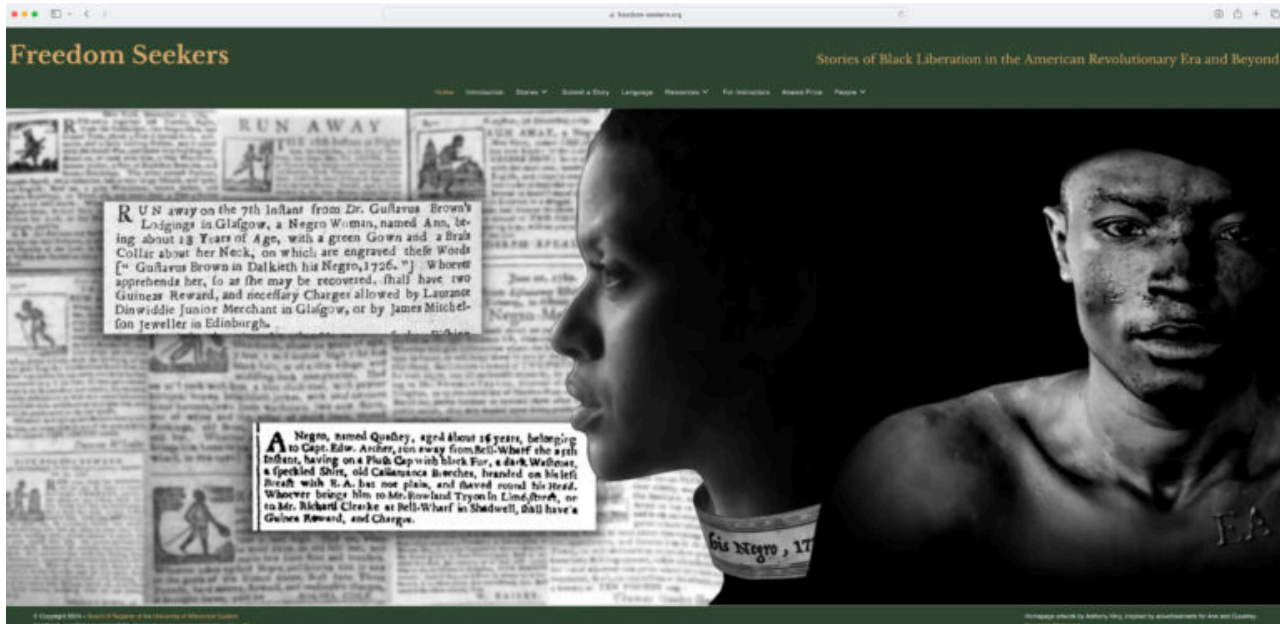


Freedom Seekers: Stories of Black Liberation in the American Revolutionary Era and Beyond



The name she chose for herself said it all. Against the backdrop of the American Revolution and at the risk of her own life, Free Poll declared her freedom, discarded her slavery name Sue, strategized to live with her husband, found paying work, and fashioned a life in a growing community of Black Philadelphians, both enslaved and free. Like many enslaved people in Maryland, Free Poll had lived on a large plantation. She was forced to work in the tobacco fields located on a point of land on the Chesapeake Bay near Annapolis. Spread over eight hundred acres, the plantation contained a brick mansion with thirteen rooms, two kitchens, a chapel, a granary, a farmhouse, and several barns for drying tobacco leaves. There were also rudimentary wooden shacks, almost certainly constructed by enslaved people, where Free Poll and other bound people lived.

Escaping from slavery was almost always more hazardous for women than it was for men, but the revolutionary era provided greater opportunities, especially for women, to seize their freedom. In July 1780, Free Poll surreptitiously fled to the nearest large town, Baltimore. She made the 35-mile journey, perhaps at night, either on foot or in a small boat across the Chesapeake Bay. At the age of 45, she was considerably older than the great majority of escapees, most of whom were young adults. But she shared other characteristics of female fugitives. Many headed for urban centers where they might earn money by doing the sort of work commonly undertaken by enslaved women: cooking, baking pies, and washing clothes. As David Kerr, her enslaver, noted in an advertisement he published in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Free Poll was “a good cook” and could

"wash and iron well." Women freedom seekers also hoped to conceal themselves among other Black people, since many White people did not look closely at nor well remember Black faces. Many escapees also no doubt sought to find assistance and camaraderie, and friends and lovers among other Black residents. Free Poll specifically wanted to join Mark Stubbs, her husband.

