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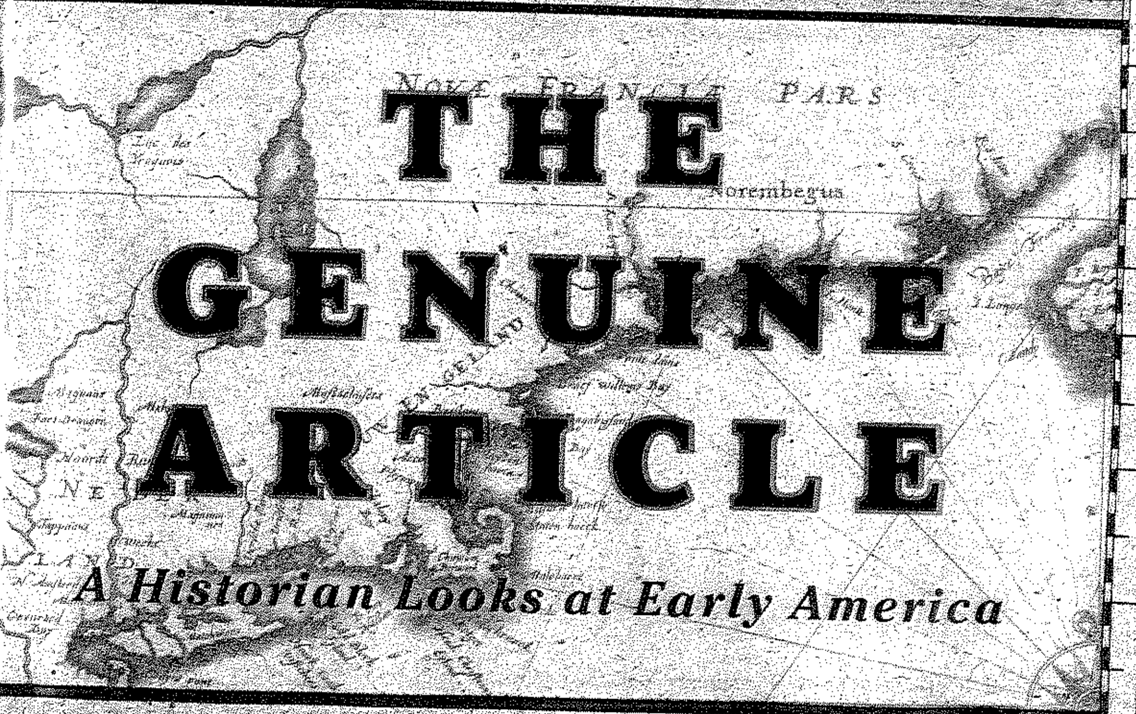

THE GENUINE ARTICLE

A Historian Looks at Early America

EDMUND S. MORGAN

Author of *Benjamin Franklin*

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Plantation Blues

Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation
John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger

Rituals of Blood: Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries
Orlando Patterson

JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN and Loren Schweninger announce at the outset of their study of runaway slaves that "even today important aspects of the history of slavery remain shrouded in myth and legend." The myths and legends are not only those that still romanticize the old plantation but also the contrary ones that demonize it. Like other myths they have only a remote resemblance to fact, but historians who seek to dispel them, an enterprise that has engaged some of the best of them in the past fifty years, have found that in the study of slavery myth clings stubbornly to fact. Every exposition of what actually happened on the plantation carries implications, frequently unintended, that echo the myths. And this is particularly the case with attempts to recover the facts of what slavery did to slaves, where a long tail of implication sometimes seems to wag the dog.

Stanley Elkins argued in a seminal work in 1959 that slavery reduced its victims to mindless "sambos," comparable to the brainwashed inmates of concentration camps.[1] This indictment carried the unintended implication that slaves lacked the character or strength of mind to resist the destruction of their self-respect by heartless masters. The implication gathered new significance in a 1965 Department of Labor report by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, which drew on Elkins to

argue that "the slave household often developed a fatherless matrifocal (mother-centered) pattern," a pattern which continued into the twentieth century with disastrous consequences.[2]

Moynihan's report, aimed toward a national effort to break that continuity, made its appearance just at the time when many black leaders of the civil rights movement were tending toward a separatism in which they cherished a positive continuity with slave culture and resented any deficiencies that whites might find in blacks, slave or free. In 1974, in a work ostensibly designed to reveal "the record of black achievement under adversity," Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman used a statistical economic analysis to portray the plantation as an enlightened business enterprise: under masters guided by cost-effectiveness, slaves enjoyed somewhat better conditions of life than free workers, and lived in nuclear families headed by husbands.[3] This went way beyond any refutation of Elkins or Moynihan, and other historians immediately challenged it, not only in its benign statistics but in its seeming "return to a very old-fashioned concept of the acquiescent slave, and to all of its potentially racist implications."[4] A large number of more detailed studies, avoiding any such implications, have explored the slave culture of resistance, and portrayed the building of nuclear families within it as acts of defiance rather than compliance.[5] Orlando Patterson, in *Rituals of Blood*, returns to the view of the Moynihan Report in dismissing such families as not families at all but mere "reproductive units," at the service of their masters.

