

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Taken Not Given: The End of Slavery in Britain

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Abstract

Between the mid-seventeenth and the late-eighteenth centuries thousands of enslaved people were brought to the British Isles. Many were enslaved, and they were publicly bought and sold, marked by brands, collars and manacles, and some were sent from Britain into plantation slavery. Slavery did not, however, flourish in Britain. By the time of *Somerset v Stewart* (1772) and *Knight v Wedderburn* (1778) the large majority of people of color in Britain were free, many of them self-liberated. Despite the best efforts of enslavers to maintain their property rights in people, the enslaved regularly escaped. Newspaper “runaway advertisements” were invented in London during the second half of the seventeenth century, and between the 1650s and 1770s they reveal the development of the freedom seeker in the public sphere. The *Somerset* and *Knight* decisions did little to change slavery in the British Isles but rather confirmed a change that was all but complete. The most significant impact of the decisions was in the colonies, where planters interpreted the courts’ actions as evidence of a growing imperial threat to the institution of slavery

From the 1650s onwards, as racial slavery began to take hold in England’s Caribbean and Chesapeake colonies, English men and women began bringing enslaved people into the British Isles. Enslaved people could be found on the ships anchored in the Thames, on the docks unloading sugar and tobacco, or in the riverside taverns of the East End and the South Bank. They worked as domestic servants in the homes and offices of merchants, ship captains, and government officials, and they could be seen running errands and carrying messages from the Royal Exchange and nearby coffee houses. On the streets and in the marketplaces, churches, and inns of early modern London, enslaved people were everywhere to be seen. The men and women who claimed ownership of them worked hard to maintain control over enslaved people, labelling them as slaves and as property,

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openly buying and selling them, utilizing collars and other restraints, and marking them with brands. Moreover, enslavers could and did send the enslaved from Britain to labour in the plantation colonies.

Yet within little more than a century, slavery had all but disappeared within Britain, ostensibly because the courts had ruled against enslavers in England and Wales in *Somerset v Stewart* (1772), and in Scotland in *Knight v Wedderburn* (1778). The *Somerset* decision was a somewhat limited ruling against slavery, preventing enslavers from transporting enslaved people to the colonies against their will but not actually outlawing slavery *per se*. This did not prevent many Britons from concluding that Lord Mansfield and his fellow judges had ended slavery in England and Wales. *The Middlesex Journal*, for example, reported that the court had ruled “that every slave brought into this country ought to be free, and that no master has a right to sell them here.”¹ This over-simplified view has endured. Two hundred years after the ruling, in July 1972, the Corporation of London hosted a banquet at Mansion House “to celebrate the Bicentenary of the Prohibition of Slavery in Great Britain.” As a direct consequence of the *Somerset* decision, the programme proclaimed, “over 15,000 slaves in England were liberated.”²

But the enslaved themselves had played a significant role in ending slavery in Britain before the handing down of the *Somerset* and *Knight* rulings. In their thousands, enslaved people in England and Scotland had escaped, and by the 1770s, the free Black and South Asian community far outnumbered the relatively few people of colour who remained enslaved. As freedom became ever more normative and slavery increasingly rare, enslavers had become far more reticent about asserting complete control over people of colour in British homes and workplaces, or publicly advertising mastery in British newspapers. The *Somerset* and *Knight* cases gave legal recognition to a status quo in which most African and South Asian people in Britain were already free.

The stories of James Somerset and Joseph Knight and their paths to freedom were strikingly similar to and representative of those taken by many hundreds of enslaved people in Britain. Somerset was one of the more than 25,000 enslaved Africans brought into the Chesapeake colonies between 1741 and 1760. Probably no more than eight years of age when he was purchased by Charles Stewart on August 1, 1749, his enslaver promptly renamed the boy Somerset. In the years that followed, Somerset occasionally appeared in inventories of Stewart’s property, alongside as many as half-a-dozen enslaved servants in the household and business of the successful Scottish merchant and imperial official. Stewart became Receiver General, the leading official within the American Board of Customs, and he relocated to Boston, and then in 1769 to England, where he would remain for several years. Every time Stewart moved, he took Somerset with him. Somerset had become Stewart’s trusted aide and

¹ *The Middlesex Journal: Or, Chronicle of Liberty* (London), June 23, 1772.

² Corporation of London, “Dinner to Celebrate the Bicentenary of the Prohibition of Slavery in Great Britain,” July 14, 1972, D3549/13/6/10, Lloyd-Baker Family of Hardwicke Court Collection, Gloucestershire Archives.

personal servant, and Stewart educated Somerset, dressed him well, and regularly gave him gifts and money.³

Two years after Stewart and Somerset had arrived in England, “James Summerstett an adult Negro about 30 Years of Age” was baptized in St Andrew’s church in Holborn, London. Choosing to be christened with the name James, the young man publicly asserted some control over his status and identity. And then, eight months later, James Somerset escaped, emulating hundreds of recently christened enslaved people in Britain. Stewart was irate, believing that he had treated Somerset remarkably well, elevating him above the brutal conditions endured by most enslaved people in Virginia. In Stewart’s eyes, Somerset’s escape was an act of betrayal, and more than a quarter-century later, the Scotsman’s obituary described Somerset’s act of self-liberation as “a singular instance of ingratitude.” Stewart moved to recapture the freedom seeker, and two months later he seized Somerset and delivered him to John Knowles, captain of the *Anne and Mary*, with instructions that the re-enslaved man should be taken to Jamaica and sold. Stewart’s vengeful intention was clear: Somerset’s act of betrayal had earned him the punishment of a lifetime of plantation slavery in Jamaica. However, within a few days, Somerset’s friends and allies applied to the Court of King’s Bench for a writ of *habeas corpus*. This was granted, and a court battle ensued as Stewart sought to regain his human property. Six months later, Lord Mansfield and his fellow justices issued their decision, ruling that an enslaved person could not be removed from England against his or her will.⁴

News of the *Somerset* decision spread quickly. At Ballindean in the Scottish Highlands, Joseph Knight “observed in Summer 1772 an article in the newspapers mentioning the noted decision of the Court of Kings bench in England in favour of Sommerset the Negro, and he judged from thence that he also was entitled to be free.” Just over ten years younger than Somerset, Knight had been 13 years old when, in the summer of 1765, he had disembarked from the Bristol slave ship *Phoenix* at Montego Bay in Jamaica. The nearly three hundred enslaved people aboard had voyaged from Anomabu on the Gold Coast, but the young boy had likely avoided the worst of the Middle Passage. Just like Somerset, he had been selected by the ship’s captain as one of the enslaved people a slave ship captain was often entitled to keep or sell on his own account. The captain was named John Knight, and this is where the boy had gained the

³ Between 1741 and 1760 26,233 enslaved Africans disembarked in the Chesapeake colonies. See *Slave Voyages: Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*, <https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyages/GKfBVbu7> [accessed February 19, 2024]. For information about Stewart and his purchase of Somerset, and Somerset’s early life in Virginia, see Mark S. Weiner, “New Biographical Evidence on *Somerset’s Case*,” *Slavery and Abolition*, 23 (2002): 121–36.

⁴ Christenings in February 1771, in Christenings 1771–1780, St Andrew, Holborn, London Metropolitan Archives; London, England; London Church of England Parish Registers; Reference Number: P82/And/A/001/Ms06667/012; “Obituary of Remarkable Persons; with Biographical Anecdotes,” *Gentleman’s Magazine* (May 1798), 443; *Somerset v Stewart* [R. v Knowles, *ex parte Somerset*] 1 Lofft 1. For Somerset’s baptism, escape, capture, and delivery to Knowles see Weiner, “New Biographical Evidence”; James Oldham, “New Light on Mansfield and Slavery,” *Journal of British Studies*, 27 (1988): 45–68; John W. Cairns, “After Somerset: The Scottish Experience,” *Journal of Legal History*, 33 (2012): 291–312.

dignity of a last name that was denied to most of the Africans arriving in Jamaica. Joseph Knight's good fortune, if we can call it that, continued upon arrival in Jamaica. He was not exhibited for public sale and instead was sold privately by Captain Knight to John Wedderburn, a Jacobite exile in Jamaica who had become an extremely wealthy planter in Westmoreland. Wedderburn would later assert that Knight enjoyed a life that was "easie and happy," and the older man taught the enslaved boy to read and write, instructed him in Christianity, and trained Knight to work as a personal servant and attendant. Then, just three years after his arrival in Jamaica, Knight left the island with Wedderburn, who was returning to Scotland with sufficient wealth to regain his ancestral estates, which had been confiscated after the failed Jacobite rebellion.⁵

And so it was that four years later, and just seven years after his journey from Africa to Jamaica, Joseph Knight read about the *Somerset* case in an issue of the *Edinburgh Advertiser*. In fact, *Somerset* did not apply to enslaved people in Scotland, which had an independent legal and court system based upon the Roman-based civil law of Continental Europe rather than England's common law. Unaware of this, Knight was inspired by *Somerset* to take action. Since arriving in Scotland the young man had, in his own words, "been admitted a member of the Christian Church by Baptism." He had fallen in love with Ann Thomson, a maid in Wedderburn's household. When Thomson fell pregnant, Knight had asked his enslaver for permission to marry and to begin receiving a salary so that he could support his wife and family. Wedderburn was outraged, refusing Knight's request and firing Thomson, but the couple eloped and were married in Edinburgh in 1773. Wedderburn refused to compromise, and Knight escaped from his enslaver to join his wife in Dundee, prompting Wedderburn to secure a warrant to have Knight detained as his slave. Initially, the Perthshire justices ruled in favour of Wedderburn, but Knight managed to have the case brought before the sheriff court in Perth, where in 1774 John Swinton, the sheriff-depute, ruled

That the State of Slavery is not recognised by the Laws of this Kingdom, and is inconsistent with the principles thereof and Found that the Regulations in Jamaica concerning slaves do not extend to this Kingdom and repelled the Defender's Claim to perpetual Service.⁶

⁵ "Memorial for Joseph Knight late servant to Sir John Wedderburn of Ballandean Baronet," and "Sir John Wedderburn, Deposition before the Sheriff of Perth, November 15, 1774," in *Joseph Knight v Sir John Wedderburn, 1774-1778*, National Records of Scotland, CS235/2/2; Phoenix, Captain John Knight, Voyage 17601, *Slave Voyages: Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*, <https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyages/ESo14hvs> [accessed February 20, 2024]. See also "Memorial for John Wedderburn against Joseph Knight, a Negro, 1775," *Knight v Wedderburn*, NRS, CS235/2/2. For more on Knight's and Wedderburn's histories see Cairns, "After Somerset," and "Joseph Knight" (2009), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edition, <https://doi-org.ezproxy2.lib.gla.ac.uk/10.1093/ref:odnb/93749> [accessed February 20, 2024]; and Stephen Mullen, "Joseph Knight," *Oxford African American Studies Center*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.74283> [accessed February 20, 2024].

⁶ Decision by Sheriff of Perth (1774), in *Knight v Wedderburn*, NRS, CS235/2/2.

