

Introduction

Spaces of Freedom in North America

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On the Fourth of July 1825, most white residents of Washington, D.C., celebrated the anniversary of their freedom and independence from Great Britain with parades, elaborate theater productions, and other amusements that included a “GRAND OLIO of Song, Dance, and Recitation” and “a GRAND SCROLL DANCE by the Corps de Ballet.” At the same time, dozens of enslaved people from the surrounding farm districts of Maryland and Virginia were making their own attempts to secure freedom and independence from a life of bondage. The *Daily National Intelligencer* printed no less than ten runaway slave advertisements that day—some of them for groups and even entire families—a significant number for any single issue. The presumed whereabouts of the runaways ran the full gamut of possible destinations, illuminating the complicated geography of slavery and freedom that existed throughout the continent.

Some runaways, for example, were explicitly presumed to be disguising their visibility as slaves and attempting to pass for free, even while remaining within the slaveholding South. Indeed, three were supposedly posing as *whites*. Granderson, a twenty-three-year-old carpenter who was described as “remarkably white for a slave, and might be readily taken for a white man,” had absconded with the intention “doubtless to pass as a free man” and practice his trade right in Washington. Two brothers named Rezin and Harry (eighteen and sixteen years old, respectively), who were also “of so bright a complexion, that

they would hardly be taken for mulattoes,” were likewise suspected of lurking about the city and passing for white. Even runaways with a dark complexion could hope to disguise their visibility as slaves in Washington, which in the antebellum period had a sizable free black population that at times outnumbered the slave population by as much as four to one. Tom, a local bondsman and a skilled wagoner, was presumed to be passing himself off as a free black in the city, where he would “probably offer his services.” Others like him were described as having changed their names and run off “with forged papers” to live among the free blacks of the District.¹

Predictably, a handful of freedom seekers had safer territory in mind. With the Pennsylvania border a mere sixty miles north of Washington as the crow flies, free soil seemed tantalizingly close to bondspople living in the capital region. Daniel, Moses, and Scipio, all between the ages of twenty-five and thirty, were suspected of having “obtained [forged] passes” to travel “out of the States of Virginia, Maryland, and the District of Columbia” to a northern free state. Another bondsman named George was also thought to be making his way north, his master so baffled by the flight of his “most industrious and faithful field hand” that he concluded that his slave “must have been decoyed off” by somebody who had provided him with a false pass. To some runaways, however, even the northern states—where federal laws allowed for southern masters to reclaim their fugitive slaves and drag them back to the South—did not seem quite safe enough. One entire family consisting of an enslaved carpenter named Ben, his three daughters, and his son-in-law—all from Stafford County, Virginia—executed a daring attempt to leave the United States altogether and make for free territory elsewhere in the hemisphere. The group reportedly fled to Washington with forged free papers, having told friends that they intended to board a vessel bound for the Caribbean because they wanted “to go to St. Domingo,” where slavery had not only been abolished but where the government also promised asylum and citizenship to all runaway slaves who reached its shores. Their secret plans had somehow become known to their master, but the other slaves who were advertised as missing on that Fourth of July slipped away more quietly and left no trace of their intentions or possible whereabouts; their masters presumed them to be either hiding out in Washington or making their way to a free state—it was anybody’s guess.²