Dutch-Speaking Runaway Slaves in New York and New Jersey, 1730–1825

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The history of runaway slaves in America has suffered from both chronological and geographical limitations. Even in the best modern works on the topic, runaway slavery is treated as a mostly nineteenth-century phenomenon, with slaves fleeing the slave South to reach the free states of the North.¹ The relative availability of source material must explain a significant part of these conceptual biases. There is simply much greater recordkeeping and many more printed sources regarding slavery that have survived from the antebellum than from the colonial period and early republic. And, of course, by the 1830s, slavery had mostly faded out north of the Mason–Dixon Line. Later, after decades of abolitionism and years of war, it was easy for Americans to forget that there were once slaves in the North, let alone runaway slaves that came from Northern slaveholders.

But in the past decade or two, there has been an increased focused on the history of slavery in the North, and with it often an interest in runaway slave advertisements.² Despite recent books on slavery in New Jersey, Boston, Rhode Island, New York City, and the Canadian Maritimes, there is yet little understanding of the connections between these regions. The New York and New Jersey case is particularly interesting because slavery lasted longer there than elsewhere in the North, and because much of slavery there was rooted in Dutch culture. A study of Dutch-speaking runaway slaves potentially has much to offer

for understanding the nature of slavery in New York and New Jersey as well as the comparative history of slavery in the United States. Such a study could help indicate connections between the slave cultures in the North and meanwhile identify any unique characteristics of Dutch American slavery.

This present study is an analysis of advertisements for 478 runaway slaves in which the runaway is described as speaking Dutch (at least to some degree) or English with a Dutch accent. This collection supersedes earlier efforts by historians Graham Hodges, who reprinted only fifty-eight such advertisements; Michael Groth, who compiled slave advertisements limited to the Hudson Valley’s Dutchess County between 1785 and 1827; and the team of Susan Stessin-Cohn and Ashley Hurlburt-Biagini, who assembled an extensive list of runaway slave advertisements from the Hudson Valley. New digital search databases and technologies not only make the search for historical newspapers much easier than in years past, but they also allow for a more expansive geographical range of coverage, including, in this study, newspapers from Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and Maryland, for example.

Research on the history of Dutch American slavery in New York and New Jersey includes a number of dissertations and case studies of particular locations, but a general synthetic account is missing. Slaves were introduced to New Netherland in the 1620s, and they primarily served the West India Company, not individual masters. Slaves under Dutch colonial rule appear to have had status approaching that of indentured servants, as they were often able to work toward their freedom, or at least “half-freedom,” the status of owing only part of their time for laboring for the West India Company. When the English took over New Amsterdam in 1664 and renamed it New York, there were perhaps three hundred to five hundred slaves in the colony. Too often the story of Dutch slavery in North America ends there, with the end of Dutch rule. But the Dutch inhabitants of New York and New Jersey continued to import slaves, and as the Dutch occupied more farmland in the

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5. The closest to a general account is Vivienne Kruger, “Born to Run: The New York Slave Family from 1626 to 1827” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1985). While extensive, and marshalling an impressive amount of data, it lacks analysis and overview. The general contours of New York’s runaway slave activity were drawn by Edgar McManus in a chapter in his A History of Negro Slavery in New York (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1966). McManus emphasizes the movement of runaways to their old homes, to rejoin friends and family, an active maritime market for runaway slaves to serve on ships, and runaways who crossed provincial lines into and out of New York.
Hudson Valley and on Long Island, slavery spread with them. Dutch-speaking slaves lived primarily in New York, both in New York City and throughout the Hudson Valley, but also in the northeastern sections of New Jersey. The geographical distribution of Dutch-speaking slaves in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was roughly coequal to the territory once claimed by New Netherland in the early seventeenth century, but it spread well beyond the areas settled in what was seventeenth-century Dutch New York. New York’s slave population grew from 2,466 in 1703 to 30,717 in 1800. Before 1786, free Black people and enslaved Black people were not counted separately.

Jeroen Dewulf, following Graham Russell Hodges, has argued that 16 to 20 percent of New York slaves could speak Dutch in the mid-eighteenth century. This estimate is based on the ratio of runaway slave advertisements from New York that mentioned Dutch language versus those that did not (as provided in a book by Hodges). In a separate article, I have provided demographic evidence that suggests there were probably around seventy-six thousand slaves who lived in New York during the eighteenth century, and that 30 to 40 percent of them spoke some Dutch.


Although the Dutch language faded from New York City—the traditional focus of study in the history of New York slavery—the decline there in the number of Dutch-speaking slaves was offset by the growth of slavery in rural areas of the Hudson Valley, where the Dutch language was still very alive at the end of the eighteenth century. Because of an active internal slave trade in New York and New Jersey, Dutch-speaking slaves were frequently found working for and living with English-speaking masters. Rather little has been published about these Dutch-speaking slaves, owing in part to the shortage of primary sources, particularly sources written in English. A quantitative analysis of these runaway advertisements is one way to move past histories of Dutch-speaking American slaves that rely on a limited number of anecdotes or late nineteenth-century memoirs of Dutch New Yorkers.8

There are two primary takeaways from this study. The first is a narrow argument about the nature and extent of Dutch slavery and language in America, and the second is an argument about how the economics of the runaway slave phenomenon likely made a significant contribution to social and political change in New York. The first argument, primarily concerned with culture, is that the data indicate that most Dutch-speaking slaves on the run were bilingual, but that some monolingual or nearly monolingual Dutch-speaking slaves fled their masters, particularly as the eighteenth century neared its end. This indicates that even as New York initiated its gradual emancipation project, there were many places in New York and New Jersey, and not just a few backwater hamlets, where slaves were still speaking primarily Dutch. The direction of the runaways—typically toward New York City—indicates a growing network of Dutch-speaking slaves moving to and hiding in the city.

