

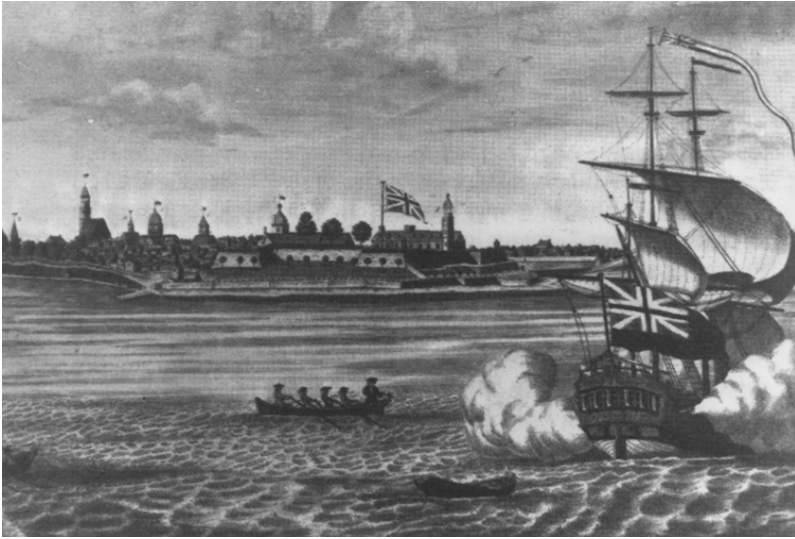
“The Outcasts of the Nations of the Earth”



AT THE HEART of the New York Conspiracy of 1741 lay a love story. The lovers were John Gwin (or Quin), “a fellow of suspicious character” rumored to be a soldier at Fort George, and “Negro Peg,” “a notorious prostitute” who lived at John Hughson’s waterfront tavern on the west side of Manhattan. Gwin paid Peg’s board at Hughson’s and joined her there many a night, climbing on top of a shed and through her open window. During one of these late-night meetings he gave her a ring, a pair of earrings, and a locket with four diamonds. Eventually Peg bore his child, whose color was a matter of considerable gossip and debate around town. Some said the baby was white; others insisted that it was black.¹

John Gwin had long been a regular at Hughson’s, and not only because he visited Peg. He often showed up with “a good booty”—speckled linen, stockings, even a worsted cap full of silver coins—that he gave to the tall, gaunt Hughson, who in turn fenced the purloined goods. Gwin’s friends at the tavern were always glad to see him, for they knew of the man’s generosity. Since aliases were common along the waterfront, where strangers and their secrets came and went with the tides, they also knew that Gwin and Peg were called by other names: Gwin, an African American slave, was known as Caesar, at least to his owner, John Vaarck. “Negro Peg” was the twenty-one- or twenty-two-year-old Margaret Kerry, though she was also known as the “Newfoundland Irish beauty.” Another thing tavern-goers knew was that Gwin and Peg were deeply involved in plotting what was later called the “most horrible and destructive plot that was ever yet known in these northern parts of America.” For it was at Hughson’s that they and dozens of others planned a “general insurrection” to capture the city of New York.²

Saint Patrick’s Day, 1741, was a day for remembering that Saint Patrick had abolished slavery in Ireland. A revolutionary arsonist named Quack set fire to New York City’s Fort George, the chief military installation of



A view of Fort George and the city of New York, 1735.
*I. N. Phelps-Stokes Collection, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach
Division of Art, Prints, and Photographs, New York Public
Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.*

the colony and one of the greatest fortifications in all of British America. The fire smoldered all night and on the following day exploded into billowing bursts of ocher and orange. Violent March winds carried the flames from the governor's mansion to the Church of England chapel, the army barracks, and the office of the general secretary of the province. Flying sparks and burning debris wafted above the wooden houses that sat just beyond the walls of the fort, threatening the city with conflagration. A shift in the winds and a sudden rain shower halted the spread of the blaze, but the damage had been done: the very heart of royal authority in this important Atlantic port now lay hollow and smoldering in ashes.

It was the first and most destructive of thirteen fires that would terrorize the city of eleven thousand in the coming weeks. When Cuffee, a slave owned by city eminence Adolph Philipse, was seen leaving the premises of the tenth fire, the cry went up that “the negroes were rising.” A vast dragnet caught almost two hundred people, black and white, many of whom would be investigated and tried over the next several months. Peg,

Hughson, and others were charged with “conspiring, confederating and combining with divers negroes and others to burn the City of New-York and also to kill and destroy the inhabitants thereof.” The conspiracy had been organized by soldiers, sailors, and slaves from Ireland, the Caribbean, and Africa, whom the officials called “the outcasts of the nations of the earth.”³ Disrespected by the mercantile oligarchy of New York, they were not without a mutuality of respect among themselves.

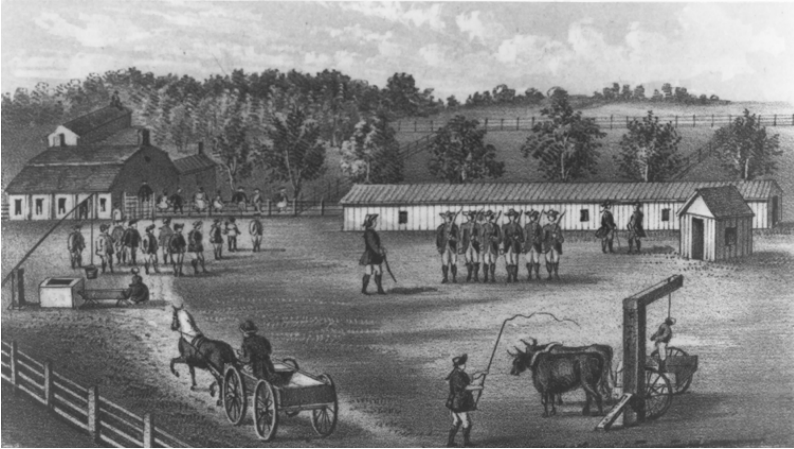
The outcasts had met regularly at Hughson’s, where they exercised “the hopes and promises of paradise.” Here the dispossessed of all colors feasted, danced, sang, took oaths, and planned their resistance. The enslaved Bastian remembered a table overflowing with “veal, ducks, geese, a quarter of mutton and fowls” from the butcher shops in which several of the conspirators worked. Others recalled the raucous, joyous fiddling, dancing, and singing for which Hughson’s was famous around town. Yet others emphasized the subversive conversation, followed by solemn oaths: Gwin asking a recruit “whether he would join along with them to become their own masters”; Cuffee saying “that a great many people had too much, and others too little”; Hughson announcing that “the country was not good, too many gentlemen here, and made negroes work hard.” At Hughson’s tavern, the rebels practiced a simple communism. Those who had no money were entertained “at free cost”; they “could have victuals and drink for nothing.” Hughson told them, “You shall always be welcome to my house, come at any time.” Bastian, exiled for his role in the rebellion, fondly recalled, “We always had a good supper and never wanted for liquor.” Here, once again, was a world turned upside down, a place where Africans and Irish were kings, as they would be in the larger society after the uprising. In New York, they believed, “there should be a motley government as well as motley subjects.”⁴

New York’s people in ruffles were terrified of the conspiracy, for reasons both local and global. A severe winter had made the city’s poor workers more miserable and more restive than usual. Trade, the lifeblood of New York, had stagnated in recent years, deepening divisions within the ruling class and creating an opening for revolt from below. Danger had also threatened from afar after the merchant mountebank Robert Jenkins waved his severed ear before the astonished bigwigs of Parliament, who then declared war against Spain (the aptly named War of Jen-

kins' Ear, 1739) and required the rulers of New York to supply both food and six hundred recruits (nearly one in six of the city's able-bodied white men) for the war effort. Imperial authorities had thus depleted New York's food supply as well as its defenses against French and Iroquois aggression from the north, Spanish privateers from the south, and domestic rebels from within.

The fires caused great damage to property, and New York's rulers made sure that there was ample human carnage to pay for it. On six afternoons and evenings between late May and mid-July, thirteen African men were burned at the stake. On six mornings between March and August seventeen more people of color and four whites were hanged, including John Gwin and Peg Kerry, whose romance came to an end on the gallows. John Hughson was also hanged, and his corpse, with Gwin's, gibbeted in chains and left to rot. Seventy people of African descent, among them Bastian, were exiled to places as various as Newfoundland, Madeira, St. Domingue, and Curaçao. Five people of European origin were forcibly sent off to join the British army, then at war against Spain in the Caribbean, where the conditions of soldiering life likely made theirs a delayed sentence of death. Sarah Hughson, the tavernkeeper's daughter, who was banished from the city for her own role in the conspiracy, took Gwin and Peg's baby to parts unknown.

