

Session Title

Forms of Freedom – Tracing the Political Costs of Freedom-Making in Bondage

Session Link [here](#)

Session Participants

Chair and Commentator: H. Robert Baker, Georgia State University

Panelists: Christy Lynn Hyman, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Evan Augustine Turiano, The Graduate Center, City University of New York

Overview of the Session

This session engages the forms of history found in the life narratives of enslaved people making freedom in the wake of the antebellum slave system.

NCHE Habits of Mind

- Realize that all individuals are decision makers, but that personal and public choices are often restricted by time, place, and circumstance.
- Recognize that history is an evolving narrative constructed from available sources, cogent inferences, and changing interpretations.

Key Points in Session

17:00: Christy Lynn Hyman, University of Nebraska- Lincoln, builds on the work of archaeologists, historians, and novelists while mapping the experiences of enslaved runaways and laborers exposed to the Great Dismal Swamp.

17:40-20:20: Hyman’s study explores the lives of a group of enslaved runaways held in bondage in North Carolina near the Great Dismal Swamp, a known place of refuge for runaways. The disappearance in 1829 of Eve and in 1832 of Sal, two women enslaved by John Wood in Eastern North Carolina, led to the placement of an advertisement for their return. Hyman interrogates the traces of their lives from partial evidence to recover a story describing significant action on the part of enslaved people.

20:20-23:40: Contrary to the prevalent notion of enslaved people’s lack of geographical literacy, Hyman asserts that Eve and Sal, with the help of their enslaved husbands Manuel and George, utilized a navigational literacy gained from such things as observing the locales crossed in the sale and resale of slaves, the work they performed to build roads and canals, and the shared knowledge of kin. Eve and Sal’s courage to escape demonstrates that life at the plantation was so adverse that the possible benefits of running away to the swamp outweighed the risks.

22:40-25:20: Due to the limited historical record, Hyman assesses the political, social and environmental scene to contextualize the obstacles runaways would have encountered. She examines Eve and Sal’s flight to freedom through the lens of

available accounts of escaped slaves from Eastern North Carolina like Moses Grandy, Harriet Jacobs, and William H. Robinson.

25:20-30:50: In the ad for Eve, slave holder John Woods wanted the children to be returned with her. Managing enslaved people's marriages was a method for slave holders to keep enslaved women having babies to add to the property holdings.

30:50-33:50: William H. Robinson's autobiography of his flight to freedom describes advice he received for fighting off bloodhounds from an elderly slave woman. Hyman notes the low value of elderly slaves in the eyes of the slave market in contrast to their deeper sense of place and survival skills often used to help younger slaves to escape and survive. Hyman says we will never know how long Eve and Sal were able to survive as fugitives but applauds that Eve and Sal, with the help of their enslaved husbands, possessed the courage to move through.

Potential Resources for Classroom Use

1. [Library of Congress](#) - "Slavery in the United States: Primary Sources & the Historical Record"
2. [Monticello](#) - Analyzing a runaway slave advertisement placed by Thomas Jefferson
3. [Gilder Lehrman](#) - Discussion of a Runaway Slave ad, 1852
4. [Stanford History Education Group \(SHEG\)](#) - Exploring what can be learned about slavery from interviews with former slaves
5. [North Carolina Slave ad database](#)

Inquiry/Discussion Questions

1. How do runaway slave advertisements contribute to a fuller understanding of slavery? With limited historical records of individual slave's escapes, how can we expand our understanding of this topic?
2. How might slaves have been able to gain the geographical knowledge to escape their bondage? How did work demands and slave holders' attention to natural increase help create a path to freedom for slaves?
3. What does the story of Eve and Sal's disappearance tell us about enslaved people's agency?