

Eighteenth Century Mastery: Strategies, Resources, and Behaviors of White Power

Cheri Todd Molter

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Patrick O'Neil

Department of History

“Around us everything is hostile. ... [M]en and more men, slaves and masters, the masters slaves themselves. Fear motivates the former, hatred the latter, all other forces are silent. All are enemies or rivals.” ~Primo Levi

On May 30, 1788, Lewis, a “Negro Man” described by his owner, Beckwith Butler, to be “about 35 years of age, five feet ten inches high” with “very little beard, thick lips, [and] a surly look,” ran away from Butler’s “plantation in Mattox Neck” in Westmoreland County, Virginia.¹ Supposedly, Lewis traveled either north toward Maryland or south to reconnect with family left behind in Richmond County, Virginia, after being sold from the estate of his former owner.² He “read well” and bore the scars from repeated whippings.³ According to Butler, Lewis had “rebellious principles,” and, by running away, Lewis made it obvious that he resisted the societal conviction that he was mere property and strove to reposition himself in colonial society as a free man.⁴ In contrast, Butler, a white plantation owner and master of enslaved people, could not tolerate Lewis’s defiance; Butler publicly behaved in a manner meant to reassert his socially expected power over Lewis, and, if successful, the result—Lewis’s capture—would reaffirm Butler’s dominance over his slaves to everyone, slaves and whites alike. Butler repeatedly requested the public’s cooperation to aid him in maintaining the cultural status quo; he placed three advertisements in different newspapers, appealing for assistance to help him reclaim his escaped slave.⁵ In fact, Lewis had been missing for two and a half years when

¹ Beckwith Butler, Advertisement in *Virginia Herald and Fredericksburg Advertiser*, November 4, 1790, *The Geography of Slavery*, <http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/gos/search/relatedAd.php?adFile=v1790.xml&adId=v1790110051>

² Butler, Advertisement in *Virginia Herald and Fredericksburg Advertiser*, November 4, 1790.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Butler, Advertisement in *Virginia Herald*, November 4, 1790.

Beckwith Butler, Advertisement in *Maryland Gazette*, July 17, 1788, *The Geography of Slavery*, <http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/gos/search/relatedAd.php?adFile=md1788.xml&adId=m1788070002>

Butler placed the last recorded runaway slave advertisement. Even if Butler reclaimed him after the last ad was published, Lewis had been successful in eluding Butler's grasp for a prolonged period of time despite his master's best efforts to regain control of him.

As exhibited by Butler's ads, the runaway slave advertisements in *The Geography of Slavery* web archive reveal the unequal distribution of power between the white planter class and the enslaved African Americans they exploited. That unequal power distribution favored white men and their desire for profit from agricultural pursuits, and became the foundation of the eighteenth-century model of white mastery. Written primarily by white men for a white audience, the runaway ads expose some patterns in the white masters' behaviors and perspectives as they worked to maintain dominance over an ever-increasing number of African Americans in Virginia and Maryland. Many white masters described the slaves' distinguishing marks, attributed dangerous or animalistic characteristics to them, advised the public of the runaway's level of education, and warned their communities to uphold the laws concerning runaways in their attempts to project a semblance of control while requesting aid in reclaiming their escaped property, a contradictory situation in itself. Butler did each of those things in all of the runaway slave ads he placed while trying to secure Lewis's capture.⁶ Nevertheless, Butler did not resort to what seems to be one of the last strategies left to the white masters who had lost control of an enslaved person: a reward offered for the return of the slave either "dead or alive." However, eight white masters—John Wormeley, John Smith, Charles Floyd, John Woodlief, Sr., John Holt, Thomas Dansie, Henry Batte, and David Jones—did; the advertisements they published were particularly revealing and are discussed in this paper.⁷ As evidenced by the many successful displays of resistance by runaway

Beckwith Butler, Advertisement in *Virginia Independent Chronicle*, June 18, 1788, *The Geography of Slavery*, <http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/gos/search/relatedAd.php?adFile=vg1788.xml&adId=v1788060031>

⁶ Butler, Advertisement in *Virginia Herald*, November 4, 1790.

