

The Montreal Gazette

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The Montreal Gazette was founded by Fleury Mesplet who began printing the first entirely French newspaper in Canada in June of 1778.¹ The newspaper was originally entitled La Gazette du commerce et littéraire, pour la ville et district de Montréal. After his editor Valentin Jautard published critical comments regarding judgements made by Judge René-Ovide Hertel de Rouville, both Mesplet and Jautard were arrested on 2 June 1779.² The men were able to leave prison in September of 1782 and Mesplet soon set up his office on Rue de la Capitale in a two story stone house belonging to Joseph Lemoyne de Longueuil.³ This site eventually became the Sailors Institute and now houses the Mariners' House Museum.⁴ (figs. 1, 2, & 3) On 25 August 1785, Mesplet published the first issue of the now bilingual Montreal Gazette/La Gazette de Montréal.⁵ As Charmaine A. Nelson has argued,

“That the first runaway slave advertisement appeared the following month on 29 September 1785, demonstrated the local white settlers’ knowledgeable use of print technology to perpetuate the colonial racial order through which their ownership of black bodies was justified and secured.”⁶

It is therefore important to investigate the interconnection between the development of printing technology and slavery, a connection which implicates newspapers and their owners. As Tamara Extian-Babiuk has argued, colonial newspapers comprised a “disproportionate amount of the discourse representing slaves.”⁷ Additionally, the services provided by newspapers directly contributed to the buying, selling, and recapture of enslaved people as well as the normalization and maintenance of the institution slavery and white supremacy. Newspapers profited greatly from slavery in a number of ways.

One very obvious example of this is the ownership of enslaved people by printers, where they profited from the forced labour of these individuals. This is clearly illustrated in a fugitive slave advertisement published in the 4 May 1786 issue of the Quebec Gazette concerning the escape from jail of a “NEGRO MAN SLAVE named JOE.”⁸ Joe was described as a pressman by trade, and the three Guineas reward for his capture and return was said to be coming from William Brown “the Printer of this Gazette,” indicating that the printer was his owner.⁹ Besides direct ownership of the enslaved, there were other more subtle and insidious ways through which newspapers profited from and helped to maintain the institution of slavery. This is primarily seen through advertisements and their inseparable connection to newspapers. As David Waldstreicher has noted,

“The slave system was...an important means of supporting print culture and the extralocal market that made print so expansive and interesting. The constitutive relation between slavery and print culture was reciprocal. When Samuel Keimer started the Pennsylvania Gazette in 1728, he offered each subscriber a free advertisement every six months. The first three advertisements to appear in the paper were for land, for a runaway servant, and a Negro Man: ‘Enquire of the Printer’.”¹⁰

Mesplet founded the Montreal Gazette in part with the explicit motive of advertising - a 1985 reprint of Mesplet’s original 1778 statement of intent upon the newspaper’s founding stated

the goals of the paper as, “giving notice to the public at any time of the sale of goods, of merchandise, moveables, houses, lands, beside the conveniency of advertising for lost effects, *slaves deserted from their masters*, the want of clerks or of servants, and many other things”.¹¹ (sic) (italics mine) Once again we see the complicity of newspapers with the institution of slavery as well as another direct means of profiting from it. Oftentimes shorter advertisements, such as one that appeared on 2 April 1789 in the Montreal Gazette,¹² concluded “Enquire of the Printer,” further implicating the printers and newspapers as the middlemen between those selling and those hoping to purchase enslaved people.

Furthermore, the printed sale, auction, and fugitive slave advertisements in newspapers laid out a web of threats and incentivized the public to become complicit with and in the institution of slavery.¹³ Financial rewards encouraged participation, while legal threats warned against harbouring and helping those who escaped at the risk of facing prosecution “to the utmost rigor of the Law.”¹⁴ This resulted in a conflation between blackness and unfreedom and blackness and criminality, while descriptions of physicality and ability in sale advertisements linked blackness and commodity at the same time as it erased traces of individuality.¹⁵

Newspapers were essential in the creation of a national Canadian identity, but it is also important to note the work they did to include and exclude certain groups based on race and ethnicity. This is perhaps best illustrated through the descriptions of two fugitives, one black and one white in an advertisement published in the 11 October 1792 issue of the Montreal Gazette. While the advertisement described the black fugitive as a “mulatto apprentice,” the white fugitive was described as, “a Canadian man”.¹⁶ This advertisement clearly explicates blackness and Canadianness as definitively separate categories. The “mulatto apprentice” was clearly separated from the category of Canadian and while no description of race is provided for the “Canadian man,” the lack of racial designation indicates his whiteness. This advertisement reinforced whiteness as the silent norm, whereas blackness was always quick to be stated and separated.¹⁷

Newspapers such as the Montreal Gazette further worked to normalize slavery by including sale, auction, and fugitive slave advertisements alongside other notices for goods and services for sale or that were being requested. The placement of these advertisements alongside each other normalized slavery since notices pertaining to the auction, sale, and escape of the enslaved appeared routinely and side by side with those for inanimate objects.¹⁸ Furthermore, the form itself of advertisements in the classified section served to smooth over social asymmetry.¹⁹ As explained by Extian-Babiuk, classified advertisement’s “use of minimal language and the virtual absence of narrative, their banality and presumed accessibility, and the fact that they generally concern the representation of inanimate objects,”²⁰ allowed for them to be seen as neutral, furthering the normalization of the institution of slavery and the ownership of human beings.

Newspapers such as the Montreal Gazette not only directly profited from the institution of slavery, they participated in the creation and hierarchization of separate racial categories like blackness and whiteness (Canadian-ness), which helped to articulate all of the stigmas and prejudices that were attached to those labels. Simultaneously, these newspapers allowed the public to profit from their complicity with the “peculiar institution” by normalizing slavery while publishing legal threats for those who disobeyed and financial rewards for those who complied.

