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often found themselves in a position where even the most honorable among them were forced into acts of dishonor and deception. In the sale of runaways, such was often the case.

### The Conspiracy Theory

Slave owners seemed to find it difficult to understand why so many slaves ran away. It was one thing for a few vicious, unruly, and unmanageable slaves to leave the plantation, but most, they argued, were gentle, obedient, and happy. How was it that such a contented group, sometimes even the most skilled and privileged among them, took their leave without uttering a word? Masters admitted that some slaves wanted to be with loved ones, take a holiday, and avoid hard work. They also admitted that some slaves found it difficult to make proper decisions, had some "defect" in their personalities, or suffered from depression or other mental problems. Little Charles stole away from his Louisiana plantation and broke into a meathouse on a neighboring farm. When he was caught and whipped by three white men and still ran away again, his master said he suffered from "mental alienation" and "fits of insanity."<sup>18</sup>

The "mental alienation" theory was given scientific authority by Dr. Samuel Cartwright, a prominent New Orleans physician. In an article in *De Bow's Review* in 1851, Cartwright explained that many slaves suffered from "drapetomania, or the disease causing negroes to run away." The name was derived from the Greek, δραπέτης, or a runaway slave, and μανία, mad or crazy. Absconding from service was "as much a disease of the mind as any other species of mental alienation," Cartwright wrote. It was as well understood by planters and overseers as it had been by the ancient Greeks more than two millennia ago. To cure the disease, Cartwright proposed that owners