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## Louisiana Runaway Slave Advertisements Dataset, 1801-1820

Peer-Reviewed Dataset Article

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### Description

The Louisiana Runaway Slave Advertisements Dataset (LRSAD) contains information about 861 individuals who appeared in 691 advertisements placed in Louisiana (predominantly New Orleans) newspapers between 1801 and 1820. Enslavers placed most of these advertisements in the hope of capturing someone who they claimed to enslave but who had escaped. Sheriffs and jailers also placed many advertisements, alerting the public that a person who was African or of African descent had been jailed on suspicion of being an escaped slave. The content of the advertisements varies dramatically, from ones with very limited information (sometimes only the name of the escapee) to ones that contain detailed descriptions of the individual, the context of their escape, occupation, and place of origin.

The advertisements in this dataset cover the first two decades of the nineteenth century, a period of rapid transformation in Louisiana and of unique interest to historians of slavery there. In 1803 the United States purchased Louisiana from France after its retrocession to France by Spain. In the years following the Louisiana Purchase, the region continued to experience geopolitical uncertainty as empires competed with Native peoples and each other for control of the lower Mississippi Valley. Most importantly, the War of 1812 roiled the region, particularly when British forces invaded Louisiana at the end of the war, leading to the escape of hundreds of the region's enslaved people with the British military.<sup>1</sup>

During the years before and after the Louisiana Purchase, the region's economy rapidly expanded due, in large part, to the adoption of sugar and cotton as its most important export commodities. Those looking to benefit from these new commodities turned to enslaved labor to produce them.<sup>2</sup> Beginning with the end of the American Revolution and continuing into the 1810s, tens of thousands of Africans were imported into Louisiana, often after transshipment in the Caribbean or South Carolina.<sup>3</sup> During the period covered by the dataset, the internal slave trade became an important source of enslaved labor for the region's planters, especially after the Louisiana Purchase and the closing of the legal international slave trade in 1808. By 1820, the "Second Middle Passage" was a central feature of how slavery functioned in the United States and Louisiana.<sup>4</sup>

As a result of these transformations, during the early 1800s, the region's enslaved population was likely far more diverse than any other enslaved population in the United States, consisting of individuals born in the region (referred to as Creoles both by local residents and in the dataset), "Americans" (as anglophone enslaved people from the rest of the United States were often called in the region and as they will be referred to in much of this article), Africans, and individuals from the Caribbean. These categories themselves contained a great deal of diversity.

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<sup>1</sup> See Methodology for Dataset Creation section below for some crucial gaps in the dataset that limit the dataset's usefulness for exploring the direct effects of the British invasion as well as for making comparisons of the aggregate number of escapees over time. For Louisiana enslaved people and the War of 1812 see, amongst others, Rashauna Johnson, *Slavery's Metropolis: Unfree Labor in New Orleans during the Age of Revolutions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), chap. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Patrick Luck, *Replanting a Slave Society: The Sugar and Cotton Revolutions in the Lower Mississippi Valley* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Pierre Le Glaunec, "Slave Migrations in Spanish and Early American Louisiana: New Series and New Estimates" and "Notes and Documents: A Directory of Ships with Slave Cargoes, Louisiana, 1772–1808," *Louisiana History* 46, no. 2 (Spring 2005): 185–230. Although Le Glaunec's articles end with the closing of the legal international slave trade in 1808, smuggling of enslaved Africans continued into the 1810s. See Luck, *Replanting a Slave Society*, 92-94.

<sup>4</sup> See Michael Tadman, "The Interregional Slave Trade in the History and Myth-Making of the U.S. South," in *The Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Trades in the Americas*, ed. Walter Johnson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 120, for an estimate of the internal slave trade that shows the accelerating number of enslaved people being brought to Louisiana from elsewhere in the United States during the 1810s.

This diversity is reflected in Louisiana's runaway slave advertisements. Some advertisements were quite simple and gave information common in runaway slave advertisements elsewhere (e.g., name, sex, "race," age, personality, and appearance), whereas many went beyond these typical descriptors and provided at least some information on the individual's place of origin. The advertisements contain information on the origins of 56% of the individuals in the LRSAD. Some advertisements also contain information on the individual's language skills, typically whether and how well they spoke English and French. Some advertisements mention other languages such as Spanish, German, and even Native American languages. The advertisements give information on the languages spoken by 40% of the individuals in the LRSAD. Presumably enslavers, sheriffs, and jailers believed that documenting origin information and language skills would be helpful in recapturing or identifying escapees in such a diverse population.

