



THE AGE OF REVOLUTIONS 1700-1811

FROM 1701 UNTIL THE CLOSE OF THE LEGAL SLAVE TRADE IN 1808, ABOUT 187,000 SLAVES WERE SHIPPED FROM AFRICA DIRECTLY TO CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA. Between 1710 and 1740 alone, more than 38,000 slaves were shipped to the Georgia-South Carolina region, creating enormous imbalances between white and black populations and a very large body of slaves with direct memory of African freedom. Additionally, from 1700 to 1740, about 39,000 more slaves were shipped to lands controlled by Spain in North America, which included Florida.

Until Great Britain ended Spanish domination of Florida in 1763, the hundreds of free black people who lived there remained a powerful symbol and a serious threat to the English colonies. The Spanish governor's offer of freedom to any slaves who fled the Carolinas and Georgia for Florida, converted to Roman Catholicism, swore allegiance to the King of Spain, and pledged to serve for four years in the militia destabilized the English settlements and encouraged insurrections. This, effectively, was the first Underground Railroad, and it ran from Charleston to St. Augustine.¹

In 1693, King Charles II issued a proclamation making it known that runaway slaves could come to Florida and be granted their freedom, in effect ratifying an unofficial policy that the governor of Florida, Diego de Quiroga, had instituted in 1687. Recall that many of the African slaves shipped to the American colonies from the kingdoms of Kongo and Angola were Catholics already. Catholic Spain, an inveterate enemy of Protestant Britain, sought to weaken, if not destroy, the colonies of its British rivals, and both countries were becoming increasingly dependent upon an unobstructed source for African slaves. Between 1720 and 1740, South Carolina rice production grew from 8.2 million pounds a year to 35 million, demanding a commensurate increase in slave labor. By encouraging runaways, the Spanish aimed a dagger at the heart of British power.²

¹ The estimates are from the Slave Trade Database: <http://www.slavevoyages.org/tast/assessment/estimates.faces>; by far and away the best work on blacks in colonial Florida is Jane Landers, *Black Society in Spanish Florida* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

² Peter Charles Hoffer, *Cry Liberty: The Great Stono River Slave Rebellion of 1739* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 26.

From the very beginning of English settlements in the Carolinas, Spain plotted their ruin. The fierce and bloody conflicts that resulted took place within a rivalry that pitted the Spanish, English, various Indian tribes, and Africans against one another for power and survival. As early as 1686, Spanish forces in Florida organized a combined Spanish, Indian, and African raid on Edisto Island, one of the Carolina Sea Islands. They not only killed several Englishmen, but burned a Scots settlement on Port Royal and made off with 13 slaves belonging to the English governor. The Spanish so often attacked English settlements that their African allies and the slaves they seized in the process became extremely familiar with the routes back and forth between St. Augustine and the Carolina coast. When in 1687, eight male and two female slaves escaped by canoe from Carolina and arrived in Florida, the governor had them baptized. They not only entered the Catholic faith, but also the defense forces of the colony and helped construct the grand Castillo de San Marcos, the large, star-shaped coquina fortification that still overlooks St. Augustine and dominates the coast.

English agent William Dunlop visited St. Augustine to protest the Spanish offers of freedom to runaway slaves, but left with only vague promises and no cessation of the flow of fugitives to Florida. In fact, the numbers would only increase as a kind of black-slave grapevine (as crusty John Adams would describe this method of communication in his diary as early as September 1775) spread word among the English slaves about the freedom that awaited

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them in Florida.³ The number of runaways became so large that the English governor complained to the Spanish that the slaves ran away "dayly to your towns." The flow grew so much that even the Spanish governor sought royal guidance. And this is why Charles II—seeing the value in thereby weakening the English and simultaneously strengthening Spain's Florida settlement—on November 7, 1693, issued his edict proclaiming that Spain would give "liberty to all . . . the men as well as the women . . . so that by their example and by my liberality others will do the same." The astonishing move offered hope to English slaves and also created an unusual multiethnic community in St. Augustine that, while still permitting slavery, also provided freedom and, for a time, a measure of security for African Americans and Native Americans.⁴

From 1702 until 1718, the region saw conflict at unprecedented levels, including two Indian wars, the Tuscarora War of 1711 and the even more catastrophic Yamasee War of 1715, which nearly destroyed the English colony in the Carolinas. All the conflict of this era involved the Spanish at St. Augustine and their African and Indian allies, and took place during Queen Anne's War (known in Europe as the War of the Spanish Secession), which only increased the levels of conflict in the region, along with the competition for slaves. Indeed, one of the prime motives for Native American opposition to the English was their fear of enslavement.

³ "The Negroes have a wonderfull Art of communicating Intelligence among themselves. It will run severall hundreds of Miles in a Week or Fortnight." Adams's diary remarks are at <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/aea/cfm/doc.cfm?id=D24>.

⁴ Landers, *Black Society in Spanish Florida*, 23-25.



SPAIN DID NOT, HOWEVER, MAINTAIN THE UPPER HAND. IN 1702 AND AGAIN IN 1704, AN ENGLISH FORCE INCINERATED MUCH OF ST. AUGUSTINE, but not its invaluable fort, murdering thousands of Christianized Indians and making off with many more as slaves. For Africans in the Carolinas, the conflicts only tightened security measures, increased the number of slave patrols, and made enslavement even harsher in an effort to stem the flow of fugitives to the Spanish. Yet at the same time the English found themselves terrified by the coalition of Indian tribes that had banded together to crush the colony. For instance, in the Tuscarora War, John Lawson, leader of the Bath, North Carolina, settlement, was executed by the Tuscaroras, although they freed one of his slaves—perhaps to further terrorize the whites. The slave reported that Lawson was hanged, but another account revealed that Lawson was impaled with numerous pieces of wood and slowly set on fire.⁵

Facing possible annihilation at the hands of the Indians throughout this era and lacking sufficient manpower, the English took the surprising move of inducting slaves into the colony's militia. While characteristic of Spanish colonies, such a move rarely happened among the English—who outlawed the right of slaves to own firearms—marking a new level of fear and desperation. In 1708, for instance, the Carolina colony awarded freedom to any slave "who in Time of an Invasion, kills an Enemy,"

⁵ Landers, *Black Society in Spanish Florida*, 25-26; William L. Ramsey, "Something Cloudy in Their Looks: The Origins of the Yamasee War," *Journal of American History* 90 (June 2003): 44-75; <http://www.nchistoricsites.org/bath/tuscarora.htm>.

and the colony agreed to compensate the slave's owner for the loss of his property. In 1715, at the start of the Yamasee War, South Carolina voted to provide lances to those blacks "who cannot be supplied with guns in the present expedition." Revealing a level of integration that would rarely, if ever, be duplicated in a military force located in the South until the Korean War, the English reported that at the beginning of the war several "good partyes of Men, White, Indian and Negroes" operated in the field countering Yamasee attacks.

Lacking enough white men, and uncertain of the loyalty of local Indians, the English turned to their slaves for defense, eventually enrolling hundreds in their militia, aiming to have "600 Whites & 400 negroes" under arms. The slaves faced a choice of bearing arms for their masters, and perhaps winning freedom, or running away to the Yamasees, who often proved welcoming hosts but could offer no permanent guarantee of freedom. Peace came to the region by the early 1720s, but the English response was dramatically to increase the number of slaves they imported, creating an even greater racial imbalance in the colony. As one colonial agent lamented, the growing number of African slaves only led "to the great endangering [of] the Province."⁶

The ever-growing body of slaves fresh from Africa and Florida's policy of offering

freedom to runaways led to disaster. Slave uprisings occurred in 1720 and 1724, significantly increasing the number of blacks in St. Augustine and of those eager to gain their freedom and take up arms in support of the Spanish Crown. In 1726, a group of escaped English slaves arrived in St. Augustine from the Stono region of South Carolina. Not surprisingly, some of the runaways were combat veterans who had fought with the Yamasee and now volunteered to fight for Spain and against their former masters. According to one account, the following year "Ten Negroes and fourteen Indians Commanded by those of their own colour, without any Spaniards in company with them" attacked the English and seized more slaves, followed up by a combined force of Spanish and former slaves that raided an English plantation on the Edisto River and captured additional slaves.⁷

When the English retaliated against St. Augustine in 1728, they met resistance not only from Spanish troops but also from a black militia unit under the command of Captain Francisco Menéndez (a self-described Mandingo, but also an Atlantic Creole, someone already acculturated to European culture on the African coast, who then enters the Atlantic world either as a slave or free), who served Spain for more than 40 years. He and his troops performed such invaluable service that they earned praise from the king, who in 1733 reissued his 1693 offer of freedom to any slaves who escaped from the English colonies.

In 1738, the runaways and other blacks then living in St. Augustine moved about two miles outside the city to land given by the

⁶ Landers, *Black Society in Spanish Florida*, 25–26; Philip D. Morgan and Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy, "Arming Slaves in the American Revolution," in *Arming Slaves: From Classical Times to the Modern Age*, eds. Christopher Leslie Brown and Philip D. Morgan (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 181; Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 Through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1974), 125–30.

⁷ Landers, *Black Society in Spanish Florida*, 26–28.

