



Carlyle House Docent Dispatch

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Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority

“He had it on when he went away...”: Clothing in Eighteenth-Century Runaway Ads



There are a variety of sources historians can use to examine the types of clothing worn by wealthy 18th-century people in the Chesapeake. Ranging from portraits,

inventories, period prints, and merchant records to surviving samples of clothing, it is not difficult to get a handle on the types of garments worn by this visible and highly documented section of colonial society. There are fewer sources that can be used to discover what the other portions of society were wearing, such as indentured servants, convict servants and slaves. Few period prints include these individuals and there are almost no surviving pieces of clothing. The runaway ads in local newspapers provide us with a very descriptive glimpse into what indentured servants, convict servants and slaves were wearing and carrying with them when they went away.

Historians, such as Linda Baumgarten, have done pivotal work in looking at runaway ads as well as plantation records to determine what slaves were wearing in the eighteenth century. According to Baumgarten, most slaves received a winter and summer set of clothes every year in the same fabric and color. The styles of the clothes worn by slaves reflect a direct influence from clothing worn by servants in England. Men wore a shirt, breeches or some form of trousers, and a coat. Women typically received a shift, petticoat, and jacket. These clothes were typically made out of two types of material: coarse linens from Germany and Scotland, such as

osnabruks or rolls, and inexpensive woolens from England, Wales and Scotland such as plains, plaid, and a woolen textile called cotton (which is different from our modern day cotton).

What most slaves wore depended on their occupation in a Chesapeake household. Slaves perceived as more important or more visible to the white community were frequently clothed in nicer attire. Many indoor slaves were dressed considerably better than their outdoor counterparts. Livery, a uniform-like garment, frequently worn by to male indoor slaves to visually identify the enslaved individual with his master’s coat of arms.

Outdoor slaves wore a uniform of a different type. The runaway ads suggest a uniformity and sameness to the clothing of field workers. Owners would purchase large amounts of a fabric and have the slaves garments made from the same material. As a result, the clothing took on a uniform like quality that would be unique to each plantation. Runway ads list things such as, “had on the usual clothing of laboring Negroes” or even more specific, “had on when he left me the usual winter clothing of corn field Negroes.” Another runaway ad from July 1769, lists two runaways from the same plantation: Isaac wearing “a Negro cotton waistcoat and breeches, a

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Mary Ruth Coleman, Director
Heidi Miller, Curator
Caroline Neely, Curator of Education



“He had it on when he went away...”: (con’t)



white linen and osnaburg shirt” and Dick “has on a Negro cotton waistcoat, osnaburg shirt and breeches.” This uniformity also appears in female dress. Two enslaved women, who ran away together from a plantation, were listed as “both dressed in crocus coats and osnaburg shifts.”

Slave clothing was not made to fit the individual. Instead, they were frequently imported as ready-to-wear, or cut out and sewn by the mistress of the plantation or by skilled enslaved women. In fact, many clothes worn by slaves didn’t fit well at all. The ad placed for Sterling in 1768 reflects this ill-fitting clothing, *“had on a purple or bluish jacket and breeches (the jacket being too narrow, had a piece of blue cloth put in to widen it at the neck and shoulders).”* Another ad refers to a runaway slave’s jacket as *“an under Jacket of spotted Swanskin, or cotton, and is too short for him in the arms.”*

The ads do not focus solely on runaway slaves, but also include ads for runaway indentured servants and convict servants. The volume of ads indicate that a large number of convict servants ran away from their owners. Fortunately for historians, their clothing is described in great detail.

So what were convict servants in the Chesapeake wearing? On the whole servants were wearing more diverse apparel than their enslaved counterparts. This is due in part to the differing circumstances between slaves and servants arrival in the colonies. Most slaves came with few possessions after their passage. They immediately were issued clothing from their masters after purchase. This is very different from the experience of some convict and indentured servants because many of them were able to bring personal items including their clothing. Some servants might actually have some money to purchase new clothes while in the colonies. As a result, descriptions of clothing in convict servant ads contain more expensive fabrics and are much more varied in the types of materials and styles that they are wearing.

Whether male or female – slave or convict servant – when these individuals ran away, clothing appears to have been an essential part of identifying them. If you were to successfully run away – the first thing you needed to do was get a new set of clothes. In fact, clothing was a similar problem for both white and black runaways. Both groups faced the challenge of altering their appearances. Changing clothes was paramount to the runaway process because a person’s clothing could very easily convey their identity to the

readership of the Virginia and Maryland Gazette.

In an age with no photographic images, it would be difficult to identify an individual by physical description alone. Some runaways possessed very visible individual traits such as scars or brands on their faces, or a limp in their walk. If obvious clues to their identity like visible scars or physical deformities did not exist, then their clothes became the most important factor in trying to describe them in a runaway ad. Especially if you had on livery or wore the clothing of a field laborer, the casual observer would be able to place you as property of a particular individual.

The runaway ads in the Maryland and Virginia Gazettes provide historians with a wealth of information about the lives of runaway slaves and servants. The vivid descriptions of clothing that fill the ads not only give us an idea of what the runaways were wearing, but also indicate the important role that clothing played in the runaway process.

Sources Consulted:

- Linda Baumgarten, “Clothes for the People: Slave Clothing in Early Virginia.”
- David Waldstrieher. “Reading the Runaways: Self-Fashioning, Print Culture, and Confidence in Slavery in the Eighteenth-Century Mid-Atlantic.”