⁷ John Wormeley, Advertisement in *Virginia Gazette* (Hunter), Williamsburg, May 30, 1751, *The Geography of Slavery*, <http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/gos/search/relatedAd.php?adFile=rg51.xml&adId=v1751050084>

John Smith, Advertisement in *Virginia Gazette*, February 4, 1768, *The Geography of Slavery*, <http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/gos/search/relatedAd.php?adFile=rg68.xml&adId=v1768020237>

Charles Floyd, Advertisement in *Virginia Gazette* (Rind), Williamsburg, October 27, 1768, *The Geography of Slavery*, <http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/gos/search/relatedAd.php?adFile=rg68.xml&adId=v1768100309>

John Woodlief, Sr., Advertisement in *Virginia Gazette*, April 29, 1773, *The Geography of Slavery*, <http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/gos/search/relatedAd.php?adFile=rg73.xml&adId=v1773040853>

John Holt, Advertisement in *Virginia Gazette* or *American Advertiser* (Hayes), Richmond, June 28, 1783, *The Geography of Slavery*, <http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/gos/search/relatedAd.php?adFile=vg1783.xml&adId=v1783060036>

Thomas Dansie, Advertisement in *Maryland Gazette*, March 15, 1749, *The Geography of Slavery*, <http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/gos/search/relatedAd.php?adFile=md1749.xml&adId=m1749030001>

Henry Batte, Advertisement in *Virginia Gazette*, February 7, 1771, *The Geography of Slavery*, <http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/gos/search/relatedAd.php?adFile=rg71.xml&adId=v1771020538>

African Americans, white masters were balanced atop a pedestal that was prone to tipping from time to time, although it was a more privileged position than either the white women or African Americans held. Despite what some historians have said about the secure dominance of white mastery, the white masters' position of power was insecure. Those men had to negotiate their resources, determine strategies, and modify their behaviors to keep their balance at the top.

According to the archived runaway slave ads, when a few eighteenth-century masters believed the status quo had been disrupted too much or too often by the enslaved, they put differing amounts of value on the corpses of returned slaves or on their decapitated heads rather than the living, whole-bodied laborers. Based on the approximately 4000 eighteenth-century runaway slave advertisements in the *Geography of Slavery* archive, only Wormeley, Smith, Floyd, Woodlief, Sr., Holt, Dansie, Batte, and Jones placed equal or greater value on the remains of their runaway slaves. Those men published appeals in newspapers that revealed the aforementioned verbal patterns of behavior that masters were utilizing as a means of preserving their status as dominators in slaving society.⁸ At the same time, they publicized their failure to maintain control over certain enslaved individuals and expressed a willingness to pay money for the bodies or heads of their dead slaves to be returned to them.⁹ The evidence pertaining to the complexities of and contradictions in the social construction of white mastery contained in their advertisements suggests that masters in the eighteenth century were trying to maintain a balance between portraying themselves as unbending, dominant overlords and intelligent, patriarchal benefactors. The advertisements placed by those eight men in particular provide a glimpse into what it meant to be a white master in the eighteenth century.

Historians have had much to say about the dominance of white plantation owners over their enslaved people. After reading and analyzing the letters and records of nineteenth century plantation owner Charles Manigault, William Dusinberre argues that it was more likely that slaves were not “active shapers of their own destinies,” despite recent historical analysis that enslaved individuals were able to assert their personal autonomy within the social structure of white mastery.¹⁰ However, since Manigault was the author of Dusinberre's evidence, it seems reasonable to assume a bias. Manigault was a master who wanted to be viewed as successfully dominant, a motivation that would have influenced how he presented himself in his records and his letters, affecting the credibility of those sources in portraying an accurate assessment of the slaves' negotiation for power. Dusinberre claims that Manigault's runaways—except John Izard, who ran away but was not sold on his return due to his blood relation to the plantation owner—either returned voluntarily or were caught, then were punished and sold to emphasize his control over their destinies.¹¹ Dusinberre acknowledges only Manigault's reclaimed

David Jones, Advertisement in *Virginia Gazette* (Dixon & Nicolson), Williamsburg, March 12, 1779, *The Geography of Slavery*, <http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/gos/search/relatedAd.php?adFile=v1779.xml&AdId=v1779030007>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ William Dusinberre, *Them Dark Days: Slavery in the American Rice Swamps*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 121.

