking of their enslaved property is illustrated, and probably exaggerated, in an essay published in the *Arkansas Gazette* in 1853. The unsigned author attempted to alert readers to the danger faced by Arkansas, Missouri, and Texas if a free state or territory were established on their western boundaries. He used the example of Kentucky, which lost a large amount of slaves through “kidnapping and running away,” focusing particularly on escapes and flights that were assisted by others. “Here many a villain lures the slave from the roof of a kind master by picturing to his imagination the phantom of freedom—that he may, when he gets him into to his power, convert him to his own use.” Not all those who encouraged slaves to run away were evil intentioned, however. “Here the misguided fanatic, forgetting the worse sufferings of white men, the broader field among his own people, for the exercise of his philanthropy and charity, applies himself to the task of decoying slaves from good homes and kind masters, that they may pine and die in pauperage [*sic*] and want, compared with which, slavery is as Elysium. . . .”

The writer worried specifically about the possibility that slavery could be abolished in Indian Territory. Abolitionist missionaries might convince the citizens of the area that slavery was immoral, or the Indians might sell off so many of their slaves that they would cease to care about maintaining the institution of slavery. To prevent the latter, he proposed that the bordering states prohibit all African Americans from entering their borders from the west, making it difficult for Indian owners to sell their slaves.¹⁴

Memories of Arkansas Slavery

Escape, flight, pursuit, and the punishment that often followed, were important themes in the memories of formerly-enslaved persons interviewed by the WPA in the 1930s. People who had been held in bondage in Arkansas provided rich descriptions that supplement the sparse content of runaway advertisements.

¹³ *Daniel v. Guy et. al.*, 19 Ark. 134 (1857).

¹⁴ “Slavery in the Indian Country West,” *AG*, November 4, 1853.

They make it clear, for example, that the practice of taking a short absence, known as lying out, was quite common. Charlie McClendon, who had been a slave in Jefferson County, was still living there in the 1930s, at the latter time in the county seat of Pine Bluff. He claimed his owner William E. Johnson, “was as good to us as could be under slavery . . . [yet] my father run off and stay in woods one or two months. Old master say, ‘Now Jordan, why you run off? Now I’, goin’ to give you a light breshin and don’t you run off again.’ But he’d run off again after awhile. . . . He had one man named Miles Johnson just stayed in the woods so he put him on the block and sold him.”¹⁵ Kittie Stanford, also interviewed in Pine Bluff, remembered that “some of the hands run away. Old Henry run away and hide in the swamp and say he goin’ stay till he bones turn white. But he come back when he get hongry and then he run away again.”¹⁶ Columbus Williams, who had bitter memories of his life as an enslaved person in Arkansas, nonetheless thought that running off could sometimes provide a respite: “One man run off and stayed twelve months once. He come back then, and they didn’t do nothing’ to him. ‘Fraid he’d run off again, I guess.”¹⁷

Other runaways had no intention of coming back. Mollie Barber’s dad was a trusted and skilled slave: “Before he run off to de North, father would haul de cotton and grain to Helena [about four miles away] for Master, and at night he work some more to make ‘out money,’ which de Old Master keep part of and let my father keep de rest. Made boots and shoes, mostly.”¹⁸ Other fugitives also attempted to reach free states. According to John Bates, living in Corsicana, Texas, in the 1930s, “when de war comes on and sometimes before de war de slaves would try ter run away ter de north, some never would be heard of again, sometimes dey would be caught and be whipped to death and maybe other things happen. Dey always knew dey had sumpin comin iffen dey was caught.”¹⁹ R. C. Smith, who was born a slave in the late 1840s claimed that in the late 1850s, slave owners in the Fayetteville area of northwest Arkansas “had a heap of trouble with the Underground Railroaders.” According to him “nearly everybody lost one or two slaves,” And at least one fugitive, whose owner was “Old Judge West,” who “was purty hard on his slaves,” “got clean away to the north and he could’t get him back.”²⁰

¹⁵ Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 207.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 212.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 375.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 260.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 370.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 393.

Plomer Harshaw described an escape that followed a much more serious act of resistance. “A white man Jim Standley, one of our neighbors, put one of his slaves in chains on account of not doing something right. He sent the slave to work in the fields, chain and all. The evening when the work day was over that slave slipped up to where Jim Standley was rocking his baby on the porch of own house. The master didn’t know the slave was around and never did know, for the slave man chopped him with an axe while some negroes in the yard looked on. He was dead. The slave run away, and how he got rid of them chains nobody know, they never saw that negro again.” Nor was that the only incident of violence against a master. “It happened on our own place. Master had a hickory club and was going to lay it on but the negro grabbed that stick and took it away from master. Then he run out toward some bushes. But that was far as he got. De dogs leap on him and tear him to pieces. I saw it with my own eyes.”

Captured escapees suffered a variety of punishments. Lewis Chase, who lived in Des Arc, where he had been a slave the first twenty years of his life, had a vivid memory of the consequences of running off for a two week period: “I was sold. Yes man I sho was. Jes put up on a platform and actioned. Sold rite here in Des Arc. . . . My old mistress [Mrs. Snibley] whoop me till I run off and they took me back when they found out where I lef from. I stayed way bout two weeks.” Mrs. Snibley was the disciplinarian of the family: “Old master Snibley never whip me but old Missus sho did pile it on me. . . . I run away.”²¹ There were slaves, however, who were unaffected by the threat of punishment or even the punishment itself: “I have known slaves to run away and stay three years at a time. Master would whip them and they would run away. They wouldn’t have no place to go or stay so they would come back after a while. Then they would be punished again. They wouldn’t punish them much, however, because they might run off again.”²² Sallie Crane, who lived on Harmon Bishop’s plantation in Hempstead County experienced whipping and other torture as a slave, but she remembered particularly well her punishment for escape and flight: “I have worn a buck and gag in my mouth for three days for trying to run away. I couldn’t eat nor drink—could’t even catch the slobber that fell from my mouth and run down my chest till the flies settled on it and blowed it.”²³

²¹ *Ibid.*, 308.

²² *Ibid.*, 8.

²³ *Ibid.*, 136

Slave patrols were often mentioned by ex-slaves, usually in the context of a whipping or other punishment inflicted for being away from home without a pass. Patrols also searched for runaways, however. Callie Washington had been a young girl on a plantation in Desha County, where she lived “in the big house” with Ann Terry, the childless wife of the owner, Sam Terry. Terry ran the plantation without overseers because he felt they were apt to punish slaves excessively, but he did whip slaves, as Callie put it, “when they done wrong.” “Most of the whippings was for running off. The patrollers was the ones to catch the runaways and they did most of the whipping.”²⁴

Louis David of Pulaski County told an interesting story that mentioned the role of slave patrols. “My father ran off once to keep from going to Texas. Missis oldest son, Henry, was moving out there to live. He was going to carry some of the slaves with him. My father didn’t want to go so he ran off and hid. They searched everywhere for him and had the patrollers looking too. When they thought he had got off, here he comes back. The big covered wagon was ready to start when somebody spied my pa. Master Henry called to him to get in one of the wagons and drive it to Texas. They didn’t have time to punish him or nothing. He got in the wagon, picked up the reins, and ‘fore you could bat your eye, they had left out of there.”²⁵

When the elderly remembered their lives as enslaved persons, they often spoke of the dogs that were used to chase freedom seekers. Moses Jefferies is an example: “I remember also seeing a runaway slave. We saw the slaves first, and the dogs came behind them. They passed through our field about half an hour ahead of the hounds, but the dogs would be trailing them. The hunters didn’t bother to stop and question us because they knew the hounds were on the trail.”²⁶ Also Joe Bean: “The ones that run away, well, they get the dogs after ‘em. Blood hounds they call ‘em, and if a slave be gone two days say, the dogs was used to track, and the masters would say, ‘If we don’t catch them on this farm catch ‘em on the next.”²⁷ And Solomon Lambert: “Some men raised dogs-hounds. If something get wrong they go get the dogs and use ‘em. If some of the slaves try to run off they hunt them with the dogs. It was a big loss when a hand run off they couldn’t ford that thing.”²⁸

²⁴ George E. Lankford, “Ten More Voices: A Supplement to *Bearing Witness*,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 53, no. 3 (Autumn 2004): 289.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 306.

²⁶ Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 8.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 383.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 249.

Steve Douglas's parents told him how one woman trained dogs to chase runaways. "A widow woman back in Arkansas what owned a big plantation and has so many slaves and after her old man die, she bought some bloodhounds to chase her run-a-ways. She got 'em when they was pups and her boy, what was about nine year old, and a little nigger boy 'bout same size, it was they job to train 'em and make mean dogs. The white boy, he hold the pups and the black boy he take run, way 'round and though the woods. After so long, the white boy he let go the pups and off they go with they nose to the ground on his trail, you know. Pretty soon the black boy turn up and twant long 'fore the pups run right on his trail. Then you know what the old woman made that little nigger do? --well, those pups had to train right—she was makin' nigger chasers out of 'em. Yes sir, they had to have blood and that little black was held and the pups tasted blood right off his legs. Its terrible to believe, but that's right—just like I tell it to you. She had to guard those dogs her own self—fed'em, no human ever touch 'em but her and her little boy. The niggers would kill 'em (the dogs) iffen they could."²⁹

Dog owners also allowed the canines to punish the slaves when they found them. Horatio W. Williams provides an example. "Dem what runs away, dey gits bloodhounds after 'em. Dey clumb de tree when dey heered dem hounds comin' but de massa make dem git down and dey shoot dem, iff n dey didn't. When dey gits down de dogs jumps all over dem and would tear dem to pieces, but de massa beats dem off."³⁰ But the masters did not always beat the dogs off, as Columbus Williams explained. "Some of the slaves ran away, but they would catch them and bring them back, you know. Put the dogs after them. The dogs would just run them up and bay them just like a coon or 'possum. Sometimes the white people would make the dogs bite them. You see, when the dogs would run up on them, they would sometimes fight them, till the white people got there and then the white folks would make the dogs bite them and make them quit fighting the dogs."³¹

The WPA narratives also provide evidence of the importance of family as a factor in the runaway phenomenon. Tempe Elgin never knew her father. Her mother, however, claimed that when she was taken to Texas with Tempe and her sister, the man followed for sixty miles and pleaded with her to leave with him: "Harriet, he'd say 'come on wid me. Let's run away f'om yo' mawster, and we'll live together." The answer was "I dain't John . . . cause I got to look out fo'

²⁹ Ibid., 326-327.