The second argument is that the runaway phenomenon contributed to the increased expense of slavery in New York, helped change the nature of the institution, and ultimately aided in its demise. The increasing numbers of runaway slaves during the Revolution, and in the decades immediately thereafter, presented a serious threat to the institution of slavery in New York. Data about runaways printed in contemporary newspapers probably represent a small percentage of the total number of runaway slaves in the period. Regardless, the number of runaways suggests a very costly problem, particularly for New York’s Dutch slaveholders. As the numbers of runaways increased, slaveholders made concessions to their slaves.

This article is based on a collection of advertisements for 478 runaway slaves who spoke Dutch. The data are drawn from a variety of sources, including digital newspaper databases, but in no instance has information been included that cannot be verified by seeing the original primary source newspaper. It is certainly not an exhaustive list of Dutch-speaking

runaways in American history, and it is not necessarily representative of the distribution of Dutch-speaking runaways over time and space. The arguments in this article require neither that the data are exhaustive nor representative, only that they are accurate and reflect at least some part of the larger picture. There are many good reasons to question how representative the data are. First, it seems that proximity to a city (like New York) would make it easier and more worthwhile for a slave owner to post an advertisement about a runaway. So, runaways from more remote areas might be underrepresented in the data. In addition, advertisements were likely placed only when a slaveholder valued the slave highly enough to justify the expense of the advertisement, and when the slaveholder desired and expected to recover the slave. During the period of gradual emancipation in New York (1799–1827), slaveholders who manumitted their slaves were required to provide bond to their city or county. Some advertisements in this period were placed not because the slaveholder believed he would recover his former slave, but because he feared that he might be liable for the cost of the slave if that slave should appear wandering the county. In other words, an advertisement, especially one with a low reward for the runaway, was a method of expressing publicly that a slave was no longer the concern of the master. A history of Passaic County, New Jersey, from 1901, relates that when runaway advertisements were published the masters “often offered such a nominal reward as to indicate [sic] that the master simply wished to keep himself within the law, which otherwise would have held him responsible for the support of his escape[d] slave, where he might be found.” Allowing unproductive slaves to run away, slaveowners avoided paying a bond to the county overseers to provide for the freed persons should they become indigent.

The number of advertisements for Dutch-speaking runaways increased over time. This might be interpreted in a number of ways. It might not mean, for instance, that the actual number of runaways over time increased; rather, it may indicate only that the desire and ability to look for them increased. Indeed, this is because there were few newspapers in early eighteenth-century New York, but a large number of them were being printed by the first decade of the nineteenth century. Many of the advertisements were printed in New York City newspapers, which one might take as a sign that masters were looking for their slaves there, in the city. But the papers printed in New York City were circulated widely in the Hudson Valley and in New Jersey. Local Hudson Valley newspapers are less likely to have survived over time and are less likely to be found in archival search databases. Dutch slaveholders lived primarily in the rural Hudson Valley, where local newspapers were uncommon before the nineteenth century. It is simply incredulous to believe, as the

9. Examples of one- and five-cent rewards for returning a runaway slave can be found in *Evening Post* (New York), June 11, 1820; *Poughkeepsie Journal*, April 21, 1819; *Poughkeepsie Journal*, January 26, 1825.

data show, that Albany County in the 1770s (then much larger than its present boundaries) would have produced no runaway slave advertisements.

The data include runaway slave advertisements for two persons listed as indentured servants: one called a “negro indentured servant,” William Smith, who fled from his enslaver in 1735 and again in 1737, and another, Isaac Cromwell, a “malatto” [sic] who ran away in 1745. Historians recognize that African Americans in the early colonial period were more likely than their later colonial counterparts to be given the status of indentured servant rather than slave. While these indentured servants might be able to eventually gain their freedom, indentured servants of African descent were certainly coerced into this arrangement. For the purposes of this article then, I consider these two men to be equivalent to slaves.

The data also include a few duplicates, by which I mean runaway persons who were captured only to run away again at a later date. William Smith (mentioned above) fled in 1735 and 1737, and Tom ran away in 1755 and 1756. Those are clearly repeat runaways. In other cases, however, it is not so clear whether a Jack, Tom, or Harry from one year is the same Jack, Tom, or Harry from another. By noting the age, master, and location of the runaways, it appears that advertisements for repeat runaways were rare. Perhaps only 1 or 2 percent of the list is composed of repeat runaways. This is consistent with the idea that slaveholders ascribed less value to runaway slaves and would spend less effort tracking down a repeat runaway.