The events of 1741 have long been controversial. The New Yorkers who lived through them argued fiercely about exactly what had happened and why, and since that time historians have done likewise. Indeed, the uniquely detailed record of the plot owes its existence to the dissension that surrounded the original events. After some expressed doubts about the conspiracy and the prosecutions, Judge Daniel Horsmanden of New York's Supreme Court compiled “the notes that were taken by the court, and gentlemen of the bar,” and published them in 1744 as *A Journal of the Proceedings in the Detection of the Conspiracy formed by Some White People, in Conjunction with Negro and other Slaves, for Burning the City of New-York in America, and Murdering the Inhabitants*. His purpose was not only to prove the “justice of the several prosecutions” but also to sound, for the public benefit, a warning about the rebellious ways of slaves and to erect “a standing memorial of so unprecedented a scheme of villainy.”⁵



The hanging of an African in New York, c. 1750.
 Manual of the Corporation of the City of New York (1860).

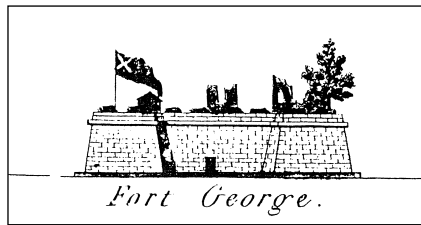
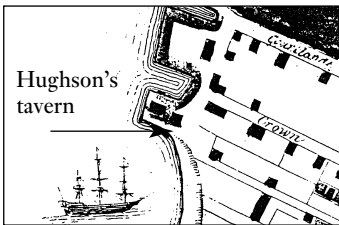
Contemporary accounts of the episode expressed three basic positions in the debate, which prefigured the views taken by modern interpreters of the events of 1741. Some historians have followed an anonymous writer of 1741 who maintained that there never was a conspiracy, and that the whole affair resembled the hangings for witchcraft that had taken place in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692.⁶ Others have echoed the belief of William Smith, Jr., son of one of the prosecuting attorneys at the trial, who wrote that the conspirators wanted only “to create alarms, for committing thefts with more ease.”⁷ A third major interpretation, offered by T. J. Davis in *A Rumor of Revolt: The “Great Negro Plot” in Colonial New York* (1985), proved the original prosecutors right in claiming the existence of a dangerous conspiracy. This view holds that blacks and whites gathered and drank illegally, fenced their goods, and plotted against their masters at Hughson’s tavern. They sought for themselves money and freedom, revenge against particular powerful people (not all “white people”), and the destruction by fire of certain areas (not the entire city). The rebels had grievances and plans to redress them, but no genuinely revolutionary objectives.⁸

This chapter argues that a revolutionary conspiracy, Atlantic in scope, did develop in New York, though it was not the “popish plot” imagined

by Horsmanden, who saw the affair as having been orchestrated by a disguised priest. It was, rather, a conspiracy by a motley proletariat to incite an urban insurrection, not unlike the uprising led in Naples by the fisherman Masaniello in 1647. It grew out of the work of the waterfront, the organized cooperation of many kinds of workers, whose Atlantic experiences became the building blocks of the conspiracy. The rebels of 1741 combined the experiences of the deep-sea ship (hydrarchy), the military regiment, the plantation, the waterfront gang, the religious conventicle, and the ethnic tribe or clan to make something new, unprecedented, and powerful. The events of 1741 can thus be understood only by attending to the Atlantic experiences of the conspirators, in the villages and slave factories of the Gold Coast of Africa, the cottages of Ireland, the Spanish military outpost of Havana, the street meetings of religious revival, and the maroon settlements of the Blue Mountains of Jamaica and their surrounding sugar plantations.

THE WATERFRONT AND THE CONSPIRACY

The events of 1741 began along the city's docks. As valuable outposts of empire, New York and other Atlantic ports garrisoned soldiers to protect their cities and propertied people against enemies within and without. Soldiers such as William Kane and Thomas Plumstead, both stationed at Fort George, drilled, guarded, loafed, and grumbled their way through rounds of life endlessly governed by the soldier's quietest but most common enemy: boredom. As bustling centers of transatlantic trade, the seaports contained masses of workers who labored in the maritime sector of the economy, sailing, building, and repairing ships, manufacturing sail, rope, and other essentials, and moving commodities by boat, by cart, and by the strength of their backs. People of African descent, almost all of them enslaved, were especially important to the waterfront, representing about 18 percent of the city's population and fully 30 percent of its workers. Brash and Ben, for example, worked together on the Hudson loading timber, while Mink labored at his owner's ropewalk. Cuff's merchant master sent him down to the docks to work with a white boy to "sew on a vane upon a board for his sloop." The Spanish "negroes and mulattoes" involved in the conspiracy were all sailors, as were the slaves



Map of Manhattan, with details of Hughson's tavern and a burned-out Fort George. A Plan of the City and Environs of New York, 1742-4, by David Grim. Collection of the New-York Historical Society.

Ben and London. Quack worked with soldiers on a new battery near Fort George.⁹

After work these soldiers, sailors, and slaves retired to the dram shops, taverns, and “disorderly” houses along the waterfront “to drink drams,

Copyright © 2000. Beacon Press. All rights reserved.

punch and other strong liquors,” often staying “till two or three o’clock in the morning, . . . drinking, singing and playing at dice.” Here they told tales, sometimes tall, sometimes true, among which were the stories of an uprising that had shaken New York in 1712. Here, too, they cursed, caroused, fought, danced, and created constant public disturbances, after which they often awoke in the basement of City Hall, in jail. Mutinous soldiers and sailors had been a problem for New York’s rulers for several decades, prompting numerous acts of legislation to contain and punish their unruly ways.¹⁰

The rebels of 1741 traveled along the wharves for secret meetings, gathering at Hughson’s, at Comfort’s on the Hudson, and “at the house of one Saunders, upon the dock.” The docks and taverns, like ships, were places where English, Irish, African, Native American, and West Indian persons could meet and explore their common interests. The authorities could not easily circumvent the flow of subversive experience, for a port city was hard to police. There were always “some strangers lurking about the city”—people such as Sambo, described as “a tall negro living at John Dewit’s (a stranger).” Always there were “Vagrant and Idle persons” to be found, and “obscure people that have no visible way of subsistence,” for the growth of the cities, and especially of their maritime sector, depended upon a mass of desperate but necessarily creative proletarians’ being forced to work for wages in order to keep body and soul together. Everyone knew that a combination of such people was not only more likely in a port city, but more dangerous than it might be elsewhere to the concentrated, established power of a cosmopolitan ruling class.¹¹

The waterfront taverns were the linchpins of the waterfront economy, the places where soldiers, sailors, slaves, indentured servants, and apprentices met to sell illegally appropriated goods and pad their meager or nonexistent wages. Tavernkeepers sometimes encouraged such trade by extending so much credit that bills could be settled only after goods were taken and submitted as payment. New York’s rulers passed legislation to limit the amount of credit tavernkeepers could offer to workers, especially soldiers and sailors. The latter were especially important to illegal trade because they not only sold stolen goods but also purchased them, and conveniently disappeared when their ships set sail. Other bills were meant to halt the flow of pilfered goods (“Cloathing, or any other

Goods, Chattles, Wares, or Merchandizes”), promising double restitution or jail for offending tavernkeepers. New York’s comprehensive slave code of 1730, “An Act for the more Effectual Preventing and Punishing the Conspiracy and Insurrection of Negro and other Slaves,” also acknowledged the subversive potential of the waterfront economy: its first article prohibited any “trade or Traffick” with a slave without his or her master’s permission, “on forfeiture of trebel the Value of the thing or things traded.” Lieutenant Governor Clark noted—almost prophetically—that illicit transactions promoted “an habit of idleness, that may in time prove ruinous to the whole Province if not prevented.”¹²

None of the threats against tavernkeepers who traded with soldiers, sailors, or slaves worried John Hughson. His house was the perfect place for the “caballing and entertainment of negroes” and for the fencing of stolen goods: built into it were secret compartments—in the cellar, in various rooms, and under the stairs—where hot items, slipped in through a back-alley window in the middle of the night, could be hidden. As Bastian explained, “The negroes brought what they could steal to him.” In return, they, like apprentices, indentured servants, soldiers, and sailors, received money, some of which they left in the hands of the tavernkeeper, “to drink out” on credit. Other, lesser fences worked through Hughson’s network. The slave Will stole a silver spoon from his mistress and carried it to the wife of soldier William Kane, who then turned it over to her husband, who in turn sold it to the silversmith Peter Van Dyke and gave Will “eight shillings of the money.” Other Irish conspirators also had a hand in the illegal circulation of goods. Daniel Fagan, Jerry Corker, and John Coffin wanted William Kane “to rob houses with them and go off.” But before they “went off,” they would have stopped at Hughson’s, as Edward Murphy had done when he wanted to cash in some purloined jewelry.¹³ Indeed, so many “run goods” passed through Hughson’s house, making it “a mart of so great note,” that its customers had wryly begun to call the place Oswego, after the great provincial trading house where the English and Iroquois swapped their goods on the upper colonial frontier. Like the Iroquois, those who gathered at Hughson’s had a special interest in guns, powder, and ammunition, which they stockpiled through the winter of 1740–41.¹⁴