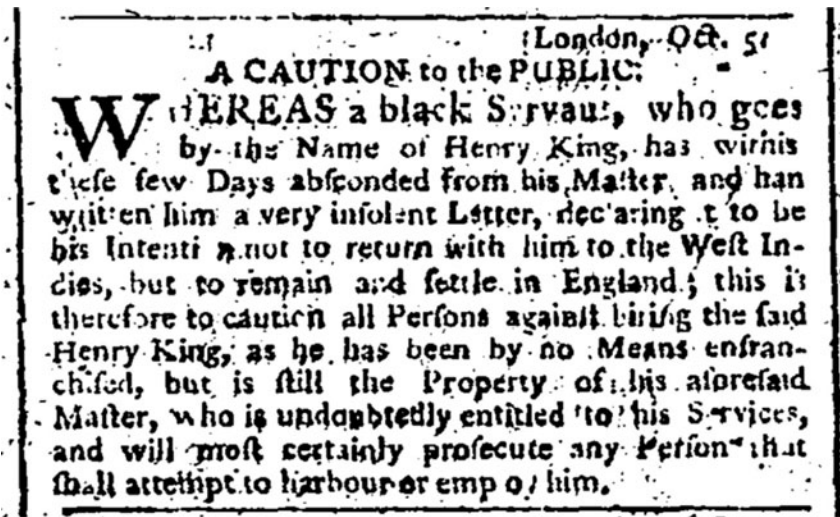


Figure 1. *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* (London), October 7, 1771, reprinted the following day. The advertisement also appeared in the *Public Advertiser* (London) on the same dates.

Wedderburn appealed this decision to the Court of Session in Edinburgh, where the case dragged on for two more years. The twelve justices were divided, and it is clear that several were extremely sympathetic to Wedderburn, but in the end, a majority upheld Swinton's ruling. James Somerset and Joseph Knight were free, or in Somerset's case, free from the threat of removal to the Caribbean, but all that set them apart from thousands of other freedom seekers in Britain was that their self-emancipation had been recognized by the courts.

Eight months before the Court of King's Bench passed judgment on the *Somerset* case, an advertisement appeared in two London newspapers (Figure 1). The short notice illuminates the two somewhat contradictory contexts for the court rulings in both the *Somerset* and *Knight* cases. On the one hand, the tone and substance of this newspaper advertisement articulated an unnamed enslaver's assertion of control over the person and labour of a bound person, and of his absolute right to take or send that individual to a colonial slave society. On the other hand, Henry King's belief that he had the right to choose to remain in England was clear, as was his determination to enjoy the greater freedom enjoyed by free Black and White Britons.

The "runaway" had no clear and fixed meaning when the first runaway advertisements appeared in mid-seventeenth-century London newspapers. In the English countryside, local courts policed the labour force, including those who ran away from their contractual obligation to serve, while in London, servants who eloped were generally ignored unless they had stolen property when they ran. However, enslaved people who escaped effectively stole themselves, and what was legally a theft encouraged enslavers to place advertisements in London newspapers seeking the capture and return of freedom seekers. During the second half of the seventeenth century, the

runaway advertisement for enslaved freedom seekers was invented in London before spreading to the colonies in the early eighteenth century. While the runaway slave existed in law, particularly in the laws and slave codes of the colonies, these newspaper notices constructed the freedom seeker in the public sphere. Sitting alongside notices offering books and medicines for sale, or offering rewards for the return of lost horses, papers, watches, or other materials, advertisements for enslaved people who had escaped made both slavery and freedom public. While it was enslavers who wrote and published these advertisements, in a very real sense the freedom seekers, through their actions, were the ultimate authors of these texts designed to constrain them. If these advertisements were intended to affirm bondage and criminalize escape, they simultaneously undermined these by publicizing self-liberation and affirming liberty above slavery.

White servants who escaped their masters in rural England often did not remain free for long. Yeoman farmers depended upon the labour of servants-in-husbandry, and when these workers eloped, masters used local courts to enforce the terms of annual contracts. However, these legal processes were not simply about enforcing labour contracts. The English population exploded in the sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries, rising from 2.8 million in 1541 to 5.2 million in 1701. For the first time in centuries, there were more people than jobs and increased rural under- and unemployment raised the spectre of “masterless” men and women, and a breakdown in law and order that terrified civic authorities. In Norfolk, for example, the courts of quarter and petty sessions enforced laws regulating service, and much the same occurred in Yorkshire, Devon, and everywhere in between. The penalization of runaway servants in rural areas was as much about demographic and social problems as it was about control of the bodies and labour of individuals.⁷

The situation was very different in London, where the population was increasing even faster than in the countryside, growing from approximately 120,00 in 1548–50 to about 480,00 by 1700. This rapid growth was sustained by constant in-migration of newcomers from rural areas, many of them young, who came to London from the English countryside, from elsewhere in the British Isles, and from abroad, and it meant that there was a constantly renewing supply of domestic servants.⁸ London’s domestic servants contracted for a year of service, and like servants in husbandry, some eloped before their

⁷ E.A. Wrigley et al., *English Population History from Family Reconstitution, 1580–1837* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 614–615; Jane Whittle, *The Development of Agrarian Capitalism: Land and Labour in Norfolk, 1440–1580* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 298, 279, 275–276, 287, 290, 296. For more on rural labour in this period see Ann Kussmaul, *Servants in Husbandry in early modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Ilana Krausman Ben-Amos, *Adolescence and Youth in Early Modern England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Christopher Tomlins, *Freedom Bound: Law, Labor, and Civic Identity on Colonizing English America, 1580–1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Simon P. Newman, *A New World of Labor: The Development of Plantation Slavery in the British Atlantic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 17–33.

⁸ These figures exclude Westminster, meaning the population of greater London was significantly larger. See Vanessa Harding, “The Population of London, 1550–1700: a review of the published evidence,” *The London Journal: A Review of Metropolitan Society Past and Present*, 15 (1990): 112.

term was up. There is little evidence, however, that masters in London were unduly concerned, or that they used the courts to punish servants who had run away, or to force them back into service. The labour supply was sufficiently plentiful to make pursuit of runaway servants unbeneficial. The household of Samuel and Elisabeth Pepys was typical in this regard, and between 1660 and 1669 seven of their servants remained in service for between six months and a year, five for between three and six months, and eight for fewer than three months, including a servant girl who eloped on her second day of work “and we heard no more of her.”⁹ High turnover among servants was normal, and Pepys was typical in that he did not utilize newspaper advertisements or the courts in pursuit of servants who had eloped.

In the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, masters tended to pursue runaway White servants only when they stole property and absconded with it, and the advertisements appearing in London newspapers were focused on the recovery of property and the apprehension and punishment of thieves, rather than the return of contracted servants. In 1658, one advertisement featured the twenty-one-year-old servant Robert Bateman, who, “having run away from his Master, took some money away with him, and a sad Chestnut Mare with a blaze on the forehead”: the horse was described in more detail than Bateman himself. Sir Ralph Sydenham advertised for a servant man who eloped with £110 of his master’s money, and Sir James Modyford advertised for a young foot-boy who absconded “with several goods and moneys to a great value.” Often, it was the thefts and the lists of stolen property that dominated such advertisements. In 1682, when a “servant Maid” with a strong Yorkshire accent ran away from John Morris in Westminster, it was the one hundred and forty guineas, six pounds of silver, eight gold rings, and an armful of expensive clothing that filled the advertisement. A brief description of Deborah Cooper herself followed this extensive list, appearing as almost an afterthought and there only to aid in the recovery of valuable stolen property. In 1723, an advertisement for Francis Prosser, a servant who had eloped from Mrs. Cardonnel in Piccadilly, reported that he had “stolen great Quantities of Wine, and committed several other notorious Frauds,” and in 1755, “a Livery Servant to the Hon. William King” took off with £500 in bank notes.¹⁰

⁹ Over a ten-year period twelve servants remained with Pepys for two or more years, while these 26 were in service for much shorter terms. See Pepys, *Diary*, 20 August 1663, <<https://www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1663/08/20/>> [accessed 19 August 2025]. See *The Diary of Samuel Pepys: Vol. 10, Companion*, ed. Robert Latham (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 196; Peter Earle, *The Making of the English Middle Class: Business, Society and Family Life in London, 1660-1730* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 221-2.

¹⁰ “Robert Bateman, having run away,” *Mercurius Politicus* (London) June 17, 1658; “One Digary Cann, A tall young man,” *Mercurius Publicus Comprising the Sum of Forraign Intelligence* (London), September 27, 1660; “A Foot-Boy... by name Thomas Banning,” *Mercurius Publicus Comprising the Sum of Forraign Intelligence* (London), July 18, 1661; “A Servant Maid,” *London Gazette* (London), November 2, 1682; “Whereas Francis Prosser, Servant to Mrs. Cardonnel,” *Weekly Journal or Saturday’s Post* (London), April 27, 1723; “WHEREAS Michael Fleming, a Livery Servant,” *Public Advertiser* (London), January 7, 1755.

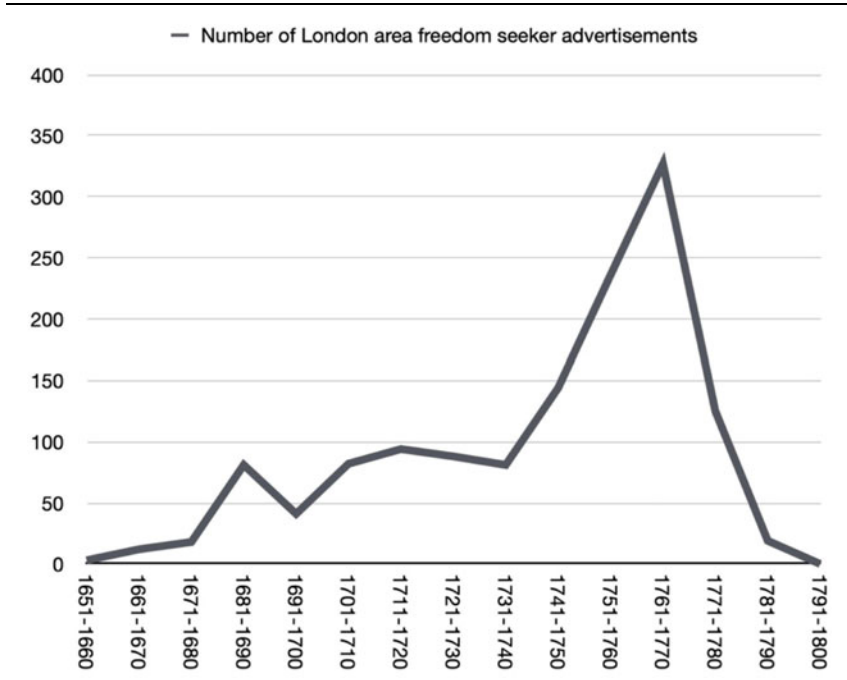
Advertisements for enslaved people who escaped were thus different in that very often they were focused on the capture and return of a person, rather than on stolen money or other goods. Yet, like the advertisements for White servants who left with items belonging to their employers, advertisements for enslaved freedom seekers were all about stolen property, but the property was the absconding person who had stolen themselves away. Whatever the actual legal categorization of runaways, the construction of runaways in late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth-century London newspaper advertisements centred upon property. The runaway slave as stolen property first appeared in such advertisements in London.