³⁰ Ibid., 217.

³¹ Ibid., 374

my little Tempe and Julia.” “So pappy rode away on his hoss and mammy never did see him again.” Tempe remembered that the family got some letters from the father and that at one point they tried to find him in Arkansas.³²

Peter Brown said his mother was a valuable slave because “they prized fast breeders,” but she was also made to work when she was on the verge of child birth. “Pa stole her out and one night a small panther smelled them and come on a log up over where they slep in a canebrake. Pa killed it with a bowie knife. Ma had a baby out there in the canebrake.” Eventually they went back and struck a deal that she would be allowed to take care of her children, which included three sets of twins, in return for the mother and father not running away again.”³³

Fugitives from Arkansas

The freedom seekers who fled from Arkansas masters do not seem different from those who came into or through the state. Among the 326 Arkansas persons in runaway slave advertisements from 1820 through 1861, both the mean and the median age were between twenty-six and twenty-seven years, less than five percent were twelve years or under, and fewer than three percent were over forty. Sixty percent of them fled alone and twenty percent in groups of two. Whether they were right or not, twenty percent of Arkansas owners thought their missing slaves had been stolen or decoyed off, somewhat less than the twenty-four percent of out-of-state owners who felt the same way. The significant difference, however, was that less than twenty percent of the Arkansas runaways were in jail as compared to fifty-four percent of those from outside the state, probably because people who captured in-state fugitives were able to contact the owners without resorting to the newspapers.

The political elites known as the Family lost their share of enslaved persons. William Woodruff, the editor of the *Arkansas Gazette*, had at least four bondsmen go missing between 1841 and 1857. Given that Woodruff lived in Little Rock and only owned a few slaves, the number of advertisements doubtless reflects his ownership of the newspaper, and it also suggests that the number of ads would have been much higher if other masters had the same access to the press. Territorial Judge Benjamin Johnson also had trouble keeping his bondsmen at home. One of them was Jacob, who escaped in April 1826. Johnson described him as 40-

³² Ibid., 238.

³³ Ibid., 262.

years-old and 5 feet 8 or 10, “large, stout, and heavy,” and having only one good eye. The judge was willing to pay a \$20 dollar reward if Jacob was captured and confined within the territory and \$50 if he was found outside Arkansas and returned. Probably he was apprehended, but if so, he did not lose his willingness to seek freedom, because sixteen months later Johnson placed another ad for a similar Jacob, who had run away two weeks earlier and had been seen traveling toward Missouri.³⁴ In 1834 Johnson lost Dick, a 30-year-old man who fled with his wife, Mima. In the same ad, Johnson listed Margary, a 25-year-old mulatto and Clarissa, “a corpulent” black women of about 30, both of whom took their small children with them. The women belonged to Johnson’s son-in-law, Ambrose Sevier, the Arkansas territorial delegate to Congress, who was probably in Washington at the time.³⁵ While the above enslaved persons were apparently house servants in Little Rock, an escapee named Toney lived on Sevier’s farm in Chicot County. He headed for the Creek nation where he was captured and sent down the Arkansas River on a steamboat from which he escaped again.³⁶

James Sevier Conway, the first governor of the state of Arkansas, owned a plantation in Magnet Cove in Hot Spring County, fifty miles south of Little Rock. In June 1840 he advertised for Carter, a 20-year-old, “dark mulatto” man, whom Conway had purchased from a Daniel R. Coody in the Cherokee Nation near Fort Gibson. Carter may have been unhappy with his work because he had been a house slave and Conway had him laboring in the fields. In any event, he left in style, wearing nice clothes and riding a “fine blooded, sorrel mare” outfitted with a Spanish-style saddle with a sheepskin cover and brass stirrups. Conway believed he would head back to the Indian Nation, but he later learned that while Carter was now dressed as an Indian he also had a compass and a map of Arkansas and had crossed the Arkansas River near Little Rock. The governor now thought Carter might be trying to get to Illinois.³⁷

Albert Pike, newspaperman, prominent attorney, and a leading figure in the Whig Party of Arkansas, lost Rebecca, a 22-year-old mulatto woman, “tall and good looking, with sharp features; high cheek bones and a large head of hair.” Rebecca was one of many Arkansas slaves who had originally lived in the East, in her case Alabama, and Pike seemed to feel she was headed out of state, raising his reward to from \$50 to \$80 if she was found outside of Arkansas.³⁸

³⁴ *AG*, April 18, 1826; *Ibid.*, October 16, 1827.

³⁵ *AG*, November 11, 1834.

³⁶ *AG*, June 7, 1836.

³⁷ *AG*, June 3, 1840.

³⁸ *AG*, June 24, 1840.

Arkansas Slaves Seeking Freedom

Like slave masters across the South, Arkansas owners who believed their slaves were stolen or decoyed off often thought they were taken by criminals who would use them for profit one way or another. In some cases, however, this appears to be a wrong assumption, at least from a modern perspective. And there were some Arkansas owners who felt that agents of the Underground Railroad were behind the escape of their enslaved persons.

Sometimes the thieves were named. In January 1823 the sheriff of Hempstead County in southwest Arkansas advertised a “Mulatto Woman, named Fanny, and her Child—the latter nearly white,” along with another slave boy about 4-years-old. They were supposed to have been taken, along with a horse and colt, by William Boyce. There was a reward of \$100 for the entire group or \$50 for the slaves alone.³⁹ In an 1837 example, a very talented slave was thought to be “taken off” by one of “Alerel’s men,” a reference to the Murrell gang.

In 1840 Robert Hamilton, of Pecan Point on the Red River in southwest Arkansas, claimed that a group of thieves stole four of his Negroes as part of a well-planned crime. The slaves were seen in the company of three armed white men traveling through the Choctaw Nation, one of whom Hamilton thought knew an Indian language. He believed the thieves would make their way north through the Washita Mountains and into Cherokee country. “It has been said the Negroes, by contract, were to be carried to the wild Indians.” He thought, however, that they would be taken to the “upper navigation of the Arkansas river” and then “downstream in a steamboat or other vessel” and sold. He believed there was “a chain of villains interested in the business,” who apparently used this method of operations.⁴⁰ The gang of thieves concept is supported by another advertisement that year. This for Jack, who might have been “stolen or decoyed away” by “an extensive clan of Negro and horse thieves operating throughout the country.”⁴¹

Free blacks were also stolen and placed into slavery. Elijah Burns, of Independence County in northern Arkansas, who may have been a free black, offered a reward of \$500 for his mulatto sister, Mary, whom he claimed was a free women stolen by one James Sloan. Burns thought Sloan would take Mary to either Mississippi or Louisiana and sell her there.⁴² William Still, the black leader of the Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania, whose evidence is widely respected, reported the formerly-enslaved Aunt Hannah Moore’s account of her life as a slave in

³⁹ *AG*, January 10, 1823.

⁴⁰ *AG*, December 2, 1840.

⁴¹ *AG*, April 15, 1840.

⁴² *Arkansas Advocate* (Little Rock, AR), October 10, 1836.

Missouri given in 1854, which contained a reference to a free black in Arkansas who had been kidnapped into slavery. One of her owners, “McCaully [,] bore the name of coming by free colored children without buying them, and selling them afterwards. One boy on the place always said that he was free but had been kidnapped from Arkansas. He could tell all about how he was kidnapped, but could not find anyone to do anything for him, so he had to content himself.”⁴³

An example in which assistance might have been given by a friend of the escapee, involves an ad placed by William Woodruff in 1844. The editor promised that if his “Negro Man” Moses had not escaped on his own, but instead had been “stolen, or seduced away by any white man or free negro or mulatto,” then he would pay \$100 reward for the capture and conviction of “the thief.”⁴⁴ Another was an advertisement in 1840 that suggested there were a group of black men involved, perhaps living together in the swamp lands along the Mississippi River. Elisha Burke claimed that Charles, “aged 24 [and] rather under the common size, “has been lurking during his absence in the neighborhood of Captain Benjamin Porter’s place, 5 miles above Helena and from there to the point (mouth of the St. Francis River) [,] he was routed near Porter’s on last Monday week. I have sufficient reason to satisfy me that he has been harbored, concealed, and assisted if not persuaded to leave me, by bad disposed Negroes in the neighborhood.”⁴⁵

Freedom-seeking slaves often sought the excitement of urban areas and the relative safety of the back communities that were part of them. For the Mississippi Valley and parts of the Gulf Coast, New Orleans was a major attraction, but runaways also fled to smaller cities such as Natchez. Little Rock, which had barely 4,000 people in 1860 was a small city, but more than twenty percent of the population were enslaved African Americans. Some of them were agricultural workers on nearby farms, but most were either domestic workers or artisans or worked in the building trades. Many worked on a hired-out basis, often negotiating jobs for themselves and sometimes renting their own places to live. Household slaves also had more freedom in Little Rock, and residents complained that there were boisterous congregations of them in the streets at night. A black culture of “quasi-freedom,” as historian Paul Lack has called it, developed that was attractive to slaves escaping from the countryside. Little Rock

⁴³ Still, *Underground Railroad*, 548-549.