Two of the most daring and most notorious members of the waterfront

economy—and part of Hughson’s “black guard”—were John Gwin and Prince, who worked along the docks, wharves, and warehouses, taking hauls big and small: fifty firkins of butter, a cache of pieces of eight, beeswax, a shirt, stockings, a coat, and whatever else came their way. According to Horsmanden, these two “very wicked idle fellows had before been detected in some robberies, for which they had been publicly chastised at the whipping-post.” The authorities scarred their backs for a theft of gin, a Dutch contribution to civilization and the drink of mortal desperation of the London poor in this era. Carried by cart in a “suitable Procession round the Town,” they got “at every Corner . . . five Lashes with a Cowskin well laid on each of their naked black Backs,” as bystanders pelted them with “Snow balls and Dirt.” Gwin and Prince took the momentary defeat in stride and in humor: in honor of the event they soon founded the “Geneva Club” and proclaimed themselves its leaders. They continued to show up at Hughson’s with booty, in their pockets, on their backs, or “tied up in a large table cloth.” When it came to the plot, Gwin and Prince were “two principal ringleaders in it amongst the blacks.” Daniel Horsmanden made this point clear when he called the waterfront workers “brother criminals” whose thefts were the actual “ingredients of the conspiracy.” Such operations along the waterfront generated leadership, connections, and solidarities that proved crucial to the conspiratorial design.¹⁵

As the number of committed conspirators grew, the older, smaller gangs of the waterfront economy evolved into quasimilitary forms of social organization adapted to insurrectionary purposes. A gang called the Fly Boys met at John Romme’s tavern, while the Long Bridge Boys met at Hughson’s. Each group had its highest leader and below him several captains, each in charge of a company. Gwin was the leader of the Long Bridge company; his equivalent in the Fly Boys was the experienced Spanish-speaking soldier Juan. Both apparently reported directly to Hughson. Other captains included Ben, a “head man or captain” and “commander of a hundred at least,” and Jack, called a “head captain.” Curaçao Dick, York, and Bastian rounded out those named (or self-named) in the testimony as captains, though the group should have included both Cuffee and Prince as well. All stayed in close, steady contact with Hughson. Dundee, Cook, London, and Gomez’s Cuffee were lesser

officers. Each company had its own drummer, such as old Tom, and its fiddler, such as Braveboy, who, Albany insisted in recruitment, was needed precisely “because he was a fiddler.” Perhaps he would have been like Louis Delgres, the Martinican who led a slave revolt on the island of Guadeloupe and was last seen sitting in a cannon port in the island’s Fort Matouba, fiddling madly amid the smoke and the sizzling shot to inspire his fellow rebels against the French.¹⁶

WEST AFRICA

The cultures and memories of West Africa figured centrally in the plan for insurrection in 1741. Several distinct groups of Africans took part, and indeed John Hughson, among others, was keenly aware of their variety and importance. Central to the plan for organizing the revolt was an inner circle of “headmen,” each of whom was, as a leader within a specific community of Africans in New York, responsible for recruitment, discipline, and solidarity. Hughson instructed these most trusted men (they were all men) carefully: they were “not to open the conspiracy to any but those that were of their own country,” since as Daniel Horsmanden would observe, “they are brought from different parts of Africa, and might be supposed best to know the temper and disposition of each other.”¹⁷ They worked according to plan. In making his pitch on behalf of the insurrection, Cato asked Bridgewater, “Countryman, will you help?” A slave named Ben used the same approach, saying to Jack, “Countryman, I have heard some good news.” The word was that the Spanish planned to invade the city, which would support their own rising from within. Cato and Bridgewater appealed to ethnic groups such as the Papa, from the Slave Coast near Whydah; the Igbo, from the area around the Niger River; and the Malagasay, from Madagascar, who constituted the revolutionary cells of New York’s movement.¹⁸

The leading cell was made up of Africans from the Gold Coast of West Africa, the Akan-speaking people who were known by the name of the slave-trading fort from which they were shipped: Coromantee (or, in Fante, Kromantse). Many a “Coromantee” had been an *okofokum*, a common soldier trained in firearms and hand-to-hand combat in one of the mass armies of West Africa’s militarized, expansionist states (Ak-

wamu, Denkyira, Asante, Fante), before being captured and shipped to America. Peck's Caesar was identified as “a Caromantee,” as was an unnamed old woman owned by Gerardus Comfort. Moreover, five of the thirteen slaves who would be burned at the stake either had Akan day-names (Quack [Kwaku in Akan], Quash [Kwasi], and two called Cuffee [Kofi]) or were known to be Coromantee (Gwin), suggesting strong Gold Coast participation in the leadership of the plot. Yet another, Quamino (Kwamena), was hanged, while three more were transported. In the aftermath of the failed conspiracy, a slave named Warwick “cut his [own] throat,” probably in the style and tradition of a defeated Asante warrior. Doctor Harry, who was almost certainly an obeah man (an Akan shaman who had deep natural and spiritual knowledge and powers) of Gold Coast origins, had produced poison—“the same sort they saw in Guinea”—for the plotters to gulp down in the event of failure.¹⁹

The role of the Coromantees, and of Africa more broadly, was most obvious in the administering of war oaths, which Hughson shrewdly “accommodated to their own customs.” The Irish soldier William Kane testified that there existed a specific “negro oath,” but in truth there were probably, as Horsmanden believed, several different oaths. The most frequent of these involved “swearing by thunder and lightning,” a “terrible” oath commonly used among the Africans. Many of the slaves swore by this oath to support the revolt and never to reveal the common secret. Military oaths invoking the primal powers of thunder and lightning were in use on the Gold Coast of Africa in the middle of the eighteenth century, suggesting both the origin and the efficacy of the practice. Nanny, the legendary leader of the Windward Maroons in the 1730s, administered similar oaths, as did rebels in Antigua and elsewhere. Horsmanden sensed that the “obligation of that infernal oath” impeded the investigation in New York, but he never understood that the original source of his difficulty lay across the Atlantic, on the Gold Coast of Africa.²⁰

These oaths, like African traditions of resistance more generally, were not new to New York, for they had been used a generation earlier, in 1712, in one of the bloodiest revolts ever to hit the North American mainland, when a coalition of slaves of Coromantee and Papa backgrounds set fire to a building and then killed several whites who came to extinguish the

flames. Afterward, nineteen slaves were executed—burned, hanged, starved, broken on the wheel—but not forgotten.²¹ Horsmanden knew the earlier history, as did attorney William Smith, who had helped to send the rebels to their “brutish and bloody” executions.²² Now, in 1741, John Romme, it would be testified in court, encouraged the conspirators “to set them all a light fire; burn the houses of them that have the most money, and kill them all, as the negroes would have done their masters and mistresses formerly.” Hughson, who himself had grown up in the environs of New York, “proposed burning the fort before anything else; because at a former rising, the white people run into the fort.” The testimony of a slave named Sawney, who was only sixteen years old at the time of the second uprising, proved that he had heard the tales of 1712, perhaps from the likes of “old man” Cook or “Comfort’s old Caromantee woman.”²³

THE IRISH

Another cell in New York’s insurrectionary movement was Irish. These plotters, like their African counterparts, demonstrated a penchant for secret societies and conspiracy; they, too, called each other countryman. There were, in all, perhaps thirty to thirty-five Irish men and women involved in the conspiracy, though only eleven of these were recorded by name. One person testified that seventeen soldiers had attended a meeting at Hughson’s tavern; more commonly an ever-changing nine or ten turned up. Most all of the Irish were soldiers—“brother soldiers,” as they called themselves—stationed at Fort George. They wanted revenge against the Protestant English, expressing a desire “to burn the English church.” Hatred of the army was another motivation: Jerry Corker declared, “By G-d, I have a mind to burn the fort.” William Kane, whose involvement began when he told his fellow conspirators that “he would help them all that lay in his power” and ended in 1742 when he was shipped off to the Caribbean in punishment, wanted the fort in flames so that the soldiers “would have their liberty.” The complicity of Corker and Kane shows just how close the conspirators got to power: both had served as “sentry at the governor’s door” inside Fort George.²⁴

Although little is known about the Irish individuals who took part in

the conspiracy, it is possible to sketch in broad outline the historical experience that set the Irish in motion around the Atlantic in the years before 1741. A depression in the linen industry, intensified oppression by landlords and Anglican clergyman, and especially the famine of 1728–29 created new waves of Irish vagabondage and migration. Another famine in 1740–41, called in Gaelic “*bliadhain an air*” (“the year of the slaughter”), sent tens of thousands to their graves and thousands more across the seas in search of subsistence. Such vagabonds were called “Saint Patrick’s vermin.”²⁵ The traditional spalpeen migrations now moved into wider, Atlantic orbits. For many the movement led to a military experience—in the army of Britain, France, or Spain—which in turn led to a new posting at the outskirts of the empire as a soldier or military laborer. Others made their way to Irish harbors, signed on in the cod fishery, and sailed for Newfoundland, where many fell into debt and whence they traveled on as indentured servants or maritime workers to the port cities of North America.²⁶ Some variant of this process would appear to have been the experience of the “Irish Newfoundland beauty,” Peg Kerry.

