Fugitivity and self-liberation

Tashia and I are in the basement of the American Antiquarian Society on a recent afternoon. They walk me over me to a huddle of cubicles where a half dozen of their colleagues pore through what look like ancient, crumbling tomes, set carefully between foam cradles under adjustable LED lamps.

These aren't, as appearances suggest, codexes of dark arcana—not quite. They're bound collections of centuries-old American newspapers. These researchers are scouring them for one particular feature: runaway slave advertisements.

Before slavery was abolitheyd in this country, the Fourth Estate was heavy into the business of re-connecting property owners with their missing human property.

Tashia grabs a particularly decrepit volume—1818-1819 issues of *The Daily National Intelligencer*—and carefully places it between the wedges on their desk. Before opening it, they tells me to grab a mask from a nearby supply shelf. The bound collections, some sitting in the AAS archives untouched for decades, contain "all sorts of weird ancient mold," they says, and people tend to come down with some manner of severe sinus pain.

As they gently pry it open, I ask if they're afraid it'll just crumble on the spot. "Oh, it will."

Off the clock at this particular time, Tashia's giving me a small snapshot of what they and their colleagues have been doing for months now in four-hour shifts. Tashia opens to a page, scanning the columns of the broadsheet with their finger. They tell me they're looking for keywords like "notice," "sheriff sell," "was committed"—the most obvious one being "reward."

It doesn't take long to find one. Tashia taps on a short paragraph entry: "This is Nell, he was committed to jail." The entry offers a description: 5 foot 8 and a half, belonging to one Rebecca Wheems. Whichever jail Nell happened to be in had submitted the entry so that Rebecca Wheems could come reclaim her property.

When Tashia or one of their colleagues finds a runaway slave ad like this, they take a picture with their phone and log it into a spreadsheet on their laptop. The end result of this process, repeated thousands of times over in archives like the AAS around the country, is the Freedom On The Move database, a website that compiles "thousands of stories of resistance that have never been accessible in one place."

These ads now serve a purpose much different from those the newspapers and the jailers and the aggrieved property owners first intended. "Taken collectively, the ads constitute a detailed, concise, and rare source of information about the experiences of enslaved people," the website reads. Researchers at several universities (Cornell, Ohio State, and the Universities of New Orleans, Alabama, and Kentucky).

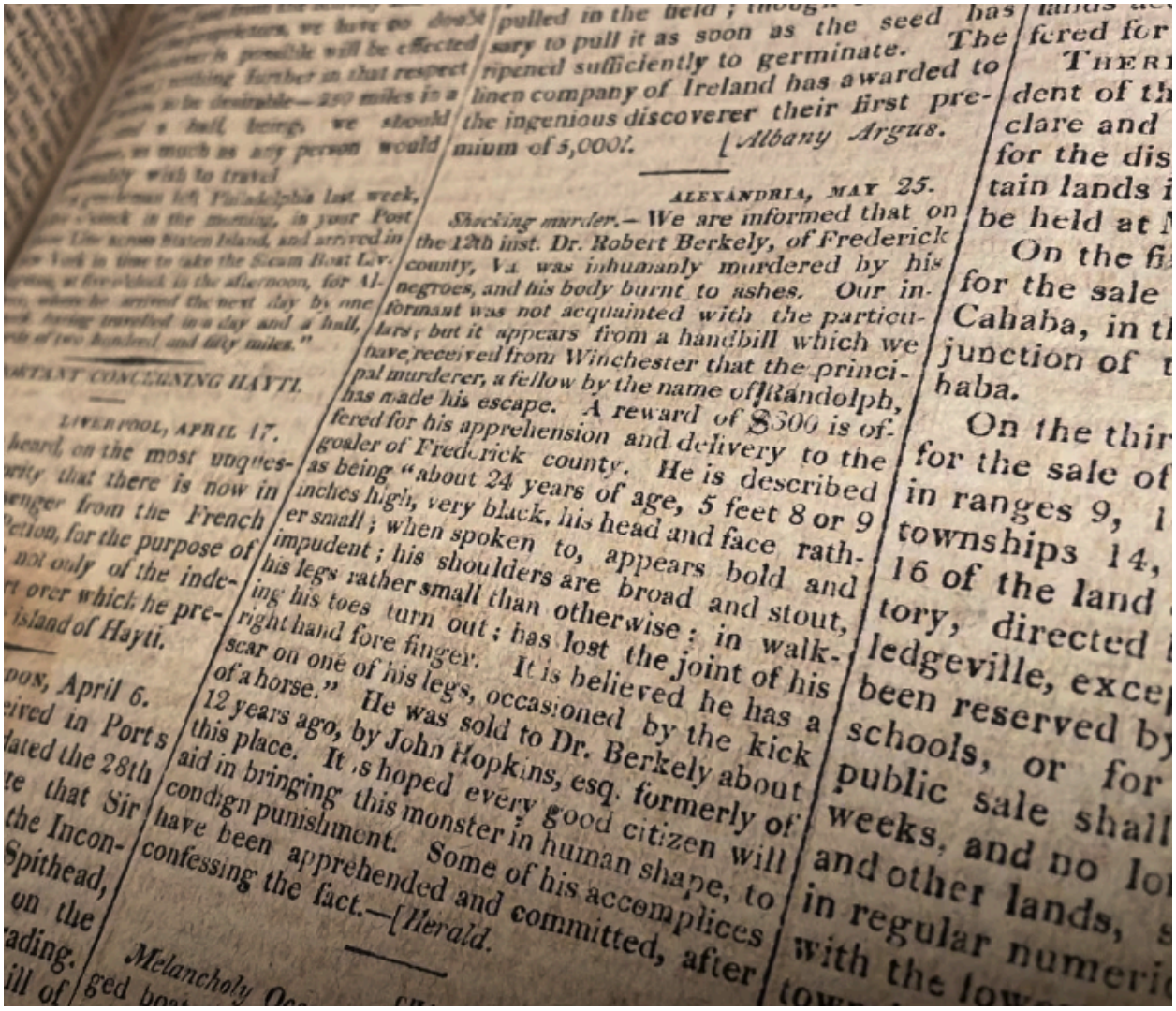
To date, the project has compiled roughly 32,000 runaway slave ads, all available in a database on the website. They estimate there are 200,000 or so ads to uncover, at least according to their press release. In any case, much more work to do by people like Tashia in basements like that of the AAS.