⁴⁴ *AG*, August 21, 1844.

⁴⁵ *Southern Shield* (Helena, AR), March 20, 1840.

slaves were also prominent in runaway advertisements since they were often unsupervised and possessed skills that made a successful flight more possible.⁴⁶

The neighboring Indian Territory was a problem for Arkansas slave masters. In 1838 Noah Badgett of Little Rock thought his bondsman, Sam, had probably “made for the Cherokee nation west, with some gang of Indians,” although it later turned out he was seen floating [in a boat] down the Arkansas River with a white man.⁴⁷ The following year, Rufus Stone of New Port thought that his “Negro boy,” Tom, might have fled to the Cherokees with an Indian who was in the neighborhood. Tom himself had Indian features that made people think he was part Cherokee.⁴⁸ E. J. Smith of Fulton in Hempstead County did not have a very good idea where his “Negro boy,” Bob, was after he went missing in 1851, but thought it might be “some of the Indian nations.” Bob was twenty-nine, enjoyed music, played the banjo, and had a family in the area, which gave credence to another of Smith’s theories, namely that “he might be hovering about some city or town not far distant.”⁴⁹ Trying to cover both possibilities, Smith placed his ad not only in the *Arkansas Gazette*, but also in the *Cherokee Advocate*, published in Tahlequah, the capital of the Cherokee Nation.⁵⁰ Another ad in the Cherokee newspaper told the story of an Arkansas owner’s two slaves, Isham and Matilda, who escaped into the Choctaw nation in July 1847. Passing as freed people, they went through the Creek Nation to Fort Gibson on the Arkansas River, where they used the names Charles and Ann, and then went up to Tahlequah, and finally headed toward Cane Hill, Arkansas.⁵¹ While the paper did not say so, the couple appeared to have used Indian Territory as a way to travel from south Arkansas to north Arkansas.

Arkansas slaves also fled to the North. Often these were men who had extra advantages as fugitives, either by the nature of the work, their talents, or the aid of others. Jerry, who belonged to Ransom Moore of Fort Smith, was one of these. Jerry was in his mid-to-late thirties, nearly six feet tall, “thin and well-made, [had] piercing eyes” and wore “tolerably large whiskers.” He was “a very likely, cunning, and artful fellow,” “fond of drinking and gambling,” but also an experienced carpenter and “very handy at most kinds of work required about a plantation.” Jerry was originally from Kentucky, but had been in Arkansas for about five years

⁴⁶ Lack, “Urban Slave Community,” 259-274-276.

⁴⁷ *AG*, August 8, 1832; *Ibid.*, August 22, 1838.

⁴⁸ *Batesville News* (Batesville, AR), July 11, 1839.

⁴⁹ *AG*, March 7, 1851.

⁵⁰ Naylor-Ojurongbe, “American Slaves and Freedpeople in the Cherokee Nation,” 119

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 118

in the possession of Sampson Gray, who lived about twelve miles above Little Rock. Moore had bought Jerry from Gray and later taken him to Fort Smith or perhaps the Cherokee Agency further west, but then given him a pass so that he could go to Little Rock and hire himself out. Some six or eight months later, Jerry was back at Gray's residence, and it was from there that he fled. Moore thought that he would probably have forged papers indicating that he was free and that he might head back to Kentucky but "most probably make for a free state." Another possibility was that he was "seduced off" by someone who would sell him further south.⁵²

James H. Walker of Hempstead County thought that William, Sam, John, and a second William, who fled from him in 1834, would "probably make for a free state."⁵³ Lewis and John from neighboring Lafayette County were also thought to be traveling north and probably attempting to reach a free state. Their master thought they had a talent for getting away, being "both plausible cunning fellows, and, if apprehended, will, by fair promises, endeavor to obtain self indulgence as may enable them to make their escape." He suggested that if captured they should be not only jailed, but chained.⁵⁴

Seventeen-year-old Charlotte, a light mulatto, five feet six inches tall and "rather slender and genteel in her appearance" was also a dissimulator, with "a smiling countenance, a down look when spoken to and a habit of rolling her eyes when replying." She was also "very active in walking," which may be why her Little Rock owner, Jacob Reider, thought she might make it to a free state after she fled with a bondsman named Sam in 1841. She might be traveling with "one or two others," an admission that there were other escapees in the Little Rock vicinity. Reider offered an elaborately graduated reward: \$10 if she was found in the township, \$20 in any other part of the county, \$30 elsewhere in the state, \$50 in any slave state, and \$100 in a free state.⁵⁵ Campbell and Reuben, who escaped from their Hot Springs County owner in 1842, were thought to be determined in their attempt to reach a free state. Each of them had a rifle and one a pistol, and it was thought that they might "resist an attempt to take them unless there is a show of competent force to overpower them."⁵⁶

Slave resistance to recapture could be very serious, at least according to an article in the *The Colored American*, published in New York City. "We learn that a Major Clarke of

⁵² AG, October 27, 1830.

⁵³ AG, October 28, 1834.

⁵⁴ AG, April 5, 1836.

⁵⁵ AG, November 10, 1841.

⁵⁶ AG, July 20, 1842.

Crittenden Co., Arkansas, not long since, in pursuing a couple of his slaves, who judged they had a better right to themselves than any body [*sic*] else, and consequently availed themselves of their locomotion, and walked away, not pleased with that country; in overtaking them, they questioned his right to interfere, and turned upon him, and killed him on the spot.” But in this case, the slaves did not escape and instead suffered the wrath of southern whites whose worst nightmare was violent resistance by their enslaved property: “The citizens turned out, arrested the slaves, and under the administration of the prevailing law as far south as Arkansas, known well by the term LYNCH LAW; hung them upon the first tree they came to, the sentence having been pronounced doubtless by the usual judge of that code, justice Lynch.”⁵⁷

Abolitionism and the Underground Railroad were mentioned in several advertisements. In one case, the friends of the fugitive were members of the owner’s family. In 1834 Jesse Terry of Little Red River Township in Pulaski County was looking for five slaves: a man named Tom, a woman named Nancy, and three children, Dan, 6-years-old, George, three years, and a girl 18-months-old. Tom was described as a “Negro,” Nancy as a mulatto, and the child George as “a bright mulatto.” Jesse said that they were taken off by William Terry and his sister Patsy, and he was convinced that the party was going to the North since he said the former slaves “were supposed to have other conductors.”⁵⁸

In July 1858 F.C. Kendall, advertised for “my boy Harden,” who was about 20-years-old and ran away somewhere between Dardanelle and Sulphur Springs. Harden was well-dressed and Kendall thought he had also taken a Colt pistol with him. He also claimed that the escapee “had been furnished with a pass by an abolitionist, whom I believe is in the country.”⁵⁹ R. C. Smith, who was born a slave in the late 1840s, claimed that in the late 1850s slave owners in the Fayetteville area of northwest Arkansas “had a heap of trouble with the Underground Railroaders.” According to him “nearly everybody lost one or two slaves,” And at least one fugitive owned by “Old Judge West,” who “was purty hard on his slaves,” “got clean away to the north and he could’t get him back.”⁶⁰

A number of Arkansas freedom seekers attempted to make use of the steamboat. Among them was Ben, a 35-year-old stout and dark man with “several scars on his neck and arms, from knife cuts,” but still “good looking” and “pleasant,” who had six months experience as a fireman

⁵⁷ *The Colored American* (New York), January 23, 1841.

⁵⁸ *AG*, July 15, 1834.

⁵⁹ *AG*, July 24, 1858.

⁶⁰ Lackford, *Bearing Witness*, 393.

on the steamboat *Liverpool* before being purchased by Thomas Thorn of Little Rock. He fled at the end of May 1839 and Thorn thought he had “left on some boat, in order to reach his wife in Tennessee.”⁶¹ The resourceful and determined Fielding, who left Washington, Arkansas, on a “dark bay horse” of “fine appearance” in 1848, had been a cook on a steamboat, and his owner thought he would try to get to the Arkansas or Mississippi Rivers, apparently believing that Fielding would prefer to escape on the water rather than on horseback. Fielding probably knew what he was doing as he had earlier fled from a Pine Bluff owner and stayed at large for three years.⁶² In another instance, Manuel’s owner thought he had left Little Rock in 1844 with “some other Negroes belonging to Mrs. Colbert” on a steamboat headed for Pittsburg, but gotten off in the vicinity of Memphis.⁶³ A slave named Bill got on the steamer *Arkansas* when it stopped in Chicot County and rode up the Mississippi and then the Arkansas, but was discovered and lodged in the Pulaski County jail.⁶⁴

One Arkansas slave appears to have escaped while she was with her owner in a free state, apparently with the help of the Underground Railroad. In 1850 Frederick Douglass’s newspaper, *The North Star*, reported the incident, which had occurred recently in Pittsburgh. John Drennan of Van Buren, Arkansas, was eating with his wife at the Monongahela House when his 14-year-old slave, “who is fairer than a mulatto, and is said to have Indian blood in her veins,” fled the premises. Drennan complained to the owner of the hotel who fired “a servant who was strongly suspected of being in the affair.” He also offered a reward to a local police officer to make a search, but that official “feared the girl was beyond his reach.” He was able to recover a trunk of Drennan’s that was taken by mistake at the same time.⁶⁵

Famous Freedom Seekers

At least one slave escaped from Arkansas and made his way to safety in Canada, and his story has the complexity and drama of a Dickens novel. Williamson Pease was born in Hardeman County, Tennessee, in about 1833. His mother was a mulatto and his father was probably a white man, making him at least three-quarters white and giving him skin, facial features, and hair that would allow him to pass as white. At the age of five or six he moved with

⁶¹ AG, May 30, 1839.

⁶² *Washington Telegraph* (Washington, AR), May 3, 1848.

