Runaway Slave Advertisements (1838-1839)

Before the Fugitive Slave Law that was enacted as part of the Compromise of 1850 required citizens to assist in recovering runaway slaves, slaveowners did not have an official system of finding and recovering runaways. Generally, owners placed detailed advertisements in local papers, promising monetary rewards that they hoped would encourage private citizens to assist in returning fugitive slaves. The advertisements below are typical of the period.

$10 Reward for a negro woman, named Sally, 40 years old. We have just reason to believe the said negro to be now lurking on the James River Canal, or in the Green Spring neighborhood, where we are informed, her husband resides. The above reward will be given to any person securing her.

Richmond Enquirer, February 20, 1838.

$50 Reward. --Ran away from the subscriber, his negro man Pauladore, commonly called Paul. I understand GEN. R.Y. HAYNE has purchased his wife and children from H.L. PINCKNEY, ESQ. and has them now on his plantation at Goosecreek, where, no doubt, the fellow is frequently lurking.

Richmond Enquirer, February 20, 1838.

The subscriber will give $20 for the apprehension of his negro woman, Maria, who ran away about twelve months since. She is known to be lurking in or about Chuckatuch, in the county of Nansemond, where she has a husband, and formerly belonged.

Norfolk Beacon, March 31, 1838.

Ranaway from the subscriber, two negroes, Davis, a man about 45 year old; also Peggy, his wife, near the same age. Said negroes will probably make their way to Columbia county, as they have children, living in that county. I will liberally reward any person who may deliver them to me.

Macon Messenger, January 16, 1839.

Document Analysis

1. What is the common theme in the suspected locations of runaway slaves?

2. Which slaves would bring the highest reward? Why?