The AAS has emerged as a central hub for Freedom on the Move—the "Green Building" on Park Ave that everyone drives by but almost no one goes in is home to some 2.5 million newspapers, most of which are pre-Civil War and a good number of which are "only known copy" status. It's one of the best collections in the entire country—a vast treasure trove of historical primary source material ironically located in one of the country's least literate & most history-adverse (or, at least, agnostic) cities (citation not needed).

It was a treat to see how this work gets done, right here in our backyard. More later, but I met Tashia by a combination of pure chance and the "small world" effect produced by the relative few number of bars in this city worth patronizing. A recent graduate of Duke University, Tashia's from North Carolina, and only in Worcester this summer because that's where the work happens to be. They hold a degree in African American Studies from Duke, where the Dismal Swamp was one of their primary research subjects.

At their basement cubicle in the AAS, Tashia lets me in on a few tips and tricks. A big one, with major throughlines to the present day: "Always check the crime section." Sometimes, the ads are tucked in news stories. Gently pulling over a few pages, they show me one they found the

other day. “Like this,” they say, tapping an entry headlined “Shocking murder.” (“Sensationalism has always been a thing with newspapers,” they say.)



pulled in the field ; ... has
sary to pull it as soon as the seed
ripened sufficiently to germinate. The
linen company of Ireland has awarded to
the ingenious discoverer their first pre-
mium of 5,000l. [Albany Argus.

ALEXANDRIA, MAY 25.

Shocking murder.—We are informed that on the 12th inst. Dr. Robert Berkely, of Frederick county, Va. was inhumanly murdered by his negroes, and his body burnt to ashes. Our informant was not acquainted with the particulars; but it appears from a handbill which we have received from Winchester that the principal murderer, a fellow by the name of Randolph, has made his escape. A reward of $300 is offered for his apprehension and delivery to the goaler of Frederick county. He is described as being "about 24 years of age, 5 feet 8 or 9 inches high, very black, his head and face rather small; when spoken to, appears bold and impudent; his shoulders are broad and stout, his legs rather small than otherwise: in walking his toes turn out; has lost the joint of his right hand fore finger. It is believed he has a scar on one of his legs, occasioned by the kick of a horse." He was sold to Dr. Berkely about 12 years ago, by John Hopkins, esq. formerly of this place. It is hoped every good citizen will aid in bringing this monster in human shape, to condign punishment. Some of his accomplices have been apprehended and committed, after confessing the fact.—[Herald.

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“Here an enslaved man murdered his enslaver and then ran away which is kinda dark,” they say, “but it’s like an ad within this big sensationalist story...”

The man’s name is Randolph, the reward is $300, and the description includes that “his shoulders are broad and stout,” “in walking his toes turn out,” a lost joint, a scar. This is information about Randolph provided for the benefit of slave catchers. But it’s also the *only* information about Randolph in the historical record.

The newspaper writes, “It is hoped every good citizen will aid in bringing this monster in human shape, to condign (?) punishment.” (Nice to see the newspapers were just as objective back then.)

Finding a place where we won't disturb their colleagues, we sit down for an interview in a room used as a waiting area for tours. As Tashia speaks, they sits in front of some of the AAS's most prized possessions in well-lit shadow boxes. To the left of them is a lithograph of Phillis Wheatley Peters and an artful map of the Mississippi. The conversation quickly turns back to Randolph.

"I'm like, what did this guy do to where you wanted to murder him and burn him outside of the fact that he enslaved you and maybe your family before you and your family after you," they says. "I would say that's reason enough."

Randolph is just one of many people from the past Tashia has become acquainted with during this work. Another was Barbara.

"There was this woman named Barbara who was called the best cook in America. She's the best cook servant, whatever. He says, we need her back. And it's around the holidays that they're like, we need her back right now."