⁶³ AG, May 29, 1844.

⁶⁴ AG, November 28, 1844.

⁶⁵ *The North Star* (Rochester, New York), September 5, 1850.

Arkansas Slaves Seeking Freedom

his mother and their master to Haywood County where he remained until he was eighteen, working most of the time as a house slave and learning to read and write.

When the master died, a grandson inherited his property and within two years sold the land and some slaves and moved to Arkansas, where he rented a small cotton plantation in the south central part of the state, “fifteen miles from Saline River, and about forty or forty-five miles from Gaines Landing.” Pease worked there for less than a year, picking cotton and doing other outdoor work, but in 1850 his owner rented the plantation, sold all his slaves except Pease, whom he took with him to search for gold in California. They took the water route to San Francisco, crossing from ocean to ocean at the Isthmus of Panama. Before leaving they had reached a bargain that Pease would be free after two years and receive \$500 if they made a profit, but after only six weeks of mining along the Merces River, his master was ill and ready to leave. Pease wanted to remain at the mine to earn enough money to buy his freedom. His owner convinced him to look for work in San Francisco, but then decided that the \$40 a month Pease would make as a waiter was not enough and convinced him to return with him to Arkansas, pleading his illness and offering to buy Pease’s mother. On the passage home aboard a sailing vessel, the owner quickly recovered and Pease worked to pay for his ticket. Bad weather forced them to land at Acapulco, from where they went inland across Mexico to Vera Cruz and then by water to New Orleans and finally to Monticello, Arkansas, near their former plantation.

On the voyage home, Pease reached an understanding with his owner that he would be freed, but the master never provided him with papers to that effect. Instead, Pease worked in a saloon and boarded with its owner for seven months, during which time the master married. One day the father of the bride came to Monticello and told Pease that he had purchased him. The young master denied this, but sent Pease to New Orleans with the father-in-law, who tried to sell him. Pease actually assisted in the process on the grounds that he would rather be a slave in New Orleans than in Arkansas. He was purchased by a New Orleans merchant, but then sold again to a man who lived in Arkansas. He worked there as a servant in the house and had time off to go hunting, but then this new owner became angry with him. Threatened with a whipping and being put into “stiff legs”—iron rings around the ankle and the waist connected with a solid rod that made it impossible to walk—Pease finally fled, walking forty miles across swampy ground to the town of Napoleon at the mouth of the Arkansas River. From there his white

appearance apparently allowed him to proceed to Canada, although his narrative does not provide the details of the journey.⁶⁶

R. C. Smith, who told of the abolitionist activity near Fayetteville on the eve of the Civil War, also recounted a story of one slave who fled with a horse and a suit of clothes and reached the North. In Smith's opinion, no one would have gone after him if he had sold the horse. Instead "he strutted around with a fine horse and a fine broadcloth suit" and his master got him back by showing that the items were stolen. Perhaps this actually happened as Smith said, but more likely it was an imperfect memory associated with a similar event that took place in the early 1840s.⁶⁷

A thirty-year-old enslaved man, Nelson Hacket (sometimes Hackett), escaped from the Fayetteville area, taking with him a heavy overcoat, a gold watch, and a very fast horse. He made his way across northern Arkansas, traveling only at night and living on berries, and found a black ferryman who helped him cross the Mississippi River. He crossed Kentucky and then the Ohio River and made his way through Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, and Michigan, eventually crossing the Detroit River into Canada. Now beyond the reach of the federal Fugitive Slave Law, Hackett stopped in the small community of Sandwich about fifty miles west of Detroit.

Hackett's owner was Alfred Wallace, who had settled on a farm outside Fayetteville in 1829 and later opened a store with his brother on the town square. Wallace had bought Hackett in 1840, and he was determined enough to get the fleeing bondsman back that he followed him to Canada. Learning where Hackett was, he went to the city of Windsor and filed papers with police officials there indicating that Hackett had stolen his property, the charge supported by a peace officer of Washington County, Arkansas, who had accompanied Wallace. With the blessing of the local authorities, the two men then captured Hackett, beat him up, and placed him in a Canadian jail. Wallace then successfully persuaded the government of Michigan to request the extradition of Hackett, not as a fugitive slave, but as a criminal guilty of theft. The Canadian government refused, however, on the grounds that Hackett had not committed a crime in Michigan. Undaunted, Wallace went back to Arkansas and Governor Archibald Yell requested extradition on behalf of that state. Yell's letter is interesting in that it ignores the issue of slavery and refers to "a certain Nelson Hackett, who has been charged with the crime of grand larceny,

⁶⁶ Benjamin Drew, *A North-Side View of Slavery. The Refugee: The Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada Related by Themselves...* (Reprint, Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1969; orig. publ. 1856 by John P. Jewett and Company).

⁶⁷ Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 393.

and against whom an indictment has been found for said felony by the grand jury of our county of Washington.” Eventually Wallace went back, reclaimed Hacket and returned him to Arkansas. Hacket escaped once on the route, but was recaptured and apparently ended his days as a slave.

The Hacket case created a stir among American abolitionists, who worried that it would be a precedent for the removal of more refugee Negroes from Canada. British anti-slavery forces also became involved and put pressure on their government to protect the role of Canada as a sanctuary. The issue was of immediate significance because the Webster-Ashburton Treaty between the United States and Great Britain was then being debated by Parliament, and it contained a provision for the return of fugitives. The British government assured British abolitionists that it would not be used to deport the formerly enslaved, however, and it never was.⁶⁸

Evidence of the significance of Hacket’s case and of the efforts of northern free black men to save him comes from the Annual Report of the Colored Vigilant Committee of Detroit, dated January 10, 1843. Learning of Hacket’s arrest, the group sent a delegation to attend the Court of King’s Bench in Sandwich and follow the proceedings there. After the extradition, when he was brought to Detroit and placed in the jail, the committee’s “vigilant eye encompassed the whole affair,” but did nothing to free Hacket since the matter had been carried out in a legal manner. However, the membership “resolved to publish the whole affair to the world” and apparently sent letters to people in both Great Britain and Canada. It took credit for generating the outcry that arose in Parliament and saw that as a sufficient result: “It is true that Nelson Hackett was returned to the prison house of bondage, but the name of ‘Nelson Hackett’ is now sounding upon the highest notes in the British House of Lords.”⁶⁹

Arkansas also played a minor, albeit passive, role in the celebrated case of Margaret Garner, the slave who fled with her husband, his parents, and her four children across the frozen Ohio River from Covington, Kentucky, to Cincinnati, Ohio, on New Years Eve 1856. When capture was imminent, Margaret killed her two-year-old daughter to keep her from growing up as an enslaved person. Abolitionists attempted to keep her in Ohio to be tried for

⁶⁸ The Hacket account is taken from Roman J. Zorn, “An Arkansas Fugitive Slave Incident and its International Repercussions,” but Yell’s letter is in “Copies of a Despatch [*sic*] . . . Relative to the Surrender of Nelson Hackett,” published by the British House of Commons in vol. 28 of the 1842 session: 133.

⁶⁹ C. Peter Ripley, ed., *The Black Abolitionist Papers, Vol. 3, United States, 1830-1846* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 397-400.

murder, which was deemed a lesser risk than being sent back to Kentucky, but her owner, Archibald K. Gaines, succeeded in gaining custody and sent the family to a plantation owned by his brother, Benjamin, near Gaines Landing in Chicot County, Arkansas. Margaret's infant daughter drowned during a steamboat accident on the way, perhaps at her mother's hand. The family spent part of March and April in Arkansas, during which period Margaret was returned to Kentucky for a brief stay, and then all the Garners were taken to New Orleans and sold.⁷⁰

The best known Underground Railroad beneficiary in Arkansas was a mulatto named William Minnis, who was freed by the well-known abolitionist Calvin Fairbank. According to Fairbank, who is our only source, Minnis's owner had died leaving in his will a provision for the manumission of the slave, but the owner's son and heir had ignored the document and sold William who eventually wound up in Little Rock. Encouraged by people in the Cincinnati abolitionist community, Fairbank determined to rescue the unfortunate Minnis and took a steamboat to Little Rock, arriving on May 16, 1843. He stayed a month in a hotel called the Little Rock House and conducted a discrete investigation only to learn that Minnis was owned by a man named Brennan, who had hired him out to work as a servant in the same hotel.

With the aid of a "Creole-French barber and a New England teacher," Fairbank worked out a plan by which Minnis was made up with the correct hair, mustache, and beard and a further whitening of his already light skin in order to look like a Mr. Young who lived up the Arkansas River a ways and "bore a very strong physical resemblance—a real *facsimile*" to the slave. He was also given voice lessons to sound like Young. With these preparations and in clothing to match his new identity, Minnis accompanied Fairbank on a steamboat bound for Kentucky.

It was an escape of high drama. Minnis's owner was on the same boat, but at Fairbank's order the slave "put on airs" and exchanged greetings with Brennan, who only knew the real Mr. Young slightly. Fortunately Brennan left the boat the next day. Then at Memphis, Fairbank met and had a lengthy discussion with a Mr. Pullum, the Kentucky slave trader who had sold Minnis. As the two men talked, they discussed Little Rock, and Minnis paced near by "swinging his gold-headed cane in true southern fashion." After that, they had an uneventful journey on to Cincinnati.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Weisenberger, *Modern Medea*, esp. 230-31, 243-44.

⁷¹ Fairbank, *Rev. Calvin Fairbank*, 34-44.

Conclusion

Slavery in Arkansas was much like that in southern states east of the Mississippi River, and in the plantation counties of the Delta and the southern border it was similar to the cotton belt of the deep South. Resistance through escape and flight was also similar, although Arkansas runaways displayed the same characteristics as those who came to the state from elsewhere. They were attracted to Indian Territory as a place of relative freedom, and many of them seem undaunted by the long distance travel involved in returning to former homes in the southeast or striking out for the North, a few by steamboat. Their owners often believed that their escapes were assisted by unscrupulous white men, thieves, or, occasionally, friends of the fugitives, and at least some of the time, they were probably right in both cases.

