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Reclaiming a Fugitive Landscape

Susanna Ashton &
Jonathan Hepworth

Introduction:

Slaves were allowed three day's holiday at Christmas time and so it was over Christmas that John Andrew Jackson decided to escape.

The first day I devoted to bidding a sad, though silent farewell to my people; for I did not even dare to tell my father or mother that I was going, lest for joy they should tell some one else. Early next morning, I left them playing their "fandango" play. I wept as I looked at them enjoying their innocent play, and thought it was the last time I should ever see them, for I was determined never to return alive.¹

To run by day or by night? To flee on a road or in the woods? To rely upon subterfuge or on unadulterated gall? These were life and death decisions for a fugitive slave. When John Andrew Jackson fled a Sumter county plantation in South Carolina, he made strategic choices for his survival. He had a pony and rode mostly on roads, relying upon his ability to talk his way out of confrontations rather than hide from them. He gambled on his own plausibility, his own charm. Most of all, he clung to a faith in his own ability to mislead others with his own imagination. He crafted his own terrain.

He wrote of his escape in an 1862 memoir published in London titled *The Experience Of A Slave in South Carolina*. While his memoir was composed some 15 years or so after his 1846 escape, many of the details he recalled were precise. Some of them, though, represented a hazy dreamscape of horror – a perspective blurred by fear and despair. He sought, as he explained it, to see from above.

I may as well relate here, how I became acquainted with the fact of there being a Free State. The "Yankees," or Northerners, when they visited our plantation, used to tell the negroes that there was a country called England, where there were no slaves, and that the city of Boston was free; and we used to wish we knew which way to travel to find those places. When we were picking cotton, we used to see the wild geese flying over our heads to some distant land, and we often used to say to each other, "O that we had wings like those geese, then we would fly over the heads of our masters to the 'Land of the Free.'"

¹ Fandango here is a shorthand for foolishness and lighthearted fun.

Jackson's flight from South Carolina did not begin with his furtive acquisition of a pony that allowed him to traverse 150 miles of roads, rivers, and swamps. Rather, it began with the landscape that he imagined and 'saw' from his birds' eye projection of the land below. Imagining the terrain as crossable through the air was what launched his escape. It was his ability to project a higher vision of his own relationship to the land, mentally flying from South Carolina itself, that enabled his more physical flight.

*

For enslaved people, geography has had a fraught and haunting significance. It resonates most powerfully in their memoirs but also glows in their interviews and recollections from later years. Whether slavery adhered to place or to the person was, of course, the question that framed the entire division of 18th and 19th century America into "free" states and "slave states." And worst of all, of course, were the ambiguous status of Kansas, Oklahoma, and the territories yet to be delineated in that cruel rubric of the Antebellum period. How much would "place" in the United States define your citizenship, your freedom and your identity? Could one ever escape?

And yet, Jackson's flight suggests a possible answer. If locale fundamentally defined identity, then one could assert the rights of citizenship or national identity by claiming one's physical relationship to the larger land of America. Those rights were fragile, however. As Jackson soon discovered, after 1850 the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act rendered Slaves liable to forcible "return" no matter where they were, which effectively made geography within the United States irrelevant to one's status. Under such a law, if one fled bondage, could a place ever be reclaimed or reoccupied under different terms?²³

² See "Geographic Consciousness in the American Slave Narrative" by Ian Finseth page 236-258 in *American Literary Geographies Spatial practice and cultural production 1500-1900* edited by Martin Bruckner and Hsuan L. Hsu Newark University of Delaware Press 2007

³ Jackson did not know of or did not choose to join any of the "Maroons" communities of runaway slaves who were known throughout the 18th and early 19th century to live in the deep backwoods and swamps in the South. The Black River and the Santee river of South Carolina were notorious for harboring runaway communities who both literally and figuratively often reclaimed and redefined swamp land for small settlements and agricultural use. He likely passed close through such territory, however, which makes his independent determination to flee all the more powerful. For a thoughtful consideration of the culture of Maroons in South Carolina, see *Maroon Communities in South Carolina: A Documentary Record* edited by Timothy James Lockley The University of South Carolina Press, 2009.

Could a person even buy back the land that enslaved them?

John Andrew Jackson's flight and eventual returns to South Carolina illustrate how one man worked out these questions logistically but also imaginatively.

At one point during his escape, Jackson was questioned, "Who do you belong to?"

With no easy answer at hand, Jackson replied simply "I belong to South Carolina."

