

Name _____

Mr. Mullady

U.S. History

MARRONAGE

Enslaved people did many things to resist and escape bondage. One of the things they did was to run away from their masters. When slaves ran away they had five different options: to form their own independent societies, to assimilate into native groups, to pass off as free men, to return to the slave society because of lack of opportunity to stay free, or to die.

The larger independence societies were called **Maroon societies**. Formed in many parts of the New World, Maroon groups moved constantly to avoid being recaptured. Because of the size of the slave system, escaped slaves could form large self-governed groups. The places generally inhabited by maroons were areas where there was no significant aboriginal population, with enough territory and resources to support their population. These were mostly in the Southeast: the Carolina's, Virginia and Florida.

Another option for slaves was to hide amongst the native groups. Many Native American's would assist runaway slaves in hiding, by making them a part of their tribe.

Some slaves, especially Mulattos, could pass off as free men, and that would be their way of escape, living in society living with other free men.

If a slave decided to go visit a family member who did not live on the plantation he/she would leave and do the same as those who could not survive in the three previous situations, which would be to return to their master(s), continuing their lives of slavery. Their last resource, other than returning, would be death.

PETIT MARRONAGE

After the end of the War of 1812, the United States began to undergo a wealth of changes. In what could be characterized as a social revolution, almost every aspect of life was reviewed. One of the institutions most harshly scrutinized was that of slavery. A part of life in the south since its foundation, slavery began to reveal its dark side in the eighteenth century. As people began to look deeper, they began to see the maltreatment and poor conditions of those in bondage. Yet they also noticed that these slaves did not submit without resistance. Believed to have the minds of children, slaves did know their value in southern society, which had established a deep-rooted form of interdependency. Using the slaveholder's over-dependency to their advantage, slaves began to slowly exert

their rights. One way of doing so was known as petit marronage. This meant running away for short periods of time, to meet loved ones, and in hopes of altering their present relationship with their owners. Over time petit marronage, became an accepted aspect of slave life; it represented an acceptance of slavery, but allowed slaves voice their opinion and so helped maintain order in antebellum plantation life.

A. Causes

One of the greatest motivations for a slave to runaway was the impending bite of an overseer's whip. (Parker 179) Slaves were whipped indiscriminately and often quite viscusly. Most slave owners understood that even slaves had a threshold for pain, but acknowledged the need to maintaining order. Slaves understood this too, yet for some it remained a burden too great to bear. If a slave knew a whipping was forthcoming, he began to survey his options. More often than not, running away became the only choice. While away, the slave and his master were allowed time for their anger to subside. By keeping in touch with friends and family on the plantation, slaves could keep tabs regarding his master's temperament. With this information a slave could plan a timely return, which could mean a more lenient punishment or maybe none at all. The lure of this possibility was powerful, especially in the eyes of a slave awaiting punishment.

Another tactic used by runaway slaves to avoid the whip was to employ the aid of another white man. A runaway slave would approach another slave owner and tell tales of ill treatment or abuse. They would then return to the slave's plantation and both would plead for leniency (Genovese 656). One of the main results of this tactic was in the minds of the slaveholders. By turning to another slaveholder, the idea that slaves had the minds of children was reinforced. They would run away to other masters and complain of their treatment at home. For the sake of many slaves, it worked.

Nevertheless, slaves could not avoid every whipping. For many slaves this was an accepted fact of life, but for some it was unforgivable. With scars still fresh on their backs, these slaves would disappear into the woods. As one slaveholder commented about a recent runaway, "he had had enough, he would run away". (Blassingame 108) In this context, slaves used running away as a form of protest. Each runaway slave constituted lost labor, or even a work stoppage if the slave knew some type of trade. The less slaves an owner had the greater the effect of the exodus. Worst of all, if a slave did not return, it was the equivalent of lost property and lost profits. For this reason it behooved an owner to treat his slaves with some form of respect, and why petit marronage served such a great purpose for slaves.

Another cause for the temporary flights from the plantation was to protest or avoid work. (Parker 184) Historical data suggests that the increase in the number of runaway slaves in the spring and early fall meant that as labor increased so did dissent. (Parker 185) Although most slaves ran away alone, many who were hoping to protest or avoid work did so in large numbers. In what was the equivalent to a strike in a northern factory, a

mass exodus of slaves would make plantation work grind to a halt. In this respect slaves exercised a form of freedom, even though most times it was short lived. Failures of these runaway groups were well known in the south, some maroons serving as a further support to the argument of the inferiority of slaves. Yet for those groups who returned, their demands were usually met. A plantation owner, happy to see the return of his investments, would grant concessions and slave life would take hold again.