Chapter Four The Civil War

The Civil War brought drastic changes to enslaved people in Arkansas. Many were carried to Texas and found freedom only when the war was over. Others died of disease as they were sheltered in camps set up by the Union Army. During the chaos of war, however, many slaves were able to escape from their masters in much the same way that a smaller number had been doing for decades. Some fled from the brutal fighting in northwest Arkansas and took refuge in the free state of Kansas. Many thousands of slaves were able to leave their places of bondage without difficulty when federal troops were nearby and their owners fled. Former slaves served the Union cause in a variety of ways; most important in terms of numbers were those who did manual labor of various kinds. At least 5,000 African Americans from Arkansas, however, also served in the Union army, a significant number involved in vigorous fighting. As soldiers they also risked more than their white comrades in arms, fighting Confederate forces that were not willing to give quarter to former slaves in arms.

Civil War in Arkansas

The immediate impact of the Civil War on the people of Arkansas, both white and black, came from the fighting that took place within the state, most of which fell into three phases. The first involved conflict in southwest Missouri and northwest Arkansas in 1861 and 1862, which was associated with a failed effort to bring Missouri into the Confederacy. The second was the Union occupation of the northern half of Arkansas that began with an invasion in early 1862 that led to the immediate occupation of Helena and of Little Rock in the following year. Finally there was the Red River Expedition of 1864, an unsuccessful Union attempt to capture Shreveport, Louisiana, that weakened the Federal forces in Arkansas so much that they lost control of much of the state until the closing days of the war.

The initial phase began in the summer of 1861 when Maj. Gen. Ben McCulloch led several thousand men from Texas and Arkansas north through Fayetteville in support of Confederate Brig. Gen. Sterling Price, leader of the Missouri secessionists. Their combined force of 11,000 men soundly defeated a smaller Union army at the Battle of Wilson's Creek near Springfield,

Missouri, but sustained more than ten percent casualties and produced no lasting gains.

McCulloch was charged with the defense of Arkansas and returned there, and Price was unable to follow up the victory and gain momentum in his effort to change the allegiance of Missouri.

Early in 1862 Union Brig. Gen. Samuel R. Curtis left St. Louis with 12,000 men to pursue Price, who had remained in the Springfield area, but quickly retreated into Arkansas where he again united with McCulloch. By this time, however, the Richmond government had created a Military District of the Trans-Mississippi West and placed Maj. Gen. Earle Van Dorn in charge of it. He marched to join McCulloch and Price and took command of some 16,000 well-equipped soldiers, many of them veterans of Wilson's Creek. From the Boston Mountains, Van Dorn moved north to engage Curtis who was encamped in the Fayetteville area. The ensuing Battle of Pea Ridge was a vicious two-day fight that the Confederates nearly won, but when the outcome went the other way, Van Dorn retreated rapidly to the southwest, and many of his men dropped out along the way. Not long after, he took most of the remaining troops and all of the available military equipment in Arkansas across the Mississippi River, leaving the state virtually undefended.

Curtis moved east through southern Missouri, leaving northwest Arkansas without a strong military presence, but open to the activities of partisan bands—small units of Confederates, and occasional Federal detachments from Springfield and Fort Scott, Kansas. By the fall of 1862, however, Thomas H. Hindman, the former U.S. Senator from Arkansas, had put together another army and was marching north. At the Battle of Prairie Grove, southwest of Fayetteville, he met two Union armies, one from Kansas, known as the Frontier Division and led by Brig. Gen. James Blount, and the other a Missouri force under Brig. Gen. Francis J. Herron. Both sides numbered around 12,000 men and both sustained over 1,300 casualties, but Hindman was forced to withdraw and eventually General Blount moved a Federal army as far south as Van Buren on the Arkansas River. The strategic result of these three hard-fought and costly battles was that Missouri remained in the Union, but the local one was the devastation of what had been a prosperous agricultural region and the dislocation of its people. According to historian Tom DeBlack, "it was no longer possible to sustain an army in the war-ravaged region between Fort Smith [Arkansas] and Springfield [,] Missouri."

Meanwhile, General Curtis invaded north central Arkansas, coming down the White River as far as Batesville and then heading southeast to Helena, where he could take advantage of the growing Union control of the Mississippi River. After Curtis entered that city in July 1862,

it remained in Federal hands through the end of the war and provided a haven for thousands of enslaved people who joined his army as it moved through the Arkansas Delta. Meanwhile Hindman was confiscating any material that might be used for the war effort and destroying cotton and crops that might fall into Union hands. With too few men to engage Curtis in battle, he carried on a campaign of harassment, in part by encouraging the formation of civilian guerrilla units. After a year of significant fighting during which the Union gradually extended its control over Arkansas, Maj. Gen. Frederick Steele, Curtis's successor, led a Union army of 14,000 men to Little Rock in 1863, occupied the capital without significant opposition, and also took Pine Bluff, fifty miles to the South.

In March 1864 Steele took the bulk of his troops south to support the Union army of 30,000 men under Maj. Gen. Nathaniel P. Banks that was to make its way up the Red River to Shreveport and then move into Texas. Steele reached Arkadelphia without difficulty, met the Frontier Division, now under Brig. Gen. John M. Thayer, and then moved on to Camden in southern Arkansas. Meanwhile, however, Confederate forces defeated Banks and sent him back down the Red River, turning his expedition into a costly failure and freeing up troops to attack Steele. The first Union setback came on April 17 at Poison Spring, when Confederate forces defeated Union troops guarding a wagon train that Steele had sent out to bring supplies into Camden. Little more than a week later, another caravan made up of 240 wagons, a large number of civilians, and 1,400 soldiers was captured at Mark's Mills. The final battle of the Arkansas Red River campaign came at Jenkins Ferry as Steele was crossing the Saline River on his return to Little Rock, and he was able to ward off an attack by 8,000 Confederates led by General Price.

Nonetheless, the Red River Campaign was a major disaster for the Union. Steele suffered 2,500 casualties, and the Confederates seized the initiative throughout the state. By the end of 1864, Union troops had withdrawn from Batesville and Fort Smith, making Little Rock and Helena isolated pockets of Federal power. Rebel control of the lower portion of the Mississippi Delta allowed Confederate Arkansans to harass Union vessels on the River, and they maintained that ability by defeating an attacking force at Ditch Bayou in Chicot County during the summer of 1864, the last major battle of the war within the state.

Eventually Union victories in the East once more changed the situation in Arkansas. Bolstered by the manpower of some 5,000 formerly-enslaved men now in blue uniforms, the Federal forces gradually regained control of Fort Smith and then opened up the Arkansas River

from there to Little Rock. At the end of the war, Federal troops were more or less in control of the northern and eastern portions of the state.¹

Contraband and Warriors

In Arkansas, as in the South generally, the Civil War greatly altered the nature of freedom-seeking by enslaved people. Individual efforts of the sort that had been common during the antebellum period continued to be important in areas that were well removed from the fighting, but as Union forces moved into southern territory, they seized thousands of slaves, and the destruction of war allowed others, as individuals and in groups, to leave their homes and find freedom a short distance away.

In May 1861 General Benjamin F. Butler had begun treating Louisiana slaves within his lines as captured property, called contraband, and putting them to work on fortifications. In August of that year, Congress passed the First Confiscation Act, which declared that slave owners who made their bondsmen work against the interests of the United States forfeited their right to ownership. The effect of the act, however, was dependent largely on the actions of military commanders. General Henry W. Halleck, commander of the Department of Missouri, had taken a conservative stand in November 1861, ordering that fugitive slaves not be admitted inside Union lines. Eventually this policy would break down under the pressure of the Second Confiscation Act, passed in July 1862, which declared that all slaves of disloyal masters were free and could not be enslaved. This measure began the widespread use of former slaves as laborers, and was a precursor to the Emancipation Proclamation Act of January 1863.²

General Curtis, commander of the Army of the Southwest, was a leader in the movement to turn contraband into free people. While his initial campaign in northwest Arkansas created freedom-seeking opportunities for slaves there, Curtis's movement into eastern Arkansas in the spring of 1862 had a much greater effect. Prior to the passage of the Second Confiscation Act, Curtis took matters into his own hands. Bothered by the Confederate use of slave labor for the construction of obstacles to the passage of his army, the general took matters into his own hands. Before the Second Confiscation Act gave him the authority to do so, Curtis issued Special Order 1251, which freed all slaves who entered his lines and offered them assistance in

¹ This account is drawn from Thomas A. DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword: Arkansas, 1861-1874* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 2003), 39-139.

² Ira Berlin and others, eds. *The Destruction of Slavery* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

traveling to the North. Officers gave each them a certificate with his or her name and that of their former owner and indicating that since the master had used them to aid the Confederate cause, they were now confiscated as “contraband” and “forever emancipated,” and not needed by the Army they could pass through Union lines and travel to the North.³

Historians William L. Shea and Earl J. Hesse describe the profound effect of the policy.