Ten Pounds Specie Reward.

RAN AWAY in July last, a Negroe Woman, named **SUE**, about 45 years of age; has a down look, remarkable large breasts, and a wen upon the temple; but as she is very artful, she may endeavour to hide it by a long ear'd cap she generally wears; she discovers the loss of some of her teeth when she laughs: She had a variety of clothes, among which are, a tartan, a white linen, and a calico gown, and a striped silk jacket. She passed in Baltimore, where she remained for some time, by the name of Free Poll. She is now about Philadelphia, waiting for the return of her husband, as she calls him; a free Mulattoe, named Mark Stubbs, who sailed from Baltimore in a ship called the *Enterprize*: He is a short thick talkative fellow, about 50 years of age, and a most notorious villain. She is a good cook, can wash and iron well; he is a butcher, and it is probable they may set up for themselves about the city. Any person who will secure her in any goal in the United States, shall have a Reward of Five Pounds Specie, or if delivered to Mr. James Heron, in Philadelphia, or to the subscriber, at Greenbury's-Point, near Annapolis, Ten Pounds Specie. **DAVID KERR.**
Maryland, May 15, 1781.

Figure 1: *Pennsylvania Gazette* (Philadelphia), May 16, 1781.

Stubbs was a mixed-race free man. At the time of Free Poll's escape he was working as a sailor on the *Enterprize*, a privately-owned ship with a commission from the American government to capture British merchant vessels during the Revolutionary War. According to newspaper reports, the *Enterprize* successfully apprehended several "prizes," then sailed them to Philadelphia to sell the ships and their cargoes. It was a dangerous business, but one that sometimes paid off. Like other sailors, Stubbs probably received a small portion of the

profits, perhaps enough to support himself and his wife for a short while.

After living as a free person in Baltimore for ten months, Free Poll must have learned that Stubbs had returned to Philadelphia, so she traveled the ninety of so miles north to join him. The City of Brotherly Love contained a growing Black population, some enslaved, some legally free, and others who had fled bondage. Free Poll and Mark Stubbs now lived in Pennsylvania—the first state to pass a gradual emancipation law in the United States, giving encouragement to Black and sympathetic White Revolutionaries that the excessively cruel system of slavery might be on the road to extinction. The law, however, did not grant Free Poll her liberty legally. She would have to remain on guard against re-enslavement by slave catchers for the rest of her life.

Like all advertisements, the notice written by Kerr reflected the deep prejudices of the enslavers themselves—an important point to bear in mind when we read these advertisements today. He described Free Poll as “artful,” when the likely reality was that she had learned to be clever in dealing with White people. Enslaved people had to pay keen attention to enslavers, who claimed them as property and exercised significant power over their bodies and lives. Those in bondage commonly devised ways to disguise their own feelings to deceive their so-called masters. Not only did Kerr portray Free Poll as deceitful and cunning, but he also ridiculed her marriage with Stubbs. Since neither enslavers nor the law respected the legitimacy of marriages of the enslaved, Kerr refused to recognize Stubbs as Free Poll’s husband in his advertisement, referring to him instead as her “husband, as she calls him.”

Modern readers need to be especially suspicious of character descriptions contained in advertisements like this one. For example, Kerr characterized Free Poll’s mixed-race husband as a “notorious villain,” probably not based on his actual behavior and actions but rather on his audacity in marrying and giving sanctuary to an enslaved woman who had eloped from the man who claimed to own her. What Stubbs most likely wanted was simply to live with his wife in freedom. Indeed, even James Madison [recognized](#) that many Blacks who fled enslavement were merely “coveting that liberty for which we [White Revolutionaries] have paid the price of so much blood, and have proclaimed so often to be the right, & worthy the pursuit, of every human being.” (Madison never emancipated any of the people he claimed as human property.)

In contrast, like all White people who published newspaper advertisements, what Kerr desired was to re-enslave Free Poll for his own financial benefit. He feared that she and her husband “may set up for themselves” in Philadelphia, meaning that they could enjoy the liberty so ardently sought by White and Black Revolutionaries at the time.

