



The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

TEACHER INSTITUTE

Colonial Slavery: Primary Sources

Introduction:

Slavery was institutionalized in the colony of Virginia between 1640 and 1662 primarily through laws enacted by the Virginia Assembly and approved by the Royal Governor and the English monarch. The establishment and codification of the system of slavery in Virginia became the model for the other colonies.

Beyond this basic framework, little is included in history books about slavery during this formative period. Historians tend, instead, to concentrate on the period of the abolition movement, focusing on the activities of the abolitionists. It is, however, reasonable to conclude that the harsh slave codes enacted in southern colonies and, later, in other states must have been developed in response to events that occurred in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Nevertheless, as a result of the lack of information concerning the reality of slavery during the colonial period, three basic myths have been perpetuated: 1) enslavers were benevolent masters whose best interests were served through maintaining and protecting the health and welfare of the enslaved people; 2) enslaved people, for whatever reasons, chose not to resist their own enslavement; and 3) enslaved people were unskilled laborers who knew only how to till the soil.

Although history books may do little to debunk these myths, the *Virginia Gazette*, a newspaper published in Virginia's colonial capital of Williamsburg during the eighteenth century, does just that. The advertisements for the return of freedom-seeking enslaved people placed in the *Virginia Gazette* by enslavers discredit each of these popular beliefs about slavery during the colonial period.

Language and Terminology:

When working with primary sources, it is important to understand the language and terminology used within the context of the time in which the source was created. While definitions may remain the same over time, their meanings may change in any given lexicon. Three terms found commonly in period sources that need contextualization for this lesson are “mulatto,” “negro,” and “slave.”

In this lesson you will see the term “mulatto.” The term mulatto at the time refers to a multiracial person, most often of African and European descent. We know this term to be offensive today and therefore only use it in the context of a primary source. The term “negro” was a commonly used noun during this period. At the time it was not intended as an insult, simply as a designation of color; negro is the Latin term for black. We only use this term in the context of a primary source.

The word “slave” is a noun indicating that being enslaved was the defining characteristic of a person’s identity. The adjective enslaved is used to describe someone’s place in society, rather than defining them by their position. Therefore, when we refer to these individuals as enslaved persons, not as slaves, we return agency to their lives and choices.

We have not removed or replaced these terms in primary sources. To do so is rewriting history, and not only compromises the source, but also marginalizes the people whose story is being told.

Objectives:

As a result of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Read and interpret eighteenth-century documents.
- Make inferences about the nature and characteristics of the system of slavery in eighteenth-century Virginia.
- Develop a comprehensive picture of slavery in eighteenth-century Virginia.

Materials:

- Slavery and the Law in Virginia
- Focus Question Worksheet (one copy for each student)
- Transcriptions of *Virginia Gazette* Self-Liberation Advertisements (one copy per group)

Setting the Stage:

This lesson is best completed within a unit on colonial America in which the system of slavery has already been addressed to some degree. Prepare for this lesson by reading the “Slavery and the Law in Virginia” timeline on the development of slavery.

Discuss with students their concept of what the system of slavery was like in the American colonies. After discussion, inform the students that this lesson will provide them with a snapshot of the system of slavery in eighteenth-century Virginia from primary sources.

Strategy:

1. Divide the class into groups of four to five students. Assign each group its focus question as follows:

Group 1 Focus Question		
WHAT SKILLS DID ENSLAVED PEOPLE POSSESS?		
Enslaved people/ <i>Virginia Gazette</i> reference	Skill	Why would this skill be important during the colonial period?

Group 2 Focus Question		
HOW DID ENSLAVERS TREAT ENSLAVED PEOPLE?		
Enslaver/ <i>Virginia Gazette</i> reference	Specific behaviors toward enslaved people	What attitudes towards the system of slavery are implied by these behaviors?

Group 3 Focus Question		
HOW DID ENSLAVED PEOPLE RESIST THEIR ENSLAVERS?		
Enslaved people/ <i>Virginia Gazette</i> reference	Form of resistance	What methods used indicated whether this was active or passive resistance?

