

Primary Source Set

Origins of Slavery, Resisting Enslavement

Objectives

- ☐ I can explain how enslaved people and free Blacks resisted the institution of slavery and summarize the main idea of primary source texts.

Background Information

In 1619, the first Africans arrived in the colony of Virginia. Slavery was written into law over the next few decades. By 1662, the colony of Virginia passed a hereditary slave law declaring the child of an enslaved mother, regardless of the status of the father, would follow the enslaved status of his/her mother. This law (and others over the next 40 years) created a hereditary, race-based system of forced labor in the colony: Black skin color became equal with enslavement and inferiority. Matthew Ashby was born to a white mother, an indentured servant named Mary Ashby, and an unknown man of African descent. As a mulatto child born to a white mother, Matthew Ashby was required by law to serve as an indentured servant until the age of thirty-one. His mother was also required to pay a fine of 15 pounds to the church. After being indentured for 30 years, Matthew Ashby worked in Williamsburg, Virginia, as a free man.

Virginia Governor's Council reply to the petition of Matthew Ashby, November 27, 1769

Text	Vocabulary
On the Petition of Matthew Ashby, a free Mulatto	<p>Petition: a formal written request, typically to a government or government official.</p> <p>Mulatto: a person of mixed African and European descent.</p>

setting forth that he had two Children by his present wife Ann Ashby, while she was a Slave to Samuel Spurr,	
that he brought her and the two Children of the said Spurr for one hundred and fifty pounds ,	<p>pound: the pound was a unit of British money. One pound equaled 20 shillings or 240 pence.</p> <p>Visit https://www.in-2013dollars.com/uk/inflation/1769?amount=150 to find out how much this equals in today's currency.</p>
that he now has two children alive by her John and Mary, that she has been a faithful and diligent Wife ever since marriage, and praying that he may be permitted to set her and his Children free;	
the Board being satisfied therein, were of opinion, that the said Ann, John and Mary were deserving of their freedom, and it was order'd that the said Matthew Ashby have leave to manumit and set them free.	<p>manumit: to release legally from slavery</p>

Reading Comprehension Questions

1. What do you know about the family of Matthew Ashby, based on their petition?
2. What was Matthew Ashby's status according to the law? What does this reveal about the law?
3. Why were Ann and Matthew Ashby's children enslaved?
4. What did Matthew Ashby have to do to free his family? Does anything surprise you about this process?

Background Information

When enslaved men, women, or children ran away to seek freedom from their unjust condition, enslavers often published advertisements offering rewards for their return. Though the level of detail varies, these advertisements provided small insights into the lives of enslaved individuals. These featured descriptions of the person's physical appearance, details surrounding their disappearance, and a reward for their return. Running away to freedom was a dangerous choice. Many were not successful and faced cruel physical punishments if they were caught. Running away also meant leaving behind family members who they might never see again and who may be punished for the runaway's absence.

Runaway advertisement for Jude, October 28, 1768

Text	Vocabulary and Notes
RUN away from the subscriber in <i>Chesterfield</i> , the Wednesday before Easter last,	
a bright mulatto wench named JUDE, almost thirty years old, is very remarkable, has lost one eye, but which I have forgot, has long black hair, a large scar on one of her elbows and several other scars on her face,	mulatto: a person of mixed African and European descent. wench: an insulting term for a woman
and has been subject to running away ever since she was ten years old.	
I have great reason to believe she will pass for a free woman, and endeavor to make it into South Carolina.	
She is very knowing about house business, can spin, weave, sew, and iron, well.	

She had on when she went away
her winter clothing...Whoever
conveys the said slave to me
shall be well rewarded for their
trouble. MARY CLAY

Reading Comprehension Questions

1. What details do we know about Jude from this advertisement?
2. Why might Mary Clay think Jude can pass for a free woman?

Runaway advertisement for Frank, August 27, 1771

Text	Vocabulary and Notes
Run away from the subscriber ... a NEGRO FELLOW named Frank, twenty seven Years of Age, five Feet five or six inches high ...	
He has run away several Times, and always passed for a Freeman.	
As he may possibly try to get out of the country, I hereby forewarn all Matters of Vessels from carrying out the said Slave, at their Peril.	
I imagine he is [sulking] about Indian Town on Pamunky among the Indians, as one of his former Trips he got himself a Wife amongst them.	Pamunky (Pamunkey): Virginia Indian tribe in the coastal area of southeastern Virginia. The Pamunkey River is named for the tribe.

Whoever brings the said Slave to me shall be handsomely rewarded. DAVID SCOTT.

Reading Comprehension Questions

1. What details do we know about Frank from this advertisement?
2. Why might the Pamunkey Indians be willing to help Frank secure his freedom?

Runaway advertisement for Walton, 1774

Text	Vocabulary and Notes
RUN away from the Subscriber, a Virginia born Negro Fellow named WALTON, 23 Years of Age, of a light Complexion, middle Size, has a pleasing Countenance ...	Countenance: appearance
he carried with him four Shirts ... two Suits of Clothes ... Velvet Cap, Hat, and every Thing else suitable for a Waitingman .	Waitingman: Person who waits on customers in an inn or a place of lodging or in the home of a family
As he is a very artful and likely fellow, he may endeavor to pass for a free Man, and I am doubtful has got a Pass from a Negro of mine who can write a good Hand.	endeavor: to try
This fellow has waiting on me for three Years past, and always rode with me, so that he has a general Acquaintance, but as he was raised in [Nansemond], near the old Town, it is probably he is gone there, as his Friends live in that Neighbourhood.	Nansemond: a county in Virginia south of the James River

the old Town, it is probably he is gone there, as his Friends live in that Neighbourhood.	
Whoever takes up the said Runaway, and brings him home, shall have 3 pounds reward, or 3 shillings if committed to Jail. All persons are forbid harboring or carrying the said Slave out of the Colony. PETERFIELD TRENT.	
*As the said Fellow ran away without receiving any Abuse, the Taker up is desired to give him ten Lashes every ten Miles.	

Reading Comprehension Questions

1. Peterfield Trent wrote that Walton “may endeavor to pass for a free Man.” What might allow Walton to pass as free?
2. How was Walton assisted by others in his attempt to secure his own freedom?
3. What does the postscript reveal about Walton’s status as an enslaved person?

