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Runaway Slave, a "Stout Healthy Lad"

***Maryland State
Archivists Bring
Stories of Black
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WANTED

Runaway Slave, a "Stout Healthy Lad"

Stories of black history come alive in Maryland State Archives

by Paul Lagasse

The story of 14-year-old William Ross of Annapolis reads like an adventure straight out of a Robert Louis Stevenson novel. Late one winter night, William flees a life of hardship to hop a passing ship and begin a new life in the West Indies.

Great stuff, until you read closer: William is a slave fleeing not for adventure but for his life.

This "stout healthy lad," according to his owner, Ross, was one of a cadre of slaves who fled their plantation in 1814 for the haven of an enemy ship, the British frigate *Menelaus*, anchored near Annapolis. The War of 1812 was raging, and British invaders were recruiting slaves to fight Americans and to serve overseas. Ross eventually became a cabin boy and later wrote to his mother — in a letter intercepted by his former owner — to say that he had "shipped himself on board of one of his majesty's ships and was on the India Station."

Rachel Frazier, a research archivist at the Maryland State Archives, pieced together the story of William Ross from newspaper advertisements for runaway and captured slaves, census records, court dockets and correspondence. Such records make up the Maryland State Archives' Study of the Legacy of Slavery in Maryland Project, which works to document the lives, experiences and stories of slaves throughout the state.



Stories like Ross' help close the gap of centuries, Frazier says, because they seem as real today as when they happened. "When you read so many stories of slaves escaping and later being recaptured, you cheer for them when they are successful," Frazier says.

The documents identified and preserved by the project tell countless long-forgotten stories of ordinary people who lived in extraordinary times. Each one reminds us we have been two nations, black and white, since our founding.

We Live Where Slaves Labored

Stories discovered by the archivists send that truth home to Chesapeake Country. We live on land where slaves once labored.

From 1820 to 1850, Anne Arundel County had the second-largest total number of slaves and freed blacks of any county in Maryland, according to census records. As the total population grew by decade, so did the percentage of freed blacks in the total population. At the same time, the percentage of slaves steadily decreased.

On the other hand, in Calvert County, which had less than a third of the total population of Anne Arundel, the total percentage of people who were slaves steadily increased from 42 percent to nearly 50 by 1850, as the number of freed blacks also increased.

A survey of runaway slave ads in the Baltimore Sun from those years shows that nearly half — 42 percent — of all runaway slaves in Maryland were from Anne Arundel and Calvert counties.

Despite what these numbers might suggest, the total number of slaveholders in Chesapeake Country was comparatively small: in 1860, only three percent of Anne Arundel residents owned slaves, while five percent of Calvert County residents did. Most slaveholders owned just one slave, and only 10 percent of slaveholders owned more than 15.

Where we live, slaves yearned and plotted for freedom in remarkable ways.

Calvert County has its own escape from slavery to the sea. Eighteen-year-old Frisby Harris, enslaved by William Harris, was working on a farm on the Patuxent River on July 15, 1814, when the British raider *Severn* sailed into his world. Harris escaped aboard and made his enemy's enemy his friend. Four days later, when the British burned down the Calvert County courthouse and jail in Prince Frederick, witnesses saw him "acting as an officer" and "in company with said troops with a sword by his side."

Discoveries of Daring and Desperation

The story of Judith, a 14-year-old slave, reveals the desperate lengths to which slavery could drive people. Archivists reconstructed

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Research archivists Maya Davis, left, and Rachel Frazier work with Chris Haley on the Maryland State Archives' Study of the Legacy of Slavery in Maryland."

photo by Paul Lagasse

her terrible history from newspaper accounts. In 1834, Judith poisoned the two young sons of her master, John Bayne, a slaveholder in Prince George's County and later a state senator during the Civil War. In interrogation, Judith confessed to also having killed Bayne's infant daughter two years earlier. She was tried and hanged.

"It's a tragic story," research archivist Maya Davis says. "It also makes you wonder what had been done to Judith to make her want to do that."

The Study of the Legacy of Slavery in Maryland, which is the largest program of its kind in the nation, has been bringing stories like these to light for a decade, ever since a volunteer at the archives found a handwritten record in an 1834 Baltimore City court docket describing how one Aaron Soulsbury was arrested and imprisoned for a month for helping a slave to escape.

Chris Haley — associate director of Reference Services, a genealogist and the nephew of *Roots* author Alex Haley — was intrigued. He recruited two more volunteers to scour old newspapers and other records for more accounts of slavery and the black experience in Maryland from 1830 through 1880. Today, Haley's staff is busy finding and scanning records and publishing them on www.mdslavery.net, which features over 250 case studies, biographies, nearly 13,000 runaway slave ads — plus a searchable database of names, dates and places.

"A runaway slave ad was perhaps one of the most descriptive documents that you could put in a newspaper," Haley explains. "There were no cameras then, so you had to describe the slave to a T, much as you would describe your car in a classified ad today."

A similar ad, from the Maryland Gazette, enabled Alex Haley to confirm that the *Lord Ligonier*, the slave ship bearing his ancestor Kunta Kinte, had docked in Annapolis in 1767. Almost exactly 200 years later, Phebe Robinson Jacobsen, head reference archivist, found the ad for Haley.

Jacobsen's successors have focused on the records of Prince George's, Frederick and Baltimore counties. This year, research expands into five counties on the Eastern Shore as the Archives hires three more full-time staffers and 12 summer interns thanks to a substantial Department of Education grant.

The goal of the Study of the Legacy of Slavery in Maryland, Davis explains, is to tell the stories of the antebellum experience in all the counties of Maryland. "The work is nonstop," she says. "People come to us and say, *We have this interesting story, and we don't know if it's true or not.* When we have the records, we can help their story come alive."

First-time Bay Weekly contributor Paul Lagasse is a freelance writer and editor in Annapolis and the editor of the Maryland Writers' Association's quarterly newsletter *Pen in Hand*. His young-adult historical novel *Seeing Through Clouds* was published in 2006, and he is the co-founder of the online science fiction zine *Channel 37*.

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