“The presence of the Army of the Southwest sounded the death knell of slavery in Arkansas’s premier agricultural region. . . . In towns along the way soldiers commandeered printing presses and produced stacks of emancipation forms. News of what the Federals were doing spread like wildfire, and by the end of the campaign, more than three thousand refugee slaves, ‘freedom papers’ in hand, trailed the dusty blue column en route to an uncertain future. Thousands more headed north toward Missouri.”⁴

As one Federal cavalryman wrote movingly: “On our march the negroes fairly swarmed around us, coming from every mansion, log cabin, and habitable place in the whole region. Some of the women had taken the finery belonging to mistresses, and, putting it on, strutted alongside of the column with great bundles on their heads. Little children walked briskly, while old men and young plodded on as [if] their lives depended on reaching some place in front; exactly what place they neither knew nor cared.”⁵

As he marched through the Delta on the way to Helena, an Illinois officer described “a country of large plantations with armies of strange looking negroes who streamed into our camps and attached themselves to our columns. They were the most wretched lot of human beings that we boys had ever seen. We were short of supplies ourselves, but we had to share what we had with these strange camp followers. We set them to work when there was work they could do.” A soldier from the same state wrote that “Negroes have thronged the road side as we passed, and thousands would have followed us if they had been encouraged to do so.”

Nor was there any doubt about their loyalty: “With a few exceptions, they are the only friends we have here, and they are all willing to fight or render us any other service we may ask of them.” A staff officer from Iowa noted that the newly-free persons “invariably told us where the bacon was buried or concealed in the brush as well as the whereabouts of the corn whiskey,

³ *Ibid.*, 260-261, 292.

⁴ William L. Shea and Earl J. Hess, *Pea Ridge: Civil War Campaign in the West* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 301-02.

⁵ Thomas A. DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword: Arkansas, 1861-1874* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 2002), 60.

etc.”⁶ Another soldier wrote that some of them were “delirious with joy.” Perhaps as many as 2,000 former slaves entered Helena with the Federal Army in July.⁷ At about the same time, Delta slaves also began to flee to union ships on the Mississippi River, some of them carrying bales of cotton to pay for the support of their families. Later many escapees found work on vessels of the Federal navy.⁸

The Helena experience was replicated throughout the war as Union forces took control of urban areas in Arkansas. Thousands of slaves followed General Steele’s army into Little Rock in August of 1863, and the same thing happened in Pine Bluff. In the latter city, Col. Powell Clayton successfully defended the city against an attack by 2,000 rebels led by Brig. Gen. John S. Marmaduke; a major factor in his victory being the efforts of formerly-enslaved men who built hasty fortifications. Clayton’s report specifically mentioned the African Americans, and a Union captain wrote of them: “None of them had ever before seen a battle and the facility with which they labored and the manly efforts put forth to aid in holding the place excelled my highest expectations, and deserves the applause of their country and the gratitude of the soldiers.”⁹

The Emancipation Proclamation authorized the enlistment of former slaves into the armed forces of the United States, and two months later Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton sent General Lorenzo Thomas, adjutant general of the army, to organize African American regiments in the Mississippi Valley. On April 6, 1863, Thomas explained his mission to 7,000 Federal troops at Helena and offered commissions to white soldiers who wanted to be officers in Negro regiments. The following day, he issued orders creating a white officer staff for the 1st Regiment of Arkansas Vols. of African Descent that included ten new captains; one of the new commissions went to a former first lieutenant and the remainder to enlisted men, seven sergeants and two privates.¹⁰ Three companies of 100 men each were quickly organized, apparently out of black “labor battalions” that included ninety-eight workers and two or three drivers. During the next few months the initial companies of the Second Arkansas Volunteer Infantry Regiment (African Descent) were organized and by November 1864, six black regiments had been raised in Arkansas. The non-commissioned officers in these units were African

⁶ Shea, “A Semi-Savage State,” 85-99.

⁷ Moneyhon, *Impact of the Civil War*, 137-8.

⁸ Bobby L. Lovett, “African Americans, Civil War, and the Aftermath in Arkansas,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 54, no. 3 (1995), 311.

⁹ DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 99.

¹⁰ Dudley Taylor Cornish, *The Sable Arm: Negro Troops in the Union Army, 1861-1865* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1956), 96, 112-119, 206.

American, but some of them were recruited from northern states because so few Arkansas freedmen were literate.¹¹

While they were still organized, the initial companies of the 2nd Arkansas (African Descent) participated in the defense of Helena against the Confederate attack led by General Holmes in July 1863. Despite the enthusiasm of some freedmen, it was often difficult to find enough volunteers, and officers were instructed to seize any able-bodied black man they could find. Sec. Lt. Minos Miller, formerly a private in the Iowa Infantry wrote that the ex-slaves “hide from us like chickens from a chicken hawk.” The manpower shortage was severe enough that one company was not organized until the regiment reached Pine Bluff later in the summer. In March 1864 the 2nd Arkansas lost its volunteer status and became a part of the permanent U.S. Army as the 54th U.S. Colored Infantry Regiment. It then became part of Second Brigade of the Frontier Division, VII Corps, Department of Arkansas, and was moved to Fort Smith, arriving in the middle of May. During the rest of the year, it helped to protect the 200 miles of Arkansas River between there and Little Rock. In September it marched to Cabin Creek near Fort Gibson in a vain attempt to prevent Confederate General Stand Watie from attacking a supply train. In January 1865 the regiment returned to Little Rock where it remained until the end of the war without seeing anymore action. In July 1866 Miller wrote his mother that General Sherman had inspected the ten companies of the regiment and declared it “the best regiment he had ever inspected, black or white.” The unit demobilized in August and September of 1866.¹²

Among the soldiers of the 57th, was John Young, who recalled the experience at age eighty: “I remember when the Yankees come and killed old master’s hogs and chickens and cooked ‘em. There was a good big bunch of Yankees. They said they was fightin’ to free the niggers. After that I runned away and come up here to Pine Bluff and stayed awhile and then I went to Little Rock and joined the 57th colored infantry. I was the kittle drummer. We marched right in the center of the army. We went from Little Rock to Fort Smith. I never was in a big battle, just one little scrimmage. I was at Fort Smith when they surrendered and I was mustered out at Leavenworth, Kansas.”¹³

¹¹ Lovett, “African Americans, Civil War, and the Aftermath in Arkansas,” 319-320; A. F. Kaufman, “The Fifty-Fourth U.S. Colored Infantry: The Forgotten Regiment,” *Ozark Historical Review* 16 (Autumn 1987), 2.

¹² Kaufman, “Fifty-Fourth U.S. Colored Infantry,” 2-8.

¹³ Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 126.

Captain James Madison Bowler, commander of Company F of the Third Minnesota Volunteer Infantry Regiment told the story of another Arkansas slave who joined the Union Army. In August 1863 Bowler was carrying out a foraging expedition with 160 men and twenty-five wagons, during which he reconnoitered on horseback “with five good men and a contraband guide.” The contraband was a fugitive who had “run away on his ‘Missus’ horse only a few days before.” He “knew the area to perfection, having lived there . . . ; so we followed bye-paths and visited everybody in the neighborhood.” Among these stops was one at the former slave’s home, where an interesting conversation took place. “The ‘Contraband,’ one of the most intelligent I every saw, got out the Banjo and gave us a tune and a song. His ‘Missus’ affectionately reproved him for running away and asked him to leave the horse he had stolen a few days ago. He told her that he rudder run away dan hab her run him off to Texas, and as for stealing the horse, ‘You know, Missus, I had to get away de best way I could, and when you pay me de money I len you den I giv you de hoss.’”

Historian Douglas E. Larson has made a strong case that Bowler’s contraband slave was a man who later enlisted in Company B of the Third Minnesota, a unit that already contained black soldiers, as “an under cook of African Descent [sic]” on November 6 at Little Rock under the name Alfred Gales. Gales claimed to have been born in Raleigh, North Carolina, and served throughout the war, later apparently in a black regiment organized by Bowler. Gales was mustered out at DeVall’s Bluff, but was apparently tired of Arkansas. He moved to Minnesota, probably traveling with other members of his regiment, changed his name from Alfred Gales, which he said was a “slave name,” to Alfred Miller. He married and worked for many years as a whitewasher before dying in August 1892, two months after being cleared for a federal pension of \$6 per month for his Civil War military service.¹⁴

Formerly-enslaved Arkansans also fought with the First Kansas Colored Volunteer Regiment and with its sister unit, the Second Kansas Colored Volunteer Regiment. The State of Kansas was able to put a thousand African Americans in the field because of its unique position as a refuge for freedom-seeking slaves from Missouri, many of them brought back by Kansas jayhawker units in their ongoing fighting with Confederate sympathizers in Missouri. What was a trickle of escapees in the late 1850s became a river after secession stepped up the fighting and a

¹⁴ Douglas E. Larson, “Private Alfred Gales: From Slavery to Freedom,” *Minnesota History* 57, no. 6 (2001), 274-83; Edward G. Longacre, ed., “Letters from Little Rock of Captain James M. Bowler, 112th United States Colored Troops,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (1981), 235-48.

flood after August 1861 when the Battle of Wilson's Creek brought full-scale war to southwestern Missouri. After the Battle of Pea Ridge in March 1862, if not before, a smaller flow of refugees came from northwest Arkansas.¹⁵ On May 15, 1862, while General Curtis was moving from Batesville to Helena, James Lane of Kansas declared in the United States Senate on behalf of his state: "We have now in our midst and are feeding at least four thousand fugitive slaves from Missouri and Arkansas. We have at least two thousand refugees-white-from Arkansas and Missouri."¹⁶

An ardent abolitionist, capable military commander, and the dominant political figure in Kansas, Lane began enlisting the state's black male population in August 1862, often drafting those who chose not to volunteer. Under the command of the very capable white officer Lt. Col. James Williams, the men trained at Leavenworth during the fall, and six companies were mustered in January and another four at Fort Scott in May 1863. Moving south to protect the supply line to Fort Gibson on the Arkansas River, the regiment fought a skirmish at Baxter Springs and a major engagement at Cabin Creek. At Honey Springs in July it exchanged volleys with a Confederate force for twenty minutes and forced it to withdraw. The overall Union commander, Maj. Gen. James G. Blunt, had this response: "I never saw such fighting done as was done by the negro regiment. They fought like veterans, with a coolness and valor that is unsurpassed."¹⁷

According to historian Dudley Taylor Cornish, an eminent authority, the men of the First Colored "seem to have been largely recruited from among fugitive slaves from out of Arkansas and Missouri."¹⁸ Probably they were and the vast majority from Missouri, but there seems no way to know. Regimental muster records had a column for residence and another for "nativity," but the former was filled with Kansas locations and the latter rarely had an entry. In addition to the initial recruits, however, the muster listed former slaves who joined later, most of them in the period from the fall of 1863 until the end of the war when the regiment was stationed at Fort Smith, Arkansas, or at other places in the state. There were sixty-six of these men, thirty-

¹⁵ Albert Castel, *Civil War Kansas: Reaping the Whirlwind* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1997; Reprint, *A Frontier State at War, Kansas, 1861-1865*), chap. 3; Richard B. Sheridan, "From Slavery in Missouri to Freedom in Kansas: The Influx of Black Fugitives and Contrabands into Kansas, 1854-1865," *Kansas History* 12, no. 1 (Spring 1989), 28-47.

