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Whaleboat Escape from Northampton County, Virginia, 1832

Dataset Article

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Description

This dataset reveals information about twenty free and enslaved Black individuals living and/or passing through the Virginia Eastern Shore in the early antebellum years. It sheds light on the centrality of the water to local shore communities and reminds researchers that, although land routes to freedom have an established place in escape narratives, many freedom-seekers took to the water. The seventeen enslaved individuals and one free Black man who stole the whaleboat lived in a geographically dispersed landscape surrounded by waterways that spanned the southernmost county of the Delmarva (Delaware-Maryland-Virginia) peninsula. The execution of such a large water-based escape suggests that, despite restrictions tightening throughout the South in response to Nat Turner's revolt just eight months earlier, the strong kinship networks of free and enslaved Northampton County freedom-seekers overcame these

constraints to reach New York City using only a stolen whaleboat and sails, their knowledge of local waterways, their understanding of maritime material culture and revolutionary spirit.¹

Sailing down the Chesapeake Bay and up the Atlantic seaboard on the verge of hurricane season and into a cholera-ridden New York City suggests that there were factors in Northampton County that made fleeing during such a dangerous time imperative.² Petitions to the Virginia legislature in December 1831 reveal that Northampton enslavers believed there were many “evils attending [the oyster] trade.” Primarily, they believed that the non-local oystermen were devoted to “universal emancipation’ & [their] zeal for the slave sanctifies . . . the worst extremities of teaching & violence.”³ In short, in the wake of the violence of Nat Turner’s revolt, Virginia Eastern Shore enslavers were wary of any interaction between their enslaved laborers, whose labor they rented to non-local oystermen, and any abolitionist-minded individuals who might stir up revolution among the local free and enslaved Black communities. Free and enslaved Black individuals took advantage of the natural abundance of waterways and seafood to supplement their incomes, diets, and possibly to negotiate and facilitate escape.

By December 1831, the colonization movement looked increasingly appealing to white Northampton County residents. A newspaper petition and a formal petition to the state legislature asked for the substantial population of free Blacks to be “sent to Liberia in Africa.”⁴ To contextualize, the 1830 U.S. Census lists that Northampton County, Virginia’s population comprised 1,333 free Black individuals, accounting for roughly 15% of the total population.⁵ The forced removal of the local free Black population through colonization initiatives would have greatly disrupted familial and kinship networks of free and enslaved Blacks. It is probable the 1832 whaleboat freedom-seekers took to the water in search of freedom together, rather than experience the social death by separation that awaited them if interest in colonization continued to grow.⁶

Upon reaching New York City, the freedom-seekers docked the stolen whaleboat at White Hall slip, met up with friends or family in the city, and attempted to blend in with the local free Black population or sought out early antebellum Underground Railroad connections that could help them reach Canada and freedom.⁷ This escape and the newspaper coverage of freeman Jack

¹ Randolph Ferguson Scully, *Religion and the Making of Nat Turner's Virginia: Baptist Community and Conflict, 1740-1840* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 1-4.

² Charles E. Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years: The United States in 1832, 1849, and 1866* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1962] 1987), Introduction-Part I.

³ Northampton County, Virginia Petition to the Legislature of Virginia (Oystering), December 6, 1831, Petition 11683120, abstracted by Race & Slavery Petitions Project, University of North Carolina, Greensboro from Virginia Legislative Petitions Repository at Library of Virginia, <https://library.uncg.edu/slavery/petitions/details.aspx?pid=2637>.

⁴ “Northampton Petition,” *Richmond Enquirer*, November 11, 1831; Northampton County, Virginia Petition to the Legislature of Virginia (Colonization), December 6, 1831, Petition 11683101, abstracted by Race & Slavery Petitions Project, University of North Carolina, Greensboro from Virginia Legislative Petitions Repository at Library of Virginia, <https://library.uncg.edu/slavery/petitions/details.aspx?pid=2620>.

⁵ *Northampton County, Virginia Census Records 1820-1840*, ed. Allen B. Hamilton (Berwyn Heights, MD: Heritage Books [2014] 2018).

⁶ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 5.