Spanish. Their settlement was called Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose, better known as Fort Mose. Not unlike a South American Maroon society, it was commanded by Africans, Captain Menéndez and another black officer, Antonio de la Puente, but functioned as an outer defense for the city. Spanish authorities oversaw construction of the fort and the surrounding homes owned by the black residents, armed the men, and even provided the services of a priest who baptized the converts. Archeologists recovered a St. Christopher medal during recent excavations at the Fort Mose site, which could have been obtained by its original owner in any part of the Spanish empire, or even in the Catholic kingdom of Kongo. A symbol of the patron saint of travelers, the medal is a remarkable symbol of the black diaspora.⁸



THE CREATION OF FORT MOSE, WHICH THE ENGLISH RAZED IN 1739, SPOKE TO A VASTLY DIFFERENT AFRICAN EXPERIENCE IN NORTH AMERICA, one that allowed for measures of freedom and autonomy that would rarely be experienced at the same level until the next century. Because of its success and the freedom it promised to English slaves, the settlement represented an intolerable symbol of black independence and a real threat to the foundations of English slavery. Nothing proved this more dramatically than

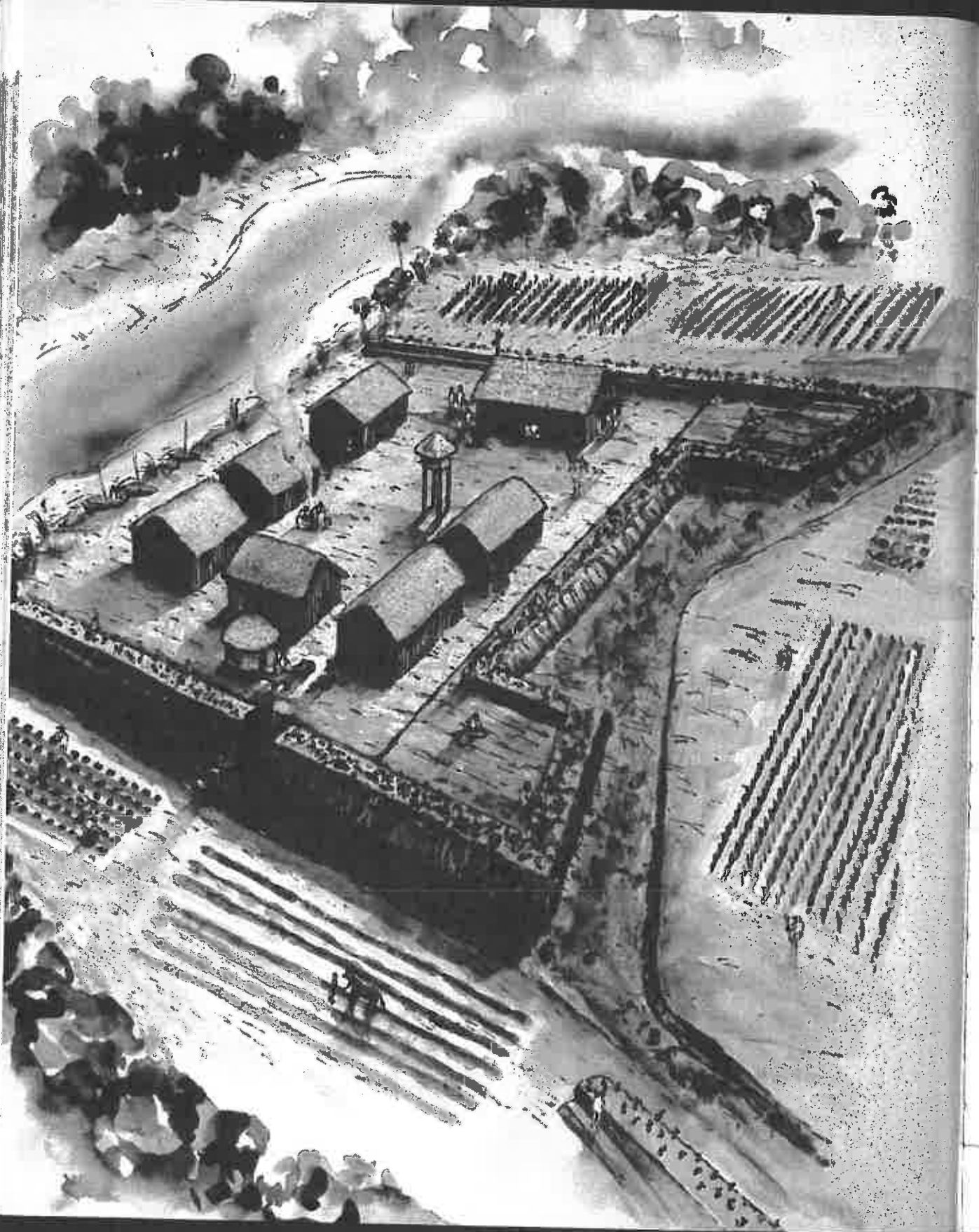
the events of September 9, 1739, at a branch of the Stono River near Charleston, South Carolina.⁹

Thousands of the slaves shipped to the Carolinas prior to 1740 came from the kingdom of Kongo. So many came from this same African region that South Carolina became known as "the Kongolese center of North America." The fact that a large number of the slaves from this region of Angola were already Catholic made them especially appealing to the Spanish, and ever more threatening to the Protestant English. Some of the English became so fearful of their slaves' religion that they imagined Jesuit priests mingling among them, spreading dissention. But no Jesuits were required to incite Africans laboring under English domination.

On Sunday, September 9, 1739, a day free of labor, about 20 slaves under the leadership of a man named Jemmy provided whites with a painful lesson on the African desire for liberty. Many of the group were experienced soldiers, either from the Yamasee War or their experience in Africa, and had been trained in the use of weapons. They gathered at the Stono River and raided a simple warehouse-like store, Hutchenson's, which supplied the region with manufactured goods from England and continental Europe. They executed the white owners and placed their victims' heads on the store's front steps for all to see. They proceeded to other houses in the area, killing the occupants and burning the structures, swelling their ranks as they marched through the colony toward St. Augustine.

⁸ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Life Upon These Shores: Looking at African American History, 1513-2008* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 22-23.

⁹ The best account remains Wood, *Black Majority*, 285-326; also see Hoffer, *Cry Liberty*.



More and more slaves joined the original 20, although others avoided the group or actually helped hide their masters. The insurrectionists soon numbered about 100 and paraded down King's Highway, according to sources, carrying banners and shouting, "Liberty!" In their native Kikongo, they would have thought the word *lukangu*, a term that would have expressed the English ideas embodied in liberty and, perhaps, salvation. They fought off the English for more than a week before the colonists rallied and killed most of the rebels, although some very likely reached Fort Mose.¹⁰

Even after colonial forces crushed the Stono uprising, additional outbreaks occurred, including the very next year when South Carolina executed at least 50 additional rebel slaves. The appeal of St. Augustine proved too much for the English, and not long after suppression of the Stono rebels, they struck with fury at the city, but especially against Fort Mose. While the English destroyed the fort, Menéndez and his militia retook the outpost the following year, earning acclaim from the Spanish government, which praised "the constancy, valor and glory of the officers . . . the patriotism, courage, and steadiness of the troops." The fort persisted but declined in significance as the Carolina slave regime strengthened, surviving until the 1763 Paris Peace Treaty, when the Spanish abandoned Florida and many of the Fort Mose residents relocated to Cuba.¹¹

¹⁰ John K. Thornton, *The Kongolese Saint Anthony: Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita and the Antonian Movement, 1684-1706* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 210-13; Hoffer, *Cry Liberty*, 18-21, 72-74.

¹¹ Landers, *Black Society in Spanish Florida*, 35, 38.



THE STONO REBELLION, THE LARGEST SLAVE REVOLT EVER STAGED IN THE 13 COLONIES, WAS NOT AN ISOLATED EVENT AND REFLECTED THE TENSIONS OF A SLAVE SOCIETY IN THE MAKING. Uprisings and conspiracies—many inspired by Spanish Florida—took place in Virginia, South Carolina, Georgia, the Caribbean, and even New York City.¹² The New York conspiracy of 1741, while never actually materializing, developed at the end of a series of disturbances—as had been the case in the Carolinas and St. Augustine—that instilled nearly uncontrollable fear in whites and led to devastating consequences for African Americans. In this case, however, the conspiracy came at a time and in a section of the country that few today think of as slave-bound, although New York did not abolish slavery until 1827. And while the region may be fairly characterized as a society with slaves, rather than a slave society, black freedom became every bit as restricted and regulated in the Empire State as in Virginia or South Carolina.¹³

¹² Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York: International Publishers, 1969), 18-20; Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 75-76.

¹³ See Jill Lepore, *New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-Century Manhattan* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005); Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), 47-63, 180, 187, 188, 190.

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In 1991, construction workers preparing the foundations for a new federal office building in Lower Manhattan struck wooden boxes containing the remains of several hundred African men, women, and children, all the former slaves of 17th-century Dutch and British householders. Just a few blocks north of City Hall in one of the world's largest financial centers, these remains remind us of the human costs of a nation's formation. Most of the bodies were of children, most of the adults were scarcely out of their 30s when they died, after lives as brutish as they were short. They remind us of both the multinational character of North American slavery during that first century of settlement and how its racial character had hardened by the end of that century.



THE NEW AMSTERDAM COLONY WAS SETTLED BY THE DUTCH IN THE EARLY 1600S DURING THEIR RISE TO WORLD POWER; it was seized from them in 1664 by the Duke of Albany and York, the future King James II of England. Just two years earlier, James had taken the helm of the newly chartered Royal African Company, which held monopoly rights to the West African slave trade. Although most of those slaves would be consigned to the plantations in the British West Indies, a not insignificant number were redirected to slave auctions in downtown Manhattan, including no doubt many of those laid to rest in the "negro burial grounds." Moreover, the burial site was established

because in the 1690s, blacks were barred from interment in the city's churchyards, as had been the practice in decades past.

