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Dutch-speaking Runaway Slaves in Early American Newspaper Advertisements, 1730-1825

Dataset Article

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Description

The Dutch-speaking Runaway Slaves dataset includes information on 483 Dutch-speaking enslaved people and three black indentured servants who were reported fleeing their condition of bondage in the American colonies and early United States. The data comes primarily from newspaper advertisements digitized and made available through Newspapers.com and ReadEx's *Early American Newspaper Database*. Published collections of runaway advertisements helped to direct the search.¹ Although there is an extensive database on

¹ Graham Russel Hodges and Alan Edward Brown, *"Pretends to be Free": Runaway Slave Advertisements from Colonial and Revolutionary New York and New Jersey* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 1994) and Susan Stessin-Cohn and Ashley Hurlburt-Biagini, *In Defiance: Runaways from Slavery in New York's Hudson River Valley, 1735–1831* (Delmar, NY: Black Dome Press, 2016).

enslaved New Yorkers available through the City University of New York, the *New York Slavery Records Index* (<https://nyslavery.commons.gc.cuny.edu/search/>), this current database includes many sources that are not found in that index. What is more, this current database is the first to gather and organize data specifically concerning runaway slaves who spoke Dutch. Additional sources include the digital collections of the New York Public Library, Rutgers University Libraries Digital Collections, and the Freedom on the Move database at Cornell University, <https://freedomonthemove.org/>.

Runaway slave advertisements placed in colonial newspapers are some of the best sources available for understanding the dress, language, and physical characteristics of enslaved people. Newspapers were printed in New York City as early as the 1730s. Slaveowners in New York state, seeking to recover their runaway slaves, often paid to post advertisements in these newspapers. By the final decades of the 18th century, newspapers were also published in regional markets within the state. These advertisements indicate where and from whom the slaves ran away. They also hint at possible directions slaves fled and methods they used for their escape. Enslaved persons in New York had many potential directions in which to flee. Many left their enslavers to try to reunite with family elsewhere in the state. Others fled to New York City, hoping to blend in and form a new identity. Others left for New England, which was especially promising after those states had passed gradual abolition laws. Some enslaved persons ran to Quebec, and others to live among the Haudenosaunee. Dennis Maika has written of one enslaved man in New York who made his way to Connecticut and attempted to catch a ship to Africa.²

Thousands of slaves in eighteenth and nineteenth century New York and New Jersey spoke Dutch because their masters spoke Dutch. Over time, many enslaved people spoke Dutch as a native language, and these advertisements indicate that some were monolingual Dutch speakers. Typically, however, Dutch-speaking slaves also spoke some English. Most advertisements for Dutch-speaking slaves demonstrate this bilingualism. Sometimes Dutch-speaking slaves were reported having run away or having been captured in other states, such as Massachusetts and Connecticut. This can partially be explained by understanding that there was a regional slave-trade; slaves who grew up in Dutch-speaking families in the Hudson Valley and on Long Island were often sold to local English-speaking families and were also then forced to move out of state with these families. Some Dutch-speaking slaves were also sold directly out of state. By the 18th century, Dutch was not just a language of enslavers but also a native language of many enslaved persons in New York and New Jersey. Moreover, for generations, these enslaved persons passed down the Dutch language. In a separate publication, I have provided demographic information and an argument that across the 18th century, some 22,800 to 30,000 enslaved persons in New York likely spoke some Dutch.³

The veracity of any historical source is always worth considering. Census records, for example, can be notoriously unreliable, as the information passed through various layers of potential error: from the reporting person who did not know their age or other information probably, to the

² Dennis J. Maika, "Encounters: Slavery and the Philipse Family, 1680–1751," in *Dutch New York: The Roots of Hudson Valley Culture*, Roger Panetta, ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 35-72.