Between the 1650s and the 1770s, British newspapers featured as many as two thousand newspaper advertisements seeking the recapture and return of enslaved and bound people; many more no doubt escaped but were not the subject of newspaper announcements. These short notices reveal the evolution of the struggle between enslavers and enslaved on British soil. The number of advertisements steadily increased: 91 freedom seekers featured in British newspaper advertisements during the 1730s, rising to 157 in the 1740s, 230 in the 1750s, and then 369 in the 1760s. Within London itself, the pattern was the same, and between the 1650s and 1770s, newspaper advertisements sought the recapture and return of at least 1,351 enslaved and bound people in the greater London area. Newspaper advertisements for freedom seekers in the metropolis slowly increased from 3 in the 1650s, to 12 in the 1660s, to 18 in the 1670s. Between the 1680s and 1730s, the number was relatively stable in the 80s and low 90s (with the exception of a dip to 41 in the 1690s). Thereafter, the number of escapes increased dramatically as both slavery and resistance climbed: 144 in the 1740s, 236 in the 1750s, and 327 in the 1760s. The number then dropped to 125 in the 1770s, 19 in the 1780s, and none appeared in the final decade of the eighteenth century.¹¹ (Table 1).

It was during the second half of the seventeenth and the first half of the eighteenth centuries that enslavers' control of enslaved people was being normalized and codified in the Caribbean and American colonies. But within the British Isles, the steadily increasing number of freedom seekers showed that enslavers were losing control over their enslaved servants. Much of this took place in London, the site of both the majority of escapes from slavery and the development of Britain's largest free Black communities. The rate of successful escapes from slavery may well have been higher in London than in any other city in the British Atlantic world, and by the third quarter of the eighteenth century, the metropolis was home to the British Atlantic World's largest urban population of free people of colour.

¹¹ These numbers are drawn from the database *Runaway Slaves in Britain* (University of Glasgow, 2018), <https://www.runaways.gla.ac.uk/database/table/> These have been supplemented by additional advertisements not yet uploaded to the database, discovered by the author, Audrey Dewjee, Nelson Mundell, and most especially Tony Berrett. These are the numbers of known freedom seekers whose escapes prompted the publication of newspaper advertisements, but since many escapes generated numerous notices the total number of advertisements was significantly higher.

Table I. Data About Freedom Seeker Advertisements in London. Drawn from *Runaway Slaves in Britain* Database (<https://www.runaways.gla.ac.uk/database/table/>) and from other advertisements Assembled by the Author, with Contributions by Audrey Dewjee, Tony Berrett, and Nelson Mundell



London's size and cosmopolitanism provided enslaved people with opportunities to achieve freedom and realize new lives for themselves. Indeed, freedom seekers across the British Isles regularly attempted to escape to London. A "Negro Servant" who eloped from Pembrokeshire in South Wales "was seen near Brecknock, going for London"; two "young Negro Fellows" named Waterford and Julius Caesar escaped in Bristol "and suppos'd are gone for London"; and Peter escaped in Portsmouth and "is supposed to set out for London." Even those who ran from further afield appear determined to get to the capital. A "Negro Man named Harry" escaped in Lancaster and "is supposed to be gone for London." Similarly Philip Watson, "A BLACK SERVANT, or SLAVE" escaped from a Glasgow merchant and set out on horseback for "Haddington, for which place, in his way to London, he said he was going, and did actually set out."¹²

¹² "WENT away... a Negro Servant," *Daily Journal* (London), April 12, 1735; "RUN away last night... Waterford... Julius Caesar," *Daily Advertiser* (London), September 7, 1745; "RAN away... a NEGRO MAN, named Peter," *Gazetteer and London Daily Advertiser* (London), December 24, 1760; "RUN away... a Negro Man named Harry," *St. James's Chronicle or the British Evening Post* (London), December 6, 1764; "A BLACK SERVANT, or SLAVE... by the name of PHILIP WATSON," *Newcastle Courant* (Newcastle), January 7, 1769.

Enslaved people in Britain lived very different lives from those who laboured on plantations, yet their trauma and bondage were all too real. Many had arrived in Britain as children, accompanying Royal African Company and East India Company agents, imperial officials, and slave ship captains. Some were boys as young as 7 or 8 years of age, and many of these were given as gifts to patrons and senior officials. Enslaved children and youths appeared in portraits of elite Britons, attired in expensive liveries and functioning as living emblems of the wealth of Britons who were reaping the fruits of empire.¹³ Others came to Britain like James Somerset and Joseph Knight, as the servants of merchants, imperial officials, military officers, planters, clergymen, physicians, and other White Britons. Some accompanied enslavers who were returning permanently to Britain, while others came with those who were merely visiting the British Isles. Yet more enslaved people, almost all male, served merchant ships and royal navy officers. While many ship captains sold the enslaved people they were entitled to carry on their own account, others chose to keep them as personal servants and cabin boys. Such was the fate of Olaudah Equiano, whose 1789 autobiography chronicled his sale as a young child to an officer in the Royal Navy.¹⁴ (Figures 2 and 3).

Examples of all of these enslaved people appeared in newspaper advertisements seeking the capture and return of freedom seekers. Eight-year-old Jack, a “Guinea Negro Boy,” eloped from Peter Paggens in London in June 1690. Jack’s livery—a “black cloth suit... and black Serge Frock”—advertised the wealth and prominence of his master, for Paggens was one of London’s leading tobacco importers and slave traders. A half-century later, Benjamin Franklin and his son William relocated from Philadelphia to London, each bringing with them an enslaved personal servant, Peter for Benjamin and eleven-year-old King for William. Within a year, King had escaped, and then two years later, he escaped again, this time for good. A “Negro Slave, [who] goes by the name James Williams, alias Lithgow” escaped from Young Husband, captain of the *Snow Pleasant*, a ship that was anchored off Cherry Garden Stairs in Rotherhithe while preparing to sail for Virginia. Williams/Lithgow was dressed as a sailor and no doubt he had worked for Husband in that capacity.¹⁵

Many of the people who held enslaved servants in Britain were familiar with bound and enslaved labour in the colonies, and the virtually unlimited power colonial enslavers had over the enslaved. They were, however, unable to

¹³ See Phillip Emanuel, “[A]s Fast as Ships Return he Will Send Every one a Boy’: Enslaved Children as Gifts in the British Atlantic”, *Slavery & Abolition*, 44 (2023), 334–49.

¹⁴ Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, The African. Written By Himself* (London: for the author, 1789), I, 89–98.

¹⁵ “A Guinea Negro Boy,” *London Gazette* (London), June 9, 1690; “LEFT his Master, a black Boy, named King,” *Daily Advertiser* (London), July 20, 1758, as well as “ABSENTED from his Master’s Service,” *The Public Advertiser* (London), February 16, 1762 and “ABSENTED from his Master’s Service,” *London Chronicle* (London), April 10, 1762; “RAN away Yesterday Morning... a Negro Slave,” *Daily Advertiser* (London), February 13, 1756. For more on these categories of freedom seekers see Simon P. Newman, *Freedom Seekers: Escaping From Slavery in Restoration London* (London: University of London Press, 2022), 71–192, and “Freedom-Seeking Slaves in England and Scotland, 1700–1780,” *English Historical Review*, 134 (2019), 1136–68.



Figure 2. Pierre Mignard, "Louise de Kéroualle, Duchess of Portsmouth," (1682). The National Portrait Gallery, London.

replicate the conditions of colonial slavery in the metropole. The labour of enslaved people in Britain who were employed as domestic servants in large households, who served merchants, shopkeepers or small producers, or who worked aboard ships was radically different from the work of enslaved people on colonial plantations. In the work they did, the clothing they wore, the food they ate, and even the churches in which many worshipped, enslaved people in Britain appeared closer to working White Britons than to the enslaved on colonial plantations. The result was a disjunction between enslavers' sense of the enslaved as chattel and enslaved people's sense of themselves and their rights within British society.

One of the clearest indicators of enslavers' belief in their absolute property rights was the buying and selling of enslaved people in Britain. The sale and trade in enslaved people in Britain was largely a trade in children and youths who constituted "a form of social currency, consumed and displayed in a



Figure 3. Attributed to John Verelst, Elihu Yale with members of his family and an enslaved child (ca.1719). Yale Center for British Art.

semiotic system of status.”¹⁶ It is quite likely that most enslaved and bound people were given, bequeathed, transferred, or sold in ways that have left no records, yet newspaper advertisements nonetheless reveal at least 256 enslaved people offered up for sale, and most were children or youths.¹⁷ Among males whose age is known, some 38 (22%) were aged 10 or younger, 113 (66%) were aged 11–18, and only 20 (12%) were 19 or older. The pattern was similar among females offered for sale: 6 (20%) were ten or younger, 15 (50%) were aged 11 to 18, and 9 (30%) were aged 19 or older.

“A Beautiful young Negro Boy about four Years old” was advertised for sale in London in 1752, and a “Pretty black Boy, about seven Years old, and well shap’d” was offered for sale at the Dolphin tavern in Tower Street, London. The

¹⁶ Catherine Molineux, *Faces of Perfect Ebony: Encountering Atlantic Slavery in Imperial Britain* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012) 31.

¹⁷ These 256 people appeared in 245 newspaper advertisements published between 1695 and 1788. These are drawn from the advertisements available on the *Runaway Slaves in Britain* website at https://www.runaways.gla.ac.uk/for_sale/Runaway%20Slaves%20in%2018th%20C%20Britain%20-%20For%20Sale.pdf [accessed February 17, 2023], and other advertisements located by the project team, and by Tony Berrett.

latter advertisement ended with the chilling “Note, If not sold soon, he will be sent to the West-Indies.” Occasionally, such children were sold upon arrival in England, as when Captain William Torbett of the *Molly*, just arrived “from Africa,” advertised for sale “TWO fine Negro Boys.” The *Molly* was a Liverpool-based slave ship that had arrived in London a week earlier after trafficking nearly two hundred enslaved people to the Americas.¹⁸ “A Negro Girl of six years of Age, [who] speaks good English, [and] is very comely and witty” was described by her enslaver as boasting an “abundance of very taking little actions” when she was advertised in 1699.¹⁹

On occasion, enslaved people were auctioned, as in the case of “two Black Boy Slaves,” one about ten years old and the other fifteen. They were the property of the recently deceased Edward Simmore, who had brought them to England on “his last Voyage, from the Coast of Guiney,” and they were advertised for sale by auction alongside the contents of his house in Wapping. In one case, a newspaper advertisement offered interested parties the opportunity to win an enslaved youth in a game of chance. This “Fine Gold-Coast Negro Boy... very Honest, active, and of quick Apprehension [sic]” was valued at 31 guineas, and thirty-one people were offered the opportunity to pay one guinea and then take three rolls of three dice, and “he that throws the greatest number of Doublets [sic] to be entitled to the Boy.”²⁰ Perhaps this advertisement best exemplifies how normalized slavery had become in Britain, and how those who bought, sold, or claimed ownership of enslaved people thought nothing of publicly advertising this kind of casual control over the fate of enslaved people.