¹¹ Dusinberre, *Them Dark Days*, 115.

dominance over the enslaved instead of recognizing also that runaways were successfully resisting Manigault's power, even if only for a short period of time; thus, it seems that the historian's argument is biased in favor of the white master.

In contrast, Drew Gilpin Faust maintains that the "master-slave relationship is never static, but of necessity evolutionary."¹² By analyzing the manner in which James Henry Hammond, the new master of Silver Bluff plantation, "sought to assert both dominance and legitimacy" over the enslaved, Faust realized that Hammond's slaves "strove to maintain networks of communication and community as the bases of their personal and cultural autonomy."¹³ Faust states, "This struggle, which constantly tested the ingenuity and strength of both the owner and his slaves, touched everything from religion to work routines to health, and even determined the complex pattern of unauthorized absences from the plantation."¹⁴ Although she utilizes a different set of sources, Faust's assertion that Hammond, a white master, reacted to slaves' attempts to undermine his socially appointed dominance by strategizing to maintain at least the appearance of orderly mastery, correlates with the power dynamics evident in the runaway slave advertisements.

In their advertisements, all eight masters used descriptive language and phrases to assist strangers' efforts to identify the runaway slaves. For example, in March 1749, Thomas Dansie described his slave Jack Spurlock as "a sensible Virginia born Negro Fellow" with "a Scar on his Face, occasion'd by a Burn, and large Whelks on his Back."¹⁵ Dansie did not attempt to dehumanize Jack, recognizing that the slave was "sensible" and that he spoke "good English," but he alluded to prior behavioral issues that reflected Jack's dissatisfaction as a slave.¹⁶ In addition, in February 1768, John Smith offered a description of "about 5 feet six inches high" and "about 50 years old" for "a Negro man named Mann."¹⁷ Like Dansie, Smith did not dehumanize his slave; he explained that Mann gave "very sensible answers," which either alluded to Mann's ability to speak thoughtfully or Mann's mastery of the English language, which enabled the listener to understand him.¹⁸ Mann also had "a slit in one of his ears," a physical marking that was obtained either voluntarily, possibly as part of a cultural tradition, or by force, resulting from a punishment of some sort.¹⁹ In March 1779, David Jones, a man somehow affiliated with the hospital in York garrison, described his runaway slave, Will, as "a Virginia born negro man...about 23 or 24 years of age, about 5 feet 10 inches high, [and] very stout made."²⁰ Jones also shared that Will was "a very good cooper" who was "very apt to stammer when surprised or questioned sharp," and he had "a lump in the bend of his arm, occasioned by bleeding."²¹ After reading this description, one could determine

¹² Drew Gilpin Faust, "Culture, Conflict, and Community: The Meaning of Power on an Ante-Bellum Plantation," *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Autumn, 1980), 84.

¹³ Faust, "Culture, Conflict, and Community," 83.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹⁵ Dansie, Advertisement in *Maryland Gazette*, March 15, 1749.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Smith, Advertisement in *Virginia Gazette*, February 4, 1768.

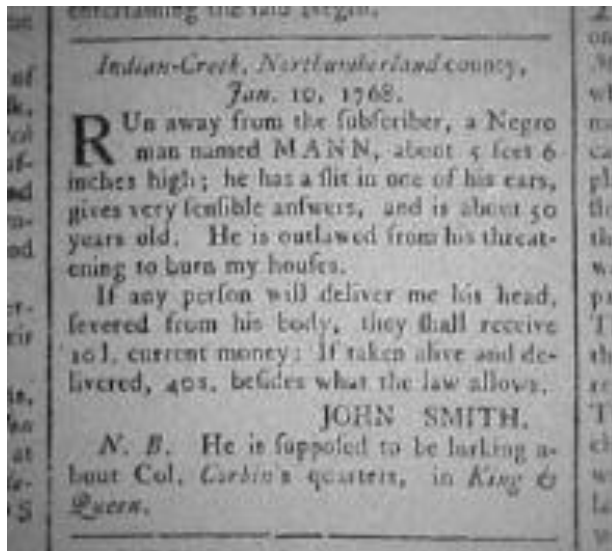
¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Jones, Advertisement in *Virginia Gazette* (Dixon & Nicolson), Williamsburg, March 12, 1779.