On the one hand, I have not included a few advertisements from Pennsylvania and Maryland that call for the return of “Dutch” slaves, as these are likely referring to slaves who spoke German (Deutsch), except when they specifically say “Low Dutch” or if they also mention that the slaves came originally from New York or New Jersey. On the other hand, I retained data for Dutch-speaking slaves in New England newspapers, where it seems less likely that there would be a confusion between Dutch and German slaves. In the mid-Atlantic, it was common to make a distinction between High Dutch (German) and Low Dutch; but in the American South, it appears that “Dutch” most often simply meant German. In New England, however, “Dutch” tended to refer to Hollanders, not Germans. It is unclear whether advertisements for Dutch-speaking slaves in Virginia and Louisiana were references to Dutch speakers or to German speakers, but these do not appear in large numbers. Some slaves in the Southern states may have spoken Dutch not because they spent time working for masters in New York or New Jersey but because they were imported from the Caribbean. No examples of such slaves have been located for this study.

Curiously, I have found no evidence for Dutch-speaking slaves in Southern states after the end of emancipation in New York. However, we can establish that Dutch-speaking slaves born in New York and New Jersey were sometimes sold out of state in the eighteenth century and then became runaways. One speaker of “Low Dutch” appeared in Berkeley

County, Virginia, in 1774.12 A slave, Tom Simpson, who ran away from a master in Georgetown in 1772, was “born in East Jersey” and could read, write, and speak Dutch.13 In 1776, Pomp, a fluent Dutch speaker with limited English, ran away from a Josiah Fessenden in Cambridge, Massachusetts.14 In 1782, Jack, a Dutch speaker born in Albany, ran away from George Ewing in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.15 Sally, a Low Dutch–speaking slave, arrived in Charleston by ship from New York and immediately ran away.16

In addition to Virginia and Massachusetts, there were Dutch-speaking slaves to be found in the mid to late eighteenth century in places like New Haven, Connecticut, and Newport, Rhode Island. The earliest advertisement I found for a Dutch-speaking runaway dates to 1730. There were, of course, runaway slaves in New York and New Jersey before this date. As early as 1659, for instance, Virginia passed an act to pay the Dutch for the return of runaway servants and promised to provide payment when Virginia masters refused to return Dutch runaways.17

For a few of these early Dutch runaways, we even have some specific information. One as yet untapped source on this topic is court case records. In the case of Lewis Morris v. Lewis DeBois, of October 1680, there is reference to “negroes taken by the Dutch” and sold in Esopus (Kingston), who then ran away to the defendant.18 Some runaways in Dutch-speaking New York were seeking freedom locally or regionally, while others were looking for a way out of the country altogether. Dennis Maika has written about the slave Jack, who ran away from the Philipse plantation in Westchester in 1696. Jack appears to have made his escape via Connecticut to Rhode Island, intending to find a ship to Madagascar.19

In the seventeenth century, the Dutch and English in the Hudson Valley were constantly worried about slaves escaping to New France, and they even passed laws restricting slaves from wandering too far north of Albany.20 In 1686, the Monsier de Denonville guar-
anted New York’s Governor Donagan that a certain pair of Black slaves from Schenectady who had been thought to have fled to Quebec would, if found, be “bound and manacled” and returned. As England warred with France, the threat of runaways going to Quebec drew a response from the New York colonial assembly. An act in 1705 prohibited slaves from traveling more than forty miles north of Albany, out of fear that they would flee to the French. The act noted that “the Number of Slaves in the Cities of New-York, and Albany, as also within the several Counties, Towns, and Mannors within this Colony, doth daily increase, and that they have been oftentimes Guilty of Confederating together in Running away, and of other ill and dangerous Practices.” The threat stretched south of Albany, as evidenced by a letter from 1712 in which Robert Livingston complained about two of his slaves who had run away to “Mont Royall” (Montreal).

Runaway slave advertisements are “extraordinary documents,” notes Jonathan Prude in an article from 1991. They are “[a]lmost unimaginably rich in detail, they provide brisk but arresting portraits of people drawn mainly from the anonymous ‘lower sort’ . . . from the unfree laborers who formed large contingents of America’s eighteenth-century work force.” Prude argues that such advertisements were fundamentally descriptions. What we might take from this is that advertisements mentioned things like language because language was an essential part of describing a slave. Such a reading suggests as well that readers of colonial newspapers could quickly spot a Dutch accent, distinguishing it from, say, a German accent or the English accent of a slave born in Africa. The existence of Dutch-speaking slaves was common knowledge everywhere from Virginia to Boston.

The text of many advertisements is not always clear about the ability of a slave to speak Dutch, and of course “some Dutch” or “good Dutch” is subjective and depends on the observer. Some advertisements note that the slave speaks Dutch but neglect to say whether he or she also speaks any English. Any number of other selection biases might be at work here in the data. For example, monolingual or nearly monolingual Dutch-speaking slaves probably had fewer connections outside of their local communities. Slaves who spoke only Dutch would have faced an added barrier to escape, the language barrier. Nearly monolingual Dutch slaves may have been less likely to have an available support network to aid them in their escape. We should expect, therefore, that there were more monolingual

22. An Act for the more Effectual preventing and punishing the Conspiracy and Insurrection of Negro, and other Slaves, for the better Regulating them, and for Repealing the Acts herein mentioned relating thereto, New York: Acts 1726–1740, National Archives London, CO 5/1153.
and nearly monolingual Dutch-speaking slaves relative to Dutch–English bilingual slaves in this period than the data indicate.