Especially in the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries, newspaper notices commonly used the language of slavery to describe both people offered for sale and those who had escaped. A London advertisement in 1714 sought the capture of a twenty-two-year-old “Indian Slave” dressed in a handsome blue livery, while another advertisement that year identified “A Negro Man call’d London” who was described in an advertisement as “a Gold Coast Slave.”²¹ In 1735, a London merchant published an advertisement in which he described “John Devonshire, alias Black Jack” as “a Negro Slave... [and] the Property of Mr. Edward Masters.” A decade later, Israel Allen, the captain of a ship named *Cape Fear*, advertised in London for “a Negro Slave” named Hannibal who had escaped from his ship in Bristol, and was believed to be making his way to the capital. The woman who claimed ownership of “a Black

¹⁸ “To be disposed of, A Beautiful young Negro Boy,” *The Daily Advertiser* (London), July 25, 1752; “A Pretty black Boy,” *Daily Advertiser* (London), November 22, 1744; “To be SOLD, TWO fine Negro Boys,” *Public Advertiser* (London), June 9, 1756. For details of the voyage of the *Molly* see Voyage 90596 in *Slave Voyages: Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database* <https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/database> [accessed February 17, 2023].

¹⁹ “A Negro Girl of six years of Age,” *The Post Man, and the Historical Account* (London), June 29, 1699.

²⁰ “To be Sold by Auction, by Mr. SMYTH,” *Public Advertiser* (London), March 7, 1759; “To be RAFFLED for... A Fine Gold Coast Negro Boy,” *Daily Advertiser* (London), February 26, 1734.

²¹ “Went away from his Master, an Indian Slave,” *Daily Courant* (London), January 6, 1714; “A Negro Man call’d London,” *Daily Courant* (London), October 5, 1714.

Woman Slave” advertised for the latter in 1757, noting that the freedom seeker used the names “Arazina, Betsy, Roberta, and sometimes Margaret.”²²

While enslavers in Britain could not emulate the power enslavers exercised over the enslaved in the colonies, they did have the right to take or send their enslaved servants to the Americas and the hell of plantation slavery. Fear of removal from Britain and enslavement in the colonies was a real and present danger, and it was one of the leading motivations for escape. British enslavers regularly sent enslaved people to Caribbean or North American slavery, sometimes for financial gain but also for other reasons. Samuel Pepys grew tired of what he described as the “lying, pilfering... [and] other mischievous” behaviour of his enslaved servant Sambo, who had been far easier to control as a young boy. Believing him to have grown too “dangerous to be longer continued in a sober family,” Pepys contrived to have some Admiralty watermen kidnap Sambo and place him aboard HMS *Foresight*, soon to set sail for the Caribbean. Pepys instructed Captain Edward Stanley to transport Sambo to the plantations and there sell him to a planter, and after subtracting any costs incurred, to invest the proceeds in whatever goods the captain thought best, then returning them or any profits they produced to Pepys.²³ Perhaps Sambo had simply grown into a man who felt himself entitled to a greater degree of freedom and at least some of the fruits of his labour. But Sambo’s size, strength, and attitude terrified Pepys, who re-asserted control over him in the most definitive fashion.

Quashy suffered the same fate as Sambo. He was the property of Anthony Bigg, a doctor and Jamaican plantation owner who, in the early eighteenth century, had returned to Bristol and died there in 1722.²⁴ In his will, Bigg left his Jamaican plantation to his wife and to his niece, as well as stipulating that his executors proceed “with all possible speed after my death to transport and send away” Quashy “to my Executors residing in the Island of Jamaica to be disposed of with my Residency.”²⁵ A half-century later, in Scotland, an enslaved man named Martin was also sent from Britain back to the colonies. He had arrived in Scotland with his enslaver, Robert Cunningham Graham, who had spent nineteen years in Jamaica, where slavery had made him extremely wealthy. Graham and his wife Anne brought Martin and one other enslaved man to Scotland in 1771/2, but within a year Graham sent Martin back to the hell of

²² “WHEREAS John Devonshire,” *Daily Advertiser* (London), July 18, 1735; “WHEREAS a Negro Slave,” *Daily Advertiser* (London), May 26, 1744; “RUN away on Sunday last, from her Mistress,” *Public Advertiser* (London), January 18, 1757.

²³ For further information on Pepys and Sambo see Claire Tomalin, *Samuel Pepys: The Unequalled Self* (New York: Knopf, 2002), 177, 405–406; Arthur Bryant, *Samuel Pepys: Volume III, The Saviour of the Navy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938), 270. These events took place well after Pepys had ceased keeping a diary.

²⁴ Grant to the Royal African Company, January 10, 1663, ‘America and West Indies: January 1663’, in *Calendar of State Papers Colonial, America and West Indies: Volume 5, 1661–1668*, ed. W. N. Sainsbury (London, 1880), 408. *British History Online* <<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/colonial/america-west-indies/vol5/pp119-122>> [accessed January 21, 2021].

²⁵ “Will of A. Bigg, of Bristol, Gloucestershire,” November 2, 1722, National Archives, PROB 11/588/6.

Jamaican plantation society. Graham instructed his friend Angus MacBean to “dispose of him to the best advantage, & put part of the proceeds into a pipe of the best Madeira to be sent me as soon as you can. I was offered £100 for him before I left Jama. & think he is now worth a good deal more.”²⁶

We do not always know exactly why such people as Sambo, Quashy, and Martin were sent from Britain to colonial slave societies, but it seems likely that some enslaved boys and teenagers had grown into young men who began expressing resentment at their situation. They were enslaved, yet they were not living in a slave society, and in Britain, church membership, marriage, and freedom were all realistic possibilities. Clearly, some enslavers in Britain responded by resolving to send or sell enslaved people to the colonies, as in the case of “a fine NEGRO YOUTH,” who was about eighteen years old and who had learned to read, write, and keep accounts, and who was offered “TO be sold cheap, for the plantations.”²⁷

Advertisements reveal that remaining in Britain and avoiding colonial slavery clearly was one of the strongest motives for escape. The threat of a return to colonial slave society had prompted sixteen-year-old Bess to escape from Benjamin Quelch, a merchant preparing to leave London and return to his Barbados home. Almost a month later, a second advertisement confirmed that Bess remained at liberty, and perhaps Quelch was forced to return to Barbados without her.²⁸ Seventeen-year-old Christopher Corydon escaped from Arthur Vaughan in mid-September of 1732. More than a month later, he remained free and Vaughan felt it necessary to promise not just a substantial reward for his return but also an assurance that should Corydon return of his own accord “his Master absolutely promises him Forgiveness, and declares, that no Consideration shall induce him to send the said Corydon beyond Sea, the Fear of which (’tis believ’d) occasion’d his leaving his Service.”²⁹ Nineteen-year-old Sabinah was quite likely African-born, and the two letters branded on both her breast and her shoulder affirmed her enslaved status. Sabinah escaped from the *Hannah*, a ship anchored on the Thames and ready to sail for Jamaica.³⁰ When a man “named Pompey (but who has taken the Name of Philip Pit)” escaped from the home of Mr. Stephenson in Charing Cross, a notice in the *Daily Advertiser* warned Pit that should he fail to return, a second advertisement would be published with a generous reward, and once recaptured, Pit would be sent to Bermuda. Transportation to the plantation colonies was as terrifying a punishment as Stephenson could imagine.³¹ Two years earlier, a “Negro Servant” was “threatened by his Master, for some Misconduct, to be sent to the

²⁶ Robert Cunninghamhame Graham to Angus MacBean, March 24, 1773, Letter Book 1772, Graham Papers, National Library of Scotland, Acc 11335/18, 41.

²⁷ “TO be sold cheap,” *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* (London), February 28, 1767.

²⁸ “A Negro Maid,” *Flying Post or the Post Master* (London) December 12, 1702; “A Negro Maid,” *Post Man and the Historical Account* (London) January 2, 1703.

²⁹ “WHEREAS Christopher Corydon,” *Daily Advertiser* (London), October 28, 1732.

³⁰ “A Black Negro Woman,” *Daily Advertiser* (London), June 17, 1743.

³¹ “ABSENTED himself from the House of Mr. Stephenson,” *Daily Advertiser* (London), August 8, August 14, 1755.

Plantations.” It was, readers of the *Derby Mercury* learned, a threat so horrifying that the man had hung himself in the cellar of his enslaver’s house.³²

Enslavers’ belief in their rights over the bodies of the enslaved often took physical form, and both brand marks and metal collars and shackles were the most visible evidence of the differences between enslaved people and White servants. When Quoshey eloped in 1700, his enslaver Captain Edward Archer thought nothing of including in an advertisement the fact that the young man was “branded on his left breast with E.A.” Similarly the “black Woman” Sarah who escaped from William Bosley was reported to be “mark’d on the right Shoulder with W.B.,” while Bacchus was branded on the shoulder with the letters T.W. when he escaped from Thomas Wheatle, a ship captain preparing to sail to Jamaica.³³ Others had been bought and sold since their branding, and so bore marks and initials that identified them as previously having been enslaved by someone other than their current enslaver. Such was the case with Dick, branded with the name “HARE,” who escaped from William Webb in Limehouse in 1720, or an unnamed “Gold Coast Negro” who escaped in 1738 while bearing “a cross Pettee, and an R branded on his left Shoulder, which is the Plantation Mark.”³⁴

Brands were used in advertisements to try and identify freedom seekers, and they clearly differentiated enslaved people from White British servants, but often they were obscured by clothing. Silver, brass, and steel collars fitted around the necks of the enslaved were, however, all too visible. The first newspaper advertisement that referred to a shackled enslaved person appeared in a London newspaper in May 1664, and it set the tone for those that followed. Seeking the return of a ten-year-old “Blackamoor Boy in a blew Livery,” the advertisement described “a Silver Collar about his neck, inscribed Mrs. Manby’s blackamoor in Warwick-Lane.”³⁵ None of the slave collars described in British advertisements featured the name of the enslaved person, but many bore the name and address of their enslaver. These collars denied rather than proclaimed the identity of the enslaved person, and they were demeaning emblems of bondage, constant and unforgettable reminders to wearers that they were property.³⁶

In February of 1727, the Scottish-born Maryland planter Dr. Gustavus Brown advertised for “a Negro Woman” named Ann who had escaped despite—or perhaps because—she had been fitted with a brass collar engraved with the words “Gustavus Brown in Dalkeith his Negro, 1726.”³⁷ Ann could not see and most likely could not have read these words, but with her fingers she could trace the engraved letters and feel their meaning all too well. Half a century later, an

³² “Yesterday a Negroe Servant,” *Derby Mercury* (Derby), June 22, 1753.