It surprises many people today to learn that New York City was the leading individual port in the slave trade in the colonies before 1700, receiving 11 shipments direct from Africa, bringing in 1,890 slaves between 1655 and 1698, although the Chesapeake region (where slaves were sold on virtually every river and inlet) took in five times that number of slaves. (In the 18th century, Charleston would receive far more slaves than Virginia, Maryland, and New York combined).⁴

Thus, we should not be surprised that New York also became a site of rebellion. Despite the ability of a very small group of freed black people to own property, not unlike early colonial Virginia, tensions remained high and the enforcement of enslavement rigorous. In the spring of 1712, slaves—Akan-speaking "Coromantees"—set fire to the house of a white owner, and as the occupants fled the flames, the slaves waited outside to butcher them. One white was stabbed in the back by his own slave. About nine whites died in the revolt and another six were wounded.

Authorities swiftly rounded up about 21 conspirators—many merely on the suspicion of involvement—and began an orgy of executions. Six of the rebels decided to kill themselves rather than be captured and suffer the fate that they knew awaited them. Of those captured,

⁴ Ira Berlin and Leslie M. Harris, eds., *Slavery in New York* (New York: The New Press and the New-York Historical Society, 2005), 3–10, 31–56.

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some were broken on the wheel, others hung alive by chains, while others burned at the stake, with one unfortunate captive named Tom slowly roasted for eight hours. One pregnant female slave was allowed to give birth, and was then executed. The remains and several severed heads were displayed along popular roads to show other slaves what lay in store for rebels. The retribution became so fierce that the colony's governor halted the killings and pardoned some of the accused, including some free Spanish black sailors who had been illegally enslaved before the insurrection.

While the governor encouraged citizens to abandon slavery for white indentured servitude, hoping to avoid future incidents, colonists only increased slave imports—as the South Carolinians would do after the Yamasee War—eventually doubling the region's slave population. To exercise increased social control and prevent future threats, the colonial legislature the following year enacted new, harsher regulations designed to rivet the chains of slavery even tighter, virtually eliminating the possibility that a master could ever free a slave.¹⁵

After the first attempt at rebellion, whites began to imagine insurrections in every whisper of a slave. Rumors of plots surfaced repeatedly in New York and New Jersey, leaving whites keenly attuned to any hint of an effort to burn their city. Hoping to avert another incident, New York outlawed the right of any black to meet with others after sunset. Whites had become so paranoid that in 1731, the words of one drunken slave proved sufficient to ignite a wave of legal killings, whippings, and mutilations. The charge of rape or that a slave had in

any way attacked a white woman would send him to the stake. Additionally, whites blamed the meddling Christianizing efforts of itinerant Great Awakening evangelicals like George Whitefield who had repeatedly warned against the dangers of slave owning. With about 1,700 blacks living in a city of about 7,000 whites determined to grind every person of African descent under their heel, revenge might be inevitable.¹⁶

In early 1741, Fort George in New York burned to the ground. Fires erupted elsewhere in the city, four in one day, and in New Jersey and on Long Island. Several whites claimed they had heard slaves bragging about setting the fires and threatening worse. They concluded that a revolt had been planned by secret black societies and gangs, inspired by a conspiracy of priests and their Catholic minions—white, black, brown, free, and slave.

Certainly, ethnic groups such as the Papa, from the Slave Coast near Whydah; the Igbo, from the area around the Niger River; and the Malagasy, from Madagascar, constituted coherent groups who may have led a resistance movement. Other identifiable groups were Spanish-American sailors, "negroes and mulattoes," who had been captured in the early spring of 1740, brought to New York from the West Indies, and sold as slaves. The sailors themselves maintained that they were "free subjects of the King of Spain" and hence entitled to treatment as prisoners of war. Known among the conspirators as the "Cuba People," they had probably come from Havana, the greatest port of the Spanish West Indies and a center of a free black population. Having been

¹⁵ Berlin and Harris, *Slavery in New York*, 63, 78–80; Gates, *Life Upon These Shores*, 18–19.

¹⁶ Berlin and Harris, *Slavery in New York*, 70; Gates, *Life Upon These Shores*, 20–21.

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“free men in their own country,” they rightly felt unjustly enslaved in New York.¹⁷

A 16-year-old Irish indentured servant, arrested in a case of theft and perhaps hoping to convince authorities to go easy on him, claimed knowledge of a plot by the city’s slaves—in league with a few whites—to kill white men, seize white women, and incinerate the city. In the investigation that followed, 34 people were executed, including 30 black men, 2 white men, and 2 white women. Seventy people of African descent were exiled to places as various as Newfoundland, Madeira, Saint-Domingue (the French colony on Hispaniola), and Curaçao. Before the end of the summer of 1741, 17 blacks were hanged and 13 more went to the stake, becoming ghastly illuminations of white fears ignited by the institution of slavery they so zealously defended.¹⁸

The slave revolts threatened in New York City and throughout the early 18th century highlight the centrality of slavery to colonial economic and political development. Despite the threat to their very lives—and ignoring any consideration of justice—the colonists insisted upon the ownership of Africans. The insurrections also shed light on how slaves retained their Atlantic identity, forged in Africa and brought to America. As revealed in religious and burial practices, Africans retained their diverse roots and borrowed ideas and tactics from

the Atlantic world. The revolts in the 13 North American colonies also echoed across the other 13 British colonies in the Caribbean, from St. John to Antigua to Jamaica, where an insurrection nearly ended slavery in 1760. Although none succeeded, the rebellions speak resoundingly of the impressive ability of Africans throughout the Americas to forge their own cultures and societies, await a chance for freedom, and strike blows for that liberty, envisioning the scope of their horizons in light of the larger Atlantic world.



“IF SLAVERY BE THUS FATALLY CONTAGIOUS, HOW IS IT THAT WE HEAR THE LOUDEST YELPS FOR LIBERTY AMONG THE DRIVERS OF NEGROES?” ASKED SAMUEL JOHNSON.¹⁹ Historians are by no means the first to notice the contradiction between colonial assertions of freedom, liberty, and equality and their commitment to slavery. Critics in England, like the great lexicographer and author Samuel Johnson, found little difficulty in rebutting the American colonists’ charges that British taxation without representation threatened liberty.

Such critiques, however, were not limited to America’s opponents. As early as 1764, colonial statesman James Otis asserted his belief in the right of all, black and white, to freedom. In 1774, the Reverend Jeremy Belknap, founder of the Massachusetts Historical Society, wondered,

¹⁷ Berlin and Harris, *Slavery in New York*, 62–89; Eliga H. Gould, “Entangled Histories, Entangled Worlds: The English-Speaking Atlantic as a Spanish Periphery,” *American Historical Review* 112 (June 2007): 764–86; Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 174–210.

¹⁸ Berlin and Harris, *Slavery in New York*, 83–89.

¹⁹ Samuel Johnson, *Taxation No Tyranny: An Answer to the Resolution and Address of the American Congress* (London: Printed for T. Cadell, 1775), <http://www.samueljohnson.com/tnt.html#top>.

“Would it not be astonishing to hear that a people who are contending so earnestly for liberty are not willing to allow liberty to others?”

“Would it not be astonishing to hear that a people who are contending so earnestly for liberty are not willing to allow liberty to others?” The next year, Thomas Paine similarly drew attention to his fellow Americans’ hypocrisy. “With what consistency, or decency [can] they complain so loudly of attempts to enslave them, while they hold so many hundred thousands in slavery; and annually enslave many thousands more, without any pretence of authority, or claim upon them?”²⁰

Even the famed Abigail Adams advised her husband that she wished “most sincerely there was not a slave in the province; it always appeared a most iniquitous scheme to me to fight ourselves for what we are daily robbing and plundering from those who have as good a right to freedom as we have.” And if they chose to listen, colonists were given reminders by their own slaves of the contradiction they so readily accepted. In 1773 and 1774, Massachusetts slaves petitioned the colonial legislature five times, asserting that “we have in common with all other men a natural right to our freedom.” In a famous 1773 petition, four slaves who claimed to be speaking for all the slaves in Massachusetts declared that they expected “great things from men who have made

such a noble stand against the designs of their fellow-men to enslave them.”²¹

The American Revolution brought unprecedented opportunities for freedom and the possibility to forever alter the institution of slavery. The rhetoric of freedom and liberty that defined the contest between the colonies and Great Britain inspired the slaves. But the message of freedom did not come exclusively from the Patriot side. In fact, in most of the 13 American colonies (it’s important to remember that on the eve of the Revolution, Britain had 26 colonies overall, plus two unofficial settlements), a slave’s best chance of securing his liberty came from Britain rather than the new United States. Struggling in the crosscurrents of many nations and conflicting appeals, most Africans Americans felt no natural allegiance to the Patriot cause—they simply wanted freedom.



HISTORIANS HAVE DONE A RATHER POOR JOB OF ASSESSING THE ROLE OF AFRICAN AMERICANS IN THE REVOLUTION—on either side of the conflict. Until relatively recently, the subject barely appeared in histories of the conflict, and to this

²⁰ Edward Ayers, “Anti-Slavery Sentiment Emerges in Pre-Revolutionary America,” <http://www.historyisfun.org/antislavery-sentiment.htm>; Thomas Paine, “Justice and Humanity” and “To Americans,” *Pennsylvania Journal and the Weekly Advertiser* (March 8, 1775), <http://www.constitution.org/tp/afri.htm>.