Group 4 Focus Question		
BY WHAT MEANS DID ENSLAVED PEOPLE ESCAPE AND TO WHERE?		
Enslaved people/ <i>Virginia Gazette</i> Reference	Possible escape method/route	What does this destination suggest about an enslaved person’s final goal?

2. Give each group the Transcriptions of *Virginia Gazette* Self-Liberation Advertisements. Explain that enslavers would place advertisements in the newspaper for the return of enslaved people who escaped. Because they had to describe the enslaved people so they could be recognized and captured, we have a record of the appearances, skills, and escapes of a variety of enslaved people. However, these advertisements are from the perspective of the enslaver, not the enslaved people themselves.
3. Discuss with students that while these advertisements are commonly called “runaway advertisements” or “runaway slave advertisements,” a respectful way to refer to these advertisements is “self-liberation advertisements,” and the enslaved people who escaped as “freedom seekers.” “Enslaved people” is the preferred term over “slave.” These were real people, and it is important to refer to them as people, not abstractions or objects. Use names whenever possible.
4. Inform students that their task is to analyze the advertisements and make a list of actions, attitudes, and behaviors based upon their focus question. Students should take notes on the Focus Question Worksheet.
5. Reassign students into new groups with a representative from each of the focus questions in the new groups. Students should share their findings with the members of their new groups and record their groupmates’ observations on the Focus Question Worksheet.
6. Hold a follow-up discussion about students’ perceptions of colonial slavery. How did their perceptions change by completing this activity?

Alternate Plan:

To expedite the process, assign individual students a copy of one of the focus questions and the readings as homework. The next day, place students with the same focus question into groups. Have each group summarize its findings. Complete the rest of the lesson plan as written.

Slavery and the Law in Virginia

Population of Black People in Virginia	
1625	23
1648	300
1671	2,000
1680	3,000
1700	16,390
1720	26,559
1730	30,000
1740	60,000
1775	210,000

Virginia Laws Impacting the Enslaved

1640–1660: The critical period. Custom becomes law when status is changed to “servant for life.”

- 1639 Black people excluded from the requirement of possessing arms.
- 1640 John Punch is the first African man to be sentenced to “servitude for life.”
- 1642 Black women counted as tithables (taxable).
- 1662 Children born in Virginia are held “bond or free only according to the condition of the mother.”

1660–1680: Slave laws further restrict the freedom of Black people and legalize different treatment for Black people and white people.

- 1667 Baptism does not alter the condition of a person as to bondage or freedom.
- 1669 An act concerning the “casual killing of slaves” establishes that “if any slave resist his master and by the extremity of the correction should chance to die, that his death not be accounted Felony.”
- 1670 All non-Christian servants imported into the colony by sea are deemed enslaved for life.
- 1670 Legislation forbids free Black people and Indigenous people, “though baptised,” to own Christian servants.

1680–1705: Slave laws reflect racism and the deliberate separation of Black and white people. Color becomes the determining factor. Conscious efforts rigidly police slave conduct.

- 1680 Prescription of thirty lashes on the bare back “if any negroe or other slave shall presume to lift up his hand against any Christian.”
- 1680s Development of a separate legal code providing distinct trial procedures and harsher punishments for Black people.
Children born in Virginia are held “bond or free only according to the condition of the mother.”
Severe punishment prescribed for any enslaved Black person who leaves their enslaver’s property or for hiding/resisting capture.
Children born in Virginia are held “bond or free only according to the condition of the mother.”
A systematic plan to capture “outlying slaves” is approved.
- 1705 All enslaved Black, mulatto, and Indigenous people are defined as property.
The definition of a mulatto is the child, grandchild, or great-grandchild of a Black person.
An enslaved person is forbidden to lift his or her hand in opposition to a Christian person.
If an enslaved person is killed in pursuance of the law, the enslaver is paid by the public.