The greatest reason for slaves to runaway for short periods of time was to visit loved ones (Parker 202). Marriage and relationships played a large role in plantation life and were actually encouraged by slave owners. This of course led to the advent of inter-plantation relationships. In which case, those unable to obtain a pass from their masters would simply run away. Living off smuggled rations, these escapes became quite frequent yet accepted. In one county there were only 282 fugitives on record who endeavored to be reunited with family members, but this is undoubtedly a conservative figure. (Parker175) Many times, these slaves choose not to return to their plantation. In one instance, the wife of a slave lived in the nearby woods of a plantation and mothered three children there. ()

In this respect, short flights from the plantation provided an avenue for slaves to carry on a relationship. Wives would prepare feasts for their arriving husbands, and each meeting was considered a special occasion. In the antebellum south, slaves attempted to carry on a normal existence, while still under the restraints of their bondage. Petit marronage allowed them to do so.

Whatever the reason, runaway slaves were faced with a big decision when choosing to run away. Each master had a different reaction to those who returned. Over time, petit marronage became an aspect of slave life, but was only experienced by few. Yet it provided a temporary release of tension, and so was vital to maintaining order in antebellum plantation life.

Deterrents

In no way was running away an easy decision for a slave to make. Aside from leaving their families behind, runaways also faced great personal dangers. In a society where whites held so much power, only those adamant about freedom were willing take the risk. For the others, slave life was better than no life at all.

The first obstacle in the path of a runaway slave was the psychological barrier of plunging into the unknown. (Blassingame 111) Running away meant leaving behind your home, family, and friends for something you only knew existed through stories. Slaves had little geographic knowledge, no money, and the belief that every white man was his enemy. (Blassingame 111) No one knew what awaited them in the north, or if it was even worth the trip. Therefore each slave had to do a lot of thinking before ever deciding to run away.

Once a slave decided to leave the plantation, their first goal was to seek refuge, usually in

the woods. Nevertheless, the sounds of dogs usually followed suit. Those dogs were one of the slaveholder's best deterrents. (Genovese 652) Known to attack viscously and incessantly, their simple sound put fear in the hearts of runaways. This was because it meant that not far behind lurked the overseer, gun in hand. This system apprehended many runaways, who returned to the plantation for their lashings.

Yet there were occasions that runaway slaves avoided capture. If a slave could reach a natural refuge, he could rest before setting off again. The Dismal Swamp in Virginia and North Carolina was one such refuge. This natural six-hundred-square mile area was considered a sight for repose for runaway slaves, and where white man dared not search

For a runaway slave, this lull did not last very long. As the white man became less of an immediate threat, hunger and the environment began to take their toll. Slaves generally did not know how to catch their own food, and so once out in the country had no way to fend for themselves. Fires to keep warm and cook only attracted attention, so slaves had to face the biting cold. Many runaways visited nearby plantations for offerings, yet this too had a risk of recapture. (Parker 202) Other slaves would tell, or a white man might simply stumble upon a runaway's hiding place. The further the slave was from the plantations the safer he was, but this meant the loss of a vital food supply. For this reason a runaway had a better chance on the move. The sooner a slave reached freedom, the sooner he could once again feel safe.

GRAND MARRONAGE

The condition of black slaves in the American South during the first half of the nineteenth century was one of degradation and constant humiliation. Life for many was simply not worth living and escape to freedom was the only viable alternative. Indeed, the biggest deterrent to escape was the fear of the unknown. A slave, however, had to be willing to leave his family, friends, and familiar surroundings if he wanted to be free. In addition, a successful attempt required much preparation and substantial resources. (Genovese 650)

It took more than a simple desire to be free to escape. Many slaves lacked the elementary knowledge of geography and the appropriate means of transportation to have a reasonable chance of escaping. It was indeed a rare occasion when a slave was able to forge papers and calmly depart on a boat, train or stagecoach. Female slaves had even a smaller probability of success because they did not have the proper skills and physical strength, and their ties to children and family were much stronger. (Genovese 650)

Historical research indicates that less than a thousand slaves per year escaped to the North, Canada, or Mexico. Whippings appear to have been the primary motivation of most escape attempts. Sadistic masters at times became so unbearable that escape was the only alternative. The decision to escape was a very hard one to make because if the slave

was unsuccessful, the penalties were rather severe. Many slaveholders kept special hounds for the sole purpose of tracking down runaway slaves. The dogs struck terror into the slaves. Stories abounded of many of them being physically mutilated during their escapes by vicious dogs. Other masters employed professional slave catchers to assure that their "property" would not be stolen. These were usually poor whites who had limited employment opportunities. (Genovese 648)

