

Un-covering Slavery, Surveillance and Resistance in the Province of Quebec through Hugh Ritchie's 1779 Fugitive Slave Advertisement Published in the *Quebec Gazette*

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Rue Saint Jean is one of the oldest streets in Quebec City, renowned contemporarily for its abundance in culinary, touristic, and historic appeal.¹ This major street, which was depicted in various early eighteenth-century maps, is positioned at the commercial heart of the city. Its resident craftsmen and merchants' industries were largely responsible for the development and prosperity of the historic Faubourg Saint Jean-Baptiste,² a renowned neighbourhood just outside of the Old city's walls.³ (figs. 1 & 2) As with much of Canadian history, whitewashed hegemonic narratives surrounding Québec's historical sites fail to account for, and even erase, the deep-rooted presence of slavery within the provincial history. Using the remarkable research of Frank Mackey (2010), I will demonstrate the ways in which Rue Saint Jean was connected to slavery within the province as well as resistance against it.⁴ More precisely, the key archival source through which this history can be recuperated is a fugitive slave advertisement, originally published on 4 November 1779 in the *Quebec Gazette* by Hugh Ritchie, tailor and merchant of Québec.

The advertisement in question centres the escape of two individuals named Cash and Nemo on 24 October 1779 from the residence of Hugh Ritchie. Although the specific location of Hugh Ritchie's home is unclear, the tailor was based on Saint Jean street.⁵ Furthermore, the notice claims that the two had fled at around four in the morning and were spotted less than a week later on the 29th in the town of Sorel,⁶ over 200 kilometres away from their initial place of escape in Quebec City. Given the material impoverishment of the enslaved, luxuries such as horses were generally inaccessible to escapees like Cash and Nemo. Such sightings not only exemplify the determined resistance of the enslaved despite their material impoverishment, but further exposes the breadth of merchant and slave owner's networks across the province and the use of fugitive slave advertisements as tools of hyper-surveillance.

The majority of enslaved people who escaped from their slave owners were males who did so alone. Therefore, alliances like that of Cash and Nemo lead us to the question of the nature of their relationship. Although a romantic relationship was possible, the significant age gap between the twenty-six-year-old "Negro Wench" Cash, and the approximately eighteen-year-old "Negro Lad" Nemo would seem to indicate that a bond of friendship or kinship may have united the two. We may never be able to recuperate such information since Hugh Ritchie did not disclose it in the advertisement.⁷ However, what Ritchie's description implies is that this escape was at the very least a *planned* and *collaborative* effort. Regardless of their relationship, the pair's collaboration would have been likely advantageous for Nemo, who Ritchie claimed had been born in Albany, New York and only spoke French "tolerably,"⁸ while Cash was described as fluent potentially hinting at the longer duration of her enslavement or birth in the region.⁹

Moreover, geographically speaking, given the abnormally long list of belongings with which they fled (listed in the advertisement) which include a number of items of women's dress, the escape would have been slower and likely impossible for one person to successfully execute alone.¹⁰ The advertisement concedes that the duo was seen in Sorel (fig. 3), meaning that they would have had to travel the approximately 200 kilometre route along the river (figs. 4 & 5) from Ritchie's estate in Quebec City to the town of Sorel, likely all on foot and in the cold weather of late autumn.¹¹ While the advertisement does not give specifics on the sighting in Sorel, it did provide the date of the 29th October 1779, merely five days following the escape. This meant that Cash and Nemo would have somehow travelled this distance in a remarkably short time. (figs. 4 & 5) Today, the journey on foot to the town of Sorel-Tracy from Saint Jean Street in Quebec City where Ritchie was based, would take just over forty-one hours, without

even accounting for necessary rest and the added weight of transporting personal belongings. (fig. 6).

While transporting the garments created an added physical burden, they hinted at a sophisticated plan. Not only would such assets have proved essential for warmth given the runaways' departure in the fall,¹² they also served an additional purpose. Beyond utility, the quality and luxurious nature of the garments described were undoubtedly out of the norm, which Charmaine A. Nelson notes was "almost certainly the direct result" of the nature of Hugh Ritchie's trade as a tailor.¹³ This suggests that the fugitives may have seized on this opportunity to disguise themselves as free people and even possibly used their garments as capital to sustain themselves on the run.¹⁴ Thus Ritchie listed these items not simply as a means of villainizing them,¹⁵ but further to expose their potentially planned disguises to readers, to increase the likelihood of their capture.¹⁶

Additionally, the sighting of the duo in Sorel despite their potential elaborate dress and remarkable distance away from Ritchie's residence, points to a larger network of allied merchants and slave owners seeking to affirm their dominance who aided in the capture of runaways. For instance, Ritchie's notice advised readers to respond to him directly, but further offers George Ross, a merchant in Sorel as an alternative contact within the province.¹⁷ Such long-distance alliances highlight the violence of slavery and persistent pro-slavery attitudes of many white citizens across the province.¹⁸

Lastly, Ritchie offered a reward of "TEN DOLLARS"¹⁹ for the recapture of Cash and Nemo and further threatened any potential allies and masters of vessels who may have harboured the fugitives with legal prosecution. Thus, such documents ultimately expose not only the violence and surveillance among different slave owning populations across the province but further the legal and institutional frameworks which worked to legitimize their ownership of "human property" and disincentivize any resistance.