For whatever reason, the retort satisfied the interrogators, who let him be. His carefully crafted remark, however, suggests how profoundly his identity tied to his sense of place. As he continued in his memoir: "It was none of their business whom I belonged to; I was trying to belong to myself." But before he could verbally sever his enslavement to the land, he had to do so physically. His fascinating memoir shows us how he did so through a traceable, mappable flight—and then, after the war, how he reclaimed that landscape on wholly different terms.

THE FLIGHT FROM SUMTER

Accounts of runaway slaves are well-known from the Antebellum south, but the story of John Andrew Jackson is something far more special. We have discovered a detailed advertisement calling for Jackson's capture—a rarity in slave history—and we can use it alongside his own account of his escape, and our own geographical understanding of the region, to triangulate his *multiple* routes to freedom. Not only can we use his specific and vague references to landmarks to re-imagine his route over rivers and roads, thus validating his claims, but we can also discover how freedom-seekers like Jackson manipulated their *enslavers'* notions of flight. In other words, Jackson didn't run the way his former masters thought he would run. Nor, later in life, did he run in the way *we* might imagine him running. That fact allows us a unique glimpse how one slave undertook his lifelong imaginary navigation of his surroundings and inner life. It reveals a movingly layered meaning of landscape, one we might reclaim today—and one that Jackson believed he could reclaim before he died.

The particulars of Jackson's storied life are as follows: he was born in Sumter District, South Carolina in about 1825 and was owned by Robert English, a successful landowner with various properties and a host of relatives to share and trade slaves with. The plantation Jackson lived was in a town once known as "English Crossroads" and later alternatively as "Magnolia" and finally as Lynchburg, SC. Despite a brutal life of labor and abuse he found some brief happiness with Louisa, a young woman he married who lived on a nearby plantation owned by the Law family. His owners objected to his marriage and to his spending time with his wife and the daughter, Jenny, they conceived. Despite repeated whippings for leaving his plantation to be with Louisa, Jackson remained devoted to his family and determined to keep crossing the land between the English and Law plantations.

In 1846, however, Jenny and Louisa were sold or sent to Houston County, Georgia. Jackson's devastation knew no bounds. He resolved to use the rapidly degrading sanity of Robert English to his advantage. With his owner collapsing into dementia, oversight and discipline of the plantation were lax. Jackson began to hatch a plan for escape. If he couldn't join Jenny and Louisa, he would escape slavery entirely and perhaps someday, somehow, be reunited.

Jackson managed to trade some chickens for a pony that a neighboring slave had somehow obtained. He hid the pony deep in the woods. On Christmas day, he took advantage of the customary three-day holiday and fled on horseback for Charleston. He had often been to Charleston to drive his master's cattle to market and knew the route well. Unlike many fugitives forced to brave unknown terrain, Jackson's flight to Charleston was through familiar turf.

It was still dangerous, however, and while he had not worked out the details of what precisely he would do in Charleston, simply and plausibly travelling the over 100 miles of main roads to the city was going to be his greatest challenge. His flight over that landscape was thus both typical and atypical of the larger fugitive slave experience.

Fugitives from slavery each had their own horrible story to tell and their own circumstances that led them to seek freedom though "self-theft," to use the parlance of runaway advertisements one occasionally saw in newspaper of the time. But there are some general patterns within the flight of men and women enslaved in the inland South.

To begin with, a vast majority of runaways likely left without any specific plans to abscond North. Rather, they were often fleeing immediate punishment or danger with the intent of returning once the circumstances or threat had changed. A Northern escape was a colossal undertaking for people enslaved in the deep South who had little access to trains or boats. The geographic challenges alone were huge.

Another common motivation for short-term flight, sometimes termed "*petit marronage*," was what took Jackson to visit Louisa; individuals would leave their plantations to see parents or spouses for limited periods of time.⁴ This resistance-through-flight was dangerous, of course, for punishments upon return could be murderous. Whether calculated or impulsive, those kinds of flight were still powerful acts of defiance that indicated to overseers or masters that some treatment would not be endured. Despite threats of violence and cruelty, men and

⁴ A thoughtful yet succinct overview of petite and grande marronage can be found in "Diasporic Marronage" in the *Encyclopedia of the African Diaspora: A Historical Encyclopedia* page 384-386 by Jorge L. Chinea Editor Carole Elizabeth Boyce Davies 2008 Santa Barbara California: ABC-CLIO.

women still held some negotiating power: labor was a temporal force, and it meant more at planting or harvest time. If a person could hide for even a week or two, they could deprive their master of labor at an exceptionally critical moment. Punishing that slave too harshly upon their return could be only a pyrrhic victory.

