

Untold Stories

OF BLACK MONTEVALLO



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ZILPHEY AND MOSES BREAK FOR FREEDOM

"Always I was in dread that slavery would succeed in snatching my children from me. This thought drove me nearly frantic, and I determined to steer for the North Star at all hazards."

-- Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

"No law can make property of me. Freedom is as natural for man as the air he breathes."

-- John Swanson Jacobs, *The United States Governed by Six Hundred Thousand Despots*

Runaway advertisements, so-called, can tell us a lot about the lives and experiences of persons who made the difficult decision to break for freedom. The newspaper ad reproduced here tells a story in miniature of two freedomseekers whose journey north took them through Montevallo, Alabama or, as it was then called, "Wilson's Hill."

In June 1824, Zilphey and Moses ran away together from their enslaver in Montgomery County, Alabama. A month later they were captured and jailed in Shelby County, probably in Shelbyville, and then, in August, by some means or other, managed to slip free of their county keepers. Four months later, having twice managed to break free, they were seen at Wilson's Hill.

Perhaps some of our earliest Montevallo ancestors found ways to hide, feed, and comfort Zilphey and Moses on their journey.

Their enslaver, a James Goodson, could be certain they would travel north. He placed runaway advertisements in at least two Tennessee papers, in addition to the Huntsville ad reproduced here.

Advertisements for runaway slaves, written by slave owners seeking to recover their property, are rich with identifying details that tell tales valued today for reasons far different from their original intent.

We learn that Moses, light-complexioned and stoutly built, the younger of the two, had a rough life. Both feet are missing toes and he "is considerably marked on his back," suggesting a back scarred by multiple whippings. And yet -- it is one of those moments when a person's individuality flashes into view -- he "carries a very smiling countenance."

Zilphey, also light-complexioned with a bushy head of straight hair, is said to be in her early to mid-thirties. She can be identified by a "wen," a swelling, on the back of one wrist. A final tell-tale piece of information shines out for us today: "It is probable she may have had a child during her absence."

Her pregnancy suggests another probability.

It suggests that Zilphey chose to endure the unimaginable hardships and dangers of flight in order to save a child from the life of slavery she had known. Zilphey's voice is forever lost, but we have the testimony of enslaved mother Harriet Jacob, who famously wrote her own story in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: "I knew the doom that awaited my fair baby in slavery, and I determined to save her from it, or perish in the attempt."

It is sad to report that Moses was caught and jailed in June 1825 in Davidson County, Tennessee, and presumably sent back to his enslaver in Montgomery County. No further information about Zilphey has turned up. Godspeed to you Zilphey! We can only hope that she and her newborn child succeeded in following the North Star to freedom.

Readers who want to discover stories of other freedomseekers--the story of Zilphey and Moses is just one of the "thousands of stories of resistance that have never been accessible in one place"--should check out the fascinating website Freedom on the Move. Advertisements for runaway slaves were created "to control the movement of enslaved people" but, ironically, they "ultimately preserved the details of individual lives--their personality, appearance and life story. Taken collectively, the ads constitute a detailed, concise, and rare source of information about the experiences of enslaved people" (<https://freedomonthemove.org>).

"The Voice for Business & Community"

This "runaway slave" advertisement with stock woodcuts is from Huntsville, Alabama, the *Southern Advocate*, 30 June 1825.

\$50 REWARD.

ON the 16th of June, 1824, a negro man and woman, to wit: MOSES and ZILPHEY, ran away from the subscriber residing in Montgomery County, Ala. Said negroes were taken up in July last, and committed to Shelby County Jail. In the month of August they were taken out of jail, and on their way home they made their escape from the person who had them in custody. It has been understood that said negroes were seen at Wilson's Hill, in this State, some time in December last.



ked on his back
countenance.

MOSES is between 26 and 30 years of age; about five feet six or eight inches high; stout built, and very full face; small teeth, and rather light complected. He has lost some of his toes of each foot; and is considerably mar-

He carries a very smiling



foot; and somewhat lighter complected than Moses. It is probable she may have had a child during her absence.

I will give Fifty Dollars Reward, for the apprehension of said negroes, and confining them in any jail, and giving information to me, residing near Montgomery, Alabama; or Twenty-Five Dollars for either; and pay all reasonable expenses.

JAMES GOODSON.

Montgomery, Ala. June 3, 1825--9--11.

You can learn more about runaway advertisements and freedomseekers in Shelby County, Alabama in the enlarged version of this story in themontevallolegacyproject.com, which also takes up the sad end of Moses's quest for freedom. Do you have stories to share? We would love to hear from you! Write us at Montevallolegacy@gmail.com. Submitted by Kathy King and Anita Stewart Sims.