Still others fell afoul of the law and ended up in the Americas as His Majesty’s seven- or fourteen-year passengers, having been sentenced as felons to long terms of punitive labor and shipped overseas. Crime and rebellion were inextricably intertwined for these Irishmen and Irishwomen, as for thousands of others in Britain who found themselves living on the wrong side of laws that were changing rapidly to protect new definitions of property. Irish felons transported to Georgia were denounced as a “Parcel of harden’d abandoned Wretches perfectly skill’d in all manner of Villainy, and who have been transported [from] their country for Committing Crimes by which they have been deemed too dangerous to be allowed to stay there.” Some of the transported were rioters who had lashed out against intolerable conditions; once in America, they stole their masters’ property and made “treasonable Designs against the Colony.”²⁷

The Irish had a history in America of betraying the English, who themselves had a history in Ireland of brutally subjugating the Irish. Several times during the seventeenth century (in 1655, 1666, and 1689), Irish indentured servants had assisted Spain or France in attacks against the English Caribbean colonies of St. Christopher, Montserrat, and Nevis.

These treacheries were well remembered among British colonial officials in the eighteenth century, especially after new calamities in Ireland sent new waves of migrants toward American shores. Governor Robert Hunter of Jamaica considered the Irish to be “a lazy useless sort of people, who come cheap and serve for deficiencies” (i.e., to expand the minority white population). On his island in the early 1730s were many—perhaps too many—Irish indentured servants and soldiers: “Many of them considering their religion might prove rather a disservice than of use to us in case of a rupture at any time with France or Spain.” Hunter could only conclude, ominously, “Their hearts are not with us.” The same fears gripped Hunter’s counterparts in New York, particularly after war broke out with Spain in 1739 and war with France simultaneously threatened.²⁸

SPANISH AMERICA

Members of a third cell within the insurrectionary plot whispered in Spanish. The leading figures here were Spanish-American sailors, “negroes and mulattoes,” who had been captured on a prize vessel by Captain John Lush in the early spring of 1740, brought to New York from the West Indies, condemned with the rest of the vessel in the city’s Vice-Admiralty Court, and promptly sold as slaves. A merchant testified that he had heard, while in Havana, that one of the sailors came from a family of slaves in Cartagena. 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 privateering, military defense, and a free black population. Having been “free men in their own country,” they felt that great injustice had been done them in New York. They “began to grumble at their hard usage, of being sold as slaves.”²⁹

The rage of the sailors heated many a conversation. Not surprisingly, Captain Lush, who had profited heavily from selling these prizes, was the object of special wrath. The sailors insisted that “if the captain would not send them to their own country, they would ruin all the city; and the first house they would burn should be the captain’s, for they did not care what they did.” Pointing to Lush’s house, they said, “*D--n that son of a b---h,*

they would make a devil of him,” doubtless by turning his home into an inferno. They even threatened to tie him “to a beam and roast him like a piece of beef.”³⁰

The Hispanic sailors had more than rage to contribute to the design to take the city, however, for they were highly skilled and knowledgeable in the ways of warfare. The tall, “very forward” Antonio de St. Bendito made no secret of their prowess. He bragged that when the time for the rising came, “while the York negroes killed one, the Spaniards could kill twenty.” The sailors’ reputation as experienced fighters circulated along the waterfront. John Hughson told York that “the Spaniards knew better than the York negroes how to fight”; he acknowledged their military experience by making Augustine an officer and Juan captain of the Fly Boys, one of the highest positions within the rebel command. Ben, a member of the conspiracy’s inner circle, considered it good news that the “Spanish negroes” were ready to lend a hand in the rising when “the wars came.” He told his skeptical countryman Jack that “those Spaniards know better than York Negroes, and could help better to take [the city] than they, because they were more used to war; but they must begin first to set the house (i.e. the houses) on fire.”³¹

Here, too, the Hispanic sailors had something to offer, in particular their knowledge of the incendiary substances called fireballs that had long been used in the marauding, plundering, city-burning warfare of the Caribbean. At one of the meetings at Hughson’s an unidentified Hispanic sailor “rolled something black in his hands, and broke it and gave to the rest, which was to be thrown in the houses, to set fire to the shingles in several places.” Antonio and Juan were especially knowledgeable about the “stuff to put the houses on fire, by flinging it into the house.” When on Monday, April 6, two fires broke out simultaneously on each side of Captain Sarly’s house, the cry went up, “The Spanish negroes; the Spanish negroes; take up the Spanish negroes.” Juan’s knowledge, motive of revenge, and insolent bearing upon being accused raised suspicions that eventually led to his hanging.³²

The Afro-Hispanic sailors also contributed to the plot an example of freedom based on their own maritime experience, and a means to achieve it, by coordinating an internal uprising with an external attack by Spanish forces. Of course, New York’s authorities could not comprehend that

news about Spanish military plans in the New World might circulate among sailors and waterfront workers. But sensing that there were real connections between the New York Conspiracy and Spanish America, they seized upon a letter written by General James Oglethorpe from Georgia in 1741 about a “popish Plot” in which secret emissaries—priests disguised as physicians, dancing masters, and the like—were inciting revolts “to burn all the magazines and considerable towns in English North America, thereby to prevent the subsisting of the great expedition and fleet in the West-Indies.” Although Oglethorpe himself “could not give credit to these advices,” many New Yorkers could. The real credit instead belonged to the Hispanic sailors, the human vessels who transported information and experience from one Atlantic port to another.³³

THE GREAT AWAKENING

Another Atlantic dimension of the conspiracy of 1741 was religious, for it occurred during the Great Awakening. Beginning in the 1730s, both sides of the Atlantic witnessed an outburst of popular religious enthusiasm in which itinerant preachers traveled from place to place, testifying about their own religious experiences and encouraging working people wherever they went to become, as Gary B. Nash has put it, the “instruments of their own salvation.” George Whitefield, a smallish preacher with crossed eyes, leather lungs, and burning charisma, ranged up and down the eastern seaboard of the colonies in 1739, delivering an endless succession of fiery sermons before the thousands, black and white (five to seven thousand in New York alone), who gathered to hear him.³⁴ The more radical itinerants preached a spiritual egalitarianism based on the biblical precept “God is no respecter of persons,” and many members of the colonial upper classes hated them for it. James Davenport, for example, was accused by the conservative Charles Chauncey of Boston of acting out the communism of the Book of Acts, seeking to destroy private property and make “all things common, wives as well as goods.” As the evangelicals preached justification by faith against the more traditional idea of justification by works, the specter of radical antinomianism hovered around their message and haunted their conservative adversaries. Some feared that the Levellers, Ranters, and Fifth Monarchy men of the

seventeenth-century English Revolution had reappeared a century later, and they were not entirely wrong. The physician Alexander Hamilton worried that such “New Light fanatics” would strip established religion of its ritualistic powers of mystification, letting loose “the mobile, that many-headed beast,” from its carefully constructed cage.³⁵

Although prosecuting attorney William Smith would call New York’s slave conspirators “Pagan negroes,” it is clear that Christianity, much of it a result of the Great Awakening, had affected many of them. John Hughson used the Bible to administer binding oaths to a number of the slave rebels. Bastian would testify in court that he and several other slaves “were sworn on a bible.” Cato agreed, claiming that Hughson took him and Albany upstairs in the tavern and “swore them upon a bible,” after which they “kissed the book.” Once captured, Cato would appear in court clutching his Bible to “his bosom”; “he said he read [it] in jail as often as he could.” Another slave, Othello, wanted assurance that his taking part in the revolt “would not hinder him from going to heaven.” Many others, black and white, fretted that by violating their sacred oath they would be “wronging their own souls.” Many New York slaves had lived long enough in English-speaking colonies to comprehend and engage the Christian message of the Awakeners, and even to endow it with revolutionary meaning. As an Anglican missionary explained, “the *Negroes* have this notion, that when they are baptized, they are immediately free from their masters.”³⁶