Jackson's flight this time, though, was the less common form of escape – a “*grand marronage*.” He was heading South to Charleston, to eventually head North for permanent freedom. He had no knowing assistance from anyone, black or white, and he travelled on the roads, in plain sight, on a pony.

[SECTION BREAK]

Jackson navigated three kinds of terrain. The first, he imagined and flew over as a bird. The second was the actual historical space of South Carolina and points north that the below [table/map/visualization] retraces. Jackson navigated its four essential stages:

But there was a third terrain as well—the terrain he feigned, the verbal map he left to confuse any pursuers.

When questioned by white people he met along the road, for example, Jackson misdirected them

I met many white persons and was hailed, “You nigger, how far are you going?” To which I would answer, “To the next plantation, mas’re;” but I took good care not to stop at the next plantation.

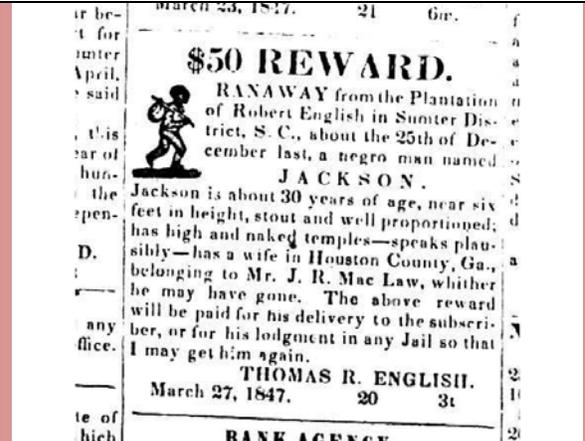
His landscape is broad, and he is travelling far, but he when he spoke to white people he projected the microcosmic space they expected him to live in: traveling to the next plantation over, at most, as an errand-running slave. (The population of Free people of color in the decades right before the Civil War was small but significant, likely only a few thousand for the entire state. He thus may have also “passed” as an unchallenged freeman on the roads.)

Land and space weren't his only stage to act upon—he also played with time. When a suspicious inn-keeper enquired of him, “Where are you going?” Jackson answered, “I am going on my Christmas holiday.”

“This satisfied him,” he added in his memoir. But “I was going to take a longer holiday than he thought for. I reached Charleston next evening.”

Jackson's greatest feint, however, may be in how he misdirected the Reverend Thomas English—his owner's son, who managed his father's plantation and its

slaves. When we discovered the advertisement that the Reverend placed in the *Sumter Banner* in March of 1847, approximately four months after John Andrew Jackson fled, we realized how deeply English was fooled.

| | |
|---|---|
|  <p>March 27, 1847. 21 6w.</p> <p>\$50 REWARD.</p> <p>RANAWAY from the Plantation of Robert English in Sumter District, S. C., about the 25th of December last, a negro man named JACKSON.</p> <p>Jackson is about 30 years of age, near six feet in height, stout and well proportioned; has high and naked temples—speaks plausibly—has a wife in Houston County, Ga., belonging to Mr. J. R. Mac Law, whither he may have gone. The above reward will be paid for his delivery to the subscriber, or for his lodgment in any Jail so that I may get him again.</p> <p>THOMAS R. ENGLISH.</p> <p>March 27, 1847. 20 3t</p> <p>BANK AGENCY</p> | <p>\$50 REWARD</p> <p>RANAWAY from the Plantation of Robert English in Sumter District, S. C., about the 25th of December last, a negro man named JACKSON.</p> <p>Jackson is about 30 years of age, near six feet in height, stout and well proportioned; has high and naked temples—speaks plausibly—has a wife in Houston County, Ga., belonging to Mr. J. R. Mac Law, whither he may have gone. The above reward will be paid for his delivery to the subscriber, or for his lodgment in any Jail so that I may get him again.</p> <p>THOMAS R. ENGLISH.</p> |
| | <p>March 27, 1847. 20 3t</p> |

Jackson was able to escape, in part, because Thomas English was looking in the wrong direction. Rather than seek his wife to the west in Georgia, as English believed, Jackson had chosen to head *South*, to Charleston, a route he knew from previous work leading cattle.

The timing, too, of English’s advertisement also suggests how terrain and speculative *marronage* were tied. While Jackson’s disappearance was presumably discovered shortly after Christmas of 1846, the first advertisement for him didn’t appear until *late March of 1847*.⁵ This lengthy time lapse suggests that English initially suspected a case of *petite marronage*, wherein Jackson had merely fled temporarily to avoid a whipping and would soon return. Only after a few months did Thomas English place the advertisement speculating that Jackson had fled over 300 miles to Houston County, Georgia. By then, however, Jackson had already worked for a month in Charleston, on the docks, before stowing away on a Boston-bound vessel, thus making it North, to freedom.