²¹ *Ibid.*

that Will was good at his trade and nervous around authority figures. Additionally, the description of the “lump in the bend of his arm” provided a unique identifying marker that may have aided in Will’s recapture.²² Furthermore, John Woodlief, Sr., not only offered identifying physical attributes of his slave Bob, such as “of a brownish Complexion upwards of six Feet high, about fifty Years old, bow-kneed...[with] a long Visage, a Roman Nose, and one of his upper fore Teeth [was] out,” but also included descriptions of the clothing Bob wore, which, if detailed enough, could have aided in the runaway’s capture.²³ Many of these descriptions were flimsy at best, since there were many men of a similar age, height, and complexion; therefore, proper identification depended primarily on scars and other physical markings, which may have encouraged the masters to punish the enslaved by branding, a strategy with dual value, not only for deterrent punishment but also for easier identification of their property. Recorded examples of the practice of branding appear in a variety of slave ads other than the eight that stressed that masters wanted the runaways back dead or alive: In 1766, Hardin Perkins describes the “HUP,” which were probably his initials, branded on the cheek of his runaway slave, Guy, as an identifying marker, revealing the white master’s desire to make his ownership of Guy visible to the community in much the same manner and for a similar reason as ranchers branded their cattle.²⁴



John Smith’s advertisement for the runaway Mann. Advertisement in the *Virginia Gazette*, February 4, 1768.

As evidenced in the eight runaway slave ads, another strategy of masters was to advise their readers of the locations of the runaway slaves’ families or details pertaining to their past owners in an attempt to pinpoint the runaways’ destinations. John Wormeley and John Smith had heard rumors of the runaways’ whereabouts and included them in their ads: Wormeley stated that his slave Charles was “suppos’d to be at Hampton or James-Town,” and Smith reported that his slave Mann may have been “lurking about Col. Corbin's quarters, in King & Queen [County].”²⁵ John Holt had been informed that

²² Ibid.

²³ Woodlief, Sr., Advertisement in *Virginia Gazette*, April 29, 1773.

²⁴ Hardin Perkins, Advertisement in *Virginia Gazette*, August 1, 1766, *The Geography of Slavery*, <http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/gos/search/relatedAd.php?adFile=rg66.xml&adId=v1766080185>

²⁵ Smith, Advertisement in *Virginia Gazette*, February 4, 1768.

Wormeley, Advertisement in *Virginia Gazette* (Hunter), Williamsburg, May 30, 1751.

his slave George was “somewhere about” the Long Bridge or the “Four-Mile Creek” area, and had “hire[d] himself as a freeman to work on vessels.”²⁶ In addition, Holt divulged that George was a “very good sawyer, and clapboard carpenter,” so, by offering details about George’s talents and the rumors he heard, Holt hoped to alert the areas’ citizenry who either employed those craftsmen or required their services to watch for his escaped slave. David Jones felt it important to discuss Will’s past: Jones wrote, “He formerly belonged to William Powell in Warwick county [*sic*],...lived in Lancaster, at ‘squire Bristow’s’ quarter, [was] well acquainted in Gloucester,...[had] a pass, and endeavor[ed] to pass for a free man.”²⁷ Will had a pass, so he had probably grown accustomed to having some measure of independence as he traveled and handled himself accordingly, similar to the manner in which free men behaved; plus, he was familiar with several places and presumably had contacts who might be willing to help him in each. Jones wanted everyone in those areas to know that, if Will was there, there was a monetary reward and the runaway should be apprehended. Likewise, John Woodlief, Sr., wanted someone to help him regain custody of his slave Bob; he revealed to readers that Bob had “a Wife at Mr. John Nelson’s in Louisa” and suggested that the slave was being “harboured by some of his Negroes.”²⁸ White masters, like Woodlief, recognized the familial bonds of those they enslaved only when it suited them to do so. When masters wanted to attempt to control their slaves, they would often threaten to sell or separate the loved ones as a means of quelling resistance and exerting their control. The existence of the runaway ad proves that Woodlief was unsuccessful in his negotiations of power distribution with Bob; Woodlief sought to regain his power by exposing and exploiting Bob’s emotional ties with his wife, who was physically removed from him.