⁷ Northampton County Court Order Book, No. 39, 1831–1836, 249–52, 282, November 9, 1833, microfilm reel no. 56, Library of Virginia; Oyer and Terminer trial of four whaleboat escapees examined and

Cortwright's freedom suit at a New York Circuit Court make it clear that the free Black communities in Northampton and New York had strong familial and kinship ties. Jack's free mother, Susan Cortwright, had moved to the city from Eastville in Northampton County six years prior to the whaleboat escape. Susan passed away in New York City before being reunited with her son and was therefore unable to testify in defense of Jack's freedom. Several unnamed free Black women who knew the Cortwrights while living on the Eastern Shore were present and attempted to defend Jack's status as a free man. Unfortunately, Jack was still stripped of his status and enslaved, despite testimony that his mother was free and his father, Jim, was a free black sailor who had died at sea.⁸ The intent behind his punishment was likely to make a statement to the local free Black population; Northampton County enslavers would cease turning a blind eye to the increasing number of free Blacks in the county and would begin enforcing the 1806 Virginia law that required all formerly enslaved individuals to leave the state of Virginia one year after their manumission or, among those born free, one year after turning twenty years of age.⁹

Fourteen of the eighteen freedom-seekers were re-captured and brought back to the Virginia Eastern Shore. Four were tried at a court of Oyer and Terminer, and their fates are recorded in the dataset. What happened to the other ten captured individuals brought back to the shore remains uncertain, but it is likely they were returned to their enslavers and/or sold. One enslaved individual was sentenced to a New York City jail with a \$10,000 bail; it is likely he remained there. The remaining three freedom seekers' fate is unknown, but it is possible they achieved self-emancipation.¹⁰

Overall, the story of the whaleboat freedom-seekers presented in the dataset highlights the agency these free and enslaved individuals chose to exert over their lives by utilizing what their natural landscape had to offer them: waterways to freedom.¹¹

Dates of Data Collection

2017-2021

transcribed by Carl Lounsbury on Feb. 5, 2018; Kirk Mariner, *Slave and Free on Virginia's Eastern Shore* (Onancock, VA: Miona Publications, 2014), 138.

⁸ "Case of Slavery," *New York Spectator*, November 25, 1833; *Northampton County, Virginia Census Records 1820-1840*; W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

⁹ Ted Maris-Wolf, *Family Bonds: Free Blacks and Re-enslavement Law in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 39-40, referencing *Code of Virginia*, 1849, 466; Sherri L. Burr, *Complicated Lives: Free Blacks in Virginia, 1619-1865* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2019), 100-101.

¹⁰ Mariner, *Slave and Free*, 140, 138.

¹¹ For additional information, see Alexandra Rosenberg, "Escaping Enslavement by Whaleboat, 1832," in *The Material World of Eyre Hall: Four Centuries of Chesapeake History*, edited by Carl R. Lounsbury: 132-138 (Lewes, UK: Maryland Center for History and Culture, Baltimore in association with D. Giles Limited, 2021) and Alexandra Rosenberg. "Hiding in Plain Sight: Virginia Oystering and Landscapes of Abolitionism," M.A. Thesis, University of Delaware, forthcoming.

Dataset Languages

English

Geographic Coverage

Northampton County, VA; New York, NY

Temporal Coverage

1820-1838

Document Types

Census or Register

Criminal Document

Digital Data Repository

Newspaper

Freedom Suit

Sources

"Affidavit of William Nottingham, Sr." Northampton County, Virginia, October 4, 1832. Governor's Office, Letters Received, John Floyd, Record Group 3, Library of Virginia, Richmond, VA.
<https://www.lva.virginia.gov/exhibits/deathliberty/resistance/nottingham9607c.htm>.

"Case of Slavery." *New York Spectator*. November 25, 1833.

"Deposition of Peter S. Bowdoin." *The Commonwealth of Virginia v. Ben and others, Slaves, &c.* October 4, 1832. Governor's Office, Letters Received, John Floyd, Record Group 3, Library of Virginia, Richmond, VA.
<https://www.lva.virginia.gov/exhibits/deathliberty/resistance/bowdain062b.htm>.

Northampton County Court Order Book, No. 39, 1831–1836, 249–52, 282. November 9, 1833. Reel No. 56. Microfilm. Library of Virginia, Richmond, VA.

Northampton County, Virginia Census Records 1820-1840. Transcribed and compiled by Allen B. Hamilton. Revised ed. Berwyn Heights, MD: Heritage Books, [2014] 2018.

Northampton County, Virginia Land Tax Records 1800-1825. Transcribed and compiled by Allen B. Hamilton. Berwyn Heights, MD: Heritage Books, 2018.

Northampton County, Virginia Personal Property Tax Lists 1800-1820. Transcribed and compiled by Allen B. Hamilton. Harbeson, DE: Colonial Roots, 2017.

Northampton County, Virginia Personal Property Tax Lists 1821-1850. Transcribed and compiled by Allen B. Hamilton. Berwyn Heights, MD: Heritage Books, 2020.

"Northampton Petition." *Richmond Enquirer*. November 11, 1831.