Information about origins and languages contained in the LRSAD give several insights into how people of African descent were experiencing this period of Louisiana history. First, African-born and American (i.e., anglophone enslaved people from outside Louisiana) enslaved people were most prominent in the advertisements when the international and internal slave trades, respectively, were operating at high levels. African-born individuals appeared in the advertisements at their highest proportion between 1801 and 1810 (28% of all individuals appearing in advertisements) before dwindling to a small minority by the late 1810s (7% of those appearing between 1816 and 1820). However, Louisiana estate inventories suggest that, until 1820, they remained a much larger proportion of the enslaved population than one would expect from their presence in the advertisements. Between 1815 and 1820 15% of all adult enslaved people appearing in inventories were listed as African and 45% of adults given an origin were.<sup>5</sup>

Americans' proportional presence in the advertisements peaked (at least through the end-date of this dataset in 1820) in the late 1810s, when they were the largest group appearing in the advertisements (35% of those appearing in runaway slave advertisements between 1816 and 1820) despite being a small minority in estate inventories (4% of all adult enslaved people appearing in those inventories and 13% of all adult enslaved people given origins).<sup>6</sup> This data indicate that enslaved people brought to Louisiana via the international and internal slave trades were either more likely to attempt to escape or enslavers were worried that such people were more likely to effect a permanent escape. Language in the advertisements suggests that enslavers were particularly worried that Americans would attempt to escape back to wherever

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<sup>5</sup> Louisiana estate inventories accessed at Louisiana Slave Database, built by Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, <https://www.ibiblio.org/laslave/introduction.php>. Here adult is defined as those identified as fifteen years or older. The numbers calculated from estate inventories should be treated with some care, as the origins of enslaved people contained in the inventories almost certainly have biases resulting from which type of enslaver was most likely to record the origins of the people they enslaved. Most crucially, francophones were far more likely to record origins of the people they enslaved than anglophones and appear to have been less likely to record the origin of an enslaved person if they had been born in the region (i.e., a "Creole"). Thus, both enslaved Creoles and Americans are likely underrepresented among enslaved people listed with origins in estate inventories. See Luck, *Replanting a Slave Society*, 142-144.

<sup>6</sup> Louisiana estate inventories accessed at Hall, Louisiana Slave Database.

they had been brought from, a worry rarely expressed for individuals from elsewhere. For example, in 1818, an enslaver informed readers that Ned “was lately brought from Kentucky . . . , and it is believed he will endeavor to return there.”<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, enslavers never included language in advertisements that hints at how they explained why African-born enslaved people appeared so often.

Second, the advertisements give some (albeit limited and indirect) sense of how Africans and people of African descent dealt with the traumatic reality of being brought against their will to the region by the international and internal slave trades. For example, groups of individuals who escaped together were rarely from a mix of different origins, suggesting that people from similar backgrounds more easily formed interpersonal connections with one another and, thus, found it easier to collectively resist enslavement. The obverse side of this insight is that individuals often found it challenging to make common cause with individuals from a different background than themselves, perhaps leading to conflict and alienation. Mentions of language knowledge support the possibility of individual alienation. For example, sixty-two enslaved Americans, living largely in francophone areas of the region, were mentioned as speaking “only” English, a potentially isolating fact for those individuals.

Still, some evidence in the advertisements hints at the creation of connections by Africans and peoples of African descent across different backgrounds. Whereas most groups of escapees were uniform in origin, a minority were not. Thus, at least some individuals were coming together across cultural boundaries to resist their shared enslavement. In addition, although rare, a handful of advertisements mention enslaved people who could speak “Creole” or “Creole French,” suggesting the learning or development of means of communication outside of the traditional European languages emphasized in the advertisements and, thus, the development of distinct new cultures at least somewhat aloof from that of their enslavers.

Finally, as mentioned above, the advertisements illustrate the immense diversity of the African-born and African-descended population in the region. One finds Africans from many different parts of Africa or ethnicities: the Gold Coast, Senegal, Ibo, Bambara, and so on. However, one group was far more numerous than the others: those listed as being from the Congo, 73 individuals or 8.5% of all escapees. No other categorization of enslaved Africans comes anywhere close to this number. Besides the very diverse Africans, one finds Americans from throughout the United States (including many from what were becoming the “free” states), individuals from throughout the Caribbean (although individuals from Jamaica and St. Domingue were particularly common), and even individuals from South America. Finally, one enslaver even placed an advertisement for a man named Talinge who was described as an “Indian negro” from the “Malabar Coast,” whose enslaver suspected he was attempting “to embark for France.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> “Twenty Dollars Reward,” *Louisiana Gazette* (New Orleans), July 11, 1818.

<sup>8</sup> “Runaway Slave,” *Telegraphe* (New Orleans), August 32, 1806. (Note: This is the date given on the issue’s masthead.)

I elaborate on these and other conclusions drawn from the dataset in *Replanting a Slave Society: The Sugar and Cotton Revolutions in the Lower Mississippi Valley* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2022), particularly chapter 4.

Beyond these insights, the information in this dataset is useful for scholars, students, and members of the public interested in the history of Louisiana around the time of the Louisiana Purchase. In particular, the inclusion of the full texts of the advertisements allows researchers to use the advertisements to answer their own questions about that history. Louisiana was a region in rapid transition in the early 1800s and the make-up and experiences of its enslaved population reflected and were an integral part of those transitions. The LRSAD provides one window into those experiences.