Whitefield made the issue of slavery central to the Great Awakening when, in 1740, he wrote and published a letter to “the Inhabitants of Maryland, Virginia, North and South Carolina,” remarking upon the slave rebellions that had recently convulsed Virginia and South Carolina and expressing his surprise that there had not been more of them. He considered rebellions past, present, and future to constitute a “judgment,” a “visitation” from God. He cited the biblical story of “Saul and his Bloody House,” who were subjected to famine for having enslaved the Gibeonites, “the Hewers of Wood and the Drawers of Water.” God had avenged the poor slaves in the day of David and he would so again. Whitefield commanded sternly, “Go to now, ye rich Men, weep and howl for your Miseries that shall come upon you!” But he also offered the sinful masters a way out of their self-built Babylon, through a proper

Christianity that attended to the souls of both masters and slaves. Masters would cease their brutalities and avert the awful judgment at the hands of the “sons of violence.” Slaves would cease to be rebellious and would naturally become better servants. Both would be conscious of their “relative Duties,” to the Lord and to each other.³⁷

Such words were more than many slaveowners could bear to hear. The Reverend Alexander Garden, who ministered to the slavemasters of Charleston, South Carolina, responded by accusing Whitefield of “enthusiasm and pride” and comparing him to “the *Oliverians, Ranters, Quakers, French Prophets.*” Such antinomianism, said Garden, led Whitefield to incite insurrection among the slaves. Others, such as William Smith, writing from the Caribbean, agreed: “Instead of teaching [the slaves] the *Principles of Christianity,*” enthusiasts such as Whitefield were “filling their heads with a Parcel of *Cant-Phrases, Trances, Dreams, Visions, and Revelations,* and something else still *worse,* which Providence forbids to name.”³⁸

The something worse reared its hydra head in New York in 1741, and Whitefield’s poisonous influence was duly noted. John Ury, a clergyman who would be hanged in 1742 for his role in the conspiracy, believed that “it was through the great encouragement the negroes had from Mr. Whitefield [that] we had all the disturbance.” Particularly pernicious, he thought, were Whitefield’s views of free grace, the theological issue at the center of the antinomian heresy, the embrace of which allowed self-declared, often poor saints to take the law into their own hands. Looking back on the conspiracy in 1746, Horsmanden would also denounce the “Enthusiastical Notions” and “New Fangled Principles” of Whitefield and other “Suspicious Vagrant Strolling Preachers.”³⁹

An Anglican missionary in New York went further in his indictment. Whitefield, he claimed, was directly responsible for the rising, for in New York as elsewhere he had unified and encouraged the slaves as he divided and discouraged their masters. His “greatest address hath been to the *Negroes* alone”: he had proposed to erect a school for slaves, which would cause many to “run away from the masters in hopes that they shall be here maintained, and have their liberty.” The result would be baptism and, from the slaves’ perspective, the freedom that came with it. Whitefield also inspired “feuds and animosities” everywhere he went. He

knew that a “kingdom divided against itself cannot stand, but is brought to desolation.” Whitefield thus “raised up a bitter spirit in the *Negroes* against their Masters.” In New York as elsewhere, “all the planters are forced to be doubly upon their guard, and are not sure when they go to bed, but that they shall have their throats cut before the next morning; and it may be the overturning of several colonies.”⁴⁰

A CARIBBEAN CYCLE OF REBELLION

The overturning of several colonies by insurrection seemed a real possibility in the 1730s and 1740s. During these years a furious barrage of plots, revolts, and war ripped through colonial Atlantic societies like a hurricane. No respecter of national or imperial boundaries, this cycle of rebellion slashed through British, French, Spanish, Dutch, and Danish territories, which stretched from the northern reaches of South America through the West Indies to the southern colonies and then the port cities of North America. Most of these events took place in plantation regions and were led by African Americans, but other areas (such as New York) and other actors (such as the Irish) were also involved. The magnitude of the upheaval was, in comparative terms, extraordinary, encompassing more than eighty separate cases of conspiracy, revolt, mutiny, and arson—a figure probably six or seven times greater than the number of similar events that occurred in either the dozen years before 1730 or the dozen after 1742. It was within this cycle of rebellion that the actions of the African slaves, Irish soldiers, and Hispanic sailors in New York in 1741 took on their greatest and most subversive meaning.

Scholars have studied the acts of resistance that constituted this cycle of rebellion, but almost always as isolated events; rarely have they analyzed them in relation to each other, as having both a coherence and a collective causal power. But of course both the rebels and the colonial authorities of the 1730s and 1740s were acutely aware of this profound, generative wave of struggle, even if their latter-day chroniclers have not been. Governor Mathews of the Leeward Islands in 1737 wrote of the cycle in the idiom of disease: “The contagion of rebellion is spread among these islands more than I apprehend is discovered.” Governor Edward Trelawny of Jamaica, who had witnessed firsthand the numerous

risings that climaxed in the Maroon War, saw clear political meaning in the rebellions, which for him expressed a “Dangerous Spirit of Liberty.” Daniel Horsmanden made repeated reference to other plots and revolts in his account of New York’s troubles. New York’s rebels likewise knew what was going on in “the hot country,” as one man called it. It had, in recent years, been hot in more ways than one.⁴¹

During the 1730s and early 1740s, the “Spirit of Liberty” erupted again and again, in almost all of the slave societies of the Americas, especially where Coromantee slaves were concentrated. Major conspiracies unfolded in Virginia, South Carolina, Bermuda, and Louisiana (New Orleans) in the year 1730 alone. The last of these featured a man named Samba, who had already led an unsuccessful revolt against a French slave-trading fort on the coast of Africa *and* a mutiny aboard a slave ship before the authorities of New Orleans broke his body on the wheel. The slaves of New Orleans were not intimidated by the terror, however, for they rose again in 1732. The following year witnessed rebellions in South Carolina, Jamaica, St. John (Danish Virgin Islands), and Dutch Guyana. In 1734 came plots and actions in the Bahama Islands, St. Kitts, South Carolina again, and New Jersey, the latter two inspired by the rising at St. John. In 1735–36 a vast slave conspiracy was uncovered in Antigua, and other rebellions soon followed on the smaller islands of St. Bartholomew, St. Martin’s, Anguilla, and Guadeloupe. In 1737 and again in 1738, Charleston experienced new upheavals. In the spring of 1738, meanwhile, “several slaves broke out of a jail in Prince George’s County, Maryland, united themselves with a group of outlying Negroes and proceeded to wage a small-scale guerilla war.” The following year, a considerable number of slaves plotted to raid a storehouse of arms and munitions in Annapolis, Maryland, to “destroy his Majestys Subjects within this Province, and to possess themselves of the whole country.” Failing that, they planned “to settle back in the Woods.” Later in 1739, the Stono Rebellion convulsed South Carolina. Here the slaves burned houses as they fought their way toward freedom in Spanish Florida. Yet another rebellion broke out in Charleston in June 1740, involving 150 to 200 slaves, fifty of whom were hanged for their daring.⁴²

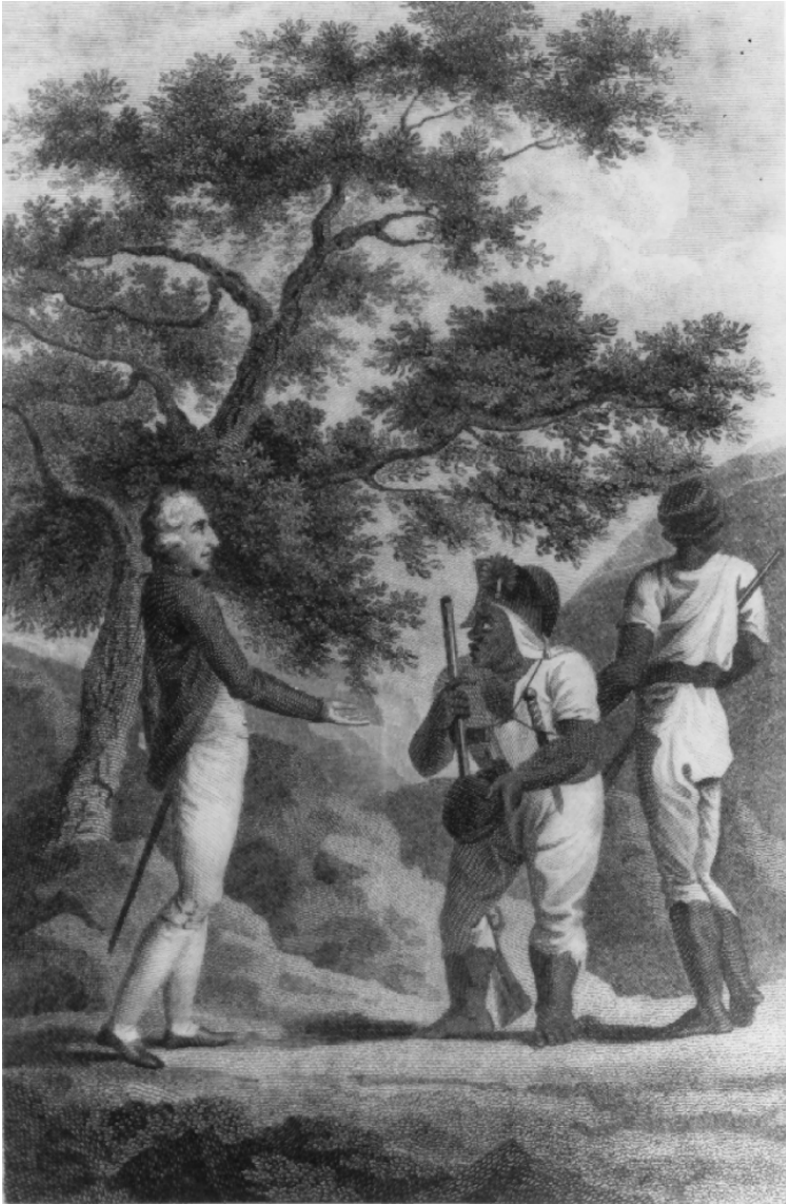
Intensifying these events—and holding aloft a beacon of possibility—was the decade-long Maroon War of Jamaica. Beginning in the late