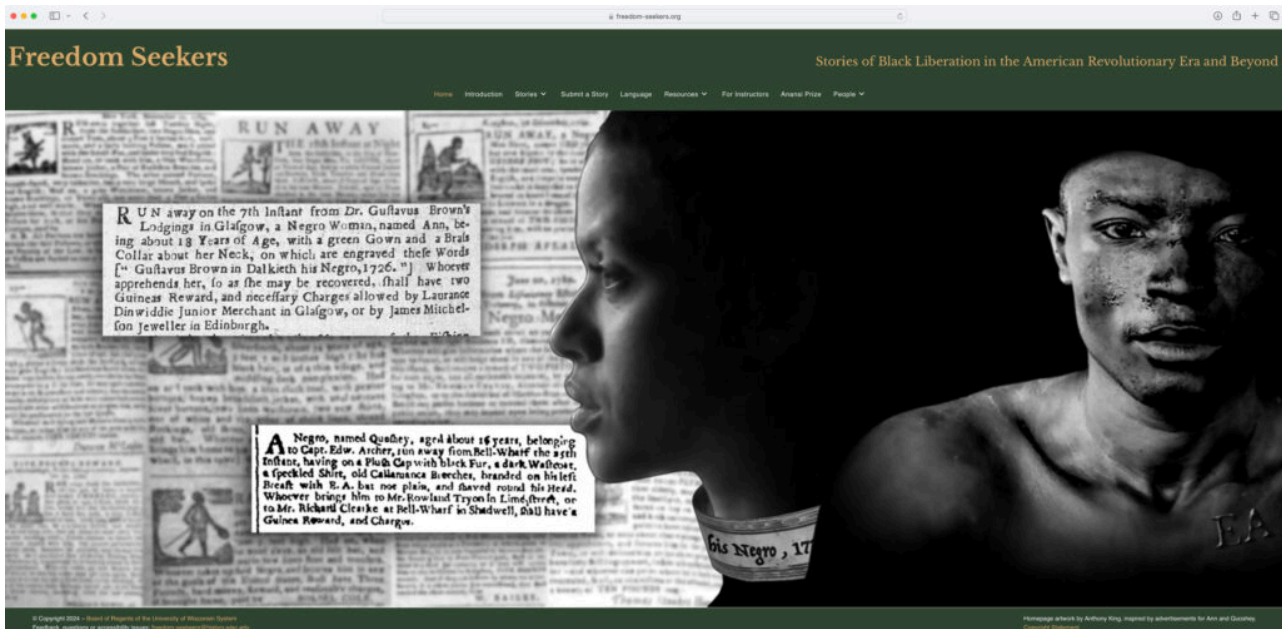


Figure 2: *Freedom Seekers* homepage.

This account of Free Poll's bid for freedom is taken from [*Freedom Seekers: Stories of Black Liberation in the American Revolutionary Era and Beyond*](#), a new online resource that transcends existing compilations of advertisements by creating a curated set of histories or "stories," each building from a single advertisement, often augmented by other sources. *Freedom Seekers* launched on July 4, 2024, and will run through to the commemoration of the semiquincentennial of the Declaration of American Independence. It will eventually feature hundreds of narratives of freedom and independence across the British and American Atlantic World in the revolutionary era and beyond. Demonstrating their dedication to ideals of liberty fundamentally at odds with those of Thomas Jefferson, tens of thousands of enslaved people absconded, risking their lives to liberate themselves. Their actions were both personal and political as they freed themselves and challenged the system of racial bondage. These brave bids for freedom generated numerous newspaper advertisements describing the freedom seekers and offering rewards for their capture. The information contained in those notices, along with research in related sources, enables us to reconstruct, reimagine, and commemorate many of their stories—a primary purpose of this project. While the project's major focus will be North America during the American Revolutionary Era, the project will also extend chronologically between the seventeenth and the early nineteenth centuries and will range across the North American and British Atlantic World.

RUN away from *William Moore*, of
Moorball in *Geester* County, a likely Negroe Man,
 named *Jack*, speaks but indifferent English; and had on when
 he went away, a New Ozenbrig Shirt, a Pair of striped Home-
 spun Breeches, a striped Ticking Waistcoat, an Old Dimity
 Coat of his Masters, with Buttons of Horse Teeth set in Brads,
 and close Sleeves, a Felt Hat almost New. Whoever secures
 said Negro, and will bring him to his Master, or to *John*
Moore, Esq; in *Philadelphia*, shall receive Twenty Shillings Re-
 ward, and reasonable Charges, paid by *William Moore*.