³ Michael J. Douma, "Estimating the Size of the Dutch-Speaking Slave Population of New York in the 18th Century," *Journal of Early American History* 11, no. 2 (2022): 3-35.

enumerator who misunderstand the person, who made mistaken marks on his reporting form, or whose written language was then misread by compilers. There is little reason to think that those who created runaway slave advertisements would have reason to create false information. In fact, in most cases, they genuinely wanted to recover their slaves and were willing to pay a hefty sum to do so. However, some runaway slave advertisements indicate that the owners were not serious about recovering their slaves. This is because in New York state it was illegal to manumit an enslaved person without providing a bond to the county or city to help provide the supervisors of the poor with resources to protect the freed person, should they become indigent. Advertisements that promised a reward of just a few pennies demonstrate that the slave owner wished to be free of any responsibility in the case.

Americans in the Northeast often made a distinction between Low Dutch (i.e. Dutch) and High Dutch (i.e. German). In New York and New Jersey, and throughout New England, Dutch generally meant the language of people originally from the Netherlands. From Pennsylvania to the south, however, the word “Dutch” often meant German. I was careful in this study to only include Dutch speaking slaves and not German-speaking ones. This could largely be determined by geographic origin. That is, if an enslaved person was from northern New Jersey, New York’s Hudson Valley, or the western part of Long Island, and they were said to speak Dutch, then it is likely that they spoke Dutch and not German. The last name of a slave owner could also help, but this often requires further research on the particular slave owner, since not all “Dutch” people in New York had Dutch last names, as the New Netherland and later New York and New Jersey Dutch included many persons who had originally come from Germany, Scandinavia, Poland, France, etc. In addition, an enslaved person who ran away from Lancaster, Pennsylvania, would be more likely to be a speaker of German, even if he or she was reported to be a Dutch speaker. German-speakers from the Palatinate in the Hudson Valley sometimes owned slaves, which could complicate matters, but in that region, the term Dutch typically did not apply to migrants from Germany. Nevertheless, careful measures have mitigate confusion between Dutch and German-speaking slaves in creating this dataset.

The compilation of this data was primarily intended for my research on the language and economics of slavery in Dutch New York, and the results of my study were published in an article in the journal *New York History*.⁴ In addition, this dataset should be useful for genealogists and local historians in New York and New Jersey who wish to find more information about enslaved peoples in their respective counties or cities.

Dates of Data Collection

2018-2022

Dataset Languages

English

⁴ Michael J. Douma, “Dutch-speaking Runaway Slaves in New York and New Jersey,” *New York History* 102, no. 2 (Winter 2021-2022): 38-58. Since publishing this article, I have added a few more rows of data to this dataset, so the analysis in the article will not necessarily correspond perfectly to the newer figures in the dataset.

Geographic Coverage

New York, New Jersey, Vermont, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Maryland, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, South Carolina

Temporal Coverage

1730-1825

Document Types

Newspaper

Sources

Albany Centinel
Albany Gazette
Albany Journal
American Citizen
American Eagler
Andrew's Western Star
Balance and Columbian Repository
Boston Weekly Newsletter
City Gazette
Columbian Gazette
Commercial Advertiser
Connecticut Courant
Connecticut Herald
Constitutional Gazette
Farmer's Register
Greenleaf's
Independent Gazetteer
Lansingburgh Gazette
Loudon's New York Packet
Loudon's Register
Mercantile Advertiser
Mohawk Mercury
New Brunswick Gazette
New England Palladium
New Jersey Journal and Political Intelligencer
New Jersey State Gazette
New York Evening Post
New York Gazette