⁵ The advertisement was scheduled to appear 3 times a week—hence the ‘3t’ at its bottom right.

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|---|---------------------|--|---|
| | | | FIGURE 1. Excerpts from the 1846 Rumsey Map (or link) of South Carolina |
| From woods on the road “to the next plantation” on his pony – stops eventually at G. Nelson’s plantation | Christmas Eve, 1846 | ...I hastened to the woods and started on my pony. I met many white persons, and was hailed, “You nigger, how far are you going?” To which I would answer, “To the next plantation, mas’re. but I took good care not to stop at the next plantation. The first night I stopped at G. Nelson’s plantation. I stopped with the negroes, who thought I had go leave during Christmas. | FIGURE 2. Excerpts of Mills 1825 map with likely stops and landmarks call outs and route |
| Goes to the Santee river – crosses (presumably near Nelson’s Ferry - then to Shipman’s hotel leaves hotel at midnight | Christmas day | Next morning, before day, I started on for the Sante [sic] River. The negro who kept that ferry, was allowed to keep for himself all the money he took on Christmas day, and as this was Christmas day, he was only too glad to get my money and ask no questions; so I paid twenty cents, and he put me and my pony across the main gulf of the river, but he would not put me across to the “bob landing;” so that I had to wade on my pony through a place called “Sandy Pond” and “Boat Creek.” The current was so strong there, that I and my pony were nearly washed down the stream; but after hard struggling, we succeeded in getting across. I went eight miles further, to Mr. Shipman’s hotel, where one Jessie Brown, who hired me of my master, had often stopped. I stayed there until midnight , when I got my pony and prepared to start. This roused Mr. Shipman’s suspicions, so he asked me where I belonged to. I was scared, but at length, I said, “Have you not seen me here with Jesse Brown, driving Cattle?” he said, “Yes I know Jesse Brown well. Where are you going?” I answered him, “I am going on my Christmas holiday.” This satisfied him. I was going to take a longer holiday than he thought for. | FIGURE 3 Show here detail from Mills maps showing swampy areas surrounding Santee River. FIGURE 4 Schipman entry on 1850 Population Manuscript Census in St. Stephen’s Parish. |
| Reaches Charleston by next | | I reached Charleston by the | FIGURE 5 |

| | | | |
|--|--|---|--|
| evening..... lives in Charleston for a month | | next evening. | Charleston Map from around 1858 showing wharfs, etc. |
| Charleston wharfs - gets on boat to Boston. | | I joined a gang of negroes working on the wharfs, and received a dollar-and-a-quarter per day, without arousing any suspicion.... | FIGURE 6 Harper & Brothers 1847 Map of the United States by Samuel Breese (possibly annotated with line from Charleston to Boston. |

Reclamation:

And yet, while English misjudged Jackson's strategy, his temporal plans and his vision of the terrain, the slaveholder did get one thing right: Jackson would work for years, and at great risk to himself, in a futile attempt to free family.

Jackson's life after his Southern escape was rich and complex. He labored in Massachusetts for a few years, desperately saving money and networking with abolitionists in order to negotiate the purchase of his wife and baby girl, still enslaved in Georgia. Yet after the Passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, Jackson quickly realized the danger he was in. His master had been making enquires about him up North and had commissioned a sort of bounty hunter or agent to track him down. ⁶ He had to give up on purchasing or ever reuniting with his family. This time, with the assistance of conductors on the Underground Railroad, Jackson made his way North to Canada, where he settled amongst the free black population of St John, New Brunswick.⁷

He married again in Canada and a few years later sailed to England where he lectured for several years about slavery, publishing his memoir *The Experience of a*

⁶ As part of the Compromise of 1850, the Fugitive Slave Act was a federal law designed to placate the South that was increasingly concerned by the weak enforcement of earlier fugitive slave laws. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 forced and rewarded Northern Law enforcement officers to aid in the capture of escaped slaves. People aiding these freedom seekers were liable to face often very serious criminal sanctions. Other aspects of the Act of especial controversy were the elimination of a jury decision for a captured slave, who was brought before a federal court or a commissioner and rarely allowed to submit testimony upon their behalf. Instead, testimony from the alleged owner, who was not even required to be present, was the most heavily weighed evidence.