³³ “A Negro named Quoshey,” *London Gazette* (London), December 30, 1700; “WHEREAS a black Woman went away from her Master William Bosley,” *Daily Advertiser* (London), February 16, 1737; “ELOPED from the Ship Williams,” *Public Ledger* (London), October 21, 1765.

³⁴ “Went away the 22d of July last, from the house of William Webb,” *Daily Post* (London), August 4, 1720; “Liverpool, October 6, 1738. RUN away, a Gold Coast Negro,” *Daily Advertiser* (London), October 11, 1738.

³⁵ “Lost upon the 13th instant a little Blackamoor Boy,” *The Intelligencer* (London), May 16, 1664.

³⁶ See Newman, *Freedom Seekers*, 117–32 and “Freedom-Seeking Slaves in England and Scotland,” 1160–7.

³⁷ “RUN away on the 7th Instant,” *Edinburgh Evening Courant* (Edinburgh), February 13, 1727.

advertisement appeared in a London newspaper seeking the capture and return of “an East-India black boy about fourteen years of age, named Bob or Pompey.” Wearing the clothing of a servant or personal attendant, this unfortunate young man was also identifiable because “he had round his neck a brass collar.” For more than a century, enslavers utilized metal collars in London and throughout England and Scotland, and as was always the case, this collar did not give the name of the enslaved boy but rather bore an inscription “with a direction upon it to a house in Charlotte-street, Bloomsbury-square.”³⁸ Shackled enslaved people were living evidence of the wealth and power of those like the Scottish merchant in London who asserted ownership of Bob/Pompey—in the words of Granville Sharpe—“with as little ceremony as a Black Dog of the same name.” Yet during the later-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries, the White Britons who mentioned collars in advertisements risked neither their social stature nor their reputations by publicizing details of these shackles.³⁹

Most of the metal collars used in Britain were made by jewellers or craftsmen from brass, silver, or newly forged steel. These slave collars were very different from the coarse, mass-produced iron restraints used on slave ships and in the plantation colonies, and they bore more than a passing resemblance to the dog collars utilized by wealthy and aristocratic Britons. The same craftsmen made both dog and slave collars: thus, the Westminster goldsmith Matthew Dyer announced his willingness to make “*Silver Padlocks for Blacks or Dogs, Collars... &c.*” Often, the name (and sometimes the address) of the dog’s master was engraved on the collar, and this may have been the inspiration for recording the same information on slave collars. Surviving portraits of Queen Anne, as well as of Charles I’s five children, show dogs with silver and brass collars, respectively, as do numerous other seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British portraits. Most striking of all are portraits like that of an unnamed young girl created in about 1725, which displays her being attended by both an enslaved boy and a dog: both the boy and the dog wore collars, and they were portrayed gazing admiringly up at their fabulously dressed young mistress⁴⁰ (Figure 4). Newspaper advertisements for missing dogs with collars were strikingly similar to those for enslaved young people wearing collars: they often included physical descriptions of dogs’ markings and colourings that were

³⁸ “RUN away, an East-India black boy,” *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* (London), June 1, 1772. For more on the use of brass and silver collars in London see Newman *Freedom Seekers*, 117–32.

³⁹ Granville Sharp wrote of this advertisement in an undated letter to Rev. Robert Findlay, probably written late in 1772. See General Correspondence: alphabetical sequence, c. 1772–c.1882, Granville Sharp Papers from Gloucestershire Record Office, D3549, Box 3812, 13/1/F4 (Adam Matthew microfilms, Box 3812, Reel 56).

⁴⁰ P. Van Somer, Anne of Denmark, 1617, Royal Collections Trust, <<https://www.rct.uk/collection/search#/page/51#when>> and A. Van Dyck, The Five Eldest Children of Charles I, 1637, Royal Collections Trust, <<https://www.rct.uk/collection/404405/the-five-eldest-children-of-charles-i>>; B. Dandridge, A Young Girl, ca. 1725, Yale Center for British Art, <<https://collections.britishart.yale.edu/catalog/tms:715>>.



Figure 4. Bartholomew Dandridge, “A young girl with an enslaved servant and a dog,” (ca. 1725). Yale Center for British Art.

similar to descriptions of enslaved people’s physical attributes, scars, bodily markings, and clothing. Included too were accounts of where they had been lost; descriptions of the collars and what was engraved upon them; and information about where and to whom they might be returned for a reward.⁴¹

During the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, advertisements offered the enslaved for sale; designated escaped enslaved people as slaves and as property; described the branded initials and symbols burned onto their skin; and referred to the silver, brass, and steel collars fitted around their necks.

⁴¹ Advertisement from *London Advertiser* in 1756, reproduced in E. F. Rimbault, “Slavery in England,” *Notes and Queries: A Medium of Intercommunication for Literary Men, Artists, Antiquaries, Genealogists, Etc.* 2nd Series, No. XXXVI (6 Sept. 1856), 187. For some examples of these collars from the 17th and 18th centuries see *Four centuries of dog collars at Leeds Castle: a collection of dog collars presented by Gertrude Hunt in memory of her husband John Hunt* (London: Leeds Castle Foundation, 1979).

These newspaper announcements appeared alongside everyday notices of goods for sale, of auctions and house sales, and of newly published books. In short, these advertisements describing and defining people as enslaved were mundane and unremarkable. Over time, however, the language and imagery of racial slavery faded away from these British advertisements, with fewer and fewer references to people as slaves and property, fewer notices offering people for sale, and fewer descriptions of slave collars and brand marks. Collars had reached their peak of popularity (as expressed in portraits and in newspaper advertisements) by the turn of the eighteenth century. During the thirty years between 1680 and 1709, twelve advertisements in British newspapers highlighted enslaved freedom seekers wearing collars, but during the roughly sixty years that followed (1710–1772), the newspapers featured only seven such advertisements. Elite and wealthy enslavers appear to have been less and less willing to impose these restraints on the enslaved people who served them, or perhaps less inclined to mention such restraints in newspaper advertisements or feature them in portraits.

Thus, at the very time that colonial slavery was expanding and solidifying, in Britain, the most visible symbols of enslavement were disappearing. From the 1730s onward, only two British newspaper advertisements referred to enslaved people who had escaped wearing collars. If these collars had symbolized the power and pride of enslavers who had ostentatiously advertised their ownership of enslaved people, then the decline in usage by the early- to mid-eighteenth century suggests that such displays were becoming less acceptable to the British public as a whole, and that enslavers were attuned to this change in popular opinion.

Just as metal collars largely disappeared, so too the word “slave” gradually disappeared from advertisements. During the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries, British advertisers had not hesitated to refer to freedom seekers as “slaves,” but from the early- to mid-eighteenth century onwards, such references declined and then all but vanished. From the 1750s onward, it became increasingly common for advertisers to refer to freedom seekers as servants or as apprenticed or indentured, a terminology seldom used to describe enslaved people in the colonies. Some of these people may have been bound servants rather than enslaved, but the language of property permeating many notices suggests a change in language rather than legal status.

The servitude, indenture, and apprenticeship of White British youths was defined by a range of laws and customs, but the protections were less clear for formerly enslaved people of colour in Britain who, in the mid- and late-eighteenth century, were described by the same terms. While words such as servant or apprentice might indicate an agreement that after a set period of service a man, woman, or child of colour might leave, such agreements were rarely written and might easily be changed. A great deal of power remained in the hands of the master. George Germain Foney may well have felt vulnerable as the apprenticed “slave” of Thomas Ralph, a man who had undertaken at least eight slave-trading voyages from Africa to the Caribbean and the American South. If Foney were to serve Ralph on another such voyage, he would be vulnerable to sale and re-enslavement outside of Britain. And even if Foney did

not fear this particular fate, by escaping, he and many other people of colour appear to have chosen a greater degree of freedom rather than the liminal state between slavery and freedom indicated by undefined terms such as “apprentice,” “indentured,” or even “servant.”⁴²

While some successful freedom seekers joined London’s fast-growing Black community, others likely found refuge in White British society. Parish records provide some of the most telling evidence both of racial integration and of the ways in which Black people utilized the church in their struggle against slavery. On November 18, 1706, for example, three different members of one family were baptized at St John’s in Wapping, East London. Elizabeth Grigg and Phoebe Grigg, aged 7 months and 10 years, respectively, were baptized alongside their mother Ann Grigg, a 30-year-old native of Barbados. Ann was married to a White Londoner named Thomas Grigg, and the family lived in Parrott Alley in Wapping, a few minutes’ walk north of St. John’s church in London’s East End. A year later, another daughter, this one named Anne for her mother, was baptized in the church, and the parish register recorded that the family continued to reside in Parrot Alley.⁴³ Parish records regularly recorded the baptism of children of mixed race unions, including such as “Mary ye daughter of James West a Negro” and his White wife Dorothy; Sarah, the daughter of Benjamin Pownes and his wife “Sarah, a Black”; and Elizabeth, the daughter of William Blyden and “Mary a Negro.”⁴⁴ Especially in London, inter-racial couples formed families and households whose simple daily lives would have been impossible in the plantation colonies. The opportunity to form free Black families or inter-racial families must surely have made freedom in Britain all the more appealing.

A degree of integration did not mean that racism was not real and present in Britain, but it did suggest that the non-White community was too small to have prompted the creation of colonial-style legal codes or social and cultural systems designed to keep the races separate and Black people subordinate. Transportation to the British Isles, and exposure to this somewhat integrated society meant that both enslaved and free people of colour could conceive of lives that were radically different from those of the colonial enslaved, living as freely as White Britons in a multi-racial society, enjoying baptism, inter-racial marriage, and relatively equal working opportunities.

Baptism served as the prelude to escape for many enslaved people in Britain. Church membership represented integration into a vital social institution and

⁴² “RUN AWAY, On the 18th April last... A BLACK MAN SLAVE,” *Liverpool General Advertiser, or the Commercial Register* (Liverpool), May 5, 1780. Thomas Ralph’s voyages are detailed on *Slave Voyages: The Transatlantic Slave Trade Database*, <https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/database> [accessed October 17, 2022].

⁴³ Baptism of Elizabeth, Phoebe and Ann Grigg, November 18, 1706, Christenings, Parish Register 1665-1707, St John of Wapping, 280, 283, London Metropolitan Archives, London, England, P93/JN2/004.

