

Citizens ALL


African Americans in Connecticut 1700-1850

Analyzing an Eighteenth-Century Runaway Slave Ad

In most newspapers you'll see ads at the back of an issue, listing items for sale, public announcements, or items and services that people are looking to buy. You would probably be shocked to find an advertisement announcing a human being for sale, or a notice of a slave that had run away, but such ads were commonplace in newspapers published in the eighteenth century in the United States, even in northern states like Connecticut.

Advertisements of this type can tell some interesting things about the values and living conditions of these long-ago Connecticut residents, if you keep your eyes open and read the ad as if you were a detective looking for clues. A good detective notices things that most people never stop to think about, and asks probing questions.

Let's look at one of the items on the Connecticut Runaway Slave Ads page:



October 9th 1764.
RAN AWAY from Gorton in
Connecticut, a Spanish Molatto
Slave, named PHAROAH,
about 5 Feet 10 Inches high,
well set; wore short Hair (but
may have cut it off) considerably
Talkative to appearance,
artful and pleasant in his Manners and Beha-
viour, plays on a Violin, & had one with him,
when he went away had on a stone grey
Bearskin Coat, a strip'd Flannel Waistcoat
without Sleeves, cloth colour'd Breeches,
Stockings uncertain, as he carried a Variety
with him in a Bag with other Cloathing, Brass
Buckles in his Shoes. Whoever takes and
secures said Slave so that the Owner may have
him again, shall receive **FIVE DOLLARS**
Reward with necessary Charges paid,
by JOHN MUMFORD, of Colchester.
N. B. All Masters of Vessels and Others
are forbid harbouring or carrying off said
Slave, as they shall answer it at their Peril.

One thing you should know when reading eighteenth-century texts like this is that an "s" sound is sometimes marked in documents with a character called the "long s," which resembles a lower-case f. For example, this word

filver

would be spelled "silver" in modern English.

As you read through this ad, jot down questions and observations quickly. After you've got a bunch of them, go back and decide which ones are intriguing enough to warrant further investigation. For example, here are some questions and observations that this ad might provoke:

1. The running figure at the top of the ad looks like a savage holding a spear and wearing a skirt made of leaves. But the description of Pharoah describes him wearing very different clothing. How does the "running savage" image contradict the description of Pharoah? If the image did not appear, would readers have a different impression of the runaway slave?
2. Pharoah is described as a "Spanish Molatto Slave" ("molatto" is a variation of "mulatto," which means a person of mixed race, typically a mixture of African and Caucasian/European). What do you suppose a "Spanish Molatto" may have looked like? Do you think there were slaves in Connecticut who were fair-skinned like their "owners"? If so, how could someone tell who was a slave and who was a free person?
3. The ad says that Pharoah is "considerably Talkative to appearance, artful and pleasant in his Manners and Behaviour." He sounds like someone you might enjoy having a conversation with. Isn't it strange to hear this, but then realize that Pharoah was considered a piece of property worth five dollars to his "owner"? What were the daily conversations and interactions like between Pharoah and the slave owner John Mumford? What would they talk about?
4. Is it surprising to learn that Pharoah "plays on a Violin, & had one with him"? Where and when did enslaved people learn to play the violin? Under what circumstances might he have played it?
5. Why is there such detailed description of Pharoah's clothing--his "stone grey Bearskin Coat," his "strip[e]d Flannel Waistcoat without Sleeves," etc.? Why might the detail about "Brass Buckles in his Shoes" be significant? Was brass rare at that time?
6. From where do you think Pharoah got his name? Isn't it strange to have a slave named Pharoah, since in the Hebrew Bible Pharaoh was the slave owner? Did he have a last name? Did he have a family?
7. Where would escaped slaves in Connecticut go? Were there any safe places to hide in the state, or in neighboring states? Are there any stories available to us today that tell about escaped slaves who boarded ships, and what were their lives like?

What other questions about Pharoah's ad can you come up with? The challenge from here is to determine which questions excite your curiosity the most, and then how you might find answers to some of them.

Don't stop asking questions after you've chosen one or two favorite ones. Take a big step backward and consider your question from a broader viewpoint. For example:

- In question 2, we started thinking about Pharoah's description as a "Spanish Molatto." What other ethnic and racial categories were used to describe enslaved people in Connecticut at this time? Did readers of these newspapers see a difference between a Spanish Molatto and a French Molatto, for example? Where do you suppose Pharoah might have been born, if he truly was a descendant of Spanish and African parents?
- In question 3, we noticed that Pharoah was valued at five dollars. How much was this worth in 1763--what else could five dollars buy? How much reward was offered for other runaways at this time in Connecticut? How did reward amounts compare in New York, or Virginia? If we compare the rewards, might we be able to determine what characteristics were most valuable to slave owners at that time?
- We wondered in question 6 if Pharoah had a family. If he did, why would he run away without them? Would they be punished for his running away? If he didn't have a family, why not? What did the slavery system do to the family structure of the enslaved?

You see how one detail in an advertisement may ultimately lead you to much broader questions? Local history can be unraveled to reveal global systems and meanings. Use your eyes, your reason, and your imagination, and there's no telling what you may discover.