That serious scholars could arrive at such conflicting conclusions testifies to the inconclusiveness and malleability of the multitude of surviving sources—ledgers, laws, letters, diaries, newspapers, books—all written by the free for the free. There are a few autobiographical narratives by escaped slaves and some recollections by survivors, gathered sixty or seventy years after emancipation by the Federal Writers Project. But for the most part what slaves thought or felt has to be extracted almost entirely from what other people did to them or said about them. That is not an insuperable barrier, for historians commonly have to cull facts from testimony not necessarily designed to

disclose them. But the exercise is a nice one when the facts all derive from controversy and can fuel further controversy. Franklin and Schweninger have been able to reduce the inherent bias of their sources by confining themselves to two kinds of documents where "it was in the interests of individuals to state their case as clearly and truthfully as possible": descriptions of runaways in advertisements for their capture and petitions to legislatures and county courts in cases involving runaways. While these sources give us only fleeting glimpses of what life on the run was like for those with the daring or desperation to undertake it, they do make possible the first comprehensive analysis of slave resistance during the seventy years prior to emancipation. The analysis neither romanticizes nor demonizes the plantation and dispels some legends, but it too carries implications that the authors may not have intended.

Violent rebellion was never a possible option for Afro-American slaves because they were outnumbered everywhere in the United States by Euro-Americans (not the case in the successful rebellion in Haiti in 1801). Running away, on the other hand, was not directed toward the goal of overthrowing the slave system. Rather, as becomes apparent in Franklin and Schweninger's study, flight served, perhaps not deliberately or consciously, as a way of limiting and defining the operation of the system. Running away kept slavery within bearable limits both for those who ran and for those they left behind, even though in the short run it usually meant trouble for both. The book's aim is simply to demonstrate with abundant evidence that slaves did not acquiesce quietly in their enslavement. They could be kept at the job of producing a profit for their owners only by the whip or the threat of the whip. And the threat was made thoroughly plausible by the continual realization of it. Slaves who ran were usually caught in the end and suffered for it, knew they would suffer, but were ready to pay in pain for a brief spell of freedom. A few made it to the free states of the North or to Canada. A few remained hidden for years or even a lifetime, in the "maroon" camps of the swamps and forests or in the anonymity of cities like New Orleans or Charleston. But most of them

were quickly captured or forced by cold and hunger or some internal compulsion to return. Many of them repeated the process again and again, gaining a reputation as "runners," thereby incidentally lowering their market value and also disrupting production sufficiently to give planters a motive for making life on the plantation more attractive than life on the run.

Because runaways were seldom advertised unless they had been gone as much as a month, the total can never be known. The authors estimate that they may have averaged fifty thousand a year or more. The number advertised from 1790 to 1860 was only about 8,400, but the authors argue that "while runaways constituted a small minority of the slave population, they were of enormous significance in the plantation universe." That significance may have lain, as the authors say, "in their defiance of the system," but it was not the defiance itself that mattered so much as its effect on the planter's profits. Analysis of age and sex, where known, supports such a judgment. Over 80 percent of runaways were male, and of these three out of four were under thirty. In other words, those most likely to run were also those most capable of hard work. But slaves of all ages and both sexes ran away as opportunities presented themselves. Eternal vigilance, to change the metaphor, was the price of slaveowning.

It was a price that slaveholders gladly paid. While Franklin and Schweninger emphasize the universal resistance of slaves to their subjection, the implication that emerges unmistakably if unintentionally from the evidence offered is the failure of that resistance to seriously impair the success of the slave system. Those who went on the run generally struck out alone. Though couples or entire families sometimes made the attempt, there seem to have been no examples of concerted or mass desertions. Running away became a regular and accepted thing for masters to put up with, "a matter of course," contained within dimensions that never challenged the viability of the system itself. Analysis of the different occasions that prompted or enabled slaves to run shows them to have coincided with irregular situations and events in their lives as slaves, such as a change of masters or over-

seers, sale or the threat of sale, forced separation from wives or husbands, children or parents, quarrels between a master and his wife that disrupted discipline, being hired out on loan to other masters.

Cases of enticement by whites who promised freedom were relatively rare, though continually feared. Runaways seldom headed north toward freedom, because the odds against making it were too great. Most of them stayed in the South, often in the immediate neighborhood, where they were assisted with provisions by fellow slaves and sometimes gathered in gangs until caught. The occasion or opportunity for running might come at any season of the year, but the only season when the recorded numbers dropped was during the autumn harvest. Presumably the decrease was due to closer surveillance at a time when labor was most needed, but again it shows the ability of masters to limit the impact of this kind of resistance. Because owners counted on regularly losing a certain amount of labor from runaways anyhow, they also counted on making up the difference by driving those who remained that much harder while their companions were gone. As Franklin and Schweninger observe, "Since those who went out were usually brought back within the fortnight, they did not represent a serious economic loss nor did the temporary loss of hands mean the work could not be transferred to those who remained behind."

