

2000 LINCOLN PRIZE WINNERS JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN AND LOREN SCHWENINGER FOR
RUNAWAY SLAVES: REBELS IN THE PLANTATION



LINCOLN PRIZE ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

Our collaboration in researching and writing Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation began along two separate paths. In 1978, John Hope Franklin, shortly after delivering the Jefferson Lectures at the Library of Congress (published as Racial Equality in America), was struck by the contradiction in the philosophy of the Founding Fathers who espoused liberty, equality, and individual rights while maintaining a system of chattel slavery. He was particularly impressed by the determination of slaves to obtain their freedom during and after the American Revolution; and the equally strong determination of slaveholders in the South to preserve their “peculiar institution” and retrieve their runaways. “No Person held to Service or Labour in one State, under the Laws thereof, escaping into another,” Article IV, Section 2 of the United States Constitution, read, “shall, in Consequence of any Law or Regulation therein, be discharged from such Service or Labour, but shall be delivered up on Claim of the party to whom such Service or Labour may be due.”

During the next three years, Franklin organized his thoughts on the subject, and, in 1981, he delivered the James W. Richards Lectures at the University of Virginia, calling them “Plantation Dissidents: Runaway Slaves.” During the 1980s and early 1990s, Franklin visited archives in a number of southern states (Texas, Louisiana, Alabama, North Carolina, among others) and worked at the Library of Congress searching the personal papers and correspondence of slaveholders for information about runaways. Among the first scholars to examine the extensive Natchez Trace Slaves and Slavery Collection at the University of Texas at Austin, he also perused the Chamberlain, Kiger, Lomongi, Bruce, Farrar, Liddell, Weeks, Terrell, and Browne family papers, among others,

at various archives. At the same time his long-time assistant Margaret Fitzsimmons copied several thousand runaway newspaper notices from the Richmond Enquirer, Charleston News and Courier, and New Orleans Daily Picavune.

Meanwhile, in 1991, Loren Schweninger launched his Race and Slavery Petitions Project at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and began collecting photocopies of documents in the southern legislatures and county courts. Underwritten by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (at the National Archives), National Endowment for the Humanities, and Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the petitions revealed a great deal about runaways. By 1994, as the collection phase of the project drew to a close, it became apparent that this new body of documentary evidence--approximately 18,500 petitions totaling 150,000 pages drawn from the fifteen southern states and the District of Columbia--would fit nicely with the material discovered by Fitzsimmons and Franklin.

Although as early as the 1960s we had worked closely together on various projects (including Franklin's supervision of Schweninger's dissertation at the University of Chicago, published as James T. Rapier and Reconstruction), neither of us had ever co-authored a full-length historical study from beginning to end. When, in February 1994, we decided to combine our efforts it was an exciting prospect not only because we had boxes of information on the subject, but also because we quickly formulated and conceptualized much of what needed to be done.

First, despite the growing popularity of the Underground Railroad, we wanted to focus our attention on the South. It was clear to us that the vast majority of runaways, especially in the deep South, failed to go farther than the next county much less to the "Promised Land" in the North. In fact, most remained in the same area as their owners, or escaped briefly to the nearest town or city before being captured and returned. Second, by focusing on blacks who resisted slavery in such a manner, we believed that the true nature of human bondage would reveal itself with more clarity than perhaps by any other focus. Indeed, although there were many fine books and articles written about the South's "peculiar institution," no study had fully examined runaways, the most prevalent type of overt resistance. Third, we felt that such an analysis would not only provide insight into

the terrible plight of slaves who openly defied the system, but also tell a good deal about plantation management. How did slave owners deal with this persistent problem? What does their response tell us about the attitudes of the planter class, and so-called “paternalism”? These questions seemed especially important, since we had discovered in our research that slave owners often responded to runaways, especially those who fled on a number of occasions, in a brutal, sometimes sadistic, fashion.

We also wanted to refine our thinking about how defenders of slavery rationalized the problem of runaways. Some slaveholders contended that runaways, especially those who persisted in their activities, suffered from some “personality defect,” “mental alienation,” even “fits of insanity.” Dr. Samuel Cartwright, a prominent New Orleans physician, attempted to give the “mental alienation” theory scientific authority when he asserted that many slaves suffered from “drapetomania,” a disease peculiar to Negroes which caused them to run away.

Within a few months other topics came to the fore, ones neither of us had considered at the outset. We decided to discuss the response of free persons of color who were taken up as runaways; the unique problems of confronting white women, especially those living alone, in attempting to manage male slaves; the responses of free children of color who were apprenticed with or without their parents permission; and the plight of elderly and sick slaves who were pushed off their plantations.

Although only a small fraction of those who absconded were advertised in newspapers, we believed that an in depth analysis of runaway newspaper advertisements would provide at least some insight into the most salient features of the runaway population. Consequently, to analyze the size, build, color, gender, age, attire, reward, probable occupation, and personality--at least as perceived by whites--of runaways, we set about to create a database drawn from 8,400 slaves advertised in newspapers in five states (Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Louisiana).

With the research completed and our chapters outlined it was now “only” a matter of completing the writing, re-writing, revision, and re-revision. One of our goals in co-authoring Runaway Slaves was to demonstrate that black and white scholars could work together over an extended period to bring to fruition a full-length scholarly study. To begin, Schweninger created a rough draft. The subsequent writing, revising, and re-

writing proved to be a most pleasant experience for both of us. It was our good fortune to live within fifty-five miles of one another (Greensboro and Durham, North Carolina) and we both adjusted our schedules to spend three or four days a week, usually once or twice a month, at Franklin's home in Durham, poring over various sections and chapters. Adjusting schedules proved to be more difficult for Franklin, who, in the midst of our writing, was appointed Chair of the Advisory Board to One America, President's Initiative on Race. Despite this, interruptions were kept to a minimum, and, with one exception, we rigorously adhered to our writing schedule during 1997 and early 1998. It proved to be a most pleasant social experience as well, as we shared conversation, daily trips to visit the late Aurelia Franklin then in a nursing home, and meals, often prepared by Franklin.

As we proceeded, adding sections, striking pages, re-organizing chapters, we were assisted in refining ideas and focusing our arguments by a number of scholars and fellow historians, including, among others, Thomas D. Morris, Stanley Harrold, Cheryl Junk, William Scarborough, David F. Herr, and Marguerite Ross Howell. To them and to our wives, Patricia Schweninger and the late Aurelia Franklin, we are deeply grateful, as we are to the Lincoln Prize Jury for its time-consuming efforts, the generosity and love of history of Lewis Lehrman and Richard Glider, the organizational skills of Gabor S. Boritt and James G. Basker, Lincoln Prize Board members Gordon A. Haaland, Edwin T. Johnson, and Louise Taper, and the Lincoln and Soldiers Institute at Gettysburg College. It is of course a great honor to be chosen as co-winners of the 2000 Lincoln Prize among so many worthy historians, and we are deeply grateful. It is also an honor to be chosen along with our long-time friend, colleague, and distinguished Lincoln scholar Richard N. Current who received the life-time achievement award.