Waddey, Edward R. of Northampton County, Virginia, Petition to General Assembly of Virginia (Requesting Payment). January 1, 1838. Petition 11683807. Abstracted by Race & Slavery Petitions Project, University of North Carolina, Greensboro from Virginia Legislative Petitions Repository at Library of Virginia. <https://library.uncg.edu/slavery/petitions/details.aspx?pid=2762>.

Methodology

The information presented in the dataset was mainly collected and transcribed from affidavits, depositions, Oyer and Terminer court records, newspaper coverage, petitions to the Virginia legislature, and transcribed census, personal property tax lists, and land tax records for affiliated Northampton County enslavers between 1820-1832. A brief narrative of the escape is recorded in a local history of the Eastern Shore and is footnoted.

The affidavit was made by William Nottingham Sr. on October 4, 1832. The document detailed who ran away in the stolen whaleboat in July and the names of their enslavers.¹² The deposition of Peter S. Bowdoin, who was the owner of the stolen whaleboat, was made the same day. In his deposition, Bowdoin lists his whaleboat as being worth \$100 and as having been "stolen from his landing" at Hungars.¹³ This is presumably where the freedom-seekers began their journey to New York City, where Mr. Bowdoin also states his boat has been sighted. Transcribed records from the uniquely Virginian Oyer and Terminer courts (where free and enslaved Blacks and others such as Native Americans were tried separately from the white court system), revealed the fates of four of the whaleboat freedom-seekers—Caleb, George, Isaac and Jack—and are represented in the dataset.¹⁴

In the affidavit, the deposition of Peter S. Bowdoin, and the Oyer and Terminer court records, Jack Cortwright is always listed as being enslaved to John Eyre of Eyre Hall (Fig. 1). However, the *New York Spectator* from November 25, 1833, details Jack's attempt to have his status as a free man legally recognized by suing William S. Floyd, one of two slave-catchers sent to re-capture the whaleboat freedom-seekers, for \$5,000 in damages at a New York Circuit Court. Through newspaper coverage of Jack's suit, the names of his mother and father were discovered, and are included in the dataset. As both his free mother and father were deceased at the time, "several very intelligent black women formerly resident at Eastville, where they knew"

¹² "Affidavit of William Nottingham, Sr.," Northampton County, Virginia, October 4, 1832, Governor's Office, Letters Received, John Floyd, Record Group 3, Library of Virginia, <https://www.lva.virginia.gov/exhibits/deathliberty/resistance/nottingham9607c.htm>.

¹³ "Deposition of Peter S. Bowdoin," *The Commonwealth of Virginia v. Ben and others, Slaves, &c.*, October 4, 1832, Governor's Office, Letters Received, John Floyd, Record Group 3, Library of Virginia, <https://www.lva.virginia.gov/exhibits/deathliberty/resistance/bowdain062b.htm>.

¹⁴ Northampton County Court Order Book, No. 39, 1831–1836, 249–52, 282. November 9, 1833; James M. Campbell, *Slavery on Trial: Race, Class and Criminal Justice in Antebellum Richmond, Virginia* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2011), 7, 76-79, 82-87.

Jack and his mother, Susan, defended Jack's status as a free man. Unfortunately, the witness for the defense was Edward R. Waddey, the second slave-catcher sent to re-capture the whaleboat freedom-seekers.¹⁵



Fig. 1: *Eyre Hall, U.S. Route 13 & State Route 636 vicinity, Cheriton, Northampton County, VA.* Photograph, Historic American Buildings Survey, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. HABS VA,66-CHER.V,1-. HABS No. VA-809-1. NH-159. Compiled after 1933. Library of Congress Washington, D.C. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/hhh.va0789.photos/?sp=1>.

Waddey testified that Jack Cortwright belonged to John Eyre; his words were believed and Jack was enslaved. Waddey would go on to join in the activities of the infamous New York Kidnapping Club, devoting many years of his life to re-capturing freedom-seekers.¹⁶ Based on the newspaper coverage of Jack's freedom suit, the reported testimonies of Susan Cortwright's friends at the Circuit Court, and 1830 U.S. Census Records for John Eyre that documented him as employing one free Black laborer at Eyre Hall, Jack's assertions to having been free are

¹⁵ Affidavit of William Nottingham, Sr., October 4, 1832; Deposition of Peter S. Bowdoin, October 4, 1832; Northampton County Court Order Book, No. 39, 1831–1836, 249–52, 282, November 9, 1833; Edward R. Waddey of Northampton County, Virginia Petition to General Assembly of Virginia (Requesting Payment), January 1, 1838, Petition 11683807, abstracted by Race & Slavery Petitions Project, University of North Carolina, Greensboro from Virginia Legislative Petitions Repository at Library of Virginia, <https://library.uncg.edu/slavery/petitions/details.aspx?pid=2762>; "Case of Slavery," *New York Spectator*, November 25, 1833; Mariner, *Slave and Free*, 138-140.