One of the most dynamic stories Tashia's come across is that of a man named Frisby. Honestly, it could be a novel.

In Tashia's research, Frisby kept appearing over and over, each time accruing a larger total reward sum.

"It eventually gets to 500 I think because he's been on the run for so long," they say.

Reading from one of his entries, Tashia recounts that Frisby escaped while "on the march" from Bowling Green, Virginia to Ohio. He's described as "very Black," the property of a colonel, 5 foot 8 and stout, 35 years of age with a few gray hairs. He was apprehended in Pennsylvania, put on a ship to New Orleans. He escaped the ship only to be caught again. Then he escaped again.

He may be in Pennsylvania or Maryland, the ad reads, and “he'll endeavor to pass as a free man and will no doubt produce documents made by himself for that purpose.”

At one moment, Tashia looks over at the lithograph of Wheatley—in script around the border of the image, it’s made quite clear that she is “servant to” a white man—and I think to myself that I’ll never be able to understand what work like this could mean to an African-American person. Genealogy is a thing I can take for granted, my ancestry consisting of immigrants from Ireland and Germany. Abused as they may have been, they were allowed their history. If they were ever written about is beyond me, but I can safely assume that, if they were, they had a personhood in the narrative. They were not de facto property.

Tashia recounts trying to help their grandmother look into their family history, and only being able to trace it back to 1910—“that’s 60 years after emancipation.”

“Any historian around African American history will tell you that the record keeping of enslaved people is very sparse and often incorrect,” they say.

And that’s exactly why the information collected here is important, and deserving of the time and attention to do it correctly (more on that later).

“And so I think it provides people a kind of look into these incredibly intimate details of people's lives and where they were and where they may have gone.”

It’s a cross reading of a fraught history—an attempt to pull the human out of something that is intentionally dehumanizing.

“Perception and ideas at this time are incredibly racist, and these people are perceiving human beings as their property. And there's militias who later turned into the American police force who are going out and chasing down these people.”

But it also reveals a complexity.

“So we know their ideas around race, but we also see ship captains who are harboring and taking people out of the South, or even to Europe or we see just different abolitionists. And I'm definitely not going to say abolitionists of the time loved Black people. A lot of abolitionists still were separatist and believed that white people were better than Black people, but didn't believe in the systems of slavery. But you see these situations where it's like, so-and-so was enticed away by a white man or stolen away, and there's no reason why he would want to leave.”

It raises a question, Tashia says: What are the abolitionist’s aims? And is said person even that—an abolitionist?

“So it’s assumed he had to have been tricked by this white man who guided him away. And then it becomes, even within that, it's like, oh, is it a slave catcher? Maliciously being like, ‘I'm going to take you to freedom,’ but actually just selling somebody for money, or is it actually an abolitionist coming in and stealing people away?”

One of the ideas the research has most complicated, Tashia told me, is fugitivity itself.

“I think people who burn down plantations, they're not going to burn down the plantation and hang around. They're definitely going to run off. But maybe you find the same person who burnt down this plantation ... and that they’re just people who are overcoming being captured and brought across the Atlantic.

“It’s about the autonomy to make the decision to steal back their own life rather than be enslaved.”

Ultimately, the research opens more questions into the lives of subjects than answers. Take, for example, the case of Barbara the cook.

“How can I piece together the histories that I know of myself and that I can find in these archives to create narratives of what could have happened? It's like exactly how Barbara got away is never turned into a narrative. I could infer using these historical documents and trying to piece them together. And that's a really important thing for me too, is Black folk having agency to learn and tell their own stories, even when the archives so often leaves our stories out. And how can we do that with care?”

Worcester is Liminal

This story only happened because Tashia went to Ralph’s one night and met my friend Dan, who works there, and Dan happened to be listening to a podcast about runaway slaves and so they got to talking. Dan gave Tashia my email address and they emailed me. Small world stuff.

So of course like any good local reporter I had to ask Tashia what they thought of the city.

For one:

“I think Worcester has too many cops. It has an incredibly inflated police budget, and I see where they're policing.”

Amen.

More than that, Worcester has a certain vibe, which Tashia calls “liminal.”

“Worcester feels liminal because it has the potential to be a really good city that could support its community. But I don't know, maybe that money's going into the cameras or the police budget, but the money's going somewhere to where you don't really see a community. I don't really feel like a community aspect in Worcester, except maybe when I go to Ralph's. And so I guess I'll plug Ralph’s right there. If I didn't have Ralph's, I think I'd be pretty miserable.”

That's a great slogan for Ralph's, if you ask me. "If not for Ralph's we'd be miserable."

Most importantly, they said, they have good hot dogs.

"Two hot dogs and a bag of chips for $5 is unheard of," they said.

Abrupt halt

After I was nearly done with this feature, I received an update that work at AAS would cease.

Apparently, project leadership at Cornell has decided to surreptitiously shelve the work after workers at the AAS collectively decided to withhold their research until certain demands were met. The workers expressed concerns about the ethics guiding the project and leadership at Cornell.

Tashia said they remain hopeful that the narrative contained in the bindings will have the opportunity to be explored and empower descendants.