In conclusion, Nemo and Cash's extraordinary 1779 escape from Ritchie's residence on rue Saint Jean not only serves as a testament to the presence of slavery in Quebec, but further highlights the resistance and agency of enslaved runaways. Since published notices required slave owners to admit the resistance of the individuals they enslaved, such details worked against hegemonic narratives and as Nelson has argued, "were unhelpful to the idea of slaves as controlled, idle, unintelligent property".²⁰ Thus, through subversive analyses of such archival records one can uncover the violence and constant surveillance that Quebec's enslaved population endured in the eighteenth century, as well as the collective agency and resistance of the enslaved amidst such oppression. Although today rue Saint Jean is merely remembered as one of the city's oldest streets, devoid of any obvious connection to the institution of slavery, documents such as Ritchie's fugitive slave notice contradict this removed, white-washed narrative. Ultimately, Hugh Ritchie, merchant and tailor of Saint Jean Street, is merely one example among thousands of pro-slavery actors who, together, shaped Quebec's history.

¹. "Old Québec: Inside Québec City's Walls," Québec Cité, Tourisme Québec (date of last access 26 April 2020) <https://www.quebec-cite.com/en/old-quebec-city/inside-quebec-citys-walls>

². Although this neighbourhood was largely working class, throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it developed into a major commercial hub. It is considered one of Quebec City's main shopping destinations to this day.

³. "Rue Saint-Jean," Commission de toponymie de Québec (date of last access 24 April 2020) www.toponymie.gouv.qc.ca/ct/ToposWeb/fiche.aspx?no_seq=184185

⁴. Mackey, Frank, "Appendix I: Newspaper Notices," Done With Slavery: The Black Fact in Montreal 1760-1840 (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), p. 323.

5. Ritchie is described by notary P.-L. Panet as a merchant tailor based on “rue Saint Jean” in a 1783 notarial document regarding another estate.

Enchère et mise à prix d'un emplacement et d'une maison situés en la ville de Québec, rue de la Montagne, appartenant à Hugh Ritchie, marchand drapier et maître tailleur d'habits de la ville de Québec, rue Saint-Jean, P.-L. Panet Notary Pub., 28 mars 1783, Archives textuelles, Bibliothèques et Archives Nationales du Québec, Centre d'Archives de Montréal (BANQ), Montreal, Canada

6. Mackey, Frank, “Appendix I: Newspaper Notices,” p. 323.

7. There are records of escapes with two or more collaborating parties, often linked by familial or romantic ties. However, the great majority of enslaved people fled alone.

8. Mackey, “Appendix I: Newspaper Notices,” p. 323. It must be noted that Nemo’s lack of English fluency does not align with Ritchie’s description of a Creole (born in the Americas) person from Albany, New York. It is possible then that Nemo was African-born or from another region where English and French were not spoken.

9. In a 1780 inventory of Ritchie’s estate mentioned in Mackey’s (2010) book however, only the presence of “a negro boy” which may have been Nemo is noted. It is thus unknown when he would have *acquired* Cash. Mackey, p. 536, note 34.

10. This escape can be compared, for instance, with Bell’s escape, described in the Quebec Gazette, 20 August 1778. Bell was said to have fled in August, yet contrary to Nemo and Cash, she fled without stockings or shoes; perhaps as a result of a specific dispute leading to a hasty departure. Nonetheless, although Nemo and Cash’s escape likely necessitated more planning in order to pack and physically transport the garments, the additional clothing would have offered immeasurable benefits like the ability for Cash to change her clothing and for Nemo to potentially cross-dress as a woman. The extra clothing may have provided protection against the colder autumn weather and also may have provided a currency with which the pair bartered for food, shelter or protection.

See: Geo. Hipps, “RAN AWAY from my service,” Quebec Gazette, 20 August 1778; transcribed in Mackey, “Appendix I: Newspaper Notices,” p. 321; In order to escape from slavery in Macon, Georgia, the light-skinned black woman Ellen Craft disguised herself as a white man and pretended to be the slave owner of her darker-skinned husband William Craft. To hide her sex, illiteracy, and feminine voice, they cropped her hair, placed her arm in a sling, and bandaged her face.

