

Typical Experiences of Runaway Slaves

The following are some actual and typical experiences of being on the run.

Precipitating Event	Path of Escape	Events along the Way	Result
Having a family member sold away (example: Brown’s family being sold away); Also, many ran to rejoin a family member who had already been away (at 6 or 7 years old W.H. Singleton fled a farm near Atlanta and found his way back to his mother and family in North Carolina).	Brown’s path of escape was Richmond, VA, to Philadelphia, PA—a trip that took 27 hours in a box.		Henry “Box” Brown was very successful, but this result was atypical. All slaves who survived to write slave narratives were able to acquire their freedom.
A person sold away from family and friends decides to return to them.	W.H Singleton fled to return to his mother from a farm near Atlanta, GA, to a plantation near New Bern, NC.	W.H. Singleton met a number of people who helped him: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A black man showed him how to get to the stage coach; • A white woman on the stage coach sat next to him and appeared as if she were his owner; • In North Carolina, people he met on the road showed him the way back to his mother’s plantation. 	W.H. Singleton was also successful when he was just seven years old and ran away to re-join his mother and brother. Later in life, as the servant of a Confederate officer, he escaped across Union Lines and went to work for the Union army, first as a spy and later as an enlisted man who rose to become a sergeant.

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When traveling in or near the North or a “free” state, the slave seizes the opportunity to run away.	From Louisville, KY, to Cincinnati, OH: Lemuel, a slave who worked at a Kentucky hotel fled on a steamer bound to the free territory of Cincinnati, Ohio.	It is not known once Lemuel boarded the boat from Kentucky to Ohio what happened; yet many slaves escaped by boat or ship and almost always they had the complicity of the ship captain, a sailor, or someone on the ship. If Lemuel hid or “stowed away” he’d need a friend on board; if he tried to “pass” as a free person who waited tables, he’d need forged “free papers,” or a ready excuse as to why he didn’t have any. Once in Cincinnati, Lemuel would have sought out allies, perhaps old friends from Kentucky who had previously escaped or perhaps an abolitionist group who could provide him with food and drink and help him on his way.	
Slaves often used crises in the master’s household when there was confusion/less focus on the slaves as an opportunity to run away, such as a death; a major illness; a marital crisis; and especially the master’s death.		When on the run, slaves had to move at night and find shelter during the day. Often, slaves sought help from other slaves; many documents suggest slaves would frequently help fugitives, find hiding places for them or providing food/ clothing.	Being caught and returned to slavery was the most common outcome of running away. Only those who made it to freedom had the opportunity to write about their experiences. From the accounts of slave owners and other observers we know that most runaways were severely punished when caught

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			and many were sold away because they had tried to escape.
To avoid severe punishment or even sexual molestation, slaves often ran. Harriet Jacobs ran away and hid in her grandmother’s attic for seven years after fleeing her sexually predatory master.	Jacobs’s path of escape was from the harbor in Edenton, NC, to that of Philadelphia, PA.	Harriet Jacobs was able to successfully “hide-away” due to the help she received from family. If fugitive slaves had free family members, they would sometimes go to them for assistance in fleeing, as Jacobs did.	Harriet Jacobs made it to Philadelphia with the complicity of a ship captain sailing from Edenton, NC, to Philadelphia, PA. There she received help from the strong free black anti-slavery community.