

Runaway Advertisements Additional Information

Advertisement #1: Thomas Jefferson seems to have a number of opinions about the character of this particular slave (using descriptions like “insolent and disorderly,” “addicted to drink,” and “artful and knavish”)—much more than we might expect of a slave owner with a large number of slaves. This could indicate that Sandy had come to his attention for behavior Jefferson would have seen as disruptive, that Sandy was particularly valuable to Jefferson, or that Jefferson wrote the ad based on an overseer’s comments.

Advertisement #2: This advertisement shows the importance of clothing at the time. Clothing is described in great detail, suggesting that it was valuable and might not have been easily replaced. In addition, clothing was closely tied to class. The assumption is that even if the runaways were not wearing these exact clothes, they would wear something similar because that is what they could access.

Advertisement #3: It is also important to note that most slaves at this time did have formal surnames assigned by their owners, while most indentured servants did. Although the subject of this advertisement is described as having a “dark complexion,” we can assume that he is close to a color that we would consider white today. He speaks in the “Irish Brogue” and “was imported” recently from “Dublin,” so he most likely came from Ireland. That he is described as “dark” indicates that the “white” is not a fixed category and that designation of color is based partially on freedom versus unfreedom. The fact that he ran away from a boat suggests that he was a sailor. It is also interesting to note that though he is “about 14 Years of Age,” he is also described as a “Servant Man,” suggesting that conceptions of childhood have changed over time.

Advertisement #4: It is important to understand that even though this runaway is described as “a Negro man,” that does not necessarily mean that he is a slave. In similar ads from the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, racial distinctions do not necessarily correspond to the distinction between freedom and unfreedom. This ad also makes it clear that verbal skills are closely connected with the ability to pass for a freeman.

Advertisement #5: This ad is unusual because of the emphasis it places on describing the runaway’s body and the markings on his body. This shift from describing clothing to describing the body began to occur close to the time of the American Revolution, when overall consciousness shifted from focusing on class identity to focusing on the identity of individuals.

Advertisement #6: This ad is unusual because ads for female runaways are relatively rare. It is also interesting because it indicates that this runaway, her child, and the “Mulatto man” who “passes for her husband” could be trying to pass for white and as freed indentured servants. This man might be the father of her child, and perhaps her husband, which her owner would not have recognized since marriage among slaves was outlawed at this time. Note again how clothes are tied to class in this ad.