²¹ Ayers, “Anti-Slavery Sentiment Emerges,” <http://www.historyisfun.org/antislavery-sentiment.htm>; Herbert Aptheker, ed., *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States from Colonial Times Through the Civil War* (New York: Citadel Press, 1962), 7.

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day we do not possess anything approaching an accurate count of how many people of African descent fought on either side of the war. Historians still rely on an estimate of the number of black Patriots formulated more than 70 years ago, asserting without any concrete evidence that about 5,000 African Americans fought for the colonists. This number is almost assuredly too low, as at the famed Battle of Bunker Hill, meticulous research has uncovered that there were more than 100 African American participants in that one engagement.²² Despite the efforts of historians stretching back to the black abolitionist William C. Nell to establish the centrality of blacks to American independence, there is no question that the majority of African Americans—most of whom were slaves—either took no part in the conflict or at the first opportunity fled to the British.²³

Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, George Mason, Patrick Henry, George Washington, and other slaveholders from New York to South Carolina lost their property to His Majesty's Royal Army during the war. For those slaves who remained on the farm, most owners believed that they were simply waiting for the right opportunity to flee. Richard Henry Lee, Virginia member of the Continental Congress and later a U.S. senator, lamented that all his

neighbors had "lost every slave they had in the world. . . ."²⁴ Jefferson believed that Virginia alone lost about 30,000 slaves in one year. The number of fugitive slaves encamped, ironically, on Sullivan's Island in Charleston Harbor (the Ellis Island of American slavery) became so threatening that Henry Laurens, the former slave trader and chairman of the city's Committee of Safety, ordered a Patriot raid on the camp.

On December 18, 1775, 54 soldiers disguised as Indians burned the shelters of the fugitives, killed several, and seized four in a raid meant to teach blacks a lesson and embarrass the English, who at the time maintained a small presence in the city but soon left. Earlier, Laurens also had authorized the liquidation of another group of blacks on Tybee Island off the Georgia coast. Again dressed as Indians, about 70 whites slaughtered the entire group.

White Charlestonians lived in dire fear that the tens of thousands of blacks in the region would rise up against them. A few months earlier, in the summer of 1775, jurors condemned to death a free black harbor pilot named Thomas Jeremiah on a rumor that he was planning a slave insurrection with the English. Although Jeremiah was free, successful, and property-owning, and although lacking any concrete evidence against him, city officials ignored the objections of the colonial governor and hanged him, then burned his corpse in the public square. Before he died, someone overheard the condemned man warn

²² Gary Nash, "Introduction," to *The Negro in the American Revolution*, by Benjamin Quarles (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1966), xiii-xxvi; George Quintal, Jr., comp., *Patriots of Color: A Peculiar Beauty and Merit* (Boston: Boston National Historical Park, 2004), 21.

²³ William C. Nell, *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* (Boston: Robert F. Wallcut, 1855); Nash, "Introduction," xviii-xx.

²⁴ Simon Schama, *Rough Crossings: Britain, the Slaves, and the American Revolution* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), quoted 118.

that God would one day punish the city for "shedding his innocent blood."²⁵

Overwhelming evidence points to the fact that whenever British forces approached, slaves took the opportunity to flee. They did so with good reason. On November 7, 1775, while standing on a captured Patriot vessel, Royal Governor of Virginia Lord Dunmore offered freedom to those slaves who would enlist in the King's army. By proclamation, he announced that he did "hereby further declare all indentured Servants, Negroes, or others (appertaining to Rebels) free that are able and willing to bear Arms, they joining His Majesty's Troops as soon as may be, for the more speedily reducing this Colony to a proper Sense of their Duty." Although Dunmore's "Ethiopian" Regiment proved militarily ineffective, with hundreds dying of a smallpox epidemic, symbolically, it wreaked havoc among Americans.

The Patriots issued no such declaration and, in fact, for a time rejected the recruitment of all black soldiers, terrified by the idea that Dunmore's proclamation would spark a blood-thirsty slave insurrection. Ironically, the ex-slave trader Henry Laurens (who was involved in the sale and purchase of the child Priscilla from Bunce Island) and his son John, an aide-de-camp to Washington, argued for a general recruitment of slaves with an offer of freedom at the close of the war, but South Carolina repudiated the idea. More important and with great portent for the future, George Washington refused to support the recruitment of slaves, although he did approve of allowing free blacks

to serve. He feared dire economic consequences for his own estate from what likely would have turned into a move toward general emancipation; and when the Laurenses pressed their plans on him, Washington contemplated selling off all his slaves.²⁶

While the Patriots offered African Americans a mixed message at best, the Crown early and warmly welcomed African Americans into their ranks. Four to five thousand black troops, the total number assumed to have fought in the Patriot cause, were with Lord Cornwallis just before the surrender at Yorktown; many of those who managed to survive the end of the war departed with the British. The same scenario occurred wherever British forces had to evacuate their troops. They withdrew about 30,000 Loyalists and African Americans just from New York, which included at least 3,000 fugitive slaves and likely many more. As many as 8,000 black people left Charleston, South Carolina, in the final evacuation, although most departed as slaves with their Loyalist owners.²⁷

Determining with precision the number of slaves who won their freedom as a result of the war is extremely difficult. Some scholars estimate that as many as 100,000 slaves at least made an attempt to reach British lines.

²⁶ <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part2/2h42t.html>; Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution*, 16-18, 19-32; Henry Wiencek, *An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 224-38; Alan Gilbert, *Black Patriots and Loyalists: Fighting for Emancipation in the War for Independence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 66-84.

²⁷ Cassandra Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom: Runaway Slaves of the American Revolution and Their Global Quest for Liberty* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 70-71.



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²⁵ Jane G. Landers, *Atlantic Creoles in the Age of Revolutions* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 25, 26-27; Sylvia R. Frey, "Between Slavery and Freedom: Virginia Blacks in the American Revolution," *Journal of Southern History* 49 (August 1983): 376.



Life of George Washington, The Farmer, by Junius Brutus Stearns, circa 1853, Paris.
Lithograph. Library of Congress.

Whatever the number, the majority who ran away never secured their freedom, and were either returned to their owners, as was stipulated in the terms of the peace treaty with Britain, disappeared without record, or died. But it is likely that at least 10,000 former slaves managed to win their freedom as a result of the war, and the actual figure may even have surpassed

20,000, since British records reveal that about 10,000 more blacks settled in Canada after the conflict ended. In one sense, the American Revolution had turned into the largest slave insurrection in modern history.²⁸

²⁸ Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom*, 22-23, 44-45, 48-49, 53, 60, 71; Gilbert, *Black Patriots and Loyalists*, 205-06; Schama, *Rough Crossings*, 8-9.

MOUNT VERNON. GEORGE WASHINGTON'S ESTATE OVERLOOKING THE POTOMAC RIVER OUTSIDE ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA, IS AN AMERICAN ICON. But when the Revolution broke out, more than 200 slaves lived there—all owned by the commander-in-chief of the Continental Army and his wife, Martha. By the time of the president's death in 1799, George and Martha Washington owned 317 African Americans, including 98 children.²⁹ One Mount Vernon slave was a groomsmen named Harry Washington, and his story vividly illustrates the issues at stake for African Americans during the Revolution.

Harry may have been born in Senegambia and brought to Virginia with several shipments of slaves in 1763, but his early years are something of a mystery since Washington owned several slaves named Harry. It is virtually impossible to distinguish one from another in the records that Washington retained, and all we know for certain is that Harry the groomsmen began appearing in the records in 1766. Although he claimed to abhor separating slave families, Washington did so when it suited him, and certainly never hesitated to sell off a recalcitrant slave to almost certain death in the Caribbean regardless of family considerations.³⁰ Harry may have had a wife and perhaps even a son, and if so Washington sent the two to a different plantation and kept Harry at Mount Vernon.

²⁹ <http://gwpapers.virginia.edu/documents/will/slavelist.html>.

³⁰ Wienczek, *An Imperfect God*, 131–33; e-mail to authors from William M. Ferraro, associate editor, the Papers of George Washington, December 6, 2012.

Harry's first confirmed attempt to run away came in 1771, at about age 31, but he was soon captured and returned to the plantation. Was he motivated by the separation of his family or by Revolutionary ideology? We do not know. It is likely, however, that Mount Vernon slaves quickly became cognizant of the growing strife between the colonies and England—perhaps Washington even expressed his anger over Britain's attempt to “enslave” the colonists within the hearing of some of his slaves. It is difficult to imagine that Harry and his fellow slaves did not know that their master was about to become head of the colonists' army.³¹

Without a doubt, Harry also had his own ideas about freedom. Washington, who took the time to get to know many of his slaves, was anything but confident that they would remain loyal if the war came to the region. After all, his slaves had run away before, even in the 1750s, and his cousin Lunt Washington (1737–1796), who managed the estate in the general's absence, expressed both confidence and concern over the state of bonded labor at Mount Vernon. While somewhat ambivalent about the slaves, he felt they would largely remain loyal, but thought that the white indentured servants would run away at the first opportunity. Even so, he knew that like himself, the slaves understood that “liberty is sweet.”

