

*Runaway Slaves*, by John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger

reviewed by [Laurie F Maffly-Kipp](#) in the [August 30, 2000](#) issue

Until fairly recently, scholars have not known very much about the everyday lives of enslaved African Americans. But in the past 20 years a wealth of historical studies has lent considerable insight into the worlds of the men, women and children held in bondage in North America. We now know a great deal about how they worked, worshiped, ate and attempted to keep their families together. Now, thanks to a remarkably thorough and accessible book by the dean of African-American history, John Hope Franklin, and his collaborator, Loren Schweninger, a professor of history at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, we also know how they consistently resisted and occasionally escaped the control of the whites who claimed to own them.

Franklin and Schweninger's *Runaway Slaves* details the stories of slaves who refused to collaborate with slaveowners, whether through small acts of defiance or outright flight. But the narrative is surprising. Most runaways did not simply flee north seeking freedom. They ran away to find families, or to avoid separation from loved ones. Or they had committed crimes and feared for their lives. Or they fled to avoid cruel treatment from harsh owners, and from their hiding places negotiated with whites for better treatment. The majority remained close to home, often staying in contact with friends on neighboring farms and plantations. Some fled to urban areas of the South, hoping to blend into the free black populations in the cities. Very few ventured north, knowing that their modest grasp of geography and the increasingly sophisticated surveillance techniques employed by whites would make the journey a poor risk.

Franklin and Schweninger also depict the extent to which runaways forced slaveowners to spend a great deal of time and money simply trying to manage their human "property." In the decades leading up to the Civil War, an elaborate "slave-catching system," including patrols, professional slave catchers, "negro dogs" for tracking, and a growing body of laws to punish offenders, suggest that an ongoing battle raged at the heart of the slave system. It left whites continually apprehensive, fearful of leaving any opening in their authority for an incursion by their slaves, who

seemed ever ready to take advantage of signs of weakness. Ultimately, the authors conclude, these financial costs and emotional hassles did not render slavery unprofitable; nonetheless, slave resistance exacted a considerable toll on whites and blacks alike.

Indeed, the only reason that we know so much about runaways is because of white attempts to track them down. Antebellum newspapers were filled with advertisements placed by owners, many of which describe escapees in elaborate detail. Franklin and Schweninger have made exhaustive use of this relatively untapped resource, reading through thousands of ads from five states, and have gathered an abundance of detail. They strike a fine balance between telling engrossing stories of individuals--tales filled with love, betrayal and suspense--and giving the reader a statistical overview of a "typical runaway" (not surprisingly, he was young, alone, unmarried and relatively unskilled). They also chart changes over time, both in the destinations of runaways and in the profile of those who fled, and diversity among states (we find that runaway slaves along the Rio Grande, for instance, were often aided by Mexicans).

Some of the authors' discoveries also cross the color line typically associated with slavery, revealing both the strength of human connections across racial lines and the powerful pull of the profit motive. Although it happened rarely, some whites helped African Americans to escape. Occasionally, interracial couples fled together. At the other end of the spectrum were the small minority of free black slaveholders, mostly in the lower South, who counted their own children or grandchildren as property, and kept their blood relations in bondage. More frequently, free black parents, facing the burdens of poverty and unable to support a family, signed indentures for their own children and hired them out as laborers.

In general, however, the slave system might best be characterized as a protracted battle between blacks and whites. This book should forever lay to rest the idea that enslaved African Americans were generally contented with their lot, or that they somehow made peace with a social system that labeled them as less than human. Though filled with tales of grim struggle and frequent failure, this fine book stands as an inspiring testimony to human creativity and hope.