



Virginia Runaways. Thomas Costa.

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Capturing Virginia Runaways in the Twenty-First Century

As the academic community becomes further inundated in vast quagmire of the world wide web, scholars are introduced to a barrage of websites that often promise more than they actually deliver. Academicians who have attempted to incorporate internet projects into their courses can readily testify to the plethora of poorly researched and awkwardly designed websites which pollute the cyber world. Nevertheless, a few researchers are dedicated to producing web-based projects that are useful, informative, and user friendly. Tom Costa, a professor of history at the University of Virginia's College at Wise, deserves recognition as being among this elite group. Costa, along with a team of proven web designers (including individuals who were involved in creating award-winning projects, such as [Valley of the Shadow](#) and [Virtual Jamestown](#)), has put together one of the best web-based historical databases available on runaway slaves.[1] <p> The [Virginia Runaways](#) project is a comprehensive collection of advertisements for runaway and captured slaves and servants which were published in Virginia newspapers during the eighteenth century. Many of the ads used for this project were printed in the Williamsburg [Virginia Gazette](#) (1736-1780), but some came from other Virginia newspapers published between 1774 and 1790, including the [Norfolk Intelligencer](#) (1775-1776), the [American Advertiser](#) (Richmond, 1782-1786), the [Weekly Advertiser](#) (Richmond, 1782-1790), the [Virginia Journal and Alexandria Advertiser](#) (1784-1785), and the [Virginia Herald and Fredericksburg Advertiser](#) (1788-1790). Additionally, Costa includes

advertisements from two Maryland newspapers, the [Maryland Gazette](#) (Annapolis, 1749-1790) and the [Maryland Journal and Baltimore Advertiser](#) (1773-1790), which make references to Virginia runaways. <p> Scholars familiar with Lathan Algerna Windley's four-volume compilation, [Runaway Slave Advertisements: A Documentary History from the 1730s to 1790s](#), might question the originality and usefulness of the [Virginia Runaways](#) database, especially considering that many of the Virginia runaway advertisements were originally reprinted in Windley's monumental work. Costa addresses this concern by explaining that his project moves well beyond Windley's publication. Costa correctly observes that Windley's work includes only advertisements for runaway slaves, excluding those ads that did not pertain directly to the fugitive slaves. Additionally, Costa points out that Windley did not include ads for runaways who had been captured, were mentioned on more than one occasion in news print, or which were listed in different editions of the [Virginia Gazette](#). Finally, Costa points out that Windley's book lacks an index, making it difficult to reference names of individuals, places, and events. <p> The [Virginia Runaways](#) project attempts to resolve Windley's oversights by encompassing several critical components in the database, including the use of both runaway and captured ads for slaves, as well as servants, military deserters, and runaway sailors; providing complete transcriptions of every ad listed in the database; reprinting the full text of all ads, including those for the same runaway printed in different editions of the [Virginia Gazette](#); reprinting

captured runaway ads which county officials and private citizens placed in the newspapers; and creating a “Search” page which allows users to search every word in every ad. Simply stated, the <cite>Virginia Runaways</cite> project significantly builds upon the foundation established by Windley’s work, providing users with easier access to a larger number of Virginia runaway advertisements.[2] <p> Two notable features of the <cite>Virginia Runaways</cite> project are the “Supporting Material” and “Reference” pages. The “Supporting Material” page includes a limited but noteworthy collection of court records, plantation accounts, letters, diaries, and personal papers of planters, other pertinent material from newspapers and a pictorial tour of the reconstructed slave quarter at Carter’s Grove near Williamsburg. The “Reference” page houses information that is designed to enhance the user’s understanding of runaway advertisements. This section includes reference material on Virginia statutes (laws) that were passed to define and control slaves; a discussion of the currency system used in Virginia during the eighteenth century; a glossary of terms used to describe clothing of the era; and a gazetteer that maps runaway ads in Virginia. The information in both pages gives the user a greater understanding of the common experiences shared by all runaways. Other notable facets of the project include a help page that introduces users to the database, detailed and user friendly browse and search pages, teaching materials (for K-12 students), a bibliography, and a credits page which identifies key individuals involved in developing and publishing <cite>Virginia Runaways</cite>. <p> Despite the project’s intrinsic worth, it is surprising that Costa does not include Mechal Sobel’s <cite>The World They Made Together</cite> in his bibliography.[3] The project’s “Supporting Material” section could have benefitted from Sobel’s argument that African-American slaves significantly influenced the architectural, religious, economic and social customs of eighteenth-century Virginia. This project does not sufficiently emphasize this fact. For example, images of the reconstructed slave quarters and the Carter plantation home (the great house) found on the “Tour A Reconstructed Slave Quarter” page reinforce the myth that widespread socio-economic disparity existed between the slaveholders and their bondsmen. While the images correctly suggest that slave quarters were crude (most were more rudimentary than those reconstructed at Carter’s Grove), the photographs of the great house seem to suggest that slaveowners as a whole lived in elaborate mansions. Even though Costa clearly states that the Carter plantation home was “expanded and re-