Lunt Washington completely misread the slaves he governed. In 1781, 17 escaped from Mount Vernon when a British warship, the *Savage*, appeared in the Potomac near the estate. Earlier, on July 24, 1776, a small fleet of British

³¹ Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom*, 3–6; Washington owned many slaves, named Harry, and Pybus confused a slave that Washington put to work on the Dismal Swamp project with a house slave bearing the same name.

warships sailed up the Potomac and skirmished with some local militia very near to the general's plantation. In the midst of the confusion, three white servants ran away and offered their services to the Crown. Harry might have taken the opportunity to join the runaways, but the British officer who received the servants made no mention of a black slave. Harry later claimed to have run away from Mount Vernon in 1776, but the exact method that he used remains uncertain. By the war's end, at least 12 slaves—and likely many more—owned by the Washingtons and his cousin had followed Harry and fled Mount Vernon. General Washington recovered only two runaways after the surrender at Yorktown and sometime later recovered a few more in Philadelphia, totaling about six or seven. Although he had hired fugitive slave catchers to bring them all back, most got away to live free.³²

Harry eventually entered a British Pioneer unit as a corporal, the troops, attached to an artillery regiment, did more fatigue work than fighting. He traveled to New York when Lord Dunmore withdrew the remnants of his Ethiopian Regiment and was then transferred to South Carolina. As the war progressed and England's fortunes failed, Harry was evacuated back to New York in 1782, where the following year he and thousands of other freed slaves—including two others from Mount Vernon—were resettled to Nova Scotia.

But the new "freedom" offered by the Crown soured for many American fugitive slaves. The British herded the black refugees into a lonely community they named Birchtown, a wind-swept, uninviting parcel of land thick with

rocks and scrub oak, not a promising location for a farm. But Harry tried his best, marrying a woman named Sara, converting to Methodism, and building a house on 40 acres. When the opportunity arose to resettle in the British colony of Sierra Leone, Harry took his wife and three children there. By 1800, he and many of the settlers had become disenchanted with white domination over the colony, especially their inability to own property, forcing them to live much as the sharecroppers of the post-Civil War era would in the former Confederate states. Ever the rebel, he and several other settlers joined an independence movement, but the colony's government soon crushed the revolt. Harry's freedom, tantalizingly offered by Great Britain, had turned to misfortune. He was exiled to Bullom Shore, an area north of the colony known for malaria, where the groomsmen of George Washington died in obscurity.³³



WHILE THE CROWN AT FIRST APPEARED TO OFFER AFRICAN AMERICANS A MORE PROMISING ROUTE TO FREEDOM, in reality most blacks faced a Hobson's choice: whatever side they chose, the result was fraught with danger—disease, death, discrimination, even possible re-enslavement. Nevertheless, the British kept their word and freed the black Loyalists, resisting the demands of the victorious Patriots that their fugitive slaves be returned. Even if their subsequent lives in Nova

³² Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom*, 71; Wienczek, *An Imperfect God*, 251.

³³ <http://gwpapers.virginia.edu/documents/revolution/martha.html>, Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom*, 12, 16, 19–20, 218; Wienczek, *An Imperfect God*, 251, 259; A. B. C. Sibthorpe, *The History of Sierra Leone* (New York: Humanities Press, 1971), 47.

Scotia or Sierra Leone proved to be far more difficult than they imagined, these former slaves were able to live as free men and women. Those who sided with the Patriots, at least in the North, stood a chance of enjoying an imperfect freedom in the new Republic, and so did their children.

Many thousands, how many we do not yet know, fought—and many died—at Lexington and Concord, Bunker Hill, and Saratoga, Cowpens and Yorktown, and virtually every other major battle of the war. They helped to build a new country and only wanted what every other American expected: a stake in it and the opportunity to fulfill whatever destiny their talents and luck would provide. Jefferson's inspiring words that "all men are created equal" represented a profound challenge to a slave society, ultimately opening a window of hope for some enslaved African Americans.

One such opening for a slave occurred in 1781 in rural Sheffield, Massachusetts, situated in the far western part of the state near the New York and Connecticut borders. The patriarchal, looking and hot-tempered Colonel John Ashley, a wealthy landowner, merchant, justice of the peace, legislator, and head of the local militia, dominated the region. He even had served as a judge on the County Court of Common Pleas before the Revolution and expected the appropriate deference. He married into a slave-owning family across the border in Columbia County, New York, and came into possession of a few slaves, including one named Mum Bett, born about 1744, and her younger sister Lizzie.

Ashley's wife, Annetje Hogeboom, shared her husband's disposition and in a rage against young Lizzie swung a fire shovel at her, but instead hit Mum Bett, who had raised her arm to protect her sister. The scar, which she "bore until the day of her death," launched a legal process that ultimately led to her freedom and helped extinguish slavery in the commonwealth of Massachusetts.⁴

Outraged that her owner felt empowered to beat her "property," Mum Bett left the Ashleys and walked a considerable distance to Stockbridge, where she met with the famed Federalist attorney Theodore Sedgwick, a friend of Ashley's, to lodge a complaint against her owners for the assault and to win her freedom. Very likely, she had heard of the rights the colonists had won as a result of the Revolution. Moreover, given the political roles during the Revolution of her owner and that of Sedgwick, whom Mum Bett may have met as early as 1773, she probably possessed an understanding that the state's new constitution of 1780 (John Adams's handiwork) guaranteed the freedom and equality of the state's citizens:

Article I All men are born free and equal, and have certain natural, essential, and unalienable rights, among which may be reckoned the right of enjoying and defending their lives and liberties, that

⁴ Douglas R. Egerton, *Death of Liberty: African Americans and Revolutionary America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 104–05; Arthur Zilversmit, "Quok Walker, Mumbet, and the Abolition of Slavery in Massachusetts," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 25 (October 1968): 617–24.

of acquiring, possessing, and protecting property; in fine, that of seeking and obtaining their safety and happiness."³⁵

Despite his friendship with Ashley, and despite the fact that he had once owned a slave himself, Sedgwick and the famed Connecticut lawyer Tapping Reeve took on Mum Bett's case, planning to base it on the idea that Article I of the constitution had effectively ended slavery in the commonwealth. This novel strategy made sense as other legal challenges, especially the Quok Walker series of cases, involved similar issues, developed simultaneously, and in one way or another were inspired by the ideology of the American Revolution that African Americans insisted was their rightful heritage, too. As historian Douglas Egerton has observed, these freedom cases that sprang up in the wake of independence showed that blacks "expected the Revolution to offer not merely new opportunities for freedom but also full participation in the new political order."³⁶

These court cases are full of ironies and contradictions. First, as we have mentioned, Sedgwick had been a slave owner and subsequently accepted another case in Rhode Island, but instead served as the attorney for a slave owner. Second, while he hired Mum Bett as a domestic after the close of the case—and she became a virtual family member, even buried

in the family plot—Sedgwick never became an antislavery advocate. Third, Tapping Reeve ran an influential law school in Litchfield, Connecticut, where among his many students was John C. Calhoun, who would become one of the United States senators from South Carolina and arguably one of the South's most articulate defenders of the institution of slavery.

The related Quok Walker cases had begun in the spring of 1781, when Walker left the employ of one Nathaniel Jennison, believing that he had an agreement to be freed when he turned 21. But when he abandoned the Jennison farm to work for John and Seth Caldwell, he was about 28 years old. Ironically, the Caldwell brothers were likely the sons of Walker's original owner. Why Walker waited so long to establish his freedom remains a mystery. Jennison found Walker at the Caldwells—whom he later successfully sued for theft of his property's labor—and beat him. Walker, like Mum Bett, had charged his "owner" with assault and asserted his freedom. He also convinced two of the state's best lawyers, Levi Lincoln and Caleb Strong, to take his assault case and win his freedom by challenging the legitimacy of slavery in the commonwealth based on the state constitution. In a final irony, the mercurial Ashley, despite his refusal to accept freedom for Mum Bett and another slave named Zach Mullen, whom he also assaulted for running away, in the end left Mullen and two other slaves a legacy in his will.³⁷

³⁵ Massachusetts Constitution, <http://www.nhinet.org/ccs/docs/ma-1780.htm>.

³⁶ Egerton, *Death or Liberty*, 94; also see Zilversmit, "Quok Walker," 614–24; and Emily Blanck, "Seventeen Eighty-Three: The Turning Point in the Law of Slavery and Freedom in Massachusetts," *New England Quarterly* 75 (March 2002): 24–51. Quok Walker's name was spelled a variety of ways.

³⁷ William O'Brien, "Did the Jennison Case Outlaw Slavery in Massachusetts?" *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 17 (April 1960): 223–41; Egerton, *Death or Liberty*, 106–07; Zilversmit, "Quok Walker, Mumbet," 617–18.

More important, however, none of these freedom suits actually outlawed slavery in the commonwealth, despite what historians have written over the years. Judges William Cushing (who owned slaves and resisted freeing them) and Nathaniel Peaslee Sargent are often given credit for instructing their juries to find slavery illegal—based on Article I—but none of the cases recorded any antislavery statements, and the juries decided only the facts in the case, that Mum Bett and Walker had been beaten and, for various reasons, were no longer slaves. In the instance of *Jennison v. Caldwell*, the jury actually found that Jennison (Walker's owner) had been deprived of the labor of his property. Moreover, as one analyst of the cases has asserted, there is "not one shred of evidence to indicate that the *Walker* cases [and Mum Bett's] brought an end to the institution of slavery." In fact, none of the freedom cases brought to trial after 1780 gained any attention beyond their localities, and they failed to be reported in any newspapers of the era.