⁴⁴ Baptism of Mary West, December 29, 1698, Christenings, Parish Register 1565-1783, St Mary, Sunbury on Thames, 45, London Metropolitan Archives, London, England, Dro/007/A/01/001; Baptism of Sarah Pownes, July 25, 1726, Christenings, Parish Register 1717-1752, St Botolph, Bishopsgate, 25, London Metropolitan Archives, London, England, P69/Bot4/A/003/Ms04517/001; Baptism of Elizabeth Blyden, December 14, 1771, Christenings, Parish Register 1722-1812, St Mary, Aldermanbury, 81, London Metropolitan Archives, London, England, P69/Mry2/A/001/Ms03572/002.

validation of a belief in the equality of Black and White parishioners in the eyes of God. Church membership must have dissolved at least some of what made people of colour appear alien, enabling the forging of friendship and community across racial lines, all of which may have facilitated escape. Mary Vernon of Covent Garden advertised for a twenty-year-old "Negro Wench, named Sarah," noting that she "is suppos'd to have been lately christen'd." In Bristol during the same year, merchant William Daniel advertised for "a negro Boy" named Fortune, who "pretends to be christened, and calls himself Thomas Clark." Both advertisements may reflect the enslavers' concern that Mary's and Thomas Clark's Christianity might erode their enslaved status, in the eyes of both White Britons and the freedom seekers themselves.⁴⁵ In 1761, an unnamed "young Negro Man... the Slave and Property of John Dalby" eloped from his master for several days. Upon his return, this canny young man informed Dalby that he had been "baptized by one Minister, and married by another in London." Dalby believed the young man had taken this course of action "with a View to gain his Freedom," and so Dalby placed a notice in the *Daily Advertiser* seeking information about the ministers who had performed these sacraments. English and Scottish legal authorities tended to agree with enslavers that baptism did not bring freedom, yet many Black and perhaps many White Britons believed that baptism and membership in a congregation contradicted enslavement, and it seems apparent that Dalby thought that he might be able to nullify sacraments given out under what he considered false pretences.⁴⁶

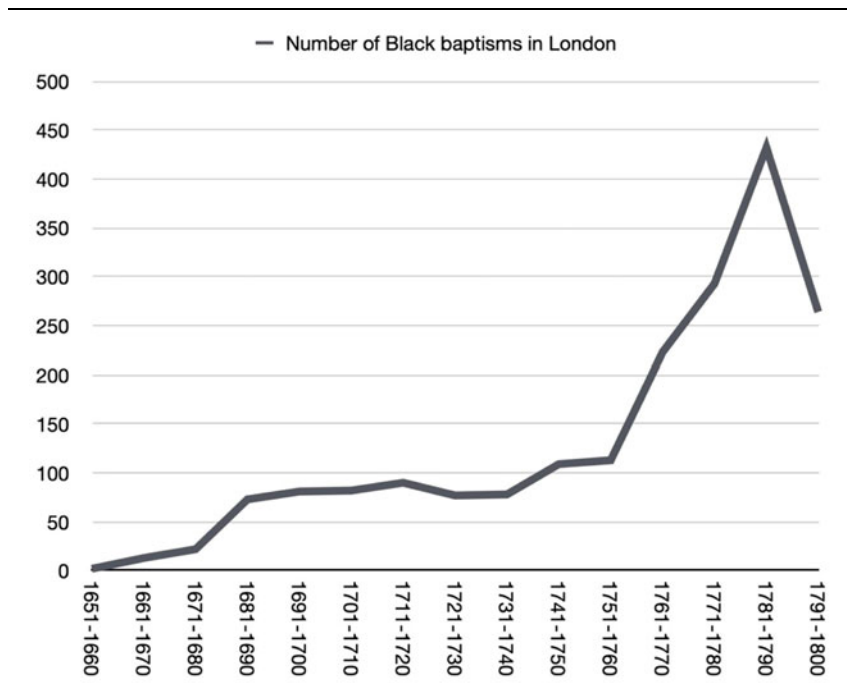
When faced with the threat of transportation to the colonies, enslaved people in Britain moved quickly to get baptized. In February 1762, an enslaved man in his late twenties escaped from Colonel Samuel Adams on a journey to Portsmouth, where they were to board a ship for Barbados. George had been "baptized, as he says, in St. Giles's, and now goes by the name of George Stewart." After being recaptured, he escaped again, prompting another advertisement a month after the first, which was reprinted many times. Another advertisement identified "a Negro Man named Sam," who had "lately been christened by the Name of John." He was desperate to avoid capture and being returned to the *Maria*, captained by Jasper Wilson.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ "RUN away from her Mistress," *Daily Advertiser* (London), November 4, 1746, 2; "ELOP'D from his Master, Mr. William Daniel," *Daily Advertiser*, March 24, 1746, 2. Clifton is listed as a merchant in Walter E. Minchinton, ed., *The Trades of Bristol in the Eighteenth Century* (Bristol: Bristol Records Society, 1957), 185, and as a subscriber to *A New General Collection of Voyages and Travels... Vol. I* (London, 1745), xiv.

⁴⁶ "WHEREAS on Saturday the 12th instant," *Daily Advertiser* (London), September 26, 1761. Sir John Fielding authored a legal commentary condemning any who might "corrupt and dissatisfy" enslaved black people in Britain "by getting them christened or married, which they inform them makes them free, ('tho' it has been adjudged by our most able Lawyers, that neither of these Circumstances alter the Master's Property in a Slave)." Baptism and membership of British church congregations thus were contested, and not always associated with freedom. See Sir John Fielding, *Extracts From Such of the Penal Laws, As Relate to the Peace and Good Order of this Metropolis* (London, 1768), 144.

⁴⁷ "WHEREAS... a Negroe Man, by Name George," *St. James's Chronicle or the British Evening Post* (London), February 20, 1762; "WHEREAS a Negro Man, by Name George," *Daily Advertiser* (London), March 13, 26, April 1, 2, 3, 9, 1762, *St. James's Chronicle or the British Evening Post* (London), February 18,

Table 2. Black Baptisms in London. Statistics Drawn from *Switching the Lens* Database (London Metropolitan Archives), from Records Collected by Peter Elmer, and from my own research



Baptism illustrates the ways in which Black people in Britain were more integrated into White society and culture than was possible in the colonies, and freedom seekers in London utilized church membership as one of their strategies to achieve liberty. Between 1600 and 1800, almost two thousand people identified as Black were baptized in London, home to Britain's largest Black community. The number was surely higher, but not all parish records survive and parish clerks were inconsistent in recording race. But the most compelling statistics are not the number of baptisms but rather how many there were in comparison with the recorded marriages and burials of Black people during the same period. In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century London, marriages constituted less than 1%, burials about 10%, and baptismal records almost 90% of all surviving parish records that identified recipients of these sacraments as non-White (Table 2).

Clearly, baptism was of vital interest to Black Britons. It is possible that for some, baptism was simply a means to an end, and a vital part of staking a claim to freedom and community membership. But for others, not least Olaudah Equiano,

20, March 13, 18, 20, 25, 27, 30, April 1, 3, 6, 8, 10, 13, 1762; "ELOPED... a Negro Man, named Sam," *Daily Advertiser* (London), December 1, 4, 5, 1770.

it certainly meant more, and some of the people of colour who were recorded in parish registers attest to what Daina Ramey Berry compellingly describes as the “soul values” of enslaved people, the determination to resist and reject bondage on the basis of a defiant awareness of their “internal, personal, and spiritual valuation of themselves.”⁴⁸ Such manifestations of faith may well have encouraged their acceptance and integration into communities of White Londoners who shared their beliefs and who were impressed by their religiosity.

Some churches stand out as having been particularly welcoming to Black people. Thus, for example, Gustavus Vassa (Olaudah Equiano) was far from the only person of colour to be baptized in the church of St Margaret, adjacent to the Palace of Westminster. Between 1751 and 1769, at least fifty other people of colour were baptized in this one church.⁴⁹ Moreover, in cases like those of Shackshoon, church congregations appear to have rallied behind enslaved people who had been baptized and who then escaped.⁵⁰ Little wonder that Sir John Fielding, friend of planters and scourge of freedom seekers, published a legal commentary condemning any who might “corrupt and dissatisfy” enslaved black people in Britain “by getting them christened or married, which they inform them makes them free, (‘tho’ it has been adjudged by our most able Lawyers, that neither of these Circumstances alter the Master’s Property in a Slave).”⁵¹

But Fielding and the enslavers in Britain he supported could not stand between the enslaved and God. Numerous advertisements for freedom seekers revealed that the escapee had recently been baptized, and church membership appears to have helped some freedom seekers to consolidate their place in the larger community. In February of 1774, “A NEGRO BOY” named Polldore eloped from John Strivens on the ship *Hero*. An advertisement in the *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser* promised three guineas reward to anyone who could capture Polldore and return him to John Fielding at Lloyd’s coffee house. Thirteen years later, a six-day-old baby boy named William was baptized at St Katherine by the Tower, the son of Ann Wallis and Pollydore, “a negro man.”⁵² There is no way of knowing whether Polldore and Pollydore were one and the

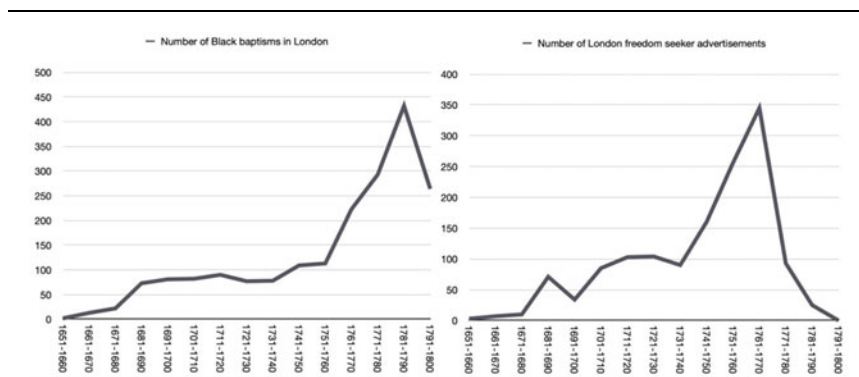
⁴⁸ Daina Ramey Berry, “Soul values and American slavery,” *Slavery & Abolition*, 42 (2021), 203; Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, The African. Written By Himself* (London, 1789).

⁴⁹ For a list of the baptisms of people of color at St Margaret’s see Rory Lalwan, *Sources for Black and Asian History at the City of Westminster Archives Centre* (London: City of Westminster Archives, 2005), 39. For baptisms, marriage, and burials across London see *Switching the Lens: Rediscovering Londoners of African, Caribbean, Asian and Indigenous Heritage, 1541 to 1840*, London Metropolitan Archives, [https://search.lma.go.v.uk/scripts/mwimain.dll?logon&application=UNION_VIEW&language=144&file=\[lma\]through-the-lens.html&utm_source=col&utm_medium=web&utm_campaign=switching-the-lens](https://search.lma.go.v.uk/scripts/mwimain.dll?logon&application=UNION_VIEW&language=144&file=[lma]through-the-lens.html&utm_source=col&utm_medium=web&utm_campaign=switching-the-lens) [accessed February 10, 2023].

⁵⁰ Advertisements for Shackshoon appeared in the *London Gazette* on November 8, 1686 and April 12, 1688. Evidence of his baptism and the support of the congregation can be found in Sir Thomas Grantham’s Case, case 81, in *Modern Reports; Or, Select Cases Adjudged in the Court of King’s Bench...* iii, 5th edn, ed. T. Leach (London, 1793), 120.

⁵¹ Sir John Fielding, *Extracts From Such of the Penal Laws, As Relate to the Peace and Good Order of this Metropolis* (London, 1768), 144.