Figure 3: *American Weekly Mercury* (Philadelphia), August 20, 1730.

There are now many published collections of newspaper advertisements for enslaved people who escaped, both printed and digital. Online collections often feature searchable transcriptions and statistical databases of many thousands of freedom seekers across space and time, enabling researchers to learn a great deal about enslaved people in the aggregate. During the past few decades scholars engaged in the labor-intensive work of transcribing advertisements and tabulating various characteristics of escapees to provide a structure within which to understand aspects of the lives of individual freedom seekers. For example, using statistics calculated from numerous advertisements allows us to assert, with some confidence, that Free Poll was considerably older than most people who fled, that she planned her escape meticulously in comparison to other escapees who carried fewer items, that she ran during the warmer months just as many others did to maximize their chance for freedom, and that she ultimately headed for Philadelphia—a popular destination for many freedom seekers during and after the Revolutionary Era.

However, as scholars like Saidiya Hartman and Marisa Fuentes have argued, the tabulation of enslaved bodies in such databases can implicitly reaffirm the treatment of enslaved people as property to be enumerated. If not done carefully, such work may inadvertently echo enslavers' objectification of enslaved people and their bodies as property. In addition, what often is lost in the compilation and utilization of statistical databases of freedom seekers is what most fascinates those who read them, namely the tantalizing hints the advertisements contain about the stories of individual men, women, and children who resisted slavery by escaping. Databases reveal the bigger picture of numbers and patterns, but they can also obscure the details about individuals, their lives, experiences and whatever else can be gleaned from the few dozen words of a newspaper advertisement and whatever related records that exist.



A/p Runaway

Adrienne Mayor.

Figure 4: Jack, as imagined by artist Adrienne Mayor.

In rare cases it is possible to research and write a great deal about a single freedom seeker, as in the case of Ona Judge who escaped from George and Martha

Washington. The surviving records related to Judge are exceptional, however, and most freedom seekers remain obscure and largely hidden from our view. Often all we know about them is contained in the brief newspaper advertisement penned by an enslaver, a source that is inherently biased. Yet these advertisements have fascinated readers since their first appearance, and a combination of contextual research and imagination can allow the freedom seekers to reach across the centuries and transcend the words used in advertisements by enslavers to categorize and define the enslaved.

We warmly invite people to participate in this project of recreating the stories of freedom seekers. During the next several years, we welcome contributions from academics, graduate students, undergraduates, and members of the public. These contributions will be reviewed and, if accepted, edited and published on the website. This web-based resource will feature numerous short essays (usually no longer than about 1,000 words) based primarily on advertisements for people who fled enslavement. We will include the stories of freedom seekers from across the British Atlantic World, from the seventeenth to the early nineteenth century, although our project will focus in particular on the American Revolutionary era. The resulting resource will breathe life into these short newspaper advertisements, revealing as much as possible about the enslaved people who challenged their bondage and sought freedom.

We hope that professors, teaching assistants, graduate students, and other teachers may use these stories in the classrooms. We have found that students are fascinated by these advertisements. They relish the challenge of careful textual analysis and research to learn more about the people and places recorded in an advertisement and to carefully establish a greater sense of the person who challenged their own enslavement and the system of slavery itself. At the University of Wisconsin, where *Freedom Seekers* is based, an undergraduate internship program in the History Department is supporting students in researching and writing stories for the website. Furthermore, each year the project's Anansi competition will provide cash prizes and additional publication in *Clio* for several of the best essays submitted by graduate students.