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- ¹ Claude Galarneau, "Mesplet, Fleury," Dictionary of Canadian Biography (date of last access 2 April 2020) http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/mesplet_fleury_4E.html
- ² Galarneau, "Mesplet, Fleury," Dictionary of Canadian Biography.
- ³ "Montreal Gazette / La Gazette de Montréal en 1785," Vieux-Montréal (date of last access 2 April 2020) http://www.vieux.montreal.qc.ca/inventaire/fiches/fiche_gro.php?id=34
- ⁴ R.W. McLachlan, "Fleury Mesplet, the First Printer at Montreal," From the Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada, Second Series 1906-1907, vol. XII, section II (J. Hope & Sons, Ottawa ; The Copp-Clark Co., Toronto ; Bernard Quaritch, London, England: 1906), p. 205.
- ⁵ Galarneau, "Mesplet, Fleury," Dictionary of Canadian Biography.
- ⁶ Charmaine A. Nelson, "'[A] tone of voice peculiar to New-England': Fugitive Slave Advertisements and the Heterogeneity of Enslaved People of African Descent in Eighteenth-Century Quebec," Current Anthropology, guest editors Ibrahim Thiaw and Deborah Mack, vol. 61, no. 22 (September 2020), 14 pages. <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/709976>
- The first fugitive advertisement in the Montreal Gazette was placed by Robert M. Guthrie for the return of a "Mullatto man Named Tom Brooks" and his accomplice, a white man named Richard Sutton. (sic) Robt. M. Guthrie, "RUN AWAY on Thursday morning last," Montreal Gazette, 29 September 1785; transcribed in Frank Mackey, "Appendix I: Newspaper Notices," Done with Slavery: The Black Fact in Montreal, 1760-1840 (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), p. 328.
- ⁷ Tamara Extian-Babiuk, "'To Be Sold: A Negro Wench': Slave Ads of the Montreal Gazette 1785-1805," (Montreal: Masters of Arts, McGill University, 2006), p. 8.
- ⁸ Anonymous, "BROKE out of His Majesty's Gaol in Quebec," Quebec Gazette, 4 May 1786; transcribed in Mackey, "Appendix I: Newspaper Notices," pp. 328-29.
- ⁹ Anonymous, "BROKE out of His Majesty's Gaol in Quebec," Quebec Gazette, 4 May 1786; transcribed in Mackey, "Appendix I: Newspaper Notices," pp. 328-29.
- ¹⁰ David Waldstreicher, "Reading the Runaways: Self-Fashioning, Print Culture, and Confidence in Slavery in the 18th c. Mid-Atlantic," The William and Mary Quarterly (April 1999), p. 268.
- ¹¹ Extian-Babiuk, "'To Be Sold: A Negro Wench'," p. 16.
- ¹² Anonymous, "To Be SOLD," Montreal Gazette, 2 April 1789; transcribed in Mackey, "Appendix I: Newspaper Notices," p. 332.
- ¹³ Charmaine A. Nelson, "Fugitive Slave Advertisement," Course Lecture, ARTH 353B Winter 2020 – The Black Subjects in Historical and Contemporary Popular Culture, McGill University, Montreal, Canada, 21 January 2020.
- ¹⁴ James Shepherd and John Hill, "BROKE out of his Majesty's Goal," Quebec Gazette, 23 February 1786; transcribed in Mackey, "Appendix I: Newspaper Notices," p. 328. Gaol is misspelled as goal in the original.
- ¹⁵ Extian-Babiuk, "'To Be Sold: A Negro Wench'," p. 27.
- ¹⁶ Extian-Babiuk, "'To Be Sold: A Negro Wench'," p. 50. See: John Tieple, "*TWENTY DOLLARS REWARD*," Montreal Gazette, 11 October 1792; transcribed in Mackey, "Appendix I: Newspaper Notices," p. 335. Canadian in this context likely referred to French Canadians.
- ¹⁷ Extian-Babiuk, "'To Be Sold: A Negro Wench'," pp. 50-51.
- ¹⁸ Extian-Babiuk, "'To Be Sold: A Negro Wench'," p. 27.
- ¹⁹ Extian-Babiuk, "'To Be Sold: A Negro Wench'," pp. 21, 25, 82-83.
- ²⁰ Extian-Babiuk, "'To Be Sold: A Negro Wench'," p. 21.

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Plate List



Fig. 1: Samuel Edward Dawson, "Map of the City of Montreal: Compiled from the Latest Surveys," Hand-book for the city of Montreal, 1888 (1888), 49 x 54 cm, McGill University Library, Montreal, Quebec, Canada. Area highlighted is approximate location of Montreal Gazette original printshop. https://archive.org/details/McGillLibrary-rbse_montreal-surveys_G3454_M65_1888_D3-16891/mode/1up



Fig. 2: Mariner's House Museum, location of Sailors Institute and original location of Montreal Gazette printshop, August 2019, Google Maps, <https://www.google.com/maps/@45.5031937,-73.5546026,3a,90y,172.59h,111.22t/data=!3m6!1e1!3m4!1s6ZdAihUo6x68TrkPzkZ36g!2e0!7i16384!8i8192>



Fig. 3: Montreal Illustrated Postcard Co., Montreal, Sailors Institute (1903-1910), Illustrated Postcard, 9 x 14 cm, Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec, BAnQ Rosemont–La Petite-Patrie, Montreal, Quebec, Canada. Original location of Montreal Gazette printshop. <http://collections.banq.qc.ca/ark:/52327/2433070>