¹⁶ Waddey Petition to General Assembly, January 1, 1838; *New York Spectator*, November 25, 1833; Mariner, *Slave and Free*, 138-140.

corroborated. Additionally, these sources provide context as to why Waddey would associate (or misrepresent) Jack's presence at Eyre Hall to the court as enslavement to John Eyre.¹⁷ His free status and the free status of his parents are reflected in the dataset.

Transcribed U.S. Census records, personal property tax lists, and land tax records from 1820-1832 were utilized to determine where the enslavers owned property. These are the sites where the freedom-seekers would have lived and labored. These are also the places from which the freedom-seekers would have run while getting to their chosen escape vessel at Bowdoin's landing on Hungars Creek. These sources helped paint a picture of the kinship ties present on a geographically dispersed farm/plantation landscape that was still heavily dependent on water-transportation networks, typical of the lower Virginia Eastern Shore.

Finally, the petitions to the Virginia legislature detailing the December 1831 anti-oystering and pro-Colonization Movement sentiments of Northampton County residents were abstracted and directly quoted from the original sources at the Library of Virginia and placed in a digital repository at University of North Carolina Greensboro's Race & Slavery Petitions Project. The petitions provide glimpses into the sociopolitical environment the whaleboat freedom-seekers were navigating in the months leading up to their escape, offering some context as to why they might have decided to seek self-emancipation at that particular moment. The information in these sources is contextual; thus they are referenced above but not reflected in the dataset. One other petition housed in the same repository provided the names of the freedom-seekers that Edward R. Waddey, the second slave catcher, brought back to Northampton County. In this January 1838 petition, Waddey asked the Virginia General Assembly for the sum of \$1,745. He claims to have spent \$2,720 during the re-capture process and to have collected only \$975 from the enslavers.¹⁸ This illustrates how expensive it was to re-capture freedom-seekers and the lengths enslavers were willing to go to keep their enslaved laborers. Waddey notes that he was personally responsible for re-capturing and transporting Ann, enslaved to William Thomas; Ben, enslaved to John Segar; Ben, enslaved to George F. Wilkins; Caleb, enslaved to Polly Nottingham; George, enslaved to the estate/heirs of John E. Nottingham; Henry, enslaved to Lucy Stratton; Isaac and Jim (James), enslaved to Southey Spady; and Jack Cortwright, enslaved by John Eyre, back to Northampton County. Therefore, it can be inferred that Floyd probably brought back five unnamed enslaved individuals back to Northampton County.¹⁹ This information from Waddey's 1838 petition supports earlier 1832-1833 affidavits, depositions, and Oyer and Terminer court records, and is reflected in the temporal coverage date-range of the dataset and fields in the dataset itself.

Overall, the compiled information from these various sources provides a rich narrative of escape and enslavement in Northampton County in the 1830s. Additionally, the water-based escape, legislative petitions about oystering, and the presence of a whaleboat situate Northampton County into a narrative of maritime culture, and shifts the focus off the traditional relationship between tobacco and slavery to the relationship between the water, enslavement and escape in Virginia in the early antebellum period. The methodology for this dataset revolves around using primary (and some secondary) sources to uncover free and enslaved Black kinship networks, gain a better understanding of early antebellum freedom-seekers' methods of escape and to

¹⁷ *Northampton County Virginia Census Records, 1820-1840.*

¹⁸ Waddey Petition to General Assembly, January 1, 1838.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

place the social actors of this stolen whaleboat narrative on the geographic landscape of the Virginia Eastern Shore.

The dataset is a compilation of primary sources originally written in English that provide information streamlined into 13 fields containing information about each of the 37 individuals involved in the 1832 stolen whaleboat escape and trials. They are as follows:

ID:

Each individual associated with the stolen whaleboat escape and trials has been assigned an identification letter and number combination. The letters reflect the individuals' role in the escape and trials, while the number following the letters was assigned after placing the individuals in alphabetical order by role. The role identifiers are as follows:

FS: Freedom-Seeker. This term was utilized to encompass both the free and enslaved Black individuals who participated in the 1832 whaleboat escape.

FR: Family Relationship. Refers to Jim and Susan Cortwright, who were revealed to be the parents of Jack Cortwright during his freedom suit in New York.

E: Enslaver. One who enslaved a whaleboat escape-affiliated freedom-seeker.