Nevertheless, a few things can be established quite clearly from the data. First, there were some monolingual or nearly monolingual Dutch-speaking slaves in New York throughout the eighteenth century. Second, most Dutch-speaking slaves also spoke English, or at least a good deal of English. Third, these slaves must have moved around a lot, especially in the earlier period, because a good portion of them spoke French, Spanish, and “High Dutch” (German) in addition to Dutch, English, and certainly their own African languages. Fourth, right up until the passage of state emancipation laws, there continued to be slaves in New York and New Jersey whose primary language was Dutch. The multilingual nature of Dutch-speaking slaves is clear, especially in the earliest advertisements—those from the 1730s through the 1760s. Johnny, listed in 1736, could speak English, French, and Dutch. William Smith, “a negro indentured servant,” could speak English, High Dutch, and Low Dutch. In fact, all but two Dutch-speaking runaways from the period of 1730 to 1760 appeared to speak English at least as well as Dutch. Only later were there more Dutch-speaking runaways who spoke little English. Hank (listed in 1761) spoke “better Dutch than English”; Cyrus (1764) spoke Dutch and “very bad English”; Pomp (1776) spoke “broken English, speaks Dutch fluently”; for Mink (1796), “the English language he speaks brokenly—the Dutch fluent”; Tom (1798) “commonly speaks Dutch, and very bad English.”

So far, none of this is an entirely novel addition to historians’ knowledge, but the general point that there was a Dutch-speaking slave population in New York and New Jersey that endured well beyond the end of New Netherland, and which consisted of slaves with mixed and various language abilities, has not been stated clearly or often enough, nor has it been demonstrated with anything beyond anecdotes. What is new here is an inference drawn from the data, showing that the number of advertisements of runaway slaves speaking better Dutch than English increased over time, not only in real numbers but also in the percentage of the runaway advertisements mentioning Dutch language abilities. This does not mean that the Dutch language in the region was gaining strength over time, as its decline in the eighteenth century is well known. But these sources do make clear that as late as the 1820s, there were slaves in New York and New Jersey who were primarily or exclusively Dutch speakers. This may indicate that while slavery was expanding in New York, not all Dutch-speaking regions were yet integrated into English language culture, society, and markets. To demonstrate this point, and as shown in Figure 2, I coded the advertised runaways for their language abilities: 1 for monolingual Dutch, 2 for those who spoke more Dutch than English, 3 for those with equal ability in Dutch and English, and 4 for those who spoke better English than Dutch. This is, of course, a subjective and relative ranking, but it may serve as a useful estimate. I only labeled 3 slaves as Dutch monolingual (code 1), while I coded 102 as speaking better Dutch than English (code 2), 354 likely spoke Dutch and English at nearly the same level (code 3), and 21 spoke English and only some Dutch (code 4).
Interestingly, monolingual or nearly monolingual Dutch-speaking slaves were not limited to one isolated rural pocket. Instead, some of the most obvious cases of monolingual or nearly monolingual Dutch-speaking slaves are, starting with one in 1760, in Staten Island; another in Tappan, Orange County (1762); Staten Island (1764); Cranberry, Middlesex County, New Jersey (1764); Orange-town, Rockland County (1771); Westchester (1772); Trenton, Essex County, New Jersey (1782); Kingston, Ulster County (1793); Dutchess (1792), Helleberg, Albany County (1796); Shodach, Rensselaer County (1796); Narrows, Kings County (1798); Clintontown, Dutchess County (1803); Marbletown, Ulster County (1805); Rensellaerville (1807); Middleburgh, Schoharie County (1807); Hurley, Ulster County (1808); New Paltz, Ulster County (1809); Ringwood, Essex County, New Jersey (1811); Claverack, Columbia County (1817); and Warwick, Orange County (1817).

Some 88 percent of these advertisements were for men (420 out of the 476 that mention sex or give a typically male or female name). The average age of runaways, from 387 advertisements that give an age, was twenty-six years. It is clear that slaves were using the Dutch language in the places mentioned in the advertisements at least until those dates mentioned. This observation is useful in charting the history of the decline of the Dutch language in New York and New Jersey. Although the English language had conquered New York City and the Hudson Valley, Dutch was alive and even dominant in many households, villages, and rural areas in the first decades of the nineteenth century. This is in line with the observation of Dutch traveler Gerhardus Balthazar Bosch, who visited the Hudson

Figure 2. Dutch Language Abilities among Runaways by Decade
Valley and New Jersey in 1826, observing that Dutch was commonly spoken in both the Albany area and in Bergen County, New Jersey.25

The existence of English-speaking slaves who knew a bit of Dutch indicates that there were a substantial number of slaves who grew up in English-speaking environments and then spent some time with a Dutch-speaking master or in a Dutch-speaking community. Slaves were often hired out, even between primarily English and primarily Dutch communities. Shades of bilingualism dominated in this region throughout the eighteenth century, but slaves whose primary language was Dutch were common even at the end of the century. Finally, it appears that the bilingual nature of the majority of the Dutch-speaking slaves in the region may provide a clue as to why the Dutch-speaking African American population disappeared with little notice in the nineteenth century. They gradually adopted the English language, and could, upon emancipation, blend into free, English-speaking African American communities.