New York Gazette or The Weekly Post-Boy
New York Gazetteer or Northern Intelligencer
New York Journal
New York Journal or General Advertiser
New York Mercury
New York Weekly Journal
Northern Whig
Parker's New York Gazette
Pennsylvania Gazette
Pennsylvania Gazetteer
Pennsylvania Journal
Pennsylvania Packet
Poughkeepsie Advertiser
Poughkeepsie Journal
Providence Gazette
Republican Watch Tower
Rhode Island Republican
Rivington's New York Gazetteer
The Albany Argus
The Bee
The Berkshire Reporter
The Connecticut Court and Weekly Intelligencer
The Connecticut Journal
The Continental Journal and Weekly Advertiser
The Country Journal, and the Political Advertiser
The County Journal and Dutchess and Ulster Farmer's Register
The Federal Herald
The Hudson Gazette
The Hudson Weekly Gazette
The Long Island Star
The New Jersey Gazette
The New Jersey Journal
The New York Gazette and Weekly Mercury
The New York Journal and State Gazette
The New York Packet
The Plebeian
The Political Barometer
The Poughkeepsie Journal and Constitutional Republican
The Rights of Man
The Rising Sun
The Royal Gazette
The Sentinel of Freedom
The Spectator

The U.S. Chronicle
The Ulster Gazette
The New York Packet and the American Advertiser
Trenton Federalist
Troy Gazette
Utica Patriot
Vermont Gazette
Virginia Gazette and Weekly Advertiser

Methodology

The dataset includes 486 rows of entries, with eleven columns of data about Dutch-speaking runaway slaves. I have attempted to ensure that dates of the newspapers are given in the format of DD, MM, YYYY. It is possible that some of these dates have been reversed, so that the entry reads MM, DD, YYYY. The categories used here are those for which there consistently was information given in the runaway advertisement. In some cases, however, more information on physical characteristics and clothing, for example, is available in the original newspaper sources than what is captured in this dataset. The county and state of the person who placed the advertisement is not always clear, but can usually be inferred from the name of the village or township provided. In all instances, the county given is that which is described in the source and reflects the boundaries of the counties at the time of the advertisement. In some circumstances, the place name exists in two places, such as in New York and New Jersey, so additional context was needed to make an informed decision about which location was being mentioned.

These eleven columns of data are as follows: Year, Name, Age, Sex, Language, Speaks, Owner, County, State, City, and Source.

Year: the year in which the runaway fled a slave owner. This is not necessarily the year in which the runaway slave advertisement was placed. For example, if a slave ran away in December of 1800, but the advertisement was placed in January 1801, I entered the year "1800" in this column.

Name: the name of the enslaved person who fled their enslavement. In parentheses, I have sometimes included after the name the age or range of ages the runaway was given.

Age: the stated age of the runaway slave. To make statistical average easier, when a range of ages was given, I selected the number in the middle of the range. When an age range was only 1 year (e.g. 14 or 15), I selected the higher of the two ages, 15. For entries that were averaged from a range of years, I retained the age data alongside the name in the "Name" column.

Sex: distinguishes whether a runaway was a man or woman. Two children who ran away in 1798 were not identified by sex.

Language: a subjective estimate of the Dutch-language ability of a slave, derived from indications in the source. It is coded from 1 to 4. 1 is an explicitly monolingual Dutch speaker who cannot speak any English (although he or she may speak other languages). 2 is a speaker

of Dutch, likely a native, fluent speaker, who can speak only rudimentary English. 3 is for a bilingual Dutch and English speaker, their strengths in the two languages not being distinguishable in the source. 4 is for a slave who speaks English better than Dutch, likely one who learned English first and Dutch as a second language.

Speaks: quote from the sources in which the person was said to speak Dutch.

Master: the name of the slaveowner who is reporting the slave missing. It is possible in some few cases that this is not the actual owner of the slave but rather the person who is paying for the advertisement and is responsible, as a bounty hunter, for recovering the slave.

County: the county that the runaway slave originated in when they fled their enslavement.

State: the state that the runaway slave originated in when they fled their enslavement.

City: the city or township in which the runaway slave lived when they fled their enslavement.

Source: the newspaper source including the name of the newspaper and its publication date in which the information about a particular Dutch-speaking runaway slave was found.

Date of Publication

August 2022

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Data Links

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

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

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