Not only did Woodlief exploit Bob’s marital status, which was not legally recognized or respected within the framework of the slave-owning society, but he also disclosed a feeling of derision for white individuals who did not support the societal constructions of such a society. Woodlief wrote, “I suppose some evil disposed Person [gave Bob] a Pass, that he [might] pass for a Freeman.”²⁹ This seems like a strange thing to say to his readers when Woodlief actually needed their assistance; such dependence might have been a bitter pill to swallow for a plantation owner. Apparently, Woodlief felt it significant to inform his audience that he did not entirely trust them to uphold the laws of the society. Perhaps offering a public excuse for Bob’s successful escape was a means of maintaining his reputation as a successful master in his community, or the statement was a mild warning to anyone tempted to deviate from the rules regarding runaways, ensuring them that he was not unaware of what might have occurred to enable Bob to slip away. Either way, there was a notable, surprising discord between the white master and his predominately white audience. Moreover, Woodlief is not the only master to exhibit the tension between himself and the population of the society in which he operated. Jones blatantly warned the public not to assist his runaway slave; he stated, “ALL persons are forewarned from harbouring the said fellow [Will], as they will be

²⁶ Holt, Advertisement in *Virginia Gazette or American Advertiser* (Hayes), Richmond, June 28, 1783.

²⁷ Jones, Advertisement in *Virginia Gazette* (Dixon & Nicolson), Williamsburg, March 12, 1779.

²⁸ Woodlief, Sr., Advertisement in *Virginia Gazette*, April 29, 1773.

²⁹ Woodlief, Sr., Advertisement in *Virginia Gazette*, April 29, 1773.

punished to the utmost rigour of the law.”³⁰ Jones’s emphasis on the word “all” signified that the white master would stand against anyone who tampered with his claim of ownership of Will, alluding to the empowerment of Jones to enforce the laws governing runaways. The law was on Jones’s side, and he was not hesitant to utilize that power. However, the fact that he felt the warning was necessary implies that there were deviants within the society who disagreed with its restrictions. Masters might benefit from the laws, but their supremacy within that society was not necessarily supported by other whites in their communities. As a result, some masters, like Jones and to some extent Woodlief, felt it necessary to confront those who might not comply with the mandates of their social hierarchy with warnings and threats, even as they asked those same readers of their advertisements for help. So, a tension existed in that society that white masters tried to confront openly using societally sanctioned laws as a resource or to overcome by promising monetary rewards. Therefore, not only were the plantation owners in the process of power negotiations with those they enslaved from within their ascribed roles, but also those masters were actively engaging local citizens of every class through their advertisements, negotiating their resources in a fluid process that originated from vulnerability. They had lost control of their slaves, and that social deviance would not be eradicated without outside assistance. Indeed, white masters like Dansie, Jones, Woodlief, Wormeley, Smith, Holt, Floyd, and Batte pooled varying resources—accurate descriptions of the runaways, the family history of the runaways, warnings that the law is on their side, and money—into personalized strategies, all meant to inspire their community to support their crumbling veneer of dominance.

The readers of those eight “dead or alive” runaway slave advertisements had several options: they could do nothing; they could assist the slaves and face the penalties enforced by the owner if caught; they could capture the slave, return him to his owner, and collect the reward; or they could kill the slave, give the master the disembodied head, and collect the reward. Regardless of which choice they made, the public knew that the plantation owners who published runaway slave ads had not been successful in legitimizing their dominance in at least one situation. The citizens knew they could respond to the masters’ requests in compliance with their individual moral standards—thereby revealing to the public how they felt about the institution of slavery—or they were motivated to capitalize on an opportunity to better their own financial situations at the plantation owners’ expense.