The data analyzed in this article can also be sorted by the geographical origins of the Dutch-speaking runaway slaves. There are many ways to interpret the data, and much could be speculated on. However, a few patterns are clear, one of which is that there is an increasing number of runaway slave advertisements over time as one looks northward up the Hudson Valley. Specifically, there is a spike in the 1790s and 1800s in Albany, Columbia, and Ulster counties. Meanwhile, advertisements for runaway slaves in New York City (Manhattan) fade out in the 1790s, and the numbers in Orange, Westchester, and Richmond counties remain small but stable. It is possible that slaves in New York City, by the nineteenth century, could generally speak English without much of a Dutch accent, even if they could speak Dutch. Perhaps in the city then, it became less useful to describe runaways as Dutch speakers if their language would not give them away. This may also indicate that it was rare for Dutch-speaking slaves, who were mostly from rural areas, to be sold to persons living in New York City. Given the slave population changes over time by county, the direction of slave sales was probably mostly out of New York City toward the Hudson Valley and New Jersey.

Figure 3 illustrates Dutch-speaking runaways by region and decade. For the purposes of this figure, the Hudson Valley consists of all counties from Westchester to Albany. The Dutch-speaking runaways from New Jersey came from Morris, Essex, Middlesex, Bergen, Hunterdon, and Somerset counties, essentially the northern half of the state, or what was once known as East Jersey before it became part of New Jersey proper in 1702. More advertisements for Dutch-speaking runaway slaves came from the Hudson Valley than from all other regions combined. Clearly, the most dominant trend in the data is the increase in advertisements from the Hudson Valley in the 1780s thorough the 1810s.

In rough comparison to the census numbers for slaves, it appears that the number of

Dutch-speaking runaways per region over time correlates well with the absolute number of Dutch-speaking slaves in those regions. Northeastern New Jersey seems to defy this observation, however, since runaway slave advertisements peaked in the 1760s and then remained in the single digits per decade, until fading in the 1810s, all while slave numbers in the state were increasing. Advertisements declined in the period 1810–1820 and ceased after that. There are a number of possible explanations for this. As final emancipation in New York neared (a law for gradual emancipation appeared in 1799, but complete emancipation came later in 1827) and manumissions increased, slaves saw freedom on the horizon and understood that the risk of running was too high. But it is more likely that masters stopped spending money to pay for advertisements to recover their slaves, as the future value of the slaves to their masters was declining. Some elderly slaves, slave children, and disabled slaves were said to have negative value, and New York required that slaves could not be manumitted without proof that they could maintain themselves. If low-valued slaves chose to run away, masters had an incentive to let them go, but they also feared that they would become legally liable if the courts determined that a slave had been freely let go instead of having run away. For this reason, there are many advertisements for runaway slaves in New York that offer paltry rewards, indicating not only the lack of desire to recover the slave, but also the concern of legal protection for the slaveholder. For example, when the twenty-one-year-old slave Isaac ran away, Nicholas Lansing of Orangetown, New York, offered $1 for his return.26

The number of runaway slaves in New York was certainly much higher than reported in advertisements. Runaways probably peaked during the Revolutionary War, establishing

a pattern for others to follow in the decades to come. But since many slaves fled to the English forces during the Revolution, their masters did not bother with posting advertisements if they believed they could not recover their slaves. Graham Hodges has identified 516 slaves from New York and New Jersey who fled to New York City with the British from 1775 to 1783. From this, he argues that “New Jersey slaveowners gave notice of only 89 of 308 or 29 percent of runaways during the American Revolution.”27 Runaways from Bergen County, New Jersey, to New York City were so common during the Revolutionary War that the British commander in the city, Colonel Cuyler, issued an order to “prevent their crossing as they had become ‘such a burden to the town.’”28

There is plenty of evidence that Dutch-speaking slaves fled their homes in the Hudson Valley during the Revolution without corresponding runaway slave advertisements to be found in their wake. In Albany in 1779, the Commissioners for Detecting and Defeating Conspiracies in the State of New York warned of a slave who was “endeavouring to Stir up the minds of the Negroes against their Masters and raising Insurrections among them.” In 1780, they wrote of a “negro man” arrested on his way to the enemy and warned that slaves at Nistageune (near Schenectady) intended to flee to Canada.29 The Manor of Rensselaerswyk established a curfew for slaves in 1776 and reminded citizens of the law of 1730, telling them to be extra vigilant because “meetings of the Negroes are more frequent of late than usual.”30 In Black Bondage in the North, McManus notes that slaves aimed for New York City and hoped to board ships where captains with short-man crews would take them on as sailors.31 This is evidenced in the New York Weekly Mercury on July 26, 1779, where there is a warning to free Black people not to harbor fugitives in the city. Significant numbers of runaways could be found at the docks in New York, as they attempted to board ships as cheap labor for captains engaged in trade or privateering on the Atlantic.32 New York’s Black men, both free-born and self-emancipated, found work in maritime trades, not only in New York City, but also in other American port cities like Philadelphia.33

The *New York Journal and Patriotic Register* of January 16, 1799, advertised a slave-catching service. There was also increased runaway activity in the heavily Dutch Ulster County in the 1790s. There, the Slave Apprehending Society of Shawangunk formed in response to the state legislature’s debates on the abolition of slavery. Most of the members of this society had Dutch last names. Yet the collected advertisements in this study mention only one runaway slave from Ulster County for the 1790s, and ten in the 1800s—more *after* the formation of the slave-catching society than *before* it. In 1810 in New Paltz, citizens formed the Society of Negroes Unsettled, a private organization of slaveholders who came together to combine funds and pay members to engage in finding runaway slaves from their neighborhood. A year later, a group of men from New Paltz signed an agreement that if they were to apprehend the slaves of another group of New Paltz men, the first group would be able to keep a portion of the amount the slaves would be sold for.