Additionally, Ashley refused to give up and petitioned the Massachusetts House of Representatives to adopt legislation protecting slave owning. He warned that failure to do so would likely invite huge numbers of black people to Massachusetts seeking their freedom and whom the commonwealth would have to support. Agitated by Ashley's racial rantings, the House passed a bill to end slavery gradually, thus seeking to control manumissions in such a way as to not burden public resources. The Massachusetts Senate rejected the move but kept the idea on its agenda for about three years. Instead, in 1787 the legislature barred any blacks not "citizens" from remaining in the commonwealth for more than two months.



Phillis Wheatley, probably by Scipio Moorhead, 1773. Frontispiece for Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (London: Printed for A Bell, 1773). Library of Congress. Wheatley (1753–1784) published the first book by an African American, wrote against slavery, and played an important role in creating the Black Atlantic literary tradition. Remarkably, she came to Boston from West Africa in 1761, quickly mastered English, and penned her first poem four years later.

Massachusetts finally did outlaw the slave trade in 1788, but upheld any trading contracts made before adoption of the law. While it is true that slavery became economically insignificant in Massachusetts long before 1790, and the first census recorded no slaves in the state, the institution did not die completely. In 1800, 1,339 slaves lived in New England (with probably many missed by the census); and 30 years

later, 48 slaves still lived in the region, with at least 1 in Massachusetts.³⁸

The significance of the *Mum Bett* case and the other freedom suits of the 1780s lay more in how they reflected public attitudes in the post-Revolutionary period, rather than in how they shaped opinion or the law. While the various freedom suits did not legally end slavery in the commonwealth, they certainly indicated how juries were likely to decide such cases. As for Ashley and other defenders of slavery of the old order, they simply read public opinion and decided to drop their costly appeals. At least one slave owner made an attempt to sell his human property in the Caribbean before losing them in a suit, but most remaining owners simply released their slaves. Thus, it was not by law or in the courts that slavery died, as the Reverend Jeremy Belknap observed in 1795, but in the court of "public opinion."

For *Mum Bett*, the change was profound. She rejected Ashley's belated offers of employment and went to work, happily, for the Sedgwick family, dying in 1829 at 87 years of age. She did not, thankfully, end her days as the slave *Mum Bett*, but rather as the Massachusetts citizen Elizabeth Freeman, a name that carried with it the aspirations of a people.³⁹

³⁸ O'Brien, "Did the Jennison Case Outlaw Slavery in Massachusetts?" 223-25; Edgar J. Bellefontaine, "Chief Justice William Cushing: Stalwart Federalist and Reluctant Abolitionist, The Massachusetts Years, 1772-1789," *Supreme Judicial Court Historical Society Annual Report*, (1993) 20-23, quoted 24; Egerton, *Death or Liberty*, 107-08, 173; Blanck, "Seventeen Eighty-Three," 44-45; 1830 U.S. Census.

³⁹ For instance, the slave owner in *Tony v. Clapp* dropped his suit after seeing the end of the *Jennison* appeals: Zilversmit, "Quok Walker, Mumbet," 624; Egerton, *Death or Liberty*, 107-09.

FOR A TIME, THE VICTORY OF ELIZABETH FREEMAN AND OTHER NEW ENGLAND SLAVES APPEARED TO BE SETTING THE STAGE FOR SOMETHING MUCH LARGER.

The American Revolution had sparked a wave of freedom movements that transformed the Atlantic world. Not coincidentally, northern states, including the commonwealth of Pennsylvania, began adopting gradual emancipation laws.

As early as 1775, Dr. Benjamin Rush and other Philadelphians founded the Quaker-dominated Society for the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage—which before long became the Pennsylvania Abolition Society. Ten years later, in 1785, wealthy patrons organized the New York Manumission Society, which bore primary responsibility for educating black children, but spent most of its resources protecting blacks from kidnapping and providing legal advice. Connecticut and Rhode Island, the great slave-trading center, both adopted gradual emancipation laws, while Vermont, which never possessed any meaningful number of slaves, outlawed the institution in its founding constitution. By 1804, New Hampshire, New York, and New Jersey had followed suit, although in New York slavery did not completely end until 1827.

While one cannot equate abolitionist sentiment with any notion of equalitarianism, the Revolution had, as the Harvard historian Bernard Bailyn once wrote, ignited a "contagion of liberty" that both led many to question the institution of slavery and sparked an

unprecedented wave of manumissions, especially in Virginia.⁴⁰

In 1789, the French Revolution followed the American war, and in 1791, just two years later, 100,000 African slaves rose up against their hated French masters in the colony of Saint-Domingue, known because of its astonishing profitability as the "Pearl of the Antilles." Fanned by the crosswinds of the Atlantic, the revolt took cues from the examples of America and France. In time, the slaves executed thousands of whites and burned their plantations. Their rebellion led to the decision to abolish slavery in the colony in 1793, a decision ratified by the French Assembly in 1794 and extended throughout the French Empire.

Despite this, Napoleon Bonaparte sent troops to the island in 1802 under the leadership of his brother-in-law, Charles Leclerc, attempting to rein in the semi-independent colony being led by self-declared "Governor-for-Life" Toussaint Louverture, and then to reinstate slavery. Bonaparte dreamed of making Saint-Domingue into the entrepôt for an empire that would spread out from New Orleans into the Louisiana territory of North America. Over the next two years, however, of the 34,000 unlucky French and allied soldiers sent to restore slavery on Saint-Domingue, 24,000 died and 7,000 lay sick, leaving only 3,000 effective

soldiers in 1803. Before France finally gave up, thousands more would perish.⁴¹

Jean-Jacques Dessalines (following Louverture's capture and imprisonment in France) turned the revolt into a well-organized revolution and Saint-Domingue into a graveyard for French arrogance and imperialism. Dessalines led his countrymen in the creation of the world's first black republic, renamed the nation of Haiti, officially born on January 1, 1804. It had been the largest and most successful slave revolt in history.

Never before had slaves overthrown their masters and then created their own independent nation. Shock waves could be felt throughout the Atlantic world. Former Saint-Domingue slave owners poured into nearby Cuba and elsewhere in the Americas, including the United States, fleeing the retribution that surely would be visited on any supporter of slavery who remained on the island. Many, along with their African "property," landed in New Orleans, Charleston, Philadelphia, and New York.

Even before the black rebels proved victorious, the revolt and the resulting immigrant influx aroused such fears that in 1802 the governor of South Carolina called out the state militia on a rumor that a shipload of slaves from the island was headed to Charleston. Earlier, in response to the outbreak of violence, Maryland and many southern states temporarily barred the importation of all slaves and even called a halt to the interstate traffic. North Carolina

⁴⁰ Gates, *Life Upon These Shores*, 36-37; Leon Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 3-10; Rhoda Freeman, "The Free Negro in New York City in the Era Before the Civil War" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1966), 64-67, 319-26; Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1967), 230-46.

⁴¹ Philippe R. Girard, *The Slaves Who Defeated Napoleon: Toussaint Louverture and the Haitian War of Independence, 1801-1804* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2011), 117-21, 183, 225-26.

barred the presence of any black person from the West Indies; Georgia and Virginia prohibited free blacks from entering their states; and in 1798, Georgia abolished the slave trade by constitutional amendment. A slaveholder's worst fears seemed realized.⁴²



ONE OF THE FIRST AMERICAN ERUPTIONS RELATED TO THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR ON SAINT-DOMINGUE TOOK PLACE IN SLEEPY RICHMOND, VIRGINIA, planned by a slave named for the Bible's divine messenger, Gabriel. Born prophetically in 1776 on the Prosser plantation, just six miles north of Richmond, Gabriel grew up strong and tall, more than six feet in height. He became a skilled blacksmith and learned to read and write, placing him in the 5 percent of southern slaves who were literate. Since Gabriel wore rather fine clothing when not hammering at the forge, and since his owners allowed him to become literate, he was clearly much-favored property. Other slaves looked up to men like him.⁴³

Gabriel and his two brothers, Martin and Solomon, grew up in an era of international revolution, intense political confrontations, the rise of evangelical Christianity, and a weakening slave regime in Virginia. In the immediate

post-Revolutionary period, Virginia slave owners emancipated about 10,000 slaves, giving real substance to the idea that the Revolution had created a contagion of liberty. In the context of the French Revolution, the rhetoric of Jeffersonian democracy, and evangelicalism, many Virginia African Americans—free and slave—came to know unprecedented levels of liberty and understandably wanted more.

In 1800, Richmond possessed a population of 5,700 people, about half of whom were black. Additionally, about 4,600 slaves and 500 free African Americans lived in the surrounding Henrico County, a region dominated by tobacco and wheat. Whites were the minority. Thomas Prosser, Gabriel's first owner, was both a successful planter and a merchant, a partner in the trading firm of Alexander Front & Company, and a legislator in the Virginia House of Burgesses. With 53 slaves, he was one of the largest slave owners in the county. He was probably typical for the times in the way he treated his slaves, allowing for much time off. As the plantations strove to be self-sufficient, masters had great incentives for their slaves to gain valuable skills—even, as in the case of Gabriel, literacy.