⁵² “RAN AWAY, on Thursday last... a NEGRO BOY... named POLLDORE,” *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser* (London), February 26, 1774; Christenings, Parish Register, St Katherine by the

Table 3. Data about Freedom Seeker Advertisements and Black Baptisms in London

same, although it is certainly possible and perhaps even likely, given that this was an unusual name that does not appear in any other newspaper advertisements or church records. A striking example is a man who had been free for two months when his enslaver advertised for him in April 1749. An advertisement described the freedom seeker as “a Black, whose Name was Othello,” an appellation both racialized and ironic. However, in the short advertisement for this man, it was made clear that “since he came to England with his Master, [he] has been christened by the name of Richard Hurly, in order, as he thinks, to be free.”⁵³

The graphs displaying the number of Black baptisms and the number of freedom seeker advertisements in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century London reveal a clear relationship between the two. (Table 3). Between 1651 and the 1730s/1740s, the number of both baptisms and escape grew steadily but quite gradually. But then, during the period between the 1730s/1740s and the 1770s/1780s, both baptisms and escapes increased dramatically in number, with escapes peaking in 1770 and baptisms about a decade later, after which the numbers of both rapidly declined. By the last two decades of the eighteenth century, the Black population of London was higher than it had ever been, not least because of the influx of Black attendants of White colonists fleeing North America and the Caribbean during the American War for Independence, as well as numerous Black Loyalists. But with the legal foundations of slavery inside Britain dissolving, baptism was no longer a useful step towards freedom.

As Christopher Brown and others have shown, antislavery sentiment existed in the British Isles from the mid-seventeenth century onwards. But while present, it was relatively unusual, and nothing like an antislavery or abolitionist movement existed until the era of the Somerset case. Many of the earliest

Tower, 1751-1812, 86. London Metropolitan Archives; London, England; Reference Number: Clc/199/Tc/009/Ms09668.

⁵³ “LEFT his Master’s Service,” *Whitehall Evening Post or London Intelligencer* (London), April 13, 1749.

antislavery humanitarians were inspired by Christianity as opposed to secular ideas of individual rights and liberties. Rather than attacking slavery itself, White people who were uncomfortable with slavery sought the redemption of souls and a more Christian society, hoping that once all enslaved people had become Christian, racial slavery would become more humane and then fade away. In the seventeenth and early-eighteenth-century colonies, however, Christianity spread slowly among the enslaved and did little to change their situation: as Brown notes, the experimental Codrington plantation in Barbados did not make Christians of the enslaved, instead having them make sugar for the Anglican Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. If Brown's estimate is accurate, perhaps only a thousand or so enslaved people in the colonies had been baptized into the Anglican faith by the 1770s, almost all of them in North America. In Britain, Christianity proved far more popular among the much smaller population of bound and enslaved people. They worshipped, were baptized in, and even became members of the congregations of Anglican churches in which White parishioners came to see these people of colour as equals, at least in the eyes of God. For some of the enslaved, baptism may have represented an important step towards freedom as much as an affirmation of faith, but this need not have weakened the significance of the sacrament in the eyes of White Christians. At the same time, an increasingly popular belief in England as a land of liberty meant that even White people who did not oppose the slave trade and colonial slavery grew uncomfortable with the presence of enslaved people in the British Isles. The fact that more and more African and South Asian people in Britain were baptized only strengthened this sense that slavery did not belong in the metropole.⁵⁴

While the antislavery beliefs of a small number of seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century White Britons did not amount to an antislavery let alone an abolitionist movement, perhaps we should think of Britain's Black community as both antislavery and abolitionist. While not organized into a movement, as individuals and often with support from the Black community, many seized freedom, and between the 1650s and the mid-eighteenth century, they played a key role in making freedom the normative condition of people of colour in London, and more generally throughout the British Isles.

In London and across the British Isles, enslaved people resisted their bondage and eroded slavery at the heart of empire. Peregrine Tyam was one of the many who were baptized, who learned to read and write, and who lived and worked alongside White servants and workers. He had been brought to England as a result of the instruction contained in a letter from officials in the Royal African Company to their agent Alexander Cleeve in Gambia in early March 1688: "We have given Leave for you to send home a black boy by this shipp to M.r John Verny one of our members." John Verney was one of two dozen assistants in the Royal African Company, roughly equivalent to a modern board of directors. The young boy may have been aboard the *Delight* or perhaps the *Speedwell*, Royal African ships that had taken hundreds of enslaved people from Gambia to Montserrat and Nevis, before returning to London in 1688 and 1689.

⁵⁴ Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 37–98.

He was about six years of age when he entered John Verney's household, one of many West African boys torn from their families and communities to suffer the Middle Passage, and then to enter the service of wealthy English men and women as the embodiment of the profits of empire and the trade in enslaved people. He was immediately put to work, although Verney noted that he would continue to have "My footeboy Harry Woodward" run errands "whilst my Black boy is so smalle." On October 6, 1689, the young boy was baptized at Middle Claydon church in Buckinghamshire, the rural seat of the Verney family. His "gossips" or godparents were "his Master Mr John Verney" as well as Edmund Verney, Mary Verney, and Mrs. Caren Stukley. The name, Peregrine Tyam, reflected both his West African origins and his new life in England. Tyam may well have been a Gambian name or refer to the place he came from: Tiam is located in Senegal, in an area then referred to as Upper Guinea. The parish register recording Tiam's death and burial in 1707 identified him as "a native of Tiam in Guinea in Africa" who had been "Sent to the Rt Honble the Ld Visct Fermanagh" (the title John Verney had inherited), and presumably it was Verney who provided this information. Peregrine was most likely the name chosen by his enslaver, John Verney, who appeared in the parish register where parents would usually be listed.⁵⁵

Verney's London house was in Hatton Garden, west of the city's walls. Family correspondence indicates that the enslaved boy served both John Verney and, after 1692, his new wife, Mary Lawley. As Tyam came to know his way around London, he accompanied Verney to the Royal Exchange, the Royal African Company, and the coffee houses and commercial venues of the City of London. Tyam ran errands and carried messages for his enslaver, including frequent messages between John Verney and his father, Sir Ralph Verney. For example, on October 5, 1692, John wrote to his father, "I send Perry to bring me word how you do; and to desire your company at dinner with me today," going on to thank Sir Ralph for a gift of pigeons and then share with him news of ships lost in storms. Tyam carried back Sir Ralph's reply, politely declining the dinner invitation and reporting "I have no news" of note.⁵⁶ (Figure 5).

⁵⁵ Royal African Company to Alexander Cleeve, March 6, 1687/88, The National Archives, T 70/50, 58v; John Verney to Sir Ralph Verney, May 1, 1689, Verney Family Papers, ca. 1463-1899, microfilm edition, M636/43; *Slave Voyages: Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*, <https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyages/usgAdpEC> [accessed March 5, 2025]; Baptism of Peregrine Tyam, Buckinghamshire Archives, Parish Register for Middle Claydon, PR_52/1/1/20; Burial of Peregrine Tyam, Parish Register for Middle Claydon, PR_52/1/1/16. See also Emanuel, "'[A]s Fast as Ships Return he Will Send Every one a Boy,'" 339. See also Hannah Lee, "'Your Most Obedient and Faithful Servant': Peregrine Tyam and the Representation of Black Sitters in Early Modern British Portraiture," *British Art Studies*, 26 (May 2025), < <https://britishartstudies.ac.uk/issues/26/black-sitters-in-early-modern-british-portraiture/> > [accessed September 12, 2025]. I am very grateful to Dr. Lee and to Prof. Susan D. Amussen for sharing their work on Peregrine Tyam.

⁵⁶ John Verney to Sir Ralph Verney, and Sir Ralph Verney to John Verney, October 5, 1692, Verney Family Papers, M636/46. For more on Verney's business interests see Susan E. Whyman, *Sociability and Power in Late-Stuart England: The Cultural Worlds of the Verneys 1660-1720* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 70-4, and Adrian Tinniswood, *The Verneys: A True Story of Love, War, and Madness in Seventeenth-Century England* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2007), 449-52.



Figure 5. Attributed to Lenthall, Peregrine Tyam and Mary Lawley Verney (1692?). Verney family collection. Image by permission of the Claydon House Trust.

Tyam's status and work as the liveried servant of a wealthy merchant and his family were made clear by his appearance in a portrait of Mary Lawley, most likely commissioned by Verney to mark their marriage. By this point, Tyam was about nine years old, and he appeared with a silver collar around his neck. The expensive jewel worn by Mary was a wedding present from John, and both the jewel and the manacled boy were property, ostentatiously displayed to advertise Verney's wealth and status. Over time, Verney and Tyam may have become quite close. The enslaver taught the young African to read and write, and when Tyam fell ill in 1707, family members wrote to John expressing their concern: his aunt Elizabeth Adams wrote that she had learned that "perly had been very ill, which I am very sorry for, but I hope he is quit well Again, by this time." Several weeks later, Adams wrote again after learning "of ye death of poor Pery, which I am much concerned fearing you'l haveth a great mis of him he having bin long with you." Letters from other family members followed, including one from his son-in-law Thomas Cave, declaring "I am very sorry for your Lordships loss in poore Perry," while Cave's wife and John's daughter

Margaret wrote that she was “extremely concerned for the loss of poor Perry... whom I feare you’le much miss.”⁵⁷

However close John Verney and his family may have felt to him, during his short life, Peregrine Tyam knew that he was enslaved and unfree. He was John Verney’s property; he had been forced to wear a collar, and his enslaver referred to him as “my Black,” a racialized term denoting Tyam’s status as property.⁵⁸ An incident in 1699, when he was about sixteen years old, gives evidence of Tyam’s awareness of and occasional resistance to his enslaved status. Verney reported that Tyam had been sent out “on a small errand” to collect several quarts of milk but had stayed out before eventually returning “half drunk.” Annoyed that Tyam had fallen into the “ill company” of “shabby fellows at the alehouse,” Verney threatened “to have him beate” and the young man promptly escaped. Tyam did not venture far. Verney believed that having spent the afternoon “with two fellows at ye blew lattice near Holborn bridge drinking brandy,” the young man “lay last night at ye Mitre alehouse in Hatton Garden but left it early in ye morning.”⁵⁹

Remarkably, the Verney Family papers include a short letter that Tyam wrote to his enslaver while he was at liberty. The tone of the letter was respectful, and even included an apology, but in a bold and confident hand, Tyam nonetheless complained about the gross unfairness of the fact that Verney had “other servents that have not been with you half soe long [who] may Stay half the day and you not say anything to them.”⁶⁰ Like many of the enslaved boys brought to London, Peregrine Tyam had been baptized, and he had learned to live and socialize with White English servants and working men and women. Tyam grew into a young man who recognized that he was doing much the same work as the White servants in the Verney household, but that while these servants enjoyed the liberty of choosing employers and of leaving them, he remained bound and property. Had he not died in 1707 at about the age of twenty-four, Peregrine Tyam may well have followed the path taken by so many other enslaved people in Britain, escaping for good and shaping his own life and perhaps even his own family.