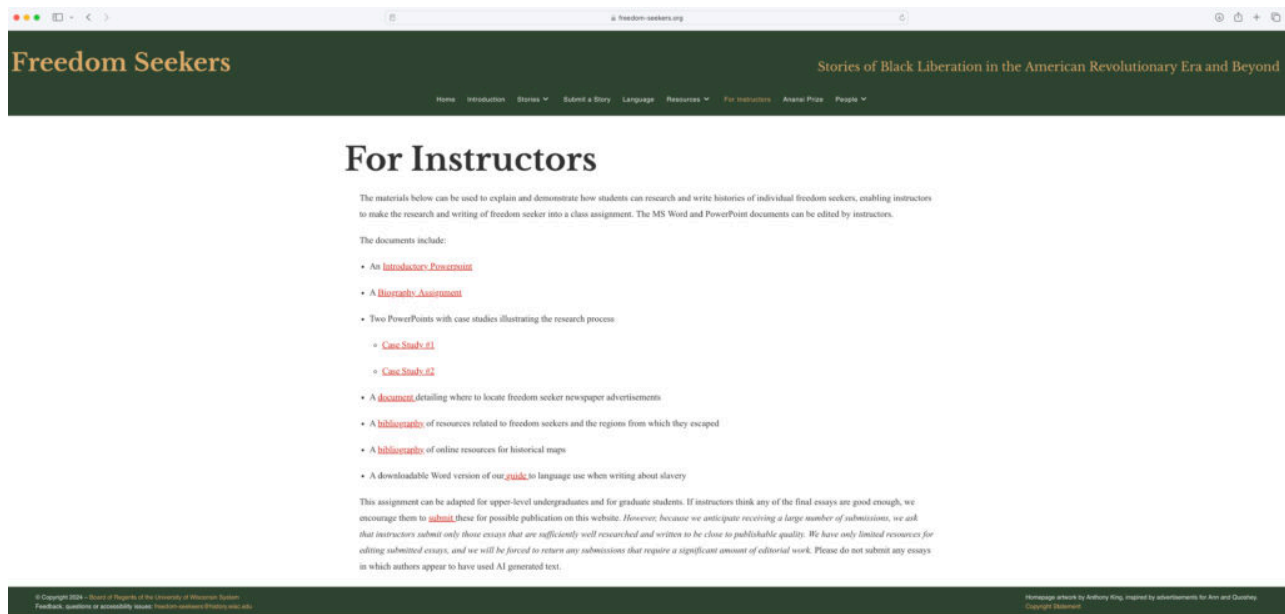


Figure 5: *Freedom Seekers* resources for instructors.

The project website includes a page with materials that can be utilized by instructors who would like to make the research and writing of stories into a class assignment. It is challenging to imagine an accurate story of a freedom seeker when most of what still exists are only the words of his or her enslaver as recorded in newspaper notices. The “For Instructors” section of the *Freedom Seekers* website features detailed resources and strategies for researching advertisements and the people they describe. This can begin with a careful reading of the language used to describe the person who had escaped: a reference to African ethnicity or to African “country marks,” for example, encourages research into African heritage and ethnicity, and the Middle Passage endured by the freedom seeker.

Fairfax County (Virginia) August 11, 1761.

RAN away from a Plantation of the Subscribers, on *Dogue-Run* in *Fairfax*, on Sunday the 9th Instant, the following Negroes, *viz.*

Peros, 35 or 40 Years of Age, a well-set Fellow, of about 5 Feet 8 Inches high, yellowish Complexion, with a very full round Face, and full black Beard, his Speech is something flow and broken, but not in so great a Degree as to render him remarkable. He had on when he went away, a dark colour'd Cloth Coat, a white Linen Waistcoat, white Breeches and white Stockings.

Jack, 30 Years (or thereabouts) old, a slim, black, well made Fellow, of near 6 Feet high, a small Face, with Cuts down each Cheek, being his Country Marks, his Feet are large (or long) for he requires a great Shoe: The Cloathing he went off in cannot be well ascertained, but it is thought in his common working Dress, such as Cotton Waistcoat (of which he had a new One) and Breeches, and Osnabrig Shirt.

Neptune, aged 25 or 30, well-set, and of about 5 Feet 8 or 9 Inches high, thin jaw'd, his Teeth stragling and fil'd sharp, his Back, if rightly remember'd, has many small Marks or Dots running from both Shoulders down to his Waistband, and his Head was close shaved: Had on a Cotton Waistcoat, black or dark colour'd Breeches, and an Osnabrig Shirt.

Cupid, 23 or 25 Years old, a black well made Fellow, 5 Feet 8 or 9 Inches high, round and full faced, with broad Teeth before, the Skin of his Face is coarse, and inclined to be pimply, he has no other distinguishable Mark that can be recollected; he carried with him his common working Cloaths, and an old Osnabrigs Coat made Frockwise.

