



Wives, Slaves, and Servant Girls: Advertisements for Female Runaways in American Newspapers, 1770–1783

Don N. Hagist

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A Surprising Source of Information About a Largely Forgotten Segment of the Colonial Population

In an age when individuals could be owned by others, people were lost and found just like other property. Indentured servants and slaves absconded from the custody of their masters, and their value prompted the masters to seek their return. Wives ran from abusive husbands or into the arms of another. Newspapers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries carried large numbers of advertisements offering rewards for the return of runaways or announcing the detention of fugitives. Each ad provided a description of the individual and often included some circumstances of their elopement. The overall effectiveness of these advertisements cannot be measured, but the sheer number of ads suggests they were perceived as useful tools by those who placed them. What could not have been known at the time was the substantial contribution to history that these ads make. The descriptive advertisements provide textual snapshots of thousands of individuals who would otherwise be lost to history, people whose names might not otherwise be recorded. In *Wives, Slaves, and Servant Girls: Advertisements for Female Runaways in American Newspapers, 1770–1783*, historian Don N. Hagist focuses on the American Revolutionary period to provide a striking portrait of a substantial but largely forgotten segment of the population. Comprised of four hundred advertisements presented chronologically, the volume provides invaluable descriptions of women's clothes, footwear, jewelry, physical appearances, education, nationalities, occupations, and other details.

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