

CHATTAHOOCHEE: CATO RUNS

Based on actual events

Following the War of 1812, withdrawing British forces turned over a fort and its armory to former slaves and Native Americans. The cannons protected a thriving community that attracted hundreds of freedom-seeking people from across the South.

TEASER

EXT. VIRGINIA TOBACCO PLANTATION - DAY

Early morning. Rising fog hovers above acres of knee-high tobacco plants flanked by lowland hardwoods and pines.

Rising with the fog, BIRD SONG, the BUZZ of insects...

TITLE OVER:

CHARLES CITY COUNTY, VIRGINIA

...the BAYING of hounds hot on the trail.

In the distance, a lean black man bolts from the tree line.

He runs steady and strong, high stepping for a hundred yards or more through the field of pale green tobacco plants before disappearing into the opposite tree line.

One beat.

Two beats.

Three beats.

Four...

BAYING hounds charge from the tree line, followed closely by two SLAVE CATCHERS on the end of the dogs' long leashes.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

HEAVY BREATHING. Controlled. Measured as a metronome.

A bare black foot SPLASHES in a puddle.

Mud spatters the ragged trousers hanging below the knees of the lean black man wearing a tattered shirt of coarse cloth.

Another time, another place, CATO, 20s, would have been a warrior. Sinewy arms. Fierce eyes.

He zigs and zags as he runs. Circles a tree twice before continuing forward.

He shinnies up the trunk of a sprawling live oak tree, grabs branches, climbs higher.

A stream of urine arcs off one side of the tree.

Cato climbs higher.

A stream of urine arcs off the other side of the tree, as the BAYING grows louder.

Cato quickly works his way back down the oak to a large, low branch that runs parallel to the ground, reaching twenty feet or so from the trunk.

He skips across the branch with the grace of a high-wire artist until it becomes too thin to hold him. He drops to the ground and runs.

EXT. VIRGINIA TOBACCO PLANTATION - DAY

The hounds strain against their leashes, tugging along a sweaty BEARDED SLAVE CATCHER, broad-brimmed hat, a brace of pistols on his belt. The dogs crash through the crops.

A HEAVY-SET SLAVE CATCHER, club in one hand, coil of rope over one shoulder, PANTS, stumbles behind.

The BAYING dogs drag the slave catcher into the

FOREST

where the hounds zig and zag through the underbrush, tracking Cato's scent.

INTERCUT SERIES OF SHOTS - FOREST - CATO & SLAVE CATCHERS

Cato bulls through the undergrowth, forearms raised in front of his face for protection. He jerks back a quarter turn, his shirt snagged by the thorns of a blackberry bramble.

He stops, surveys the landscape.

To his right, a thick wall of prickly blackberry canes lush with ripe fruit. He ravenously picks the berries, popping them in his mouth. He stops eating, cocks an ear to hear the BAYING of the pack.

He plucks three more blackberries, eats them, wipes his mouth with his sleeve.

Cato bends slightly and plows into the bramble.

The hounds rush to the large live oak, BAYING and BARKING as they stand on their hind legs, scratching, hopping, as if they're trying to climb the tree.

The bearded slave catcher relaxes, takes off his hat and wipes his brow.

He pulls a pistol from his belt, extends it as an offering as he waves his lagging partner forward.

BEARDED SLAVE CATCHER

Shoot the nigger down.

Cato breaks through the blackberry bramble, blood oozing from his arms, legs and face.

The hounds go nuts, one runs off leash and circling the tree, leaping, BARKING. Chaos.

The heavy-set slave catcher, winded and pouring sweat, aims the pistol up at the branches. He circles the great tree.

Cato jogs through the woods, leaps across a slow-moving creek, takes a sharp turn, following the flow of the water.

The hounds circle the tree seeking Cato's scent. One goes one way, one goes the other, jerking the handler back and forth, causing him to lose his balance.

Cato runs in the creek, SPLASHING downstream.

The dogs dive into the blackberry bramble. The bearded slave catcher pulls them out.

BEARDED SLAVE CATCHER

I ain't getting tore up in there.
We'll pick up the scent on the
other side.

The handler drags his hounds through the woods.

Cato slows, walks, stops. Bends over, hands on his hips, EXHALES. Looks up to see

THE CYPRESS TREES AND OPEN WATER OF A GREAT SWAMP.

Cato glances left. Glances right. Gazes behind him to focus on the BAYING of the pack growing louder.

He sprints into the swamp. SPLASH. SPLASH.

Two steps in, he comes to a sudden halt, goes face first into the knee-deep water as the momentum of his upper body continues forward.

Cato thrashes about to stand. GRUNTS to pull up one leg.

Stuck in the mud.

The BAYING grows louder.

Cato strains to pull one leg out of the mud. THUCK. Steps forward. Strains to pull the other leg out of the mud. THUCK.

Again.

Again.

Running in slow motion.

Cato turns toward the now deafening BAYING to see...

...the hounds charging to the water's edge.

The handler holds his dogs back from jumping into the swamp. Turns back to his partner.

BEARDED SLAVE CATCHER
Rope'em in. Be ready for a tussle.
He 'bout snapped Jacob's neck.

Cato struggles forward. THUCK. THUCK.

The heavy-set slave catcher takes the rope from his shoulder, fashions a jack-leg noose, twirls the rope, throws it.

The lasso goes wide. The fat guy is no cowboy.

Cato fights ahead. One step. THUCK. One more step. THUCK.

Another throw. Another miss.

One step. THUCK. One more step. THUCK.

Another throw.

The loop of rope wobbles in the air. Lands on Cato's shoulders, circling his neck.

A violent jerk snatches Cato backwards.

SPLASH.

END OF TEASER