Slavery never took hold in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British Isles, and it was never institutionalized as it was in the plantation colonies. Instead, freedom became ever more normative. The Jamaican planter Edward Long, a deeply racist man who abhorred the existence of a large community of free Black people in London, wrote that newly arrived enslaved people “soon grow acquainted with a knot of blacks, who, having eloped from their respective owners at different times... endeavour to strengthen their party, by seducing as many of these strangers into the association as they can work to their purpose.” But what Long saw as the evil machinations of formerly enslaved people was, in

⁵⁷ Elizabeth Adams to John Verney, September 2, 1707; Elizabeth Adams to John Verney, September 23, 1707; Thomas Cave to John Verney, September 29, 1707; Margaret Cave to John Verney, October 5, 1707, Verney Family Papers, microfilm 636/53.

⁵⁸ John Verney to Ralph Verney, November 16, 1792, Verney Family Papers, microfilm 636/46.

⁵⁹ John Verney to William Coleman, March 18, 1699, Verney Family Papers, microfilm 636/50.

⁶⁰ Peregrine Tyam to John Verney, March 1699, Verney Family Papers, microfilm 636/50.

fact, a significant support network for freedom seekers, whose members worked “to procure... [freedom seekers] a place in some family,” that is employment as free people. To Long’s chagrin “Many persons of rank and fortune entertain these fugitives on the footing of other servants.” Likewise, John Fielding believed that formerly enslaved Londoners “enter into Societies, and make it their Business to corrupt and dissatisfy the Mind of every fresh black Servant that comes to England; first, by getting them christened or married, which they inform them makes them free.” The impact on enslaved people in England was so significant, Fielding believed, that those who were exposed to Black British society and were then sent back to the plantation colonies “have been the Occasion of those Insurrections that have lately caused and threatened such Mischiefs and Dangers to the Inhabitants and Planters in the Islands in the West Indies.”⁶¹

Hyperbolic racism aside, Long and Fielding inadvertently highlighted the power of London’s Black community—sometimes with the cooperation and complicity of White Londoners—to erode slavery in the metropolis and throughout the British Isles. We can only guess at how many people of colour were in London and Britain, but we know that by the end of the eighteenth century, this population was larger than it had ever been, and quite likely larger than it would be until the *Windrush* migration during the second half of the twentieth century. By the turn of the nineteenth century, there may well have been twenty thousand or more Black people in London alone.⁶²

As the Black British population grew over the course of the eighteenth century, an ever-increasing proportion of its members had been baptized. Over time, more and more of these people appear to have been free, and the various other markers of people of colour as enslaved were steadily disappearing. Fewer

⁶¹ Philip Thicknesse, *A Year’s Journey through France, and part of Spain* (London: W. Brown, 1778), II, 108; Edward Long, *Candid reflections upon the judgement lately awarded by the Court of King’s Bench, in Westminster-Hall, on what is commonly called the negroe-cause, by a planter* (London: T. Lowndes, 1772), 47–48; Fielding, *Extracts from such of the penal laws*, 144–145.

⁶² In 1772 Edward Long guessed that there were 3,000 Black people in England, but he quickly revised that figure to 15,000 in the wake of the arguments made during the Somerset case. Lobbyists for Caribbean planters, eager to inflate the Black British population in order to alarm White Britons put the number as high as 40,000 (1788). Scholars acknowledge the difficulty of producing accurate estimates, but most agree that by the late-eighteenth century the Black British population may well have been at least twenty thousand, most of them in London. See Edward Long, *Candid Reflections on the Judgement Lately Awarded by the Court of King’s Bench in Westminster Hall on what is commonly called the Negroe-Cause* (London: T. Lowndes, 1772), 75; Gilbert Francklyn, *Observations, occasioned by the attempts made in England to effect the abolition of the Slave Trade* (London: Logographic Press, 1789), xi. For scholars’ estimates see Peter King and John Carter Wood, “Black People and the criminal justice system: prejudice and practice in later eighteenth- and early-nineteenth century London,” *Historical Research*, 88, 239 (2015): 111; Norma Myers, *Reconstructing the Black Past: Blacks in Britain 1780–1830* (London: Routledge, 1996), 35; Kathleen Chater, *Untold stories: Black People in England and Wales during the Period of the British Slave Trade, c.1660–1807* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 27; Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina, “Black Loyalists in London after the American Revolution,” in *Moving On: Black Loyalists in the Afro-Atlantic World*, ed. John W. Pulis (New York: Garland, 1999), 85, 100–101; Cassandra Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom: Runaway Slaves of the American Revolution and their Global Quest for Liberty* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 75, 82.

and fewer Black and South Asian children appeared in the portraits of elite Britons, and those that did no longer wore collars and the restraints of the enslaved. In parish records, court records, and advertisements for people who had eloped, the use of the word slave all but disappeared. By the third quarter of the eighteenth century, freedom had become the default condition for Black people living in London and across the British Isles.

The changes were reflected in advertisements for people of colour who escaped, for these changed in language and in tone well before they declined in number. In the second half of the eighteenth century, those who used advertisements to try and recapture freedom seekers moderated the language they used to describe escapees. Some of those who advertised must have continued to believe that they owned the people who had eloped, but they tended to utilize the language of servitude rather than slavery. Thus, for example, when “a Negro Man” aged 26 who “goes by the Name of John York” eloped in 1760, an advertisement referred to him as “apprenticed.” Two years later, an advertisement for a young Black man who had escaped from a Bristol ship captain was titled “A Negro Lad, named Anthony Bristow, Apprentice to Captain Heaney of Bristol.” Following the escape of fifteen-year-old Thomas Cambridge in 1764, an advertisement described him as “a Black indentured servant,” while an advertisement in 1767 referred to John Cominbuzar as “an East Indian Boy, an indenture[d] Servant to Mr. Charles Marsh.” Other notices, such as one for an unnamed “Negro Boy” in 1768, described the freedom seeker as “being an indentured Servant for Life,” a framing that is suggestive of the transition that was underway in Britain. The advertiser claimed a right to a lifetime of labour from this boy, yet refrained from claiming him as enslaved property, and the enslaver may even have been paying him a wage. By 1770, a man bearing a previous enslaver’s brand mark on his right shoulder was nonetheless described in the first line of an advertisement as “an indentured black Servant Man.”⁶³

Thousands of English and Scottish newspaper advertisements published between the 1650s and the 1770s provide evidence of the constant resistance that had steadily undermined slavery in the British Isles. As the enslaved population shrank, the free Black population grew. Occasionally, we see glimpses of this free population in surviving records. An article in the *General Evening Post* in 1773 reported that over three hundred Black people visited two of their brethren incarcerated in the Bridewell prison, while the editor of the *London Chronicle* described how close to sixty Black men and women “supped, drank, and entertained themselves with dancing and music, consisting of violins, French horns, and other instruments, at a public-house in Fleet-street, till four in the morning.” Such entertainments were “not the least” of those held in the capital. Eight years later, “near 200 Blacks, with their Ladies” paid five shillings a head to enjoy “an entertainment at a Public-house in

⁶³ “ELOPED on Thursday... a Negro Man,” *Daily Advertiser* (London), June 2, 1760; “A Negro Lad,” *Public Advertiser* (London), October 6, 1762; “WHEREAS THOMAS CAMBRIDGE,” *Public Advertiser* (London), May 26, 1764; “ELOPED the 13th instant, an East Indian Boy,” *Daily Advertiser* (London), September 28, 1767; “Ran away from the Castle... Chelsea... a Negro Boy,” *Daily Advertiser* (London), July 4, 1769; “RAN away... an indentured black Servant Man,” *Daily Advertiser* (London), December 5, 1770.

Westminster, to celebrate the Triumph which their brother Somerset had obtained over Mr. Stuart his Master.”⁶⁴ By 1764, the *Gentleman’s Magazine* reported that there were “near 20,000” Black people in London alone, although in the absence of a proper census, such estimates are little more than educated guesses. But the author of the paragraph in which this estimate appeared went on to observe that enslaved people being brought into the British Isles “cease to consider themselves as slaves in this free country, nor will they put up with an inequality of treatment.” The few still forced to labour in bondage in Britain “are generally sullen, spiteful, treacherous, and revengeful.”⁶⁵

While the *Somerset* decision changed little within England, it had the potential to undermine slavery in the colonies, and an advertisement in the *Virginia Gazette* in September 1773 highlighted the case’s impact. John Austin Finnie sought the capture of twenty-seven-year-old Amy and nineteen-year-old Bacchus, and he warned readers that these freedom seekers might “endeavour to get out of the colony, particularly to Britain, where they imagine they will be free (a Notion now too prevalent among the Negroes, greatly to the Vexation and Prejudice of their Masters).” Similarly, Gabriel Jones advertised for another man also named Bacchus, thirty years of age, and a “cunning, artful, sensible Fellow” who was likely to attempt to pass as a free man named John Christian and to seek passage on a ship to Britain “from the Knowledge he has of the late Determination of Somerset’s Case.”⁶⁶

Both enslaved and enslavers saw how *Somerset* might undermine slavery in Britain’s colonies, and within three years, American enslavers’ worst fears were realized. In November 1775, Virginia governor Lord Dunmore issued a proclamation instituting martial law and promising freedom to enslaved men who would escape from Patriot enslavers and join “his Majesty’s troops.” To White Patriots this was British abolitionism gone mad, with the agents of royal government encouraging the transformation of resistance by individual enslaved people into widespread slave rebellion. In the words of the Declaration of Independence, approved less than a year later, George III had “excited domestic insurrections amongst us.”⁶⁷

But within Britain itself, and despite enthusiastic claims to the contrary, the *Somerset* and the *Knight* cases had changed relatively little. It is time to acknowledge the role of generations of freedom seekers in Britain as first-wave anti-slavery activists and abolitionists. This was freedom taken rather than freedom given. If *Somerset* and *Knight* weakened slavery, it was not in the

⁶⁴ “Among the sundry fashionable routs or clubs...,” *London Chronicle* (London), February 18, 1764; “On Monday near 200 Blacks,” *Public Advertiser* (London), June 27, 1772.

⁶⁵ *The Gentleman’s Magazine and Historical Chronicle* 34 (1764), 493.

⁶⁶ “RUN away from the Subscriber in Surry County,” *Virginia Gazette* (Williamsburg), September 30, 1773; “RUN away the 16th Instant... BACCHUS,” *Virginia Gazette* (Williamsburg), June 30, 1774.

⁶⁷ “By His Excellency the Right Honorable JOHN Earl of Dunmore... A PROCLAMATION,” (Williamsburg: John Dixon and William Hunter, 1775). See Sidney Kaplan, “The ‘Domestic Insurrections’ of the Declaration of Independence,” *The Journal of Negro History*, 61 (1976), 243–55; Benjamin Quarles, “Lord Dunmore as Liberator,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d. ser., 15 (1958), 494–507; Gerald Horne, *The Counter-Revolution of 1776: Slave Resistance and the Origins of the United States of America* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 209–52.

metropole, where freedom seekers had largely won this battle, but rather in North America, where Patriots resisting the Crown saw in these cases evidence of British antipathy to the slavery upon which colonial wealth and power rested.

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