EE: Employer & Enslaver. An identifier unique to Jack Cortwright and John Eyre's relationship; it is utilized to signal the changing relationship between Jack's time employed as a free Black laborer to John Eyre prior to the whaleboat escape, and his subsequent enslavement by John Eyre following the loss of his freedom suit in New York. John Eyre required a set of identifiers 'E1 & EE1' because he also enslaved freedom-seeker Severn at the same time.

SC: Slave-Catcher. Used to describe the two agents sent to retrieve the freedom-seekers in New York City.

WB: Whaleboat. Used to denote the owner of the stolen whaleboat that was chosen as the 1832 escape vessel.

Name:

Compiled from primary sources. The names of all individuals affiliated with the stolen whaleboat escape and trials.

Role in Whaleboat Escape & Trials:

Compiled from primary sources. Role of each individual involved in the stolen whaleboat escape and trials is listed here to ensure clarity.

Alternative Names:

This category was created to address all possible surnames associated with Jack Cortwright in coverage of his freedom suit in the *New York Spectator* and the Affidavit of William Nottingham Sr. Jack's testimony that his surname was Cortwright (the same as his mother's) illustrates not only the importance of free Black women/mothers in their communities, but also how the mother's surname was sometimes the only form of identification protecting a free Black child

from enslavement.²⁰ The denial of Jack's status of a free Black man by the New York court is supported by the multiple names listed in the affidavit (none of which are Cortwright). Despite the New York court's ruling that Jack was not free and his name was not Cortwright, it is assumed Jack knew his own name and that he and his parents truly were free. Additionally, in the case of James, enslaved to Southey Spady, Waddey reported him as going by the nickname, Jim, in his 1838 petition, and that nickname is also noted in this field of the dataset.

Legal Status:

Compiled from primary sources. This section denotes the legal status of those affiliated with the whaleboat escape as free white enslavers, free Blacks or enslaved individuals.

Enslaved By (E) OR Enslaved & Employed By (EE):

Compiled from primary sources. This section highlights who enslaved whom. In the case of John Eyre and Severn, the E1 ID is used, as John Eyre enslaved Severn. In the case of John Eyre and Jack Cortwright, the EE1 ID is utilized to show how John Eyre went from employing Jack to eventually enslaving him.

Gender:

Inferred from primary sources. Gender in the antebellum period is assumed to be binary. Gender was inferred by traditionally female names such as Ann, Lucy, Polly and Margaret and traditionally male names such as John, William, Edward, George, Jack, etc. Traditional male names used on the Virginia Eastern Shore include Severn and Southey.

Familial Relationship (FR):

Extrapolated from *New York Spectator's* coverage of Jack Cortwright's freedom suit. A free Black sailor named Jim was noted to be Jack's father and Susan Cortwright to be his mother. The only mention of a free Black surname was in relation to Susan Cortwright and Jack Cortwright. Jim's surname was not mentioned and was also not called upon by Jack to defend his free status; only the name of his mother was invoked. Therefore, it is not clear if Jim and Susan were married, lived as spouses, or if they shared a surname. The assumption of marriage is not implicit based on these primary sources and, therefore, is not presumed or reflected in this field of the dataset.

Place(s) of Residence Around Time of Escape, 1832:

Compiled from primary sources including census records and personal property and land tax lists of the named enslavers between 1820-1832. These locations place kinship networks of free and enslaved Black individuals across the antebellum Virginia Eastern Shore landscape of Northampton County.

Re-Captured by Edward R. Waddey (SC2)?:

Extrapolated from Edward R. Waddey's petition to the Virginia General Assembly in 1838. In his petition Waddey asks for reimbursement of the fees he incurred in New York while pursuing the freedom-seekers. He lists nine by name.

²⁰ Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill, NC: Published by the University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1996), chap. 7.

Tried at Northampton County, VA Court of Oyer & Terminer, 1833?:

Extrapolated from the Northampton County court order book, only four of the whaleboat freedom-seekers were tried at a court of Oyer and Terminer: Caleb, George, Isaac and Jack.

Northampton County, VA Oyer & Terminer Court Formal Verdict(s) for Defendants:

Extrapolated from the Northampton County court order book. The sentences and/or punishments of the four freedom-seekers are listed.

Other Known Repercussions:

Deduced from the *New York Spectator's* coverage of Jack's freedom suit. The New York Court's decision to return Jack to Eyre Hall in Northampton County and to be enslaved by John Eyre is noted here.

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December 2021

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Data Links

Dataset Repository: Harvard Dataverse [<https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/IZC1PB>]

Linked Data Representation: *Enslaved.org* [Summary Visualization](#)

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