Similarly, as masters tried to legitimize and reestablish their dominance publicly with the assistance of their peers, the advertisements they wrote disclosed some of the measures they took to quell their rebellious slaves’ efforts to resist. As the white masters’ desperation to make African Americans submit to subordinate positions within the slave society increased, the degree of violence meted out to slaves increased too. Many masters branded, whipped, or physically burdened the enslaved with iron shackles and collars, which served the dual purposes of disciplining deviant slaves and marking them for easier identification if they ran away. Finally, a few masters, like the eight who advertised for the return of their slaves’ severed heads, resorted to committing or arranging murders, acts of supreme violence.

³⁰ Jones, Advertisement in *Virginia Gazette* (Dixon & Nicolson), March 12, 1779.

Although none of the eight masters discussed in this analysis mentioned using iron shackles or collars in their ads, other masters did. In the 1750s, two masters, William Pickett and Peter Jefferson, admitted to using iron collars to physically suppress their slaves' attempts to gain more power in their relationships.³¹ Pickett wrote that his slave, John Saunders, "had on, when he went away, an Iron collar about his Neck, with which he could not have travelled; therefore it [was] supposed some evil-disposed Person [took] it off," which was similar to Woodlief's statement in 1773.³² The problem of "evil-disposed" people seemed to persist throughout the years, which was further proof of tension between divergent social attitudes in a society that did not wholeheartedly support plantation owners' overall entitlement to supreme mastery.

On the next level of the spectrum of violence in the runaway slave ads, masters branded enslaved African Americans who questioned their masters' authority or misbehaved in some other manner that threatened their masters' positions of power. Dansie and Woodlief both informed their readers that their slaves had been burned, although neither specified if the burns were inflicted intentionally.³³ However, in 1792, Wade Mosby described his "mulatto fellow," Davy, as "very impertinent, and...branded on one of his jaws by his former master for [that] fault, with the letter M," which demonstrates that such practices occurred as a form of punishment.³⁴ It is interesting that Mosby felt it important to pay more for each word necessary to communicate that the inflicted burn was not his doing. Perhaps his audience would not be inclined to help a cruel master who was too heavy-handed with his slaves, so Mosby sought to avoid that type of negative public characterization.

In addition, three of the eight masters who wanted their slaves back dead or alive informed their readers that the runaways had been whipped prior to their escapes. Dansie and Jones both referred to the scars on their slaves' backs. Dansie described his slave Jack Spurlock as having "Large Whelks on his back," or scars from being whipped, which became identifying markings.³⁵ Moreover, Jones wrote that Will had "several marks on his shoulders, occasioned by whipping [sic]."³⁶ As their advertisements portrayed, Dansie and Jones either used the whip to physically beat slaves into submission or ordered someone else to do the deed for them; regardless of who wielded the whip, the violence was used to maintain control over enslaved people. Equally important, in 1771, Henry

³¹ William Pickett, Advertisement in *Virginia Gazette* (Hunter), Williamsburg, September 2, 1757. *The Geography of Slavery*, <http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/gos/search/relatedAd.php?adFile=rg57.xml&adId=v1757090143>

Peter Jefferson, Advertisement in *Virginia Gazette* (Hunter), Williamsburg, November 7, 1751. *The Geography of Slavery*, <http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/gos/search/relatedAd.php?adFile=rg51.xml&adId=v1751100092>

³² Pickett, Advertisement in *Virginia Gazette* (Hunter), Williamsburg, September 2, 1757.

Woodlief, Sr., Advertisement in *Virginia Gazette*, April 29, 1773.

³³ Dansie, Advertisement in *Maryland Gazette*, March 15, 1749.

Woodlief, Sr., Advertisement in *Virginia Gazette*, April 29, 1773.

³⁴ Wade Mosby, Advertisement in *Virginia Gazette* and *General Advertiser*, February 22, 1792, *The Geography of Slavery*, <http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/gos/search/relatedAd.php?adFile=vg1792.xml&adId=v1792020027>

³⁵ Dansie, Advertisement in *Maryland Gazette*, March 15, 1749.

³⁶ Jones, Advertisement in *Virginia Gazette* (Dixon & Nicolson), March 12, 1779.