¹⁶ *The Congressional Globe*, 37th Congress, 2nd Sess. Pt 1, May 15, 1862, p. 2149.

¹⁷ The fullest account of the First Kansas Colored Regiment is in Dudley Taylor Cornish, "Kansas Negro Regiments in the Civil War," *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, 21 (June 1953), 417-429. The Blount quote is on p. 426.

¹⁸ Cornish, "Kansas Negro Regiments," 422.

three of whom joined at Fort Smith, most in October or November of 1863. In December the regiment moved further down the Arkansas River to the small town of Waldron, passing through the hamlet of Roseville along the way. According to Captain B. F. Van Horn Sr., a white Kansan who had recruited Company I, “the country below Ft. Smith was a very rich farming country and those old rebels got out of there in such a hurry that they left everything except their teams and niggers.” Apparently, however, some of the slaves were either left behind or escaped. Twelve enlisted at Roseville, three at Waldron, and nine came from nearby Ozark. Several slaves from Little Rock also made their way up the river and joined the unit at this winter quarters.¹⁹

By the fall of 1863 there was also a Second Kansas Colored Regiment. Recruiting for this unit probably benefited from the Battle of Prairie Grove, which occurred in December 1862. According to Wiley Britton, who wrote a history of the fighting in this area in 1899 after having participated in it during 1863 and 1864, “a good many of the negro men of Southern Missouri and Northern Arkansas, who had come to the Army of the Frontier, took the first opportunity to go to Kansas with the view of enlisting.”²⁰ Unlike its predecessor, the Second Colored created a muster roll that filled in the place of nativity. Forty-two of the men listed Arkansas and there were probably many more since the enlistees appear to have given the state in which they had been born rather than the one in which they were living prior to their escape. There were more listings for Kentucky than for Missouri, for example, and Virginia, Maryland and other slave states also showed up.²¹

By March 1863 the Second Colored was stationed at Fort Smith while the First was at Waldron, and both regiments were sent as part of the Frontier Brigade to Camden, Arkansas, and participated in the ill-fated Red River Expedition. Desperately short of food, Steele sent a party of 600 men and 160 wagons to forage in an area sixteen miles west of Camden where the farms and plantations were known to have large stocks of corn. The command included 438 members of the First Kansas Colored and was led by its commander Col. Williams. The troops,

¹⁹ “Muster Out Roll of Seventy-Ninth Regiment United States Colored Infantry (formerly the First Kansas Colored Infantry,” Kansas Adjutant General’s Records, Kansas State Historical Society, microfilm reel AR 120; B. F. Van Horn autobiography, typescript, Kansas State Historical Society.

²⁰ Wiley Britton, *The Civil War on the Border*, Vol. 2, 3rd rev. ed. (Dodge City, KS?: Kansas Heritage Press, 1990; orig. publ. 1899 by Putnam’s), 18.

²¹ Muster Out Roll of Second Kansas Colored Volunteer, Kansas Adjutant General’s Records, Kansas State Historical Society, microfilm reel AR 120.

already worn out from recent hard duty, marched out on April 17 early in the morning, reached their destination, and loaded 141 of their wagons. The next morning, early in their march back they were met by a 500-man relief expedition. There were, however, some 6,000 Confederate troops in south Arkansas, made available by the failure of General Lyon's efforts to move up the Red River.

Learning of the exposed Union forces, Brig. Gen. John S. Marmaduke had successfully rounded up 3,621 Confederate cavalry and mounted artillery and met William's force at Poison Spring, about twelve miles from Camden. After a hard fight in which the Second Kansas Colored played the major role, the Union command was overwhelmed and the surviving elements forced to flee back to Camden. Meanwhile, as historian Gergory J. W. Irwin has written, "the Rebels celebrated their victory with an orgy of barbarism." Black soldiers who attempted to surrender were shot, and the Texas troops bested at Holly Springs had a grisly revenge. In Irwin's words, "Execution squads from the Twenty-ninth Texas Cavalry roamed the battlefield to finish off the First Kansas Colored's wounded." Soldiers detailed to drive off the captured supply wagons made a sport of running their wheels over the heads of dead black soldiers.²²

An Arkansas Confederate soldier who recognized three of the black soldiers killed or captured wrote a letter providing details of the events and indicating his own attitude about them. "I think there were 10 negroes killed to one white Fed. Just as I had said before, they made the negroes go in front and if the negro was wounded, our men would shoot him dead as they were passed and what negroes that were captured have, from the best information I can obtain, since been shot. I have seen enough myself to know it is correct our men is determined not to take negro prisoners, and if all of the negroes could have seen what occurred that day, they would stay at home. What I have seen reminds me of the talk I gave Henry and John [his slaves]. They may have been there as I have not information as yet from home. If so, they are convinced by this time."²³

²² This account is drawn from Gregory J. W. Urwin, "Poison Spring and Jenkins' Ferry: Racial Atrocities During the Camden Expedition," in *All Cut to Hell and Gone to Pieces: The Civil War, Race Relations, and the Battle of Poison Spring*, ed. Mark K. Christ, 107-137 (Little Rock, AR: August House Publishers, 2003), for quote see 124.

²³ Mark K. Christ, "Who Wrote the Poison Spring Letter?," in *All Cut to Pieces and Gone to Hell: The Civil War, Race Relations, and the Battle of Poison Spring*, ed. Mark K. Christ, 100-06 (Little Rock, AR: August House Publishers, 2003).

Retribution of sorts took place when the Second Kansas played a central role in the successful Union action at Jenkins Ferry, which occurred as General Steele was moving his troops across the Saline River on their way back to Little Rock. At a critical point, soldiers from the Second, shouting “Poison Spring,” launched a bayonet attack that overwhelmed a Confederate battery. Their white officers had vowed to take no prisoners and the men killed at least three Confederate soldiers who attempted to surrender.²⁴

Last of the Runaways

Not surprisingly there were few advertisements for fugitive slaves in the *Arkansas Gazette* during the war years, and the ones that did appear reflected the circumstances of the time. After the Union occupation of Little Rock in the summer of 1863, they ceased altogether. In southwest Arkansas, however, the situation was different. The *Washington Telegraph* carried forty-five runaway ads from 1862 into 1865. While there was opposition to the war, and particularly to conscription, in that area, which nearly led to the implementation of martial law, there were no major battles in the area, no Union armies nearby except during the Camden campaign, and the Confederate government of Arkansas carried on its business from Washington after the fall of Little Rock.²⁵ The large number of advertisements in the newspaper there seems to have been related to the movement of enslaved peoples into Texas carried on by owners who hoped to keep them away from Federal armies.

A Little Rock advertisement in November of 1862 sought Peter, a six foot tall male in his thirties, who had left his employment at the Anthony House, a Little Rock hotel, “without leave” and was said to be carrying a pass that would identify him as a teamster working in General Hindman’s army.²⁶ In June 1863 the Pulaski County jailor advertised a confined “Negro boy” named Willett, who claimed to have run away from his owner while the latter was serving in the Confederate army at Vicksburg.²⁷ Surely the approach of General Steele’s Union army must have influenced the escape of the last and most unlikely set of fugitive slaves to leave Little Rock. The August 18, 1863, ad carried a reward of \$200 for a 33-year-old black woman named Nancy and her children: William, who was ten, John Henry, eight, and Laura, five. In addition to

²⁴Urwin, “Poison Spring and Jenkins’ Ferry.”

²⁵Carl H. Moneyhon, “Disloyalty and Class Consciousness in Southwestern Arkansas, 1863-1865, in Bailey and Sutherland, *Civil War Arkansas*, 117-32.

²⁶AG, November 20, 1862.

²⁷AG, June 13, 1863.

fleeing with three children, Nancy “was near confinement and her legs are considerably swollen.”²⁸

While the disruption of war certainly made it easier for the enslaved to escape and flee, freedom was hardly certain. In 1862 the Supreme Court of Arkansas decided in favor of Stroud, “a negro catcher” who claimed the whole reward for five runaways that he had captured with the aid of three other men.²⁹ Indeed, some of the advertisements in the *Washington Telegraph* have an almost eerie quality of normalcy about them. In April 1862, for example, the jailor of Hempstead County advertised Lewis, who said he belonged to Benjamin Etheridge of Calhoun County.³⁰ Two ads on August 5, 1863, have no hint of wartime conditions about them. Jack, a 24-year-old bondsman, ran away from his master who lived in the Washington area, and an unnamed “black boy” who claimed to have escaped from a man living in Walnuts was being held in the jail at nearby Murfreesboro.³¹ In July 1864 R. Jones, who lived across the border in the Choctaw Nation, advertised for a runaway in the Washington paper.³² Even in January 1865, the Hempstead County owners of Henry gave no evidence that his missing status might be related to the war.³³

On the other hand, one does suspect that the size of the five-man group who fled from the Texas Iron Works in Marion County, Texas, in June 1862 might have had something to do with the war.³⁴ And the slaveholder’s desire to move their bondspeople away from situations where confiscation or escape was likely may explain the circumstances of Boston, who had been owned by a Mr. Lasslur of Point Pleasant, Missouri, but escaped from John S. Deaderick of Bowie County, Texas, in April 1863 and was thought to be heading for the Mississippi River.³⁵ A few months later another Bowie County escapee was thought to be headed for Missouri.³⁶ Two men, Louis and Milford, were captured in Hempstead County and said they had escaped from an overseer taking them to Texas.³⁷ One has a sense that a “Negro man” wearing a “federal uniform” who was jailed in Hempstead County as a runaway in October 1863 was lucky to be

²⁸ AG, August 22, 1863.