1720s, slaves escaped to the interior of Jamaica in swelling numbers, returned to the plantations in nocturnal raids, and seized livestock, tools, and sometimes other slaves to take back to their secluded and inaccessible maroon communities in the mountains. Over the next ten years the maroons created a major crisis in the plantation system, especially in the northern and northeastern regions of the island, where they repeatedly forced small, marginal planters to abandon their estates and sell off their slaves, some to New York. Writing in 1739, Charles Leslie claimed that the maroons had “increased to such a Degree, as many Times to make the Island tremble.” Others agreed: Jamaica was in “a tottering state.”⁴³

One of the reasons that the maroons were so dangerous to the rulers of England’s prize colonial possession was that they were in touch with the government of Spain by way of Cuba, which was, after all, only a canoe ride away off the northern shore of Jamaica. There were not only rumors but actual testimony that the maroons had contacted the Spanish authorities, “offering to hand over the island [of Jamaica] to Spain when they had taken it over, on condition that the Spaniards guarantee their freedom.”⁴⁴ The maroons may have been confident that they would eventually take over the island themselves, but they also knew that an external attack by Spain, coupled with their own uprising from within, represented an undeniably powerful combination. The authorities of Jamaica certainly did not deny it. Indeed, in 1739 and 1740 they made peace, first with the Leeward Maroons under the firm leadership of Cudjo, then with the Windward Maroons, giving both groups land and autonomy in exchange for their promise to return all future runaway slaves and, perhaps most crucially, to fight against foreign invaders. Its primary enemy within thus neutralized, Great Britain declared war on Spain a mere three months later.⁴⁵

A similar long-term struggle was taking place deep in the rain forests of Suriname, where maroons battled Dutch settlers who, according to Governor Mauricius, struggled to slay the hydra of resistance. A rising tide of rebellion in the Dutch colonies expressed itself in what another official called, in 1740, the intolerable “insolence of the Coloreds and Blacks, freedmen as well as slaves,” and in the subversive gatherings of soldiers, sailors, and slaves in waterfront taverns to smoke, drink, gamble, trade, and plot who knew what other dreaded cooperative ventures.

Copyright © 2000. Beacon Press. All rights reserved.



*Maroon leader Cudjo signs a treaty with the English authorities, 1739;
R. C. Dallas, The History of the Maroons, from their Origin to the
Establishment of their Chief Tribe at Sierra Leone (1803), vol. 1.*

Indeed, Dutch authorities were complaining about this explosive combination of workers in the spring of 1741, precisely when the same kinds of people were making trouble in New York.⁴⁶

The famines of 1728–29 and 1740–41 and their respective diasporas added an Irish dimension to the cycle of rebellion. Of special importance was the “Red String Conspiracy,” which took place in Savannah, Georgia, in March 1736 and foreshadowed the events in New York five years later. A gang of forty to fifty transported Irish felons met in a low tipping house, where they traded in stolen goods and formed “plots and treasonable Designs against the Colony,” even as the elites worried about “the Spaniards or French Instigations.” Eventually they designed to burn the town, kill the white men, save their women, and then meet up with a band of nomadic Indians with whom they would make their escape, perhaps to join the German-Cherokee Christian Gottlieb Priber, who was building a “City of Refuge,” a communist society for runaway African slaves and European indentured servants as well as Native Americans. The rebels in Savannah would know each other by a “Red string about the Right Wrist.” The plot was foiled but nonetheless threw the young colony into “great confusion.” Such events were not uncommon, as noted by Kerby A. Miller: “On numerous occasions in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, colonial officials in Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, New York and the West Indies feared that Irish ‘papists’ were plotting insurrection with negro slaves or foreign enemies.”⁴⁷

Arson was a common instrument of destruction within the cycle of rebellion, not least because fire was the most accessible of weapons among the dispossessed, especially for those who worked with it in the normal course of their daily life.⁴⁸ On the island of Danish St. John in 1733, slaves entered Fort Christiansvaern, killed several soldiers, and set fires to signal a general rising. In Somerset, New Jersey, in 1734, slaves conspired to kill their masters, torch their houses and barns, saddle their horses, and fly “towards the Indians in the *French* Interest.” In the Red String Conspiracy, as we have noted, Irish workers planned to burn Savannah and escape to freedom. It was reported in October 1738 that a group of Native Americans, some of whom were whalers, had plotted in Nantucket “to set Fire to the Houses of the English Inhabitants in the night, and then to fall upon them Arm’d, and kill as many as they could.”⁴⁹ The slaves who

led the Stono Rebellion in South Carolina in 1739 burned several houses as they made their way toward St. Augustine and freedom among the Spanish. More ominously still, a suspicious fire devastated Charleston on November 18, 1740, consuming more than three hundred buildings and doing, in all, several hundred thousand pounds' worth of damage. Flames continued throughout 1741 to haunt the ports and towns of New York, Boston, Charleston, and Hackensack, New Jersey.⁵⁰

Fire also figured in prophecies, rumors, and tales. George Whitefield's friend Hugh Bryan of South Carolina wrote to his fellow slaveowners in early 1741 that the "repeated Insurrections of our Slaves" and the frequency of fires were proof of the great itinerant's dire prophecy that "God's just judgments are upon us." The big planters of South Carolina responded to this pious apostasy in their midst by arresting both Bryan and Whitefield for libel. Two weeks later—on Saint Patrick's Day, when arson was to ignite New York—a Grand Jury condemned Bryan, who taught Christianity to his own slaves, for his "sundry enthusiastic Prophecies of the Destruction of Charles-Town, and deliverance of the Negroes from their Servitude."⁵¹ The tales would continue in 1742, with Daniel Horsmanden's reporting "several pretended prophecies of negroes, that Charles-Town in South-Carolina, and the city of New York, were to be burnt down on the twenty-fifth of March next." The timing suggested that slaves were planning new fireworks to commemorate the earlier acts of revolutionary arson. Horsmanden knew that "there were yet remaining among us, many of the associates in that execrable confederacy, who might yet be hardy enough to persist in the same wicked purposes, and make new attempts." New attempts were in fact made in February and March 1742, as some New Yorkers tried to make good the prophecies. Fire remained a weapon of liberation. If it threatened apocalypse, a new world might yet arise from the ashes.⁵²

PATTERNS OF TRADE

When Dr. Alexander Hamilton arrived in New York on June 15, 1744, three years after the failed insurrection, the first thing he noticed was the forest of ships' masts in the harbor: the city truly had "a great deal of shipping." He made his way from the waterfront northward to Broad Street,

where he lodged at the home of merchant Robert Hogg. This was the place where the sailor Christopher Wilson had stolen a cache of coins, the search for which by the authorities had eventually unraveled the larger conspiracy. Here Hamilton read Horsmanden’s *Journal of the Proceedings*, then inspected the work of the rebels firsthand: “The castle, or fort, is now in ruins, having been burnt down four [*sic*] years agoe by the conspirators.” Little did Hamilton realize that what he saw as he gazed upon the charred rubble of Fort George had its origin in what he had observed when he first entered the city: in New York’s ships along the wharves and farther out at sea.⁵³

A key to the events of 1741 lay in the structure of New York’s commerce, which was, as Hamilton quickly understood, the driving force in this city of merchants and maritime workers. During the first half of the eighteenth century, New York’s trade was not triangular but rather bilateral, a shuttling from Manhattan down the North American coast to the West Indies and back. In the half century surrounding 1740 (1715–65), roughly three out of four voyages followed the coastal/Caribbean route, plying southward to Maryland, Virginia, and Carolina and even more commonly to Caribbean destinations, especially the English and Dutch islands, Jamaica and Curaçao in particular, and to a lesser extent the French and Spanish colonies, to and from which they regularly smuggled commodities of various kinds. Cadwallader Colden had noted in 1723 that New York’s greatest remittances went to Curaçao and Jamaica.⁵⁴