Batte stated that his slave Will had “been much whipped for the Crime he committed, and expect[ed] to be hanged if taken,” thereby acknowledging that Will might be dangerous—he literally was running to save his life—and admonishing the white community to secure the slave well if they caught him.³⁷ Will’s crime, according to Batte, was thievery; supposedly he stole some items from Batte’s store. However, from Will’s point of view, the slave probably believed he was only taking what was his due for his labor.³⁸ Nevertheless, Batte was of the opinion that Will’s attempt to gain more from their association overstepped the bounds of appropriate negotiation for power. As a result, Batte displayed the behavior of an insulted, vulnerable master who sought vengeance for Will’s audacious, socially deviant behavior. It is probable that Batte whipped Will not only for punishment, but as an outlet for Batte’s aggression and a public display of his dominance too. Furthermore, Batte let it be commonly known that Will was to be hanged if returned, perhaps because whipping the slave did not satisfy Batte’s injured pride. Murdering a person is the ultimate act of violence against the individual, but the act becomes more heinous when the murder is planned and implemented as a means of exerting control over the people who relate with the murdered victim, thus victimizing all who witness the example.

Dansie, Jones, Batte, Wormeley, Smith, Floyd, Woodlief, and Holt all wanted and were willing to pay to have the runaways returned to them dead or alive. None were willing to pay more for their property to be returned alive rather than dead, but Dansie, Batte, and Jones did place the same monetary reward amount on the return of their runaway slaves whether dead or alive. In 1749, after his slave Jack had been missing for almost a year, Dansie wrote, “Whoever brings the said Negro, dead or alive, to me...shall receive Two PISTOLES Reward.”³⁹ Batte declared that he would give ten pounds to anyone who returned Will to him, and “TEN POUNDS Reward for [Will’s] Head, if separated from his Body,” emphasizing the monetary amounts in all capital letters to draw his readers’ eyes to them first.⁴⁰ Finally, in 1779, Jones stated, “A reward of ONE HUNDRED DOLLARS will be given on delivery of the said negro (dead or alive) to Mr. David Jones, at the hospital in York garrison.”⁴¹ Jones mentions the phrase “dead or alive” in a parenthetical afterthought; his slave’s condition did not seem to be relevant to him. Jones also utilized capital letters to emphasize the monetary gain that was available to the person who succeeded in apprehending his slave.

The remaining five masters—Wormeley, Smith, Woodlief, Holt, and Floyd—offered more money for their slaves’ severed heads than for the return of the live runaways. For example, in pursuit of his runaway slave Charles, Charles Floyd offered his readers “a reward of fifteen pounds for [Charles’s] head, severed from his body, or ten pounds if brought alive.”⁴² The slave Charles, a “Virginia born Negro” who was a “sawyer and shoemaker by trade,” had previously run away from Floyd on February 16,

³⁷ Batte, Advertisement in *Virginia Gazette*, February 7, 1771.

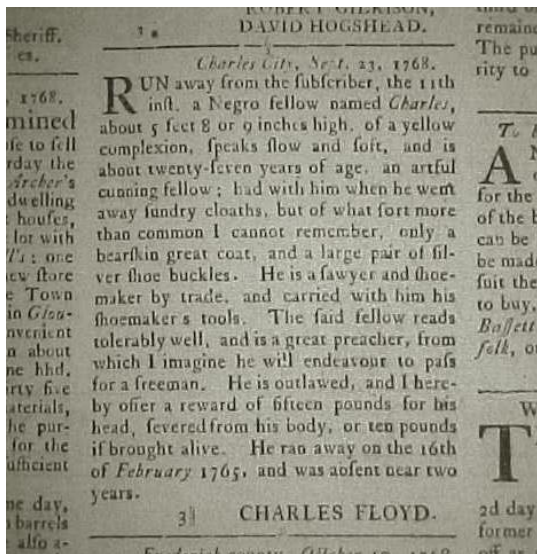
³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Dansie, Advertisement in *Maryland Gazette*, March 15, 1749.

⁴⁰ Batte, Advertisement in *Virginia Gazette*, February 7, 1771.

⁴¹ Jones, Advertisement in *Virginia Gazette* (Dixon & Nicolson), March 12, 1779.

⁴² Floyd, Advertisement in *Virginia Gazette* (Rind), Williamsburg, October 27, 1768.