Possession of these skills could give a slave a certain liminal status—what the historian Rebecca J. Scott in another context, using a metaphor from the discipline of statistics, calls “degrees of freedom”—which a later generation of masters would abhor. It was not uncommon for slaves to travel great distances to see family members—with or without the officially required passes—and to hire out their own time when the season permitted it. When Gabriel's owner died in 1798, his son Thomas Henry assumed control of the plantation. He increased the level of economic activity, becoming rather

⁴² Jed Handelsman Shugerman, “The Louisiana Purchase and South Carolina's Reopening of the Slave Trade in 1803,” *Journal of the Early Republic*, 22 (Summer 2002): 263, 270, 282.

⁴³ Douglas R. Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 & 1802* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 17, 19–22.

more successful than his father, which allowed him to spend much of his time in a townhouse in Richmond, and this left Gabriel even more time to call his own.⁴⁴

Gabriel's road to revolution began prosaically with a scuffle over a stolen pig. Stealing by a slave could bring on severe punishment, depending upon circumstances, but fighting a white man and biting off his ear, as Gabriel did, could lead to execution. One of Gabriel's accomplices in this escapade went unpunished, but another received 39 lashes and narrowly escaped execution by pleading "benefit of clergy." (This holdover from colonial law was grounded in an ancient English law originally applicable to clerics that mitigated capital punishment or the first conviction of a felony. It had expanded to apply to those with literacy in 19th-century Virginia, but by an oversight was only available to African Americans.) Gabriel did not escape punishment, however, and received a brand on one of his hands that meant death if he ever engaged in anything similar again. He came away from the incident with intense resentment. The liberty permitted by his owner allowed Gabriel to visit Richmond often and frequent the many taverns that catered to the working class, white and black. He grumbled to associates over beer and grog and began formulating plans for freedom, inspired by the pig incident and fortified by the heated political controversies between the Jeffersonian Democrats and Federalists.

But even more directly, Gabriel found inspiration in the French and Saint-Domingue revolutions. Coincidentally, he met two French soldiers in the Richmond taverns who had remained behind after the close of the American Revolution and, still fired with Revolutionary

fervor, encouraged Gabriel in his desire for freedom, not just for himself but for all slaves and even for oppressed white workingmen. Misunderstanding the context of political debates in the early Republic—or appropriating them for his own ends—Gabriel concluded that Jeffersonian Democratic ideology encompassed the interests of slaves, white mechanics, sailors, and workingmen, who could combine to oppose the Federalist merchant class.

Moreover, the fears that Virginia whites expressed over the impact of the Saint-Domingue Revolution only incited Gabriel further. Conservative whites had spread rumors that the revolutionary government in France had ordered a black rebel from Saint-Domingue to lead an army of former slaves and invade the southern United States. Gabriel could read these reports for himself and overhear the dire stories of whites who had fled the island, and he could speak with the slaves that the French colonial slaveholders had brought to Virginia from Saint-Domingue. In this hot-house of Richmond political life, with stories of the black slave insurrection, the slaves' military victories over their masters, and the granting of their freedom by the French Assembly permeating the air, Gabriel understandably concluded in the spring of the critical political year 1800 that slaves could, in fact, throw off their chains.⁴⁵ (Neither he nor Toussaint Louverture could imagine that First Consul Napoleon Bonaparte would seek to reinstate slavery on the island just two years later.)

⁴⁴ Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion*, 17-24.

⁴⁵ Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion*, 25-29, 31, 34, 38, 43, 46-47; Matthew J. Clavin, *Toussaint Louverture and the American Civil War: The Promise and Peril of a Second Haitian Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 16.

Gabriel believed that he could rally at least 1,000 slaves to his banner of "Death or Liberty," inverting the famed cry of the slaveholding revolutionary Patrick Henry.

Gabriel began his plot in his blacksmith shop, where he convinced his brother Solomon and another servant on the Prosser plantation to join his quest for freedom. The number of his contacts grew, reaching Richmond, other nearby towns and plantations, and well beyond to Petersburg and Norfolk, word spreading through free and enslaved black people who worked the waterways. Aided by his French associates, Gabriel believed that he could rally at least 1,000 slaves to his banner of "Death or Liberty," inverting the famed cry of the slaveholding revolutionary Patrick Henry. With incredible daring—and naïveté—he planned to march to Richmond, seize weapons stored there, and hold Governor James Monroe as a hostage until the merchant class agreed to establish equal rights for all. He did not seek to make war on all white people—far from it. He believed that the interests of the working class, Quakers, Baptists, and French all coincided with African Americans against the merchant class, who, he held, imposed the thralldom under which the oppressed labored.

During the summer, possessing few weapons, Gabriel put his blacksmithing skills to work and began literally making swords out of plowshares and other farm implements. He planned his uprising for the end of August. Word of the day and time had gone out far and wide. But when the time to strike came, one of the worst thunderstorms in recent memory

came with it, washing away roads and disrupting travel. Gabriel hesitated, but believed that even a small band could march to Richmond, take the armory, and distribute weapons to slaves and workers who would rally to the cause. Telling so many other black people about his plans represented a necessary gamble to gain supporters, but also exposed him to the possibility of betrayal. Fearing retribution if the plot failed, a slave aptly named Pharoah exposed Gabriel's plans. Others soon talked to save their lives.⁴⁶

Was Gabriel's plot simply naïve? Could it actually have succeeded? Many whites in Richmond thought so. The unpredictable John Randolph believed that the plot had failed only because of the "heavy fall of rain which made the water courses impassable." Outnumbered by African Americans, whites also lacked personal weapons. If Gabriel had managed to rally 100 or more blacks to his standard, he might have been able to seize Governor James Monroe as a hostage as planned and negotiate a settlement, although the chances of such an outcome seem rather slender. Given racial attitudes and white fears of an insurrection in the style of Toussaint Louverture, whites undoubtedly would have crushed any revolt that they believed aimed at taking possession of their

⁴⁶ Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion*, 46-47, 50-53, 58-59, 69-71.

FACING PAGE: *Toussaint L'Ouverture*, by Nicholas Eustache Maurin, one of a series sold in Paris and London in 1832. Hand-colored lithograph. Collection of Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

property and their "white women," even if it took time and many lives.⁴⁷

Show trials and prompt executions followed discovery of the plot. Ironically, those free African Americans accused of complicity went unpunished since no Virginia court would recognize the testimony of a slave against a free person, and the only actual witnesses to the conspiracy were other slaves. By October 3, 17 men had been hanged and 30 more languished in jail, with many more death sentences likely to follow. But some white leaders like Thomas Jefferson and even Governor Monroe worried about the impact of a bloodbath of retribution and the costs to the commonwealth as it had to reimburse owners for the loss of their slaves, still considered their property. As the number of executions reached 25, the cost reached the exorbitant amount of \$9,000 or so, money that cash-strapped Virginia could ill afford. Thus, authorities began pardoning a few conspirators and transporting others out of state, saving Gabriel for last. Despite his pleas, they hanged him alone on October 10, in front of those who reviled him and imagined a bloodthirsty black Saint-Domingue rapist rather than someone inspired by the liberty and freedom they themselves enjoyed.⁴⁸

The newly formed United States, styling itself as a beacon of freedom and an Empire for Liberty, as Thomas Jefferson termed it, saw only alarm emanating from Saint-Domingue. As president, Jefferson feared that the black republic—formed in 1804 when Dessalines chose the name *Haiti* for the new nation, replacing the French colonial name of Saint-Domingue—would become a base for European adventurism

in the hemisphere. Even worse, the self-freed slaves—whom he called "cannibals of the terrible republic"—might succeed as a nation.

With the Gabriel conspiracy in mind, Jefferson refused to recognize the new Haitian government, fearing the anger of fellow slave owners and the possibility of American slaves emulating their Haitian brothers and sisters, just as Gabriel had done. Although at first he saw benefit in the rebel Louverture checking French aggrandizement in the Caribbean, in fact, lurking behind Jefferson's understandable anti-European diplomacy was racial fear, pure and simple. Since the 1780s, despite whatever nascent antislavery sentiments he harbored, Jefferson anticipated that emancipation, even gradual, would spark a war that could not end "but in the extermination of the one or the other race."⁴⁹

While the American race war that Jefferson anticipated never took place, Haitian independence did—and reverberated through American history straight to the Civil War. In 1862, about a year after the events at Fort Sumter, the great Boston abolitionist Wendell Phillips spoke in the lecture hall of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. His stunning lecture "Toussaint L'Ouverture" must have struck that Southern city with all the force of a hurricane. In the midst of our own Civil War, sparked by the terrors of slavery and racial hate, Phillips drew public attention to the earlier war in the Caribbean that was a "war of races and a war of nations," words that must have been painfully familiar to his audience.

He took the opportunity to disabuse Americans of the idea that black men were

⁴⁷ Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion*, 77–78.

⁴⁸ Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion*, 92–94, 108–09, 110–12.

⁴⁹ Tim Matthewson, "Jefferson and Haiti," *Journal of Southern History* 61 (May 1995): 217–18, 225.

incompetent and cowardly. "Some doubt the courage of the negro," he declared, undoubtedly thinking about the federal government's refusal at that time to recruit black soldiers to fight the slaveholders' rebellion. "Go to Hayti, and stand on those fifty thousand graves of the best soldiers France ever had, and ask them what they think of the negro's sword." But when he praised Louverture as a hero, greater than Cromwell, Napoleon, and George Washington, the audience must have heard in those words the metaphorical report of a howitzer.⁵⁰ Phillips's remarks testify to the inspiration fired throughout the hemisphere by the Haitian Revolution, and in the hands of African Americans even after Gabriel's ill-fated plan, the results could prove explosive.