Focus Question: WHAT SKILLS DID ENSLAVED PEOPLE POSSESS?	
Skills	Why would these skills be important during the colonial period?
Focus Question: HOW DID ENSLAVERS TREAT THEIR ENSLAVED PEOPLE?	
Specific behaviors toward enslaved people	What attitudes toward enslaved people did enslavers hold?

<p>Focus Question: HOW DID ENSLAVED PEOPLE RESIST THEIR ENSLAVERS?</p>	
<p>Form of resistance</p>	<p>Was this active or passive resistance?</p>
<p>Focus Question: BY WHAT MEANS DID ENSLAVED PEOPLE ESCAPE AND WHAT WERE THEIR DESTINATIONS?</p>	
<p>Possible escape method/route</p>	<p>What does this destination suggest about this enslaved person's final goal?</p>

Transcriptions of *Virginia Gazette* Self-Liberation Advertisements

RAN away from one of the Subscriber's Quarters upon *Sapponie*, in *Prince George* County, about 8 Weeks ago, a Mulatto Man Slave, named Tom, 25 Years old, about 5 Feet 8 or 9 Inches high, thin fac'd, has bushy Hair, if not cut off; he is very apt to grin when he speaks or is spoken to; had on a dark Fustian Coat, with plain Metal Buttons; is Out-law'd in *Charles-City* County, where he lurked some time. Whoever brings him to me, in *Charles-City* County, shall have a Pistole Reward, besides what the Law allows.

JOHN STITH.

N.B. It is suspected he will endeavour to escape on Board some Vessel

Source: *Virginia Gazette* (Hunter), May 9, 1751.

RUN away from the subscriber, in *Mecklenburg* county, on *Wednesday* last, a fellow named JACK. It appears he has been principally concerned in promoting the late disorderly meetings among the Negroes, and is gone off for fear of being prosecuted for many robberies he has committed. He is a low squat made fellow, bow legged, his eyes remarkably red, has been branded on the right cheek R, and on the left M, though not easily to be perceived. It is supposed he intends for *Carolina* or *Georgia*. Whoever apprehends the said slave, and will deliver him to me, shall receive 50 s. if taken 50 miles from home and 6 l. a mile for a greater distance.

ROBERT MUNFORD.

Source: *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie & Dixon), May 2, 1766.

RUN AWAY from the subscriber, the 22d of this instant, three slaves, viz. JUPITER, alias GIBB, a Negro fellow, about 35 years of age, about 6 feet high, knock kneed, flat footed, the right knee bent in more than the left, has several scars on his back from a severe whipping he lately had at *Sussex* court-house, having been tried there for stirring up the Negroes to an insurrection, being a great Newlight preacher. ROBIN, about 25 years of age, a stout fellow, about 6 feet high, has a film over one of his eyes, a sore on one of his shins, and is brother to *Gibb*. DINAH, an old wench, very large, near 6 feet high; she has a remarkable stump of a thumb, occasioned by a whitlow, by which the bones of the first joint came out, and is mother to the two fellows. They carried with them a variety of clothes, among the rest an old blue duffil great coat, one bearskin do, a scarlet jacket, and a fine new linen shirt. It is supposed they will endeavour to make their escape to the Southward. Whoever takes up, and conveys to me the above slaves, shall have a reward of 50 s. for each of the fellows and 20 s. for the wench, if taken in *Virginia*; if in any other government, 5 l. for each of the fellows, and 40 s. for the wench, paid by

GEORGE NOBLE.

Source: *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie & Dixon), October 1, 1767.

RUN away from the subscriber in *Chesterfield* the *Wednesday* before *Easter* last, a bright mulatto wench named JUDE, about 30 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 in her face, and has been subject to running away ever since she was ten years old. I have great reason to think she will pass for a free woman, and endeavour to make 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, also a blue and white striped *Virginia* cloth gown, a *Virginia* cloth copperas and white striped coat, besides others too tedious to mention. Whoever conveys the said slave to me shall be well rewarded for their trouble.

MARY CLAY.

Source: *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie & Dixon), October 20, 1768.