constructed in the 1930,” users could leave the website with the idea that most slave quarters and plantation homes built in Virginia during the eighteenth century looked similar to those featured in the project. In reality, many slaveowners and slaves lived in similar conditions, and often it would have been difficult to pick out the great house from the slave quarters, especially in the Virginia backcountry. Though the images of the plantation home and the reconstructed slave quarters are somewhat misleading, the overall merit of this site remains intact, especially considering that its primary goal is to retell the story of runaway slaves. <p> Secondary and College instructors will appreciate the diverse ways that the <cite>Virginia Runaways</cite> project can be used in their classrooms. For example, if instructors want to compare and contrast the different experiences of runaway slaves and runaway indentured servants in eighteenth-century Virginia, they could have students review selected advertisements for both groups outside of class and then analyze the documents in a classroom discussion. In the same way, one could also use the project to compare and contrast how African-born slaves and Virginia-born slaves adapted differently to the institution of slavery. The “Search” page makes it easier for instructors and students to find the type of specific ads needed to complete the assignments mentioned above. Additionally, instructors can use the ads to illustrate how proficient slaves were in using the English language, the type of clothes slaves wore, the owners’ perceptions of their slaves, the types of places where slaves went after they escaped, and the possibilities continue, limited only by an instructor’s imagination. Overall, <cite>Virginia Runaways</cite> is an excellent tool for introducing students to many of the elements associated with slavery in Virginia and the common experiences of those bondsmen who tried to escape from its clutches. <p> In the final analysis, Tom Costa has done an extraordinary job of capturing the story of eighteenth-century Virginia runaways with twenty-first century technology. The <cite>Virginia Runaway</cite> project deserves the attention and praise of both students and academicians who are interested in the history of the Old South and its peculiar institution. <p> Notes: <p> [1]. The <cite>Valley of the Shadow</cite> is located at http://valley.vcdh.virginia.edu/\$>. As stated on the project’s website, the Valley of the Shadow Project takes two communities, one Northern and one Southern, through the experience of the American Civil War. The project is a hypermedia archive of thousands of sources for the period before, during, and after the Civil War for Augusta County, Virginia, and

Franklin County, Pennsylvania. Those sources include newspapers, letters, diaries, photographs, maps, church records, population census, agricultural census, and military records. <cite>Virtual Jamestown</cite> is located at <<http://jefferson.village.edu/vcdh/jamestown/>>. According to its homepage, the Virtual Jamestown Archive is a digital research, teaching and learning project that explores the legacies of the Jamestown settlement and “the Virginia experiment.” As a work in progress, Virtual Jamestown aims to shape the

national dialogue on the occasion of the Four hundred-year anniversary observance in 2007 of the founding of the Jamestown colony. <p> [2]. Lathan A. Windley, <cite>Runaway Slave Advertisements: A Documentary History from the 1730s to 1790</cite> (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1983). <p> [3]. Mechal Sobel, <cite>The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth-Century Virginia</cite> (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

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