The two last of these Negroes were bought from an *African Ship* in *August* 1759, and talk very broken and unintelligible *English*; the second one, *Jack*, is Countryman to those, and speaks pretty good *English*, having been several Years in the Country. The other, *Peros*, speaks much better than either, indeed has little of his Country Dialect left, and is esteemed a sensible judicious Negro.

As they went off without the least Suspicion, Provocation, or Difference with any Body, or the least angry Word or Abuse from their Overseers, 'tis supposed they will hardly lurk about in the Neighbourhood, but steer some direct Course (which cannot even be guessed at) in Hopes of an Escape: Or, perhaps, as the Negro *Peros* has lived many Years about *Williamsburg*, and *King-William County*, and *Jack* in *Middlesex*, they may possibly bend their Course to one of those Places.

Whoever apprehends the said Negroes, so that the Subscriber may readily get them, shall have, if taken up in this County, Forty Shillings Reward, beside what the Law allows; and if at any greater Distance, or out of the Colony, a proportionable Recompence paid them, by

GEORGE WASHINGTON.

N. B. If they should be taken separately, the Reward will be proportioned.

Figure 6: *Maryland Gazette* (Annapolis), 20 August 1761. This advertisement for

four freedom seekers was published by George Washington. Three of the four were African-born, and Washington reported that Neptune and Cupid had been purchased from a slave ship in August 1759. The [Slave Voyages](#) database contains records of two ships bringing enslaved people from Africa that docked in the Chesapeake in August 1759, the *True Blue* (Voyage 90763) and the *Upton* (Voyage 90772).

Advertisements might also include descriptions of scars and other injuries that marked the bodies of freedom seekers. References to a clipped ear and whip-scarred back, along with adjectives such as “artful” or “cunning” can be read as evidence of long-term resistance by the escapee. Researchers can also look for more advertisements, which may provide further information about how long a person was free, and perhaps where they were suspected of having gone. Some advertisements include lengthy descriptions of clothing that may enable a detailed reconstruction of the person’s appearance. There are strategies for exploring locations mentioned in advertisements, such as the place a person had escaped from, and perhaps the place where they may have gone, as well as the journey between the two. It is often possible to learn more about the White people who placed advertisements or are mentioned in them, and this too can provide contextual information for understanding the situation of the freedom seeker before their escape.

FORTY DOLLARS Reward.

RAN AWAY on Saturday, the 26th of November, 1791, from the subscriber, living near Ridgeley's Furnace, in Baltimore county, state of Maryland, a small NEGROE MAN, named BEN, about 27 years of age, 5 feet 5 or 6 inches high, well made, very active, a good waggoner and plowman, or can do any thing of plantation business, as well as any man; took with him two or three suits of good cloaths, amongst which are, a light coloured coat, black velvet breeches, cotton and thread stockings, and a Holland shirt. It is likely he will change his name and cloaths, as he is a very artful fellow, a great thief and a dreadful liar, and drinks little or no spirits. Whoever apprehends and secures him, so that his owner may get him again, shall have, if taken 20 miles from home, Three Pounds, if 40 miles, Five Pounds, if 100 miles Ten Pounds, if 200 miles the above reward, and reasonable charges if brought home, paid by
December 7, 1791. MICAJAH MERRYMAN,

SPRAN COW at a light brindle color, sometimes is

WAS committed to the Goal of this county, a Negro Mⁿ, who says his name is SAMPSON, and that he is a slave to John Crapper, Esq; living in the state of Virginia about three miles from Accomack court-house. The said Negro is five feet six inches high, slim built, yellow complexion, appears to be about twenty-one years of age, a little marked with the small-pox. somewhat knock-kneed. had on a new high crowned hat, maker's name in the crown Jacob Hollingshead, of Philadelphia, one coat, waistcoat and overalls, all new, made of elastic cloth, one white linen shirt, thread stockings, good shoes and steel buckles; he had with him a bundle of clothes, consisting of two ruffled shirts, one marked with the letters I. C. one pair of cotton stockings, marked I. C. one pair of black worsted, never wore, one pair of black velvet breeches, one red jacket, three white cravats, one black ditto, one linen handkerchief, marked A. D. C. one pair of childrens stockings, one pair of white yarn stockings, and one small curious key. His master, if any he has, is desired to come, pay charges, and take him away, within six weeks from the date hereof, otherwise he will be sold for the same, by
ZENAS SMITH, Gaoler.
Salem, New-Jersey, October 26. 1792

Figure 7: *Pennsylvania Gazette* (Philadelphia), December 14, 1791. The description of Ben as artful, a thief and a "dreadful liar" portray him in very negative terms, but can be read against the grain of the text as positive qualities of a man who was able to deceive and resist his enslaver.