## **Dates of Data Collection**

2008-2022

## **Dataset Languages**

English, French

## **Geographic Coverage**

The modern American state of Louisiana

## **Temporal Coverage**

1801-1820

## **Document Types**

Runaway Advertisement

## **Sources**

Newspapers were accessed via the following archives:

American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts

Library of Congress' Early State Records Project, Law Library Microform Consortium

Louisiana Newspaper Project, Louisiana Digital Library (Note: This collection is no longer available online.)

Louisiana State Museum, New Orleans, Louisiana

New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, Louisiana

Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana

Full citations for newspaper sources can be found in the dataset itself.

## Methodology

Data for the LRSAD was derived from advertisements appearing in Louisiana newspapers between 1801 and 1820. 1801 was chosen as the starting year because that is the year of the earliest extant advertisement identified. 1820 was chosen as the end date for reasons related to the larger project that produced this database (1820 being the year after the post-War of 1812 cotton boom went bust during the Panic of 1819) and is somewhat arbitrary.

The advertisements were gathered from several different newspapers located at several different archives. A large portion of the individuals in the dataset (632) appeared in the *Louisiana Courier*, which published in New Orleans between 1807 and 1859. Many issues of the newspaper have survived at various archives, including at the Louisiana State Museum in New Orleans, the archive where the author accessed most of the *Louisiana Courier* advertisements in the dataset. The remaining 229 individuals appeared in advertisements in a variety of other newspapers.

This dataset is not a result of a systematic exploration of the newspapers included but is largely an incidental outgrowth of research done for a larger project. As a result, the dataset has gaps in chronology (most frustratingly December 1814 through March 1815, when the British invasion and the Battle of New Orleans occurred) that likely could be filled as copies of issues unavailable at the archives visited may exist elsewhere. As a result of these gaps, the dataset should not be taken as a comprehensive database of available advertisements published in Louisiana during the period. Thus, researchers should be particularly cautious about comparing changes in the absolute number of advertisements or individuals appearing in advertisements over time.

During the years included in the LRSAD, most Louisiana newspapers published their text in both English and French, thus most of the advertisements included in the dataset were published in both languages. As an Anglophone, I chose to work with only the English-language advertisement where available. However, in some cases, the English-language advertisements were illegible or lost. In addition, some newspapers only published in French (most importantly Louisiana's first newspaper, the *Moniteur de la Louisiane*). In these cases, I used the French-language advertisements.

For all advertisements, I transcribed the advertisement with no changes (excepting changing the medial s into a modern s). When working with French advertisements, accent marks posed a challenge as they often faded. I decided to err towards inclusion of accent marks rather than exclusion when it was unclear whether one was present where one typically would be. Finally, my transcriptions did not include the advertisement date as it was often set aside from the main text.

The information in the advertisements was far from standardized and the level of information given varied dramatically. Many fields are empty for a given individual. Most of the fields are

direct transcriptions of information contained in the advertisements. However, a few are not. For example, I translated “Timeframe escaped” and “Timeframe jailed” into English when the advertisement was in French. Also, although the advertisements typically specified the individual’s gender, sometimes I inferred it based on their name. In the language categories, if the individual’s ability in a language is not specified, it means that the advertisement stated that the individual spoke that language with no comment on ability. One should also use information provided about enslavers’ identities with care. In many cases, the advertisement was not clear about what the enslaved person’s relationship was to the individual I have identified as the enslaver. It is possible that in at least some of these cases the person I have identified as the enslaver was either hiring the enslaved person or representing the enslaver in their attempt to capture the escapee.

I imputed regional origins from information given in the advertisements (the data field “Region of origin”). The regions I used are very broad (Africa, America, Caribbean, and Other) reflecting my interests. The actual origin data in the advertisements was often much more specific (e.g., Congo rather than Africa or Virginia rather than America). In imputing these origins, I took a conservative approach and tried not to read too deeply into the sources. For example, some enslaved people are called “English” in the advertisements. Likely most of these individuals were from the Anglophone parts of the United States. However, a few Jamaicans appear in the advertisements, and, in at least one case, a Jamaican is referred to as English. Therefore, if an advertisement only stated that an escapee was “English,” I did not impute their region in the dataset.

A final complication of the dataset is that I included what are, functionally, two different types of advertisements, those placed by enslavers looking for an escapee and those placed by sheriffs and jailers alerting the public that an African or person of African descent had been arrested and jailed under suspicion of being an escapee. A few advertisements do not fit easily into either of these two categories. In those cases, usually found during the early years included in the dataset, an African or person of African descent had been detained by an individual and was being held by them on their private property until the enslaver claimed the detained individual. Still, all three types of advertisements contain similar kinds of information about the escapee or detained individual, so I decided that including them in a single data set made sense.

## **Date of Publication**

March 2023

## **Data Links**

Dataset Repository: Harvard Dataverse <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/IQQJHI>

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

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