The conspiracy turned, however, not on what went out in New York’s ships but rather on what came home in them. And what came home in them, again and again and again, from coastal and especially from Caribbean ports, was slaves. The primacy of the West Indies in New York’s trade meant that the islands provided the vast majority of the city’s slaves to achieve a balance of trade. According to statistics compiled by Professor James G. Lydon from the naval officers’ record lists and the inspector general’s ledgers, in the dozen years before 1741, four out of five slaves (79.5 percent) came to New York from the Caribbean (the bulk of them from Jamaica), while another 6 percent came from the ports of the southern mainland colonies. They arrived in lots of three or four on small vessels of thirty to forty tons’ carrying capacity, most to be sold at the Meal

Market on the lower east side of Manhattan. Fewer than one in seven of New York's slaves came directly from Africa in the big slave ships that spent months gathering a "cargo" and months more in the Atlantic crossing. Some of New York's bondmen and bondwomen had been sent from the coastal/Caribbean trade routes on special order, and some on consignment; others were what the slave traders called "refuse negroes," with physical "defects" that prevented their sale in the South.⁵⁵

Most crucial for our purposes—and most alarming to a great many New Yorkers—was that many of the slaves who came to New York had a history, often a secret history, of making trouble. West Indian planters sold to New York's traders slaves who possessed "turbulent and unruly tempers" and often some experience in resistance. In the red wake of many a plot or insurrection in plantation America came a mini-diaspora, in which the leaders of the events were sold off, frequently away from their families and communities, to buyers in other parts of the Atlantic. Such was the practice on Antigua in 1736, when eighty-eight slaves were executed for taking part in a conspiracy, and another forty-seven sold and shipped off the island. The same program was followed on Jamaica, on Bermuda, and elsewhere, as it would be in New York after the fires of 1741.⁵⁶

New York was hardly alone in receiving such malefactors: all of the northern seaports, including Newport and Boston, served as markets of last resort in the regional trade in slaves. The governors of both Massachusetts and Rhode Island complained bitterly of the problem in the early eighteenth century, the governor of the former claiming that the traders sent "usually the worst servants they have," including slaves who had accumulated records of violent resistance to their condition. As Edgar J. McManus has written, "Since some colonies permitted masters to export slaves convicted of major crimes, including arson and murder, the intercolonial trade involved serious risks for importing colonies like New York. How many of these slaves were channeled into New York cannot be estimated precisely, but the number was probably large." Governor Rip Van Dam cautioned in the early 1730s that a majority of the slaves imported from the South posed a serious threat to the safety of New York. Governor Cosby objected in 1734 to the "too great Importation of Negroes and Convicts"; a "Negro" and a "Convict" were often one and the same person.⁵⁷

The New York Assembly acknowledged the problem by passing a resolution that warned the buyers of slaves against “refuse Negroes and such malefactors as would have suffered death in the places whence they came had not the avarice of the owners saved them from public justice.” Indeed, the assemblymen deemed the matter so serious that they did not stop at a warning; they also imposed a special duty on slaves imported indirectly—that is, from the Caribbean and coastal America—which was twice as high as the duty on slaves imported directly from Africa. The purpose of this policy was, writes Lydon, “largely to discourage importation of recalcitrant blacks from other colonies.”⁵⁸

Daniel Horsmanden knew that rebellious slaves imported from other English colonies had played a major role in the conspiracy. In “a modest hint to our brethren in the *West Indies*, and the more neighboring English colonies,” he explained how he and his fellow New Yorkers had *properly* transported seventy-seven rebels to other, non-English parts of the Atlantic. He asked other rulers within the British empire to note “how tender we have been of *their* peace and security, by using all the precaution in our power, *that none of our rogues should be imposed upon them.*” Horsmanden was quietly complaining that his brother gentlemen in coastal and Caribbean America had imposed *their* rogues on New York, thereby undermining the colony’s peace and security. Governor Trelawny, whose Jamaican planters had sent north many of the slaves in question, got the message. After reading Horsmanden’s published account of the trial, which identified the slave named Hanover as having been involved in the plot but now being missing, Trelawny personally *found* Hanover among the 112,000 slaves in Jamaica and promptly returned him to New York. Both Trelawny and Horsmanden understood that it was impossible to import slaves without also importing the experience of opposition to slavery. It was in this literal sense that the insurrection was promoted by those whom Horsmanden called “the outcasts of the nations of the earth.”⁵⁹

One of these outcasts was a slave named Will, whose life illustrated the connections among insurrection, diaspora, trade, and new insurrection as it represented one long, Atlantic ruling-class nightmare. In 1733, Will had participated in the slave revolt on Danish St. John, in which a gang of rebels carried concealed cane bills (knives) into Fort Christiansvaern, killed several soldiers, and took control of the island’s central military in-

stallation. They held the fort for seven months, until the imperial powers put aside their differences and organized a joint expedition to defeat the mostly Coromantee rebels, who had in the meantime damaged or destroyed forty-eight plantations. In the aftermath, 146 slaves were implicated in the rising, and twenty-seven of those executed. It was alleged, in New York, that during this rising Will had killed several white men with his own hands. Will was banished from St. John, sold to a planter on the island of Antigua.

Will did not wait long before beginning to plot again, for in 1735 the Akan-speaking slaves of Antigua combined with creole slaves in a plan to seize the island and make it their own. Unlike the rebels of St. John, the insurgents of Antigua never reached the stage of open action. An informer disclosed their plot, after which they were immediately rounded up and arrested. Imprisoned again and knowing that his failure to reform meant certain death, Will saved his own neck by turning state's witness, giving evidence against numerous slaves and earning, briefly, a traitor's reputation as he watched eighty-eight of his comrades be hanged, burned, and broken on the wheel. Along with forty-six others, Will was banished, sold this time to someone in New York, sold again to a new owner in Providence, Rhode Island, and then sold back once more to New York.

Will played a pivotal part in the New York Conspiracy, bringing his West Indian expertise to bear. He was, after all, "very expert at plots, for this was the third time he had engaged in them," as the court was at pains to point out. Will met, at Hughson's and other places, with the slaves and the Irish soldiers, no doubt telling the gripping, bloody tales of his earlier exploits and explaining precisely what had gone wrong. He held up the courage of the plotters on Antigua as an example, claiming that "the negroes here were cowards" and "had no hearts as those at Antigua." The plan of attack on Fort George may have owed something to Will's experience at Fort Christiansvaern. Will even showed the other rebels how to make a dark lanthorn, "a light that no body should see it," which made the nighttime work of conspiracy easier.⁶⁰

For Will and many others, New York was a sort of penal colony in disguise; southern and West Indian planters had surreptitiously made it so. But New York's rulers found them out, discovering in their midst an un-

knowable but significant number of slaves who were experienced in the ways of resistance. As it happened, New York’s merchants had been importing not only sugar, molasses, and slaves on their vessels but the literally explosive class relations of the slaveowning regions to the south—regions that had for several years witnessed a ferocious cycle of rebellion that featured prominently both arson and insurrection. The importation of such experience of rebellion—and the dawning recognition of its dangers—constituted the rational basis of New York’s hysteria in 1741.

INSURRECTION AND IMPERIAL RIVALRY

Many of the conditions for insurrection were present in New York in 1741. The city’s ruling class was divided and squabbling; a hard winter had caused misery for many; and war had broken out with Spain, increasing hardship all around and weakening military defenses when six hundred able-bodied men were shipped overseas to support the war effort. One conspirator, London, had advised some of his fellow insurrectionists that “now was the best time to do something, it being war time.” Moreover, as we have seen, New York’s slave traders had inadvertently brought to the city a motley crew of experienced veterans—insurrectionists such as Will, who brought their knowledge of the Caribbean cycle of rebellion of the 1730s and 1740s, *and* soldiers such as William Kane, Juan de la Sylva, and the numerous Coromantees, who brought their knowledge of war and military organization from Ireland, Cuba, and West Africa.⁶¹

Even though Albany believed “an hundred and fifty men might take this city” (he chose roughly the same number that had been involved in the uprising in Will’s St. John), the plotters knew from the beginning that the success of their insurrection would depend on support—local (in New York), regional (in the surrounding countryside), and international (from Britain’s imperial rivals, Spain and France). Hughson saw the insurrection as a rising of the mob, wherein early successes would draw more supporters to the cause. Another source of support would be people, both black and white, from the outlying areas, especially “country negroes” such as Jamaica and several sailors who had attended meetings at Hughson’s. Comfort’s Jack had brought his rural relatives into the

Copyright © 2000. Beacon Press. All rights reserved.

plot. Peg Kerry explained that the urban rebels “were to be joined by the country negroes” after the fires were set. Arson did indeed light up the countryside on Long Island and in New Jersey after the burning of Fort George.⁶²