See: Amani Marshall, “ ‘Will Endeavor to Pass as Free’: Enslaved Runaways’ Performances of Freedom in Antebellum South Carolina,” Slavery and Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies, vol. 31, issue 2 (2010), pp. 161-80.

11. Unless fugitives had connections with free blacks or were aided by anti-slavery or merely opportunistic whites, which no records seem to suggest here, they likely would not have had access to other modes of transportation.

12. This contrasts with the greater majority of escape attempts taking place in the warmer seasons, namely spring and summer, given the more tempered climate.

13. Charmaine A. Nelson, “Neither Indigenous, Nor Settlers: The Place of Africans in Canada’s ‘Founding Nations’ Model,” Who Founded Canada, eds. Boswell, Eisenberg, Flanagan, Grammond, Jedwab, Maclure, Mahoney, Nelson, and Teillet (Association for Canadian Studies, 2016), p. 44.

14. Nancy Christie, “Qu’il était maître chez lui,” The Formal and Informal Politics of British Rule in Post-Conquest Quebec, 1760-1837: A Northern Bastille (Oxford University Press, 2020) p. 335.

15. This would include both the crime of stealing garments, but further the illogical notion of “self-theft” legitimized under slavery. Marcus Wood, “Rhetoric and the Runaway: The Iconography of Slave Escape in England and America,” Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America, 1780-1865 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 79.

16. Interestingly, Ritchie claimed that Cash had taken “a considerable quantity of Linen and other valuable Effects not her own,” but also “a large bundle of wearing apparel belonging to herself”. Ritchie, “RAN-AWAY,” p. 323.

17. Mackey, “Appendix I: Newspaper Notices,” p. 323.

18. In fact, Trudel’s findings classifies merchants as the leading group among recorded slave owners in the eighteenth century, under French rule and likely onward, making them key stakeholders within the institution of slavery. Marcel Trudel, “Owners at All Levels of Society,” Canada’s Forgotten Slaves: Two Hundred Years of Bondage, trans. George Tombs (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 2013), p. 116.

19. Mackey, “Appendix I: Newspaper Notices,” p. 323.

20. Charmaine A. Nelson, “ ‘Ran away from her master... a negroe girl named Thursday’: Examining evidence of punishment, isolation, and trauma in Nova Scotia and Quebec fugitive slave advertisements,” Legal Violence and the Limits of the Law: Cruel and Unusual, eds. Joshua Nichols and Amy Swiffen (New York: Routledge, 2018).

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Plate List

Fig. 1: Henry Whitmer Hopkins, “Atlas of the city and county of Quebec from actual surveys, based upon the cadastral plans deposited in the office of the Department of Crown Lands” (1879)¹, Coloured Atlas, pp. 63, BANQ Archives Numériques: Plans de villes et villages du Québec



¹ One should note that this map dates from about a century following the escape and should simply be used to locate Saint Jean street rather than the organization of estates in 1779, at the time of the original incident..

Fig. 2: Zoom in view of figure 1 for clarity wherein the St John Ward (Faubourg Saint-Jean) is centered and Saint Jean (also labelled Saint John) is traced in red until it reaches the old city's Western fortifications.



Fig. 3: Henry Whitmer Hopkins, "Atlas of the town of Sorel and county of Richelieu, Province of Quebec from actual surveys, based upon the cadastral plans deposited in the office of the Department of Crown Lands," (1880), Coloured Atlas, pp. 49, BANQ Archives Numériques: Plans de villes et villages du Québec.