In January 1811, about 40 miles north of New Orleans, Charles Deslondes, a mulatto slave driver—and likely a former Haitian slave—on the Andry sugar plantation, took volatile inspiration from the Haitian Revolution. Gabriel's fate probably would have mirrored that of Deslondes if the weather had been different 11 years earlier in Virginia. Deslondes, like Gabriel, had built a network of slaves, including recent arrivals from Africa and Saint-Domingue, and with these forces, he led the German Coast uprising, possibly the largest slave revolt in American history. Although little known, the insurrection involved a small army of at least 100 men and women who sang Creole protest songs while pillaging plantations and murdering whites.

⁵⁰ Wendell Phillips had also given his address in 1860 at the Cooper Union in New York to cheers and hisses. *New York Times*, February 1, 1860; Wendell Phillips, "Toussaint l'Ouverture," in *Selections from the Works of Wendell Phillips*, ed. A. D. Hall (Boston: H. M. Caldwell Co., 1902), 154 quoted, 121–58. Clavin, *Toussaint Louverture and the American Civil War*, 1–2.

The Haitian Revolution, in fact, hung over the entire episode, encouraging blacks and terrorizing whites.

In many ways, Louisiana was ripe territory for violence. The region experienced enormous growth in slave importations in the period leading up to the revolt, as was the case in South Carolina in the time leading up to the Stono Rebellion in 1739. By 1808, when the legal slave trade ended, somewhere between 20,000 and 29,000 slaves had landed in Louisiana, most after 1803 when the United States took possession of the Louisiana territory from France. In 1809, the number of free black people in New Orleans increased by 3,110, and the number of black slaves there increased by 3,226, because Saint-Domingue exiles who had fled the wrath of the former slaves and found sanctuary in Cuba (where slavery remained legal until 1886) were suddenly forced to vacate the island as a consequence of the Napoleonic wars, when Napoleon imposed his brother as the monarch of Spain. Nothing reveals more marvelously the inextricably intertwined connections within the early-19th-century Black Atlantic world—here specifically defined as the relations among Port-au-Prince, Haiti; Santiago de Cuba, Cuba; and New Orleans, Louisiana—than this migration, which transpired between May 1809 and January 1810. In fact, by the time of Deslondes's revolt, "Saint-Domingue slaves represented almost a third of the 1810 slave population of New Orleans and its precincts (10,824) and 10 percent of the slaves of Orleans Territory (34,660)."⁵¹

⁵¹ Carl A. Brasseaux and Glenn R. Conrad, eds., *The Road to Louisiana: The Saint-Domingue Refugees, 1792–1809* (Lafayette, LA: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1992), 25.

This was not the first time Louisiana blacks planned to resist their enslavement. In 1795, when Spain ruled the territory, authorities uncovered a conspiracy near New Orleans. Spanish officials even found a copy of France's Declaration of the Rights of Man in one slave's cabin. What became known as the Pointe Coupée conspiracy ended horrifically for 23 slaves. With no affection for revolutionary ideology from either the United States or France, Spanish authorities quickly hanged the conspirators, severed their heads, and then placed them on poles for all to see.⁵²

More than a decade later, Deslondes, sickened by the arrogance of whites and his own role in having to enforce their will, plotted an end to the oppression that he and other people of African descent endured in the insufferable cane fields of Louisiana. After communicating his intentions to slaves on the Andry plantation and in nearby areas, on the rainy evening of January 8, 1811—just seven years after Haiti became independent—Deslondes and about 25 slaves rose up and attacked the plantation's owner and family. They hacked to death one of the owner's sons, but carelessly allowed the master to escape. Deslondes and his men wisely chose the Andry plantation to begin their revolution, because it served as a warehouse for the local militia. The 25 men broke open the stores and seized uniforms, guns, and ammunition. As they moved toward New Orleans, intending to capture the city, their numbers swelled.

⁵² Daniel Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America's Largest Slave Revolt* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 23, 89; Shugerman, "The Louisiana Purchase and South Carolina's Reopening of the Slave Trade," 282.

Some estimated the force as large as 300, but Deslondes's army probably did not exceed 124.

Alarm coursed through the region as Manuel Andry, Deslondes's owner, managed to arouse whites with his tale of black butchery and warnings about the Haitian-style revolution to come. The territorial governor assigned Wade Hampton, the South Carolina congressman, slave master, and Indian fighter, the task of suppressing the insurrection. Hampton had accepted a military commission in 1808 and the following year took over military command of New Orleans. Hampton quickly threw together a force of militia and about 30 regular U.S. Army soldiers to confront the slaves.

About 20 miles from New Orleans on January 10, 1811, the combined militia and Army force stopped the rebels. They fought a pitched battle that halted only when the slaves ran out of ammunition. The soldiers then charged, led by mounted militia, which sent the slaves into a panic. The rebel line broke and a slaughter commenced. When the slaves surrendered, about 20 lay dead, another 50 became prisoners, and the remainder fled into the swamps. The whites suffered no casualties, which revealed the lack of military skill on the part of the slaves. By the end of the month, whites rounded up 50 more of the insurgents. About 100 survivors were summarily executed, their heads severed and placed along the road that led to New Orleans. As one planter noted, they looked "like crows sitting on long poles."⁵³

⁵³ Rasmussen, *American Uprising*, 105–06, 117, 128–39, 140, 147–48; Junius P. Rodriguez, "Always 'En Garde': The Effects of Slave Insurrection upon the Louisiana Mentality, 1811–1815," *Louisiana History* 33 (Autumn 1992): 400–01.



FOR GENERATIONS, STANDARD AMERICAN HISTORIES DOWNPLAYED THE IMPORTANCE OF THE HAITIAN REVOLUTION AND ITS RELATIONSHIP BOTH TO AFRICAN AMERICANS, slave and free, and to the institution of slavery in the United States. Although once a footnote to the era of revolutions, we now understand its enormous significance much differently. Contemporaries, however, possessed no ambivalence on the subject. For most Americans, it was a cataclysmic event, a foreshadowing of what whites could expect if the slave regime was weakened either from within, by a lapse of rigorous enforcement and supervision, or from without, by the abolitionist “fanatics” of the North. As one commentator remarked, “The scenes of horror which were witnessed in St. Domingo [Saint-Domingue] under the leadership of the ghoul Toussaint long since became by-words for everything that is cruel and infamous.” White Louisianans did not doubt the meaning of the Haitian Revolution, and even contended that Deslondes was in Haiti at the time of the revolt and brought his beastly plans back home with him to the north.⁵⁴ While the 1811 insurrection was quickly suppressed—and largely ignored even by the popular press at the time—its historical importance can hardly be overlooked today.

The Haitian Revolution rippled through American history, from Gabriel Prosser’s Richmond right to Wendell Phillips’s stirring evocation of Toussaint Louverture’s heroism in the very first year of the Civil War. Even during

the Missouri Compromise crisis, which began just eight years after the Deslondes revolt, the fires of the revolution still burned brightly in American slaveholders’ imagination. Thomas Cobb of Virginia warned that attempts to stifle the spread of slavery would only encourage America’s own “ghoulish” Toussaints and ignite a conflagration that “all the waters of the ocean cannot put out, which seas of blood can only extinguish.” When the debates over slavery’s extension in Missouri wrenched the country and sparked impassioned speeches in the halls of Congress against slavery as “contrary to the law of nature, which is the law of God,” defenders of the “peculiar institution” recoiled in horror. The speaker of Virginia’s House of Delegates warned that such rhetoric “would sound the tocsin of freedom to every Negro of the South and we may have to see the tragical events of St. Domingo repeated in our own land.”⁵⁵

Thus, for whites and blacks, Haiti became a source of powerful symbolism for revolution. Most whites, however, saw only the savagery of murderous, bloodthirsty, avenging slaves, while African Americans and their white abolitionist allies saw courage and models of resistance that would fire antislavery imaginations for the next six decades. Black sailors transported news about the Haitian Revolution and the fortunes of the new republic from Haiti to ports north, ranging from New Orleans, St. Augustine, Savannah, and Charleston, all the way to New York and Boston. From these cities,

⁵⁴ Clavin, *Toussaint Louverture and the American Civil War*, 3–4, 16.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Robert Pierce Forbes, *The Missouri Compromise and Its Aftermath: Slavery and the Meaning of America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 39–40, 145.

word spread to slave communities throughout the South, through books, pamphlets, and newspapers, which were sometimes even sewn into the sailors' clothing (as was the 1829 revolutionary pamphlet of the Boston clothier, freemason, and black abolitionist David Walker). Slaves and free women and men who detested slavery drew strength from this unprecedented example of freedom born in the Black Atlantic world as they continued to build their lives, their social institutions, their families and, ultimately, their own cosmopolitan culture and sense of their place in the world.

It would take three-quarters of a century for America to absorb the lessons learned in Saint-Domingue about the fate of the

institution of slavery. This culminating moment in the story of slavery in the French part of the Black Atlantic represented a challenge—and an opportunity—that the divided American nation and its conflicted economic interests could not meet. While the American Revolutionary era would, both directly and indirectly, propel some black people to freedom, technological advances in the cultivation and harvesting of cotton—especially the invention of the cotton gin in 1793, ironically the same year in which slavery would first be abolished in Saint-Domingue—would usher in at least 75 years of captivity for the vast majority of African Americans that would turn out to be worse than anything that had come before.