Runaway slave activity that was not reported in the press is exceptionally difficult to track, but evidence of it can crop up in letters from the period. For example, in 1824, Senator Martin Van Buren (later president of the United States) received a letter offering the potential return of one of his runaway slaves who had appeared in Worcester, Massachusetts. The correspondent, Alzono Hammond, noted that the slave “quit” him (Van Buren) “some 10 years since,” and Hammond wondered if Van Buren would be willing to sell the slave, should Hammond be able to take him into possession. Van Buren’s response is unknown, but on the back of the envelope from Hammond he scribbled that if Hammond “could get him without violence I would take $50.” New York City abolitionist Thomas Van Rensselaer fled from slavery in Montgomery County in 1819. A newspaper article from 1837 says, “His offended master issued hand-bills, sent messengers in all directions, and traveled himself as far as Canada” in search of his missing enslaved man.

The extent of the runaway phenomenon in New York must have put significant social and economic pressure on slaveholding in the state, and indeed the region. Michael Groth calls this resistance in the Hudson Valley “the most direct means of challenging slavery” and argues that it hastened emancipation. What, however, was the cause-and-effect mechanism at work here? How did runaway slaves hasten emancipation? A likely answer is

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37. The Martin Van Buren Papers, Library of Congress. A. G. Hammond to Martin Van Buren, December 23, 1824, Van Buren Papers: Series 2, General Correspondence, 1787–1868, Box 6, Reel 6, accessed September 15, 2021, https://www.loc.gov/resource/mss43828.006_0408_0572/?sp=150&r=0.059,0.34,1.104,0.73,0.
that runaways made slaveholding expensive, both for slaveholders as individuals and for a society that spent resources to enforce the slave system.

Jeffrey Hummel’s “Deadweight Loss and the American Civil War: The Political Economy of Slavery, Secession, and Emancipation” includes an important study of the economic effect of runaway slaves and provides points of comparison for this current study. Hummel argues that Missouri slaveowners were worried about Kansas becoming a free state not only because it would upset the balance of power in Congress, but also because slaves in Missouri would be able to run west to freedom, in addition to north and east. One might draw a parallel between Missouri in the 1850s and New York at the turn of the eighteenth century. In both cases, slavery was hemmed in on multiple sides. Slaves running away from their masters in New York could head to Vermont, where slavery was abolished in 1777; to Pennsylvania or Connecticut, where gradual emancipation began in 1780 and 1784, respectively; to Canada, where slavery was recognized but not as well established; or even to Massachusetts, where slavery was fully abolished in 1783. Following national law, a slaveholder from New York could enter other states to attempt to reclaim his “chattel slaves,” but this could be a difficult, expensive proposition. The case *Glen v. Hodges*, settled at the New York Supreme Court in 1812, relates the story of a slave from Albany who fled to Rutland, Vermont, where, after a few years, the citizens of Rutland assumed that he was a free man. This meant slaves had more directions in which to flee. In the end, however, the greatest destination for runaways from New York slavery was New York City, where they could mix with the growing free Black population of the expanding city. New York City acted as a magnet and safe haven for runaway slaves, threatening the slave system at the state level.

The rates of runaway slaves in New York, and in particular among Dutch-speaking slaves, appear to be very high in comparison to rates in the American South. Historian Shane White argued this when he wrote that between 1771 and 1805, there was an average of at least thirty-five runaways per year from New York and New Jersey combined. White, however, excluded runaways from counties to the north and west of Ulster and Dutchess counties, where there were large Dutch-speaking slave populations. Hummel’s work provides some insight here and better points of comparison than the published research that was available to White in 1989. Hummel notes that fugitive slave rates were compiled for the 1850 and 1860 censuses. The reported rates of runaways were fairly consistent across states, although higher in the border states than in the Deep South. For the year 1850, for example,

the average number of runaways for all slave states combined was 0.03 percent of the slave population, or 0.15 percent of “prime males,” and in 1860, 0.02 percent of the slave population (one in five thousand slaves), or 0.10 percent of “prime males.” Because runaways were predominantly prime-aged males, runaway activity struck directly at slaveowners’ pocketbooks. A standard ratio is that there was one prime-aged male for every five slaves. This means that although one out of every eight hundred slaves might have run away per year, the ratio of prime males who ran away was five times greater. Some runaways, of course, were caught and returned to their owners.