RUN away from the subscriber in *Charles City* county, the 14th of *April* last, a VIRGINIA born Negro fellow named PETER, about 44 years of age, of a black complexion, a slim fellow, his teeth out before as if broke off, and is a sly artful rogue if not watched; he carried with him sundry clothes, such as crop Negroes usually wear, also a white *Virginia* cloth waistcoat and petticoat, a *Tarlton* plaid gown, and sundry other of his wife's clothes. He also carried away a gun of an uncommon large size, and a fiddle, which he is much delighted in when he gets any strong drink, which he is remarkably fond of, and then very talkative and impudent. I suspect he is gone to *Amelia* county, to Mr. *Tanner's*, as Mrs. *Tanner*, alias Mrs. *Johnson*, sold him to Mr. *Richard Hayles*, and by him sold to the subscriber, as he often told the other Negroes that if ever I used him ill he would go to his old mistress, as she never sold him to Mr. *Hayles*, but only lent him during pleasure, and that he would go to her and be protected. The said Negro is outlawed; and I will give 10 l. to any person or persons that will kill him and bring me his head, separate from his body, or 40 s. if delivered to the subscriber near the *Long Bridge*.

WILLIAM GREGORY.

Source: *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie & Dixon), May 4, 1769.

Forty Shillings Reward. RUN away from the subscriber, in *York* county, about the 11th or 12th of *November* last, a very black Negro man named BEN, about 5 feet 6 inches high, 35 years old, spare made, by trade a carpenter, and understands something of the coopers business, his upper teeth rotten; he has many clothes, so it is impossible to describe them. He took with him sundry carpenters and coopers tools. I expect he will endeavour to pass for a freeman, as he can read tolerably well, and am doubtful of his obtaining a pass from some evil disposed person, and leave the colony. This is to desire all masters of vessels, and others, from harbouring him; and I will give the above reward to any person that will deliver him to me, at Mr. *James Shields's*, near *Williamsburg*.

JOSHUA JONES.

Source: *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie & Dixon), March 22, 1770.

RUN away from the Subscriber, about the 20th of *April*, a Mulatto Fellow named PETER BROWN, by Trade a Painter, but can do Carpenter's Work, about 35 or 40 Years of Age, five Feet eight Inches high, of a dark Complexion, slim made, thin Visage, has lost several of his upper fore Teeth, is fond of Singing and sings well, has several Suits of Clothes, therefore I cannot describe his Dress. He was some Years past tried for a Robbery, and found guilty, but obtained the Governour's Pardon, on suffering one Year's imprisonment. After that Time he was sold to Mr. *John Fox* of *Gloucester*, with whom he lived one or two Years; he then ran away and passed for a Freeman in the Counties of *King William*, *Caroline*, and *Hanover*, where he was taken up and brought home. As he has a Wife at Mr. *Benjamin Hubbard's* it is likely he may be lurking in that Neighbourhood, or near *Petersburg*, where he was raised. Whoever takes up the said Runaway, and delivers him to me at *Osborne's*, shall have 40 s. Reward. All Persons are forbid from harbouring or carrying him out of the Colony.

PETERFIELD TRENT.

Source: *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie & Dixon), June 16, 1774.

RUN away from the Subscriber, last *Friday*, a likely *Virginia* born Negro Man called JOHNNY, about 22 Years of Age, five Feet eight Inches high, has a down Look, and walks upright; he carried with him a Variety of Clothes, is fond of Liquor, in which he is very talkative and insinuating, has been always bred to the House, and is an extraordinary good Waiter. This Fellow formerly belonged to *Armistead Lightfoot*, Esq; deceased, and is remarkable for Cock-fighting, Card-playing and many other Games. I suspect he will pass as a Freeman, and endeavour to get out of the Colony, as he can read and write. All Masters of Vessels are cautioned not to carry him off, at their Peril. I will give 40 s. if taken within this Colony and brought home, besides what the Law allows, or 5 l. if taken in any other Colony.

CHARLES GRYMES.

Source: *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie & Dixon), October 13, 1774.