Figure 8: *Pennsylvania Gazette* (Philadelphia), November 7, 1792. The description of the clothing taken by Sampson when he escaped is far more detailed than the description of Sampson himself.

We are living through a time of deep crisis in our nation, and the meaning and significance of freedom and democracy are as controversial today as they were in the late eighteenth century. Our project asks what freedom meant in the eighteenth century, exploring how for many people in North America and across the Atlantic World, liberty meant an end to slavery. Demonstrating their dedication to ideals of liberty at odds with the practices of men such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison, tens of thousands of enslaved people absconded, risking their lives to liberate themselves. Their actions were both personal and political as they freed themselves and challenged the system of racial bondage.

It is our hope and expectation that the accumulation of hundreds of freedom seeker stories will provide a new kind of community-built resource, one that will enable us to think about enslaved people who resisted their bondage as individuals rather than as statistics. *Freedom Seekers* will show how all kinds of men, women, and children who escaped were important actors in the challenge

not just to their own enslavement but to slavery more broadly. It will require us to broaden our thinking about the American Revolution to encompass a related but distinct set of bids for freedom and independence.

Further Reading

Karen Cook Bell, *Running From Bondage: Enslaved Women and their Remarkable Fight for Freedom in Revolutionary America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

Erica Armstrong Dunbar, *Never Caught: The Washington's Relentless Pursuit of Their Runaway Slave, Ona Judge* (New York: Atria Books, 2017).

Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).

Graham Russell Hodges and Alan Edward Brown, eds., *"Pretends to Be Free": Runaway Slave Advertisements from Colonial and Revolutionary New York and New Jersey* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019; originally published in 1994).

Daniel Meaders, *Advertisements for Runaway Slaves in Virginia, 1801-1820* (New York: Garland, 1997).

Simon P. Newman, "Hidden in Plain Sight: Escaped Slaves in Late Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth-Century Jamaica," *William and Mary Quarterly* (OI Reader app), June 2018, 1–53.

https://oireader.wm.edu/open_wmq/hidden-in-plain-sight/hidden-in-plain-sight-escaped-slaves-in-late-eighteenth-and-early-nineteenth-century-jamaica/ [accessed September 9, 2024].

Billy G. Smith, "Free Poll (May 1781)," *Freedom Seekers: Stories of Black Liberation in the American Revolutionary Era and Beyond*, <https://freedom-seekers.org/story/free-poll/> [accessed July 15, 2024].

Billy G. Smith, "Resisting Inequality: Black Women Who Stole Themselves in Eighteenth Century America," in Carla Gardina Pestana and Sharon V. Salinger., eds., *Inequality in Early America* (Hanover, N.H: University Press of New England, 1999), 146-49.

Billy G. Smith and Richard Wojtowicz, eds. *Blacks Who Stole Themselves: Advertisements for Runaways in the Pennsylvania Gazette, 1728-1790* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989).

Lathan A. Windley, ed. *Runaway Slave Advertisements: a documentary history from the 1730s to 1790*, 4 vols. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983).

Major online collections of freely available freedom seeker advertisements include:

[*Freedom On The Move*](#).

[*Discover Enslaved People in the Newspapers*](#).

[*The Geography of Slavery in Virginia*](#).

[*North Carolina Runaway Slave Notices, 1750-1865*](#).

[*Runaway Slaves in Britain*](#).

[*Runaway Slaves in Jamaica \(I\): Eighteenth Century*](#).

This article originally appeared in September 2024.

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Simon P. Newman is Emeritus Brogan Professor of History at the University of Glasgow, and an honorary fellow at the Institute for Research in the Humanities at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. His most recent book is [*Freedom Seekers: Escaping from Slavery in Restoration London*](#) (2022).

Billy G. Smith is Emeritus Malone Professor of History and Distinguished Professor of Letters and Science at Montana State University. He has published widely on class, poverty, and race in early America and the Atlantic World, including extensive work on freedom seekers. His recent publications include "Mapping Inequality, Resistance, and Solutions in Early National Philadelphia," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 110 (2021), 207-29.

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