⁷ [For more information about the free black community of St. John, New Brunswick which dated back to the exodus of British loyalists, including black loyalists, from the newly formed United States, see \[here\]\(http://www.museevirtuel-virtualmuseum.ca/edu/ViewLoitDa.do;jsessionid=0F62ECDA4C47D26F4DEE46420E35B594?method=preview&lang=EN&id=646\).](http://www.museevirtuel-virtualmuseum.ca/edu/ViewLoitDa.do;jsessionid=0F62ECDA4C47D26F4DEE46420E35B594?method=preview&lang=EN&id=646)

Slave in South Carolina in 1862. He chose to return to the United States after the Civil War and spent his remaining years with a third wife, in Springfield Massachusetts. He regularly travelled to and from South Carolina over the next 30 years, seeking to alleviate the plight of the freed men and women there. He collected donations for clothes, farm equipment, money, and food for orphans and the destitute in Lynchburg, the township of his former plantation.

Ending there, however, underemphasizes Jackson's determination to link land to his freedom. An 1866 newspaper notice in the *Springfield Republican* reveals the audacious coda that Jackson attempted to give to his life—and to the land where once he was a slave:

John Andrew Jackson, formerly a slave and a fugitive from the South, and lately from Europe, is in this vicinity receiving clothing and supplies to send to the destitute negroes, through the aid society, at No. 76 John Street, New York. He is also trying to raise funds to purchase his old master's plantation, so that the former slaves may go to work on it, on their own account. He comes plentifully indorsed, and is apparently worthy of assistance in the causes he represents. [italics mine]

John Andrew Jackson wasn't merely returning to a region where he had friends and relatives. He was trying to purchase back the very land on which he had picked cotton, the site where his sister had been murdered, the farm where his mother was repeatedly whipped and where he himself had been brutalized. Jackson's land claim was one born in blood.

As he stated during the escape: "I belong to South Carolina." It wasn't an idea he forgot. In an interview of 1893 he told a reporter that he longed to return to South Carolina to die:

... I'm getting old and feeble and I only want to live till I get the money for the Home, and then I will go down to Old Carliny and there is where I want to die, down in my old cabin home.

We can perhaps best understand his intent to reclaim his landscape, the land he had painted with his blood, by looking at the anecdote that closes his entire memoir—the final image to which he, and his readers, must bear witness. In this final passage he tells of a local Sumter slave owner, "Old Billy Dunn" who had whipped a man to death

... and dug a hole in the field, and threw him in without coffin or anything of the kind, just as dogs are buried; and in the course of time, the niggers ploughed up the bones, and said, "Brudder, this the place where Old Billy Dunn buried one of his slaves that was flogged to death."

I, John Andrew Jackson, once a slave in the United States have seen and heard all this, therefore I publish it.

J. A. Jackson.

Landscape / Escape

So did Jackson actually return to die in South Carolina? It's hard to say.

His last known location dates to 1896, when the *New York Herald Tribune* remarked that "John Andrew Jackson lost his satchel in New York City November 18 in Water-st., containing all his clothes; please return to Police Headquarters." Since Jackson had lost things in previous years and advertised for them in newspapers, this final trace rings true. He may have died there: it's hard to imagine him returning to South Carolina in his destitute or elderly state.

And yet, for a man who against all expectations had travelled the world, this kind of final and triumphant return still seems believable—especially if we see that return, to his primal landscape as the final stage of his escape.

We generally associate 'landscape' with 'escape' only inasmuch as landscape is something to be crossed or triumphed over in order to achieve escape. Perhaps it hinders or perhaps it assists the escape. The close sounds of the term might also lead us to associate the natural world as itself an "escape" from an unnatural world.

That association, however, is more fraught and complex than instincts suggest. Despite being close cognates, the 'landscape' and 'escape' have fundamentally distant origins. Landscape arises from the Dutch term "*landschape*" which suggests a state of being of the land. Initially it was used as a painterly term, the artistic perspective or creation of the land's very essence or state of being. ("Scape" here functions as a form of "ship" as it might appear in more familiar terms such as "friendship" or "seamanship". Only in the last century or so has it taken on the modern sense of it as 'arrangements of natural forms.')

"Escape" however, comes from Central Old French: the term "*eschaper*," essentially the removal of a cloak, presumably in order to flee.⁸

The terms share no linguistic lineage, but their overlap is telling. "Escape's" origins are revelatory: the unmasking/uncloaking that can allow one to run. "Landscape's" painterly origins, conveying a state of being, actually complement the notion of escaping as revelation. Jackson remade the land, precisely because he escaped from it. Jackson may never have been able to purchase his master's land, but he remained invested in it through human bondage, the blood he left behind, the bones he remembered—and flight.

⁸ [Insert and cite OED reference](#)