Professional slave hunters not only used tracking dogs, but eventually developed their own unique techniques for finding runaway slaves. For example, the hunters carried birdshot (small bullets) so that they could catch the slaves without causing too much physical damage. This became common knowledge and one of the fleeing slaves was once caught wearing a homemade "bulletproof vest" stuffed with turkey feathers. The special care of the slave hunters did not remove the possibility that dogs could at times catch the runaways and tear them apart before they could intercede on their behalf. The masters did not do very much to eliminate this possibility, for they felt it gave the rest of the slaves something to think about. (Gorrell 50)

The closer slaves lived to towns and cities or to northern states, the greater the probability they had of escaping. With a little bit of help from slaves on other plantations and from sympathetic whites, some of them were able to obtain freedom. Knowing this, white southerners made a concerted effort to limit the probabilities of escape from border regions, as they felt that too many successes would embolden many other slaves to attempt similar efforts. The constant discussion of the subject of escape led Samuel A. Cartwright, a well-known southern ideologue, to say that blacks suffered from drapetomania, a compulsion to run away from home. (Genovese 650)

In reality, escape attempts were only efforts to maintain, or attempt to reestablish, the human dignity that had been taken from a people enslaved for many years in inhuman conditions. These were slaves who chose freedom as an alternative to enslavement, no matter what the risks involved. In addition, escape attempts also reflected the fact that an insurrection by blacks in the South had almost zero probability of success. It was, therefore, the only reasonable action to be taken under the circumstances. (Genovese 657)

Henry Brown, a Virginia slave, in his great desire to flee to freedom, devised a very original escape plan. He convinced a friend to ship him from Richmond to Philadelphia in a box two feet, eight inches deep by three feet long. Although the box was marked "This side up with care," he often found himself upside down on the long journey. One time, he was upside down for twenty miles and the veins in his temples became swollen until he could no longer take the pain. When he finally arrived in Philadelphia twenty-six hours later, he soon became known as Henry "Box" Brown. (Cosner 82)

Slaves were allowed to travel alone only if they had a pass from their master. The pass had to be displayed whenever slaves left the confines of the plantation. Failure to follow this regulation often led to serious penalties. The rod was seldom spared and the physical

abuse of slaves was common both in the South and in the North. Whites who assisted slaves also faced severe penalties. These security measures were an attempt to keep escapes, such as Brown's, to a bare minimum. (Haskins 107)

Runaway slaves encountered their greatest assistance from abolitionists who had founded the "Underground Railroad," a loose organization of safe houses owned by white abolitionists to help them escape. The idea that white northerners would begin to assist blacks in large numbers began to terrify white southerners. The slaves were supposedly hid by day and moved from one hiding place to another at night in violation of fugitive slave laws that had been passed from at least 1793. It was not a laughing matter that one of the biggest organizers of this underground operation was a black former slave, Harriet Tubman. (Burns 43)

There were no metal tracks in the Underground Railroad; it moved along a fellowship of goodwill and sympathy. The conductors were people who met fugitive slaves-passengers-and guided them along their way. The stations were places where runaways could stop and rest and get some help and were run by "stationmasters." Conductors and stationmasters were often free blacks or poor farmers, but they could also be wealthy, well-known citizens. The Underground Railroad never really functioned in the Deep South-there just weren't enough sympathizers there, and anyone caught helping runaways was likely to be savagely punished. (Gorrell 63)

Most runaways remained in the South. Many of them would often runaway in groups to undeveloped areas in attempts to establish self-sufficient colonies or villages similar to the ones they had known in Africa. Florida was a common destination. It had an Indian population that could provide some aid and it had a reputation as a haven for runaways. Once the United States acquired Florida, this ceased to be a real option for most slaves.

Escape, for most slaves, was a highly dangerous activity which had to be attempted individually and without much assistance from others. To be successful, slaves had to combat professional bounty hunters, dogs, pangs of hunger, bloodthirsty wildcats, wolves and white men. The fear of punishment, was also a big consideration. Extreme punishment, and ridicule from other slaves and the loss of whatever little freedom slaves had was also a big consideration. Thus, when slaves attempted an escape, it reflected a loss of all hope for a better life and a feeling that there was nothing to be lost but a life of slavery, degradation, and constant humiliation.

Name _____

Period

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Date

After reading and marking up the handout on Marronage and Petit Marronage answer the following questions.

What were Maroon Societies?

Where were they located?

List the options that an escaped slave had.

Petite Marronage

How would a slave know when to return to the plantation?

How could another plantation owner help a slave avoid being whipped?

How were short run-aways similar to strikes?

What was the common reason for a slave to leave the plantation for a short period of time?

Grand Marronage

Where did some slaves manage to escape? Why those locations?

Who were most often hired as slave hunters? What weapons did they use? Why?

What do escape attempts show about the odds of the success of a slave insurrection (rebellion)?

What Southern state became a hide away for runaway slaves? Why?