Of the 478 Dutch-speaking runaway slaves mentioned in advertisements, at least 361 came from New York, 93 from New Jersey, 4 from Pennsylvania, 3 from Massachusetts, 2 each from Maryland, Virginia, and Rhode Island, and 1 each from Connecticut, Delaware, and South Carolina. Another seven were likely from New York, but no clear geographic descriptor is available in the advertisement. Taking just the confirmed reports for New York (361), we arrive at the following rates of Dutch-speaking runaway slaves per year as shown in Table 1 and Figure 3.

### Table 1: Minimum Reported Dutch-Speaking Slave Advertisements in New York, Average Per Year (By Decade)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decade</th>
<th>Rate per Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1750s</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1760s</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1770s</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1780s</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1790s</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1800s</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1810s</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In 1790, New York’s slave population stood at 21,314. Over the decade to follow, it would fall to 20,953. If, for example, 40 percent of the slave population of 1790 and 1800 were Dutch-speaking slaves, then these Dutch speakers were running away at a minimum reported (i.e., advertised) rate of at least 1 per 900 per year in the 1790s and 1 per 730 per year in the 1800s. If, however, the Dutch-speaking slave population was only 20 percent of the state’s slave population (in line with a previous estimate by Graham Hodges), then the minimum reported rate of Dutch-speaking slave runaways during those decades would have been twice as high, 1 out of 450 per year in the 1790s and 1 out of 365 per year in the 1800s.

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43. Hummel, “Deadweight Loss and the American Civil War,” 371–72. See also Delbanco, The War before the War. The highest rates occurred in Delaware, where in 1850 some 1.1 percent of all slaves fled, or in 1860 when 0.67 percent of all slaves fled. Delaware, because of its small size and small number of slaves, should be regarded as a statistical anomaly here.
The actual rate of Dutch-speaking runaways must have been higher, of course, not only because not all advertisements about runaways who spoke Dutch would mention such language abilities, but also because many runaway attempts went unreported and many potentially relevant sources from the period have not been preserved or made available. Shane White has gone so far as to write that “Dutch-speaking slaveowners probably did not advertise in the press. Most of the owners of Dutch-speaking slaves in fact had non-Dutch names and had presumably purchased these slaves from owners of Dutch origin.”

Nor is it a simple matter to guess a slave’s Dutch connection by their name. Some slaves of Dutch masters had Dutch names, but they also often had English or classical names. And moreover, names could change or be abbreviated in ways that are not obvious. Of the 478 runaways considered in this study, I counted just 214 from owners with Dutch names. Omitting eighteen advertisements in the dataset that do not give the name of the slaveholder means that in just above 46 percent (214 of 460) of advertisements in which slaves were said to speak Dutch did their masters also have Dutch last names. Two things may explain this. First, slaves raised in Dutch families had probably been sold to English-speaking families. Second, Dutch-speaking slaveowners were less likely to take out an advertisement for a runaway slave, or to mention that the slave spoke Dutch. There were certainly families with Dutch-speaking slaves who had non-Dutch names but were of Dutch ancestry only on their maternal side. And, there were examples of families like the Livingstons and Zabriskies who had non-Dutch origin names but nevertheless learned to speak Dutch and integrate into Dutch society in New Netherland or early New York.

Runaway slaves lowered the value of retained slaves and made New York slavery more costly. This may be counterintuitive for those who would imagine that a reduced supply of slaves should have led to an increase in the price of remaining slaves. But another, countervailing force at work here was likely stronger, contributing to lower prices despite lower supply. The primary reason for this is that, as running away became an established strategy, the risk of each slave absconding grew. Who would be willing to buy a slave if he or she knew that the slave had a good chance of running away? Price differences between the

44. White, “Question of Style,” 41.
46. For New England, for example, Antonio Bly gives rough numbers for runaways per decade. There were “at least” sixty-seven runaways in the 1730s, Bly writes. In the 1750s and 1760s, Bly continues, there were an average of 100 per decade, and in the 1770s, some 125. Bly gives no guesses for New England runaway numbers for later decades, when the Dutch-speaking New York numbers were on the rise. Comparing this to New York data may not be very useful because we do not know the comparative rates at which people in various Northern states posted advertisements for their runaway slaves. Antonio T. Bly, ed., Escaping Bondage: A Documentary History of Runaway Slaves in Eighteenth-Century New England, 1700–1789 (Lanham, MD: Lexington Press, 2012). Bly’s book is a collection of the newspaper advertisements he found for Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and New Hampshire. It does not include New York or New Jersey.
South and North (more expensive for slaves farther south) were based on more than productivity or marginal revenue product; they were also affected by runaway risk. In other words, prices were lower if escape risk was high.47

In the later years of New York slavery, runaways put pressure on slaveholders to manumit their slaves, extracting the most amount of labor from them before agreeing to let them go. Gerald Mullin found a similar effect at play in Virginia in the 1780s, the era of the greatest number of slave manumissions in Virginia history following a period of high rates of slave runaways.48 As manumissions increased, running away became easier, as there were more places for a fugitive to take shelter, more sympathetic supporters, and more safe bases to run to. New York City in particular was fertile ground for slaves pretending to be free. In the nineteenth century, some observers noted or recalled that the Dutch held slaves even when it was not financially sensible to do so. If a slave’s cost was not a function of his marginal product alone, but instead reflected the social advantage a slave provided his or her enslaver, then this would have given another reason for why runaways might have contributed to an increase in the cost of slaves, at least in the short term. A study of slave prices in New York will help clarify these developments.