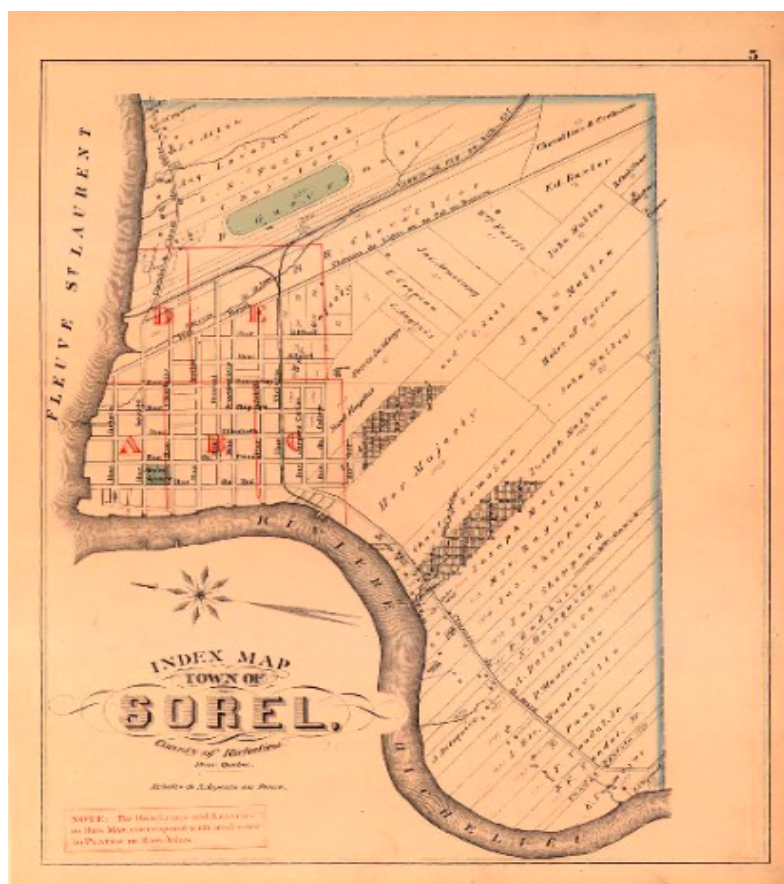
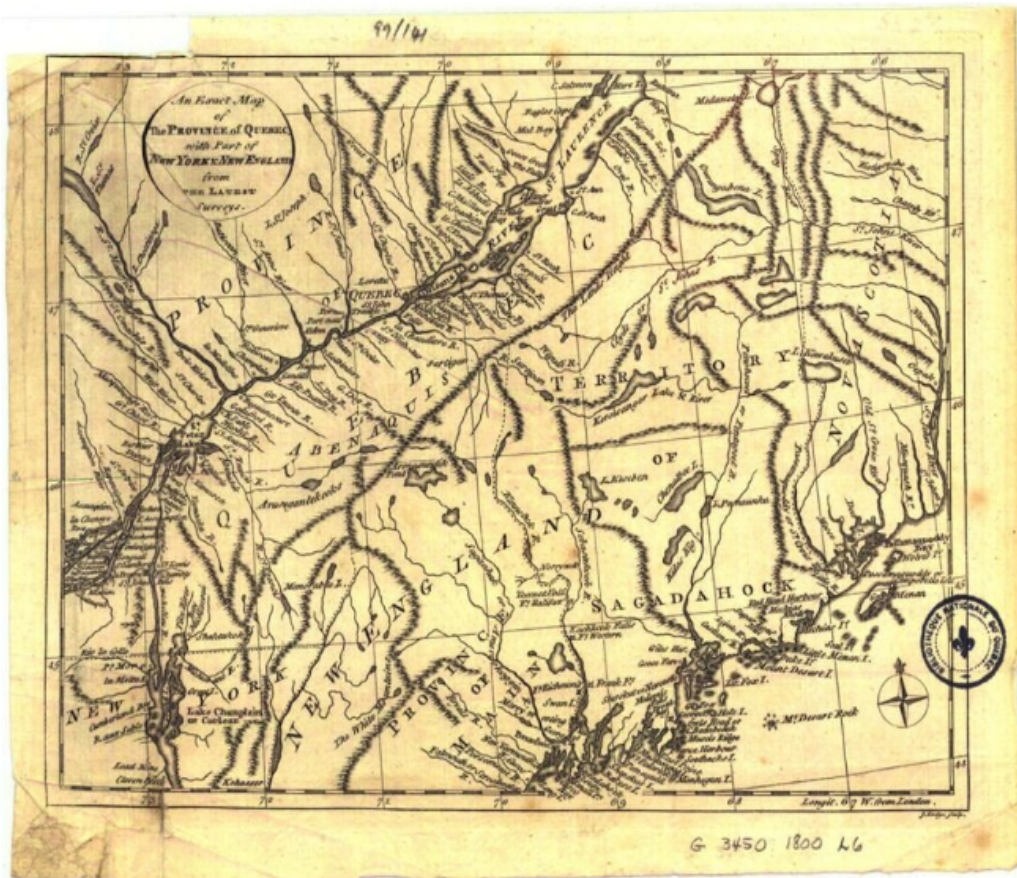


Fig. 4: John Lodge, “An Exact map of the Province of Québec with part of New York & New England from the latest surveys” (Edited 1800), 21 x 27 cm, Cartography, BANQ Archives Numérique <http://collections.banq.qc.ca/ark:/52327/2244578>



5: Detail of figure 4 for clarity wherein Québec City can be seen just East of Orleans Island and Sorel is depicted in the South-West of the province, just South of St. Peter Lake



Fig. 6: “Route from Rue Saint Jean, Quebec City to Sorel-Tracy” (2020) Google Maps