The success of masters in keeping all resistance within bounds is evinced even by their corresponding success in persuading themselves that they were playing the role of benevolent fathers to children who owed them not only labor but gratitude. Prompted perhaps by verbal assaults from the North, they learned to speak of their "peculiar institution" as one of "domestic" slavery and increasingly referred to their slaves as part of their "family." "Again and again," Franklin and Schweninger note, "slaveowners used the same word to describe runaways: ungrateful." Their departure always seemed "without any cause," a betrayal of their paternal keepers.

To dismiss such habitual designations as hypocrisy (which the authors do not do) would be to miss the significance of the fact that running away, however common, could be treated as abnormal,

deviant behavior. One New Orleans physician diagnosed it as "drapetomania, or the disease causing Negroes to run away." It was, he insisted, "as much a disease of the mind as any other species of mental alienation." The norm was happy childlike Negroes who loved their masters and deserved punishment if they failed to do what they were told. Whippings that left a man or woman scarred or maimed for life could be considered without regret as applications of the old adage about sparing the rod. It required no more than the usual human capacity for self-deception to sustain this delusion.

Measures to limit running away were not difficult to devise, because freedom and slavery were so closely tied to color in a society where miscegenation was common that the market value of a slave depended in some degree on complexion: any light-colored slave lost value by virtue of the fact that he or she could too easily escape and pass for free. The proportion of mulattoes among runaways was three to four times their proportion in the slave population, because it was easier for them to get away with it. Most runaways of whatever shade returned of their own accord in a short time, because the forces arrayed against them were so many: the slaveowners of a region kept up a network of correspondence in which they alerted one another to escapes; tracking runaways became a profession for a small class of men, who made use of dogs trained for the purpose; patrols rode up and down the roads night and day, requiring every person of color to explain his or her presence away from a plantation.

Free black persons away from home (where a neighboring white could vouch for them) would likely wind up in jail as presumed runaways and perhaps be auctioned off as slaves before their status could be verified. One free son of a white woman and a colored man escaped such a fate while traveling in Virginia only because no one would buy him: he was "too white." Trackers sometimes bought at bargain prices any runaways who had evaded capture long enough to make owners decide to cut their losses rather than bank on their recapture. When and if the tracker succeeded in running down the fugitives, he could sell them for whatever the market would bear. And the continually rising

price of slaves made the possible profits worth the risk. On the other hand, the expected return of most runaways kept any rewards offered for their capture at a surprisingly low figure, averaging no more than 5 percent of what a slave would sell for. Franklin and Schweninger have demonstrated conclusively that slaves resisted their subjection by running from it despite the obstacles that normally made their escape shortlived and painful. What they have also demonstrated, whether intentionally or not, is that this form of resistance posed no serious threat to the system. It does not follow that the resistance was futile. The authors do not draw that conclusion, but neither do they give us a direct assessment of what runaways did achieve, apart from requiring slave owners to organize effective measures to thwart them.

The constant pressure of runaways on the system can be seen as one indication of the determining role played by slaves in setting practical limits to a coercion that was only theoretically absolute. For slavery to be cost-effective, as it clearly was, running away had to be made normally less attractive than submission. The costs and the modes of deterring it must not exceed or cancel the rewards. Measures severe enough to make it impossible might have debilitated or demoralized the labor force and defeated the purpose. Slavery, as Ira Berlin has argued, was a negotiated relationship, varying from time to time and from place to place.[6] The threat of running away was one of the few bargaining chips that slaves could always bring to the negotiations; and Franklin and Schweninger record a few instances in which slaves actually "left with the intention of lying out for a few days, or weeks, and then negotiating to gain concessions."

But the larger significance of running away lay in the silent negotiation that defined the system itself. Just as the threat of punishment accompanied by frequent exercise of it was sufficient to prevent most slaves from running most of the time, the threat of running away accompanied by continual examples of it was sufficient to keep the exercise of owners' powers within limits acceptable to the owned. By showing that they could be pushed just so far and not farther, slaves won what amounted to rights that could be violated only by endanger-

ing the relationship: the right to grow a small crop of their own, to buy and sell property of their own, and especially the right to have a family of their own.

Although John Hope Franklin is currently presiding over a national "dialogue" on race relations, he avoids making any connections here between runaway slaves and present-day relations between or within ethnic or racial groups. His and Schweninger's findings nevertheless point to the strength of the slave family ties that have figured so largely in recent studies of slave culture: separation from "loved ones" by a sale was one of the common occasions for running away.