Runaway slaves had always been a problem in Dutch New York, and the cost of recovering them would have made slaveholding a riskier financial venture. When two of Robert Livingston’s slaves ran away to Canada in 1712, he feared that others would be lured away by the French and Indians. To prevent this, he stationed twenty Palatines at guard for nearly a week until he felt secure that the threat had passed. The cost of twenty guards for five or six days must have been substantial.49 Runaways to New York City also caused significant concern there, with social and economic costs to bear. The state of New York does not appear to have had slave patrols, at least not consistent ones. But cities and counties still bore costs from runaways. The overseers of the poor needed to spend efforts certifying which free persons deserved support. The courts needed to determine which individuals were free and which were enslaved.

Regional patterns also contributed to the success of runaways and the burden such movement put on the slave system. Gradual emancipation for slaves became law in Vermont

49. “About 3 weeks ago we had an Information from Albany y t my 2 negroes who runn away last fall and are got to Canada by the help of a River Indian, y e one is with y e Govr of Mont Royall y e oyr with Seber y e was here y t they had told y e french y t there was 8 more negroes from whence they Run upon w e y e french had sent y e Indian y t brought them there & 12 more to this Place in Particular to take y e negroes, we had upon this 20 Palantines y e keep guard 5 or 6 Days & then were dismissed, hearing it was y e negroes at Albany that were to Runn away if y e french Indians come.” R. Livingston to Lawrence Smith, April 2, 1712, in O’Callaghan, Documentary History of the State of New York, vol. 3, 681.
(1777), Pennsylvania (1780), New Hampshire and Massachusetts (1783), and Connecticut and Rhode Island (1784), and in 1787, with the Northwest Ordinance, slavery was banned in the new lands to the west. The laws enabled slavery to hold on in these New England states for another generation, but by the time New Yorkers came around to a gradual emancipation act in 1799, they were surrounded by free-soil states. Only their neighbor to the south, New Jersey, had not yet passed emancipation legislation. Reports like the following from 1807 show that early nineteenth-century runaways had more options than ever before. “It has been conjectured that she [Dine] has been decoyed away, and many have got on board of some vessel, and gone to New-York. Or in company, perhaps, with some black man, many have gone up the Mohawk river, where she said she had children. She once ran away from her former master and rambled into Connecticut, where she was taken up and brought back.” A slave catcher could not just look for a runaway slave in the city, or in the local area, but had to consider the frontier and neighboring states, too.

Runaway activity became part of a negotiation strategy for slaves across New York, but particularly in the rural Dutch areas. Running away was always a threat when the slave faced severe mistreatment or sale to another slaveowner. The case of *De Fonclear v. Shottenkirk*, decided at the New York State Supreme Court in 1808, tells of a slave who ran away immediately after being sold. The slave did not like his new master, and so the seller allowed the slave to work for the purchaser on trial, to see if the situation could be tolerable. But when the new master sent the slave to town to get some tobacco, the slave fled. The chance that the slave could be recovered might be suggested in the low reward of only $10 that the purchaser, De Fonclear, was willing to offer, despite having paid $300 to acquire the slave.

Running away, then, was a dangerous but common strategy in the negotiation process. Writer Daniel Van Winkle relates that many of the runaways during the Revolution returned to their masters in Bergen County, New Jersey, were taken back in, and were thereafter allowed their own private gardens, the products of which the slaves could take to New York City to sell. They were given the freedom to travel to the city by canoe, sell these garden products, use the proceeds to make purchases as they pleased, and then return to New Jersey. Here one can see some of the real negotiating power of the runaway threat. After the Revolution, especially for slaveowners close to New York City, a new kind of slavery had to develop. The narratives of kind treatment of slaves recorded in so many local histories, as well as early histories of slaves in and around New York City, may be based mostly on this new social order.

Advertisements for Dutch-speaking runaways indicate that there was a large, persistent

Dutch-speaking slave population in New York and New Jersey and that this population had some monolingual Dutch speakers but consisted mostly of Dutch–English bilingual slaves. The Dutch slave population on the whole was never isolated from American English. However, certain Dutch-speaking slaves in certain places in New York and New Jersey were indeed isolated from English speakers. These advertisements indicate the geographical distribution of Dutch-speaking slaves, the expansion of Dutch-speaking slavery in the Hudson Valley in the mid to late eighteenth century, and its demise, first in New York City, then elsewhere in the state.

The extent of runaways contributed to the need to clarify state laws on slavery. It is no coincidence that the 1790s and 1800s, the decades with the highest rates of runaway slaves, were also the decades in which New York passed an increasing number of laws that protected slaves and attempted to ameliorate their situation. This system of rigid control broke down during and after the Revolution, as slaves became more mobile and took flight. In addition, as antislavery sentiment was building, state laws began to turn in favor of slaves. In the 1780s slaves could give testimony, while for capital cases they had the right to trial by jury. After the 1780s, new laws regarding slavery in New York tended not to further restrict slave movement or rights but gradually chip away at the power of masters over their slaves. The legal system shifted, therefore, from a one-sided focus on the preservation of the slave system to an arena of negotiation between slaves and masters.