²⁹ Stroud v. Garrison, 25 Ark. 53 (1862).

³⁰ WT, April 20, 1862.

³¹ WT, August 5, 1863.

³² WT, July 20, 1864.

³³ WT, January 4, 1865.

³⁴ WT, August 6, 1862.

³⁵ WT, April 22, 1863.

³⁶ WT, June, 10, 1863.

³⁷ WT, September 9, 1863.

alive.³⁸ Johnson and Caleb, two men in their early twenties who escaped from the Confederate military post at Lewisville, must have been serving at the behest of their owner, Robert Fletcher, who offered a \$100 for each of them in July 1864.³⁹ The last two runaway slave advertisements in Arkansas appeared in the *Washington Telegraph* of January 4, 1865. One of them sought Henry, who had left his master in Hempstead. The other was for 27-year-old Adolphus and Angeline, his 17-year-old wife, both of them mulattoes who had been purchased from a Doctor Smith in Princeton and carried to Dallas, Texas. They were thought to be “trying to make their way to the Federal lines in that vicinity.”⁴⁰

³⁸ *WT*, October 28, 1863.

³⁹ *WT*, January 4, 1865.

⁴⁰ *WT*, January 4, 1865.

Conclusion

Wilbur Siebert's admiring study of the Underground Railroad defined the way historians understood the institution until 1961 when Larry Gara questioned both Siebert's sources and his assumptions. Gara claimed the earlier historian had used exaggerated and dramatic accounts of slave rescues and overemphasized the role of white abolitionists, neglecting the assistance provided by free blacks, and ignoring the fact that most of the enslaved people who successfully fled to the North did it on their own. Following Kenneth Stampp's book on slavery, Gara also pointed out that most runaway slaves did not attempt to reach the North, but instead stayed close to home or traveled to nearby places in the South. The most thorough study of the freedom-seeking phenomenon, John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger's *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation*, published in 1999, largely ignored the Underground Railroad.

Meanwhile, however, an article by Charles L. Blockson, published in *National Geographic* in 1984, renewed popular interest in the Underground Railroad and led to Congressional support for what became the National Park Service's Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program. J. Blaine Hudson's recent scholarly study, *Fugitive Slaves and the Underground Railroad in the Kentucky Borderland*, accepted the Franklin and Schweninger analysis of the runaway slave phenomenon for the most part, but argued that the Underground Railroad did play an important role in certain areas. His approach also blurred the distinction between organized and unorganized assistance provided to fugitives and thus supported the approach taken by the National Park Service, which was to view escape and flight, with or without assistance, and for whatever goal, as part of freedom-seeking resistance to slavery. It is that approach that has been taken in this study.

In most respects the runaway slaves of Arkansas were similar to those in eastern states. The average escapee was a male in his mid-twenties whose goal was to win concessions from his owner, to visit relatives in places not too far away, or to make his way to a city. He was more likely to be mulatto than were other slaves, and he typically fled on his own. Not all fugitives were average, however: Some were young or old, there were women among them, many did flee in groups of two and sometimes more, and the majority was of unmixed African blood. Data taken from Arkansas runaway slave advertisements is congruent with that produced by a large sample collected by Franklin and Schweninger from five southern states. Hudson's Kentucky evidence, however, shows a larger percentage of old and young, female, and non-mulatto

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escapees that more often ran off in groups. The high incidence of these variables, all of which make successful escape more difficult, suggests that the Kentucky fugitives were receiving more assistance than the others, presumably by individuals who fit under the large umbrella of Hudson's redefined Underground Railroad.

Advertisements in Arkansas newspapers placed by out-of-state owners and those paid for by local jailors both indicate that a large number of enslaved persons from outside Arkansas came there or at least passed through. Some of them hoped to find freedom in the wilderness environment that was available in many parts of the state up to the Civil War. Others were headed to Indian Territory further west, but an equal number of runaways fled east to escape from Native-American owners. Fugitives attempting to make their way up the Mississippi Valley comprised the largest portion of the out-of-staters, but a significant number were traveling south. Viewed from the Arkansas cross-roads, more freedom seekers appear to have attempted long-distance journeys than earlier studies have suggested. The same may be said of Arkansas slaves who absconded from their masters. Most of them probably stayed within the state and many close to home, but a significant percentage sought escape to the North or traveled substantial distances to return to places from which they had been brought. A reasonable hypothesis is that the experience of coming west, whether with a master or a slave trader, made slaves not only more willing to embark on longer journeys but perhaps more able to complete them.

The Civil War changed the situation of enslaved Arkansans in very drastic ways. The invasion of a northern army allowed many thousands of those in the cotton-producing Mississippi Delta to escape to Union lines, and Brig. Gen. Samuel R. Curtis gave many of them freedom well before the Emancipation Proclamation. The disruption of war also favored freedom-seekers in places more distant from Federal troops, but the institution of slavery continued to function in southwest Arkansas until 1865. Meanwhile, some thousands of former slaves joined African American regiments organized by the Union army in Arkansas and played an important role in the war effort. At least some slaves in northwest Arkansas used the chaotic conditions created by the major battles in that region to escape to Kansas along with a large number of white Unionists. Black Arkansans joined the First and Second Kansas Colored Volunteer Regiments and later served in their home state, a few of them dying at the Battle of Poison Spring and during the infamous murder of surrendered black troops that followed it.

Conclusion

To this reader, Arkansas runaway advertisements indicate that escape and flight may have been more successful than other studies have suggested. Not that the process led to more permanent freedom, resulted in any less punishment, or was easier or less dangerous than we have thought. But the lengthy trips that were attempted and the complex network of travel, suggest that for some slaves the action they took was a conscious choice, one made out of calculation rather than desperation, a risk taken by people who knew the odds and thought they could beat them. These enslaved not only sought freedom through escape and flight, they exercised it.

While these pages provide information and analysis about freedom-seeking slaves in Arkansas, they have hardly exhausted the topic. One way to learn more would be to expand the types of sources that are used as evidence. This study has relied heavily on runaway slave advertisements from Arkansas newspapers. For most purposes related to the study of freedom-seeking enslaved people in the United States, such advertisements are the best source, and there are particularly valuable for understanding larger patterns such as the geographical movements that are analyzed here. County court records are another valuable source, and many of those for Arkansas are extant and may be used on microfilm at the Arkansas History Commission in Little Rock. Going through those will be a time-consuming task, but probably a rewarding one.

There are also manuscript sources that may yield additional information on Arkansas fugitive slaves. The major plantation records include the John Brown Diary, the Trulock Family Letters, and the Rust Family Letters at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock Archives and Special Collections, the Camp Family Letters at the University of Arkansas Special Collections in Fayetteville, and the Wright Family Letters in the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina. All these were used extensively by Donald P. McNeilly in his recent *The Old South Frontier: Cotton Plantations and the Formation of Arkansas Society, 1819-1861*, which helped to provide the context for this study. Most of the other contemporary manuscripts that are important to antebellum Arkansas history are located at the state repositories mentioned above, although the Butler Center at the Central Arkansas Library in Little Rock has a growing collection. In addition to the finding aids at these institutions, scholars will benefit from looking at the citations in Conevery Bolton Valencius, *The Health of the Country: How American Settlers Understood Themselves and Their Land* (2002) and David Sloan, "The Louisiana Purchase, Expansion, and the Limits of Community: The Example of Arkansas," in the *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* (2003). The best source on the Underground

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Railroad in general is the massive collection of Siebert Papers at Ohio State University, which are now also available on microfilm. The absence of references to Arkansas in Siebert's work and the general nature of the collection suggest that it will not be a rich source of material for this state, but research is the only way to find out.

One of the insights gained from this study is that freedom-seeking by enslaved people in the Mississippi Valley and west of there may have been different from what it was in the East. We have long known that Kansas was a destination for escaped slaves in Missouri, and we now know that Arkansas functioned in somewhat the same manner. It seems less likely that this would have been the case in Louisiana, but there is at least that possibility. More important is the issue of mobility. How significant was the Mississippi River as a geographical friend of the fugitive? Is it true that the experience of migration west made enslaved people in that region more ambitious and capable as freedom seekers than those in the East. These are only some of the questions that suggest a regional study of the western slave states would be a useful project. An important building block for that project is Harriet C. Frazier's *Runaway and Freed Missouri Slaves and Those Who Helped Them, 1763-1865*, published in 2004.

There are also a number of smaller topics within the general study of runaway slaves in Arkansas that deserve more attention. Among them is Nelson Hacket, who is more important to the history of freedom-seeking and abolitionism than has yet been recognized. New research might yield additional information, but it seems more important to integrate Hacket's story into the larger topic of international issues involving American slavery. The Calvin Fairbank and William Minnis episode also deserves further research, the best source probably being the Siebert Collection. One would also like to know more about the movement of Arkansas slaves to Kansas during the Civil War, something that may have occurred earlier, perhaps making Arkansas a spur on the Missouri Underground Railroad.

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