Charles Floyd’s 1768 advertisement. in the *Virginia Gazette* (Rind), Williamsburg, October 27, 1768.

than the ten pounds promised if his slave was returned to him alive.⁴³ Although Charles was outlawed two years prior to the final ad, it was only after his second runaway attempt that Floyd placed a higher value on his decapitated head than his living person. Murder had become Floyd’s last resort as a means of control. Likewise, Wormeley, Smith, Woodlief, and Holt attempted to ensure that, when and if the runaway slaves were captured, it would be just the severed heads that were returned.

At that point in the master-slave relationship, all negotiations had ceased; the masters were not only ready to lose their initial investments of their slaves’ purchase prices, but were also willing to pay high prices for other people to kill the runaways and return their murdered slaves’ heads to them. For whatever reason, the runaway slaves named in those ads were too threatening to their masters, too rebellious against their socially enforced oppression, to be permitted back into plantation life. Instead, those eight masters wanted their dominance fully restored and the deviant runaways destroyed. Despite the economic irrationality of the situation, those white masters were willing to use one of their resources—money—to obtain proof of their rebellious slaves’ deaths—their heads—and, with that proof, achieve closure. Furthermore, since most of those masters wanted to maintain an outward appearance of being patriarchal benefactors to their other slaves, having the runaways’ heads returned to them also offered an

1765, and “was absent near two years.”⁴³ In the first ad, published in May 1766, Floyd described the blankets, clothing, and shoes the runaway took with him, labeled him “outlawed,” and promised to give a reward of five pounds to anyone who located Charles in Virginia, or ten pounds to anyone who returned him from farther away.⁴⁴ However, in the advertisement printed in October 1768, Floyd reported that Charles was “an artful cunning fellow” and “a great preacher,” who took “a bearskin great coat, and a large pair of silver shoe buckles” with him when he ran away.⁴⁵ Floyd also disclosed Charles’s past runaway experience, stated again that the slave was “outlawed,” and offered a higher reward—fifteen pounds—for Charles’s “head, severed from his body”

⁴³ Charles Floyd, Advertisement in *Virginia Gazette* (Rind), Williamsburg, May 2, 1766, *The Geography of Slavery*, <http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/gos/search/relatedAd.php?adFile=rg66.xml&adId=v1766050172>

Floyd, Advertisement in *Virginia Gazette* (Rind), Williamsburg, October 27, 1768.

⁴⁴ Floyd, Advertisement in *Virginia Gazette* (Rind), Williamsburg, May 2, 1766.

⁴⁵ Floyd, Advertisement in *Virginia Gazette* (Rind), Williamsburg, October 27, 1768.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

opportunity to support that persona: Because the masters were not the ones who killed the runaways personally, slaveholders could present themselves as ‘fatherly’ caretakers, showing their other enslaved individuals the bodiless heads as an example of what happened to those who resisted the rules of the society and tried to go North. Consequently, the plantation’s remaining slave population could be frightened into subordination. Hence, the money for the decapitated heads was actually an investment if it helped the masters, who had already been proven vulnerable by the slaves’ escapes, nonetheless maintain an appearance of dominance over those who remained enslaved. However, the fact that some white masters considered themselves father figures did not mean that the enslaved people held the same view. In fact, the existence of a multitude of runaway slave advertisements proves that many slaves were dissatisfied with their masters and the oppressive restrictions of the slave society.

Although slaveholders were powerful, their dominance was never guaranteed and they had to assess the conditions around them, use their resources, and strategize to maintain their precarious position at the top of the social hierarchy of the eighteenth century. Faust was correct in her assessment that within every relationship, “[e]ach participant confronts the other with demands and expectations, seeking continually to enhance his own power within the framework of their interaction.”⁴⁷ John Wormeley, John Smith, Charles Floyd, John Woodlief, Sr., John Holt, Thomas Dansie, Henry Batte, and David Jones all had to negotiate their positions of power with those they enslaved and, when the resistance they met outweighed their control and slaves ran away, they composed advertisements in which they attempted to publicly disguise their vulnerability, while mustering all their resources to gain their communities’ support.

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⁴⁷ Faust, “Culture, Conflict, and Community,” 84.

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