RUN away from the Subscriber's Plantation in *Manakin Town*, the last of *July* or first of *August* last, a black Negro Man named TOM, formerly the Property of Major *Henry Gaines* of *King William*, but since the said *Gaines's* death has been sold several Times, and is now my Property. He was bred by Major *Gaines* to keeping Horses and riding Races, but is now a good Sawyer. He is not tall, knock-kneed, full Eyes, and I believe a Speck in one of them, caused by a Chip as he was cutting with an Axe. He values himself for his fine Dancing, is subject to Liquor, and fond of talking about Religion. If he is taken in the Colony, and brought to me, near the old Courthouse, in *Albemarle* County, or my Overseer, *James Scott*, at *Manakin Town*, I will give 3 l. and if out of the Colony 10 l.

JOHN SCOTT.

Source: *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie & Dixon), December 1, 1774.

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, his Skin very smooth, one of his upper fore Teeth is decaying, which it is likely he will pull out, and his Hair on the fore Part of his Head is cut short; he carried with him four Shirts, two of them new Sheeting, two Suits of Clothes, one *Russia* Drilling, the other dark brown Duffil, trimmed with gilt Buttons, &c. He had a Surtout Coat, Velvet Cap, Hat, and every Thing else suitable for a Waitingman. As he is a very artful and likely Fellow, he may endeavour 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. This Fellow has waited 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 probable he is gone there, as his Friends live in that Neighbourhood. Whoever takes up the said Runaway, and brings him home, shall have 3 l. Reward, or 30 s. if committed to Jail. All Persons are forbid harbouring 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.

Source: *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie & Dixon), December 1, 1774.

TEN POUNDS REWARD. RUN away from the subscriber in *Dunmore* county, in May last, a negro fellow named SAM, 5 feet 5 or 6 inches high, has a broad face, and is a well looking fellow. As to his clothing, I cannot be certain, he having carried several things with him. He also took with him an old bay horse very gray about the head, an iron pot, a narrow axe, a handsaw, and an old smooth bore gun. About three years ago he purchased his freedom of his old master, Mr. *Francis Slaughter*, and continued in that state till this spring, when it was discovered he was attempting to inveigle away a number of negroes to the new or Indian country (where he had been most of the last summer) upon which the neighbours insisted on his being reduced to slavery again, and I purchased him. I imagine he will endeavour to pass as a freeman, he having a discharge from his old master, as well as one from Lord *Dunmore*, having served in the expedition against the Indians last fall. Whoever delivers said slave to me shall have the reward that is offered.

GABRIEL JONES.

Source: *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie), June 16, 1775.

RUN away from the subscriber in *Dinwiddie*, the 5th day of *April* last, a dark mulatto man named JEMMY, 5 feet 9 or 10 inches high, well made, has remarkable long feet, the middle toes longer than the rest, which they ride over, has lost part of one of his foreteeth, which occasions the next to it to look blue, is a very artful fellow, and will probably endeavour to pass for a freeman; he is very fond of *singing hymns* and *preaching*, and has been about *Williamsburg* ever since he went off, passing by the name of *James Williams*. Whoever apprehends the said slave, and secures him so that I get him again, shall have 40s reward, and if delivered to me in *Dinwiddie* 4 l.

DAVID WALKER.

Source: *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie), September 8, 1775.

RUN away the first of *January* 1775 a likely mulatto negro wench named KATE, 18 years of age, well made, 5 feet 9 or 10 inches high, and talks very smooth. She was hired to mr. *Philip Moody* of *Williamsburg* in 1774, and last year to mr. *John Thruston*, from whence she ran off. She has got a husband in *Williamsburg*, and probably may pass for a free person as she is well acquainted in that city, and I have repeatedly heard of her being there. She formerly belonged to the estate of Mr. *John Cary*, deceased, of *York* county. I will give 20s. to any person that will secure her in jail and give me intelligence thereof, or 40s if brought to me in *King & Queen*, at Mr. *John Thruston*'s.

EDWARD CARY, jun.

Source: *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie), November 29, 1776.