The most important assistance would come from Britain’s imperial enemies, France or particularly Spain, for like the maroons of Jamaica, the rebels in New York planned to link their uprising from within to an invasion from without. The *New York Weekly Journal* made the point clearly: “The *Spanish* Negroes (of which there are many in this Place) were deeply concerned and active in the Business; and whatever Encouragement or Assurances they might receive from abroad, or hellish incendiaries at home, they were perswaded that an Attempt on this Province would be made by the Spaniards and French, for whom they agreed to wait some Time; and if it should happen that such an Attempt should be made, and our Enemies invade us, they were to rise and join with them.” A leader among the African Americans in the plot, Bastian, had the same understanding: “They had a parcel of good hands, Spanish Negroes, five or six of them (then present) who would join with the York Negroes: that they expected that war would be proclaimed in a little time against the French, and that the French and Spaniards would come here.” Trial records indicate that at least ten other conspirators saw matters the same way. Primus had heard that the French and Spanish were coming and that the rebels would assist them in taking the city. Kortrecht’s Caesar heard from Jack that “the Spaniards were coming here, and the negroes were going to rise, and would help the Spaniards.” Scipio also expected the French and the Spanish to invade, “and then would be a fair opportunity”: “they might all be free men.” The fires might be the beacon of insurrection, signaling to a Spanish flotilla offshore that the time for attack had arrived; or perhaps Spain would learn about the destruction of Fort George and then decide on its own to invade. The soldiers and sailors of New Spain would help the rebels to seize the city (which had, after all, already changed imperial hands once, from Dutch to English, in recent memory), or failing that, they would “carry them off into another country, and make them a free people.” In any case, the rebels would win freedom for themselves, and Spain would protect that freedom.⁶³

The references to Spain, in New York and throughout the cycle of re-

bellion of the 1730s and 1740s, bespoke a truth well understood at the time but seldom emphasized since. The slaves of the anglophone Atlantic often saw Spain as a liberator, not least because of the tradition of Spanish abolitionism. When Bastian told other conspirators that Spain might guarantee their eventual freedom, it was no idle fantasy, for Spain had already done just that for many people of African descent in the New World. Indeed, the Hispanic sailors were, by their own claims to freedom, living, breathing instances of liberation, there to confirm the possibilities that lay in New Spain. It was widely known that the Spanish king had aggressively enticed the slaves of English masters with royal *cédulas* in 1733 and 1740, promising first limited freedom and then full freedom to anyone who escaped an English for a Spanish settlement. New Spain's officials in Florida followed through on the promise by creating an official maroon village on the northern edge of their settlement, called Gracia Real Santa Teresa de Mose, where a hundred runaways, mostly from Carolina, were settled and transformed into a first line of defense against English attacks from the north. Spain had also for years been encouraging the maroons of Britain's Caribbean colonies, as New York's many Jamaican slaves knew well. It was an accident of history, though a fateful one, that Afro-Cubans and Afro-Jamaicans conversed about freedom in New York in 1741, just as they had done when communicating across the waters between Cuba and Jamaica in the 1730s.⁶⁴

More important still was that Spanish officials consciously planned to use agents such as the Hispanic sailors to foster slave revolt in English dominions in North America by late 1742, or perhaps even earlier. Juan Francisco de Güemes, governor general of Cuba, wrote to Manuel de Montiano, governor of Florida, to explain an imminent military action: three thousand Cuban soldiers would attack South Carolina between April and June 1742, unleashing a force of “negroes of all languages” to filter through the countryside, promising land and freedom to the slaves of English masters and inciting revolt throughout the province. The agitators and organizers of insurrection were to be not priests, as the paranoid Protestants of New York thought, but rather former slaves, who would operate through precisely the kinds of networks that existed in New York.⁶⁵

And yet the insurrection in New York failed. It is impossible to know

exactly what went wrong, but there is evidence to suggest that Quack burned the fort several weeks too early, catching everyone off guard and causing the carefully laid plans to unfold in a chaotic series of small fires, as the rebels did what they could to carry out the long-plotted uprising. Quack had been voted by his fellow conspirators “to be the person who should fire the fort” because his wife worked there as cook for the governor, which meant that he had the requisite knowledge of and access to that most strategic of places. Unfortunately for the rebels, Quack soon got into trouble with the authorities; he was prohibited from visiting his wife and banned from the fort. Acting in anger and apparently motivated by a desire for personal revenge, Quack broke discipline and set the first fire prematurely, on March 17. Several sources—including one rebel’s saying to another who set a fire, “You should not have done it till we were all ready”—indicated that the fires were scheduled to be set instead in early May, at the very moment when a flotilla of five Spanish privateers arrived off the coast, having captured eight prize vessels along the way and in so doing panicked the rulers of New York. The ships’ arrival coincided with the trials of John Hughson, Peg Kerry, Cuffee, and Quack.⁶⁶

REBELLION OF THE HANGED

The multiracial waterfront posed a political problem for New York’s rulers. The cooperative nature of work in the port had created dangerous insurrectionary connections between slaves of African descent—men such as Gwin and Cuffee—and “the most flagitious, degenerated, and abandoned, and scum and dregs of the white population,” represented by John Hughson and Peg Kerry. The love story alluded to at the outset of this chapter was an instance of the human solidarity that developed in the plot. Colonel Thomas Rainborough had warned at Putney that care must be taken to choose the right mother and father. Solidarity was not restricted to the genetic nuclear family, nor could it be so restricted among “outcasts.” As Francis spoke of the “sisters” of her spiritual community, so the Irish soldiers called one another “brother.” The love of John Gwin and Peg Kerry thus paralleled a broader alliance.⁶⁷

The authorities approached the solidarity with a trident in hand, each of its points carefully sharpened to puncture the prevailing multiracial

practices and bonds of proletarian life in Atlantic New York. First they went after the taverns and other settings where “cabals” of poor whites and blacks could be formed and subversive plans disseminated. Next they self-consciously recomposed the proletariat of New York to make it more difficult for workers along the waterfront to find among themselves sources of unity. And finally, they endeavored to teach racial lessons to New York’s people of European descent, promoting a white identity that would transcend and unify the city’s fractious ethnic divisions. Let us treat these three major consequences of the conspiracy of 1741 in turn.

Both during and after the trials for conspiracy, New York’s men in ruffles attacked the city’s low tipping houses, criminalizing black-white cooperation and controlling the sites where multiracial conspiracies might unfold. Horsmanden urged “diligent inquiry into the economy and behaviour of all the mean ale-houses and tipling house within this city,” especially those that entertained “negroes, and the scum and dregs of white people in conjunction.” Such establishments encouraged theft and debauchery, but even worse, they provided “opportunities for the most loose, debased and abandoned wretches amongst us to cabal and confederate together, and ripen themselves in these schools of mischief, for the execution of the most daring and detestable counterprizes: I fear there are yet many of these houses amongst us, and they are the bane and pest of the city; it was such that gave the opportunity of breeding this most horrid and execrable conspiracy.” Horsmanden was right: mean alehouses such as Hughson’s, where the wretched of many colors and nations gathered, were indeed schools. These were places where such people told their Atlantic tales, yarns, and stories, their oral histories and lore of insurrection.⁶⁸

The second major policy change was not a matter of governmental action but rather a series of private business decisions taken by the merchants of New York. In what may constitute the strongest evidence of the related Caribbean and insurrectionary dimensions of the conspiracy, the city’s big merchants responded to the upheaval by restructuring their slave trade, sending many more of their ships directly to Africa, and many fewer down the coastal/Caribbean route, in search of slaves. Partly this was a response to a growing demand for slaves in South Carolina and

Jamaica after the economic slump of the 1730s had passed. But it was also a collective recognition by merchants that their earlier business practices had endangered their own base of accumulation. Before 1741 they had imported seven out of every ten slaves from the regions to the south, and only three of ten from Africa. After 1741 they reversed the ratio, bringing seven of ten slaves directly from Africa and only three of ten from plantation regions to their south. As James G. Lydon has written, “The full range of reasons for this shift from dependence upon indirect sources to direct importations from Africa is difficult to establish, but the slave plot at New York in 1741 appears to have been quite important.” Fears about the importation of “incorrigible slaves,” or “malcontents,” concludes Lydon, “may well have dictated this shift in the city’s trading pattern.” New York merchants realized that the commodity was not always what it seemed: they had imported aboard their ships not just the scarred, beaten bodies of West Indian slaves but within those another bloody body of ideas and practices of insurrection. They would, in recognition of this fundamental fact, seek to recompose the proletariat of New York, counting at least in part on the linguistic and cultural barriers of African ethnicity to ensure social peace.⁶⁹

The third major response to the events of 1741 was the promotion of a white identity designed to cut across and unite a variety of ethnicities. Of course many New Yorkers, people in ruffles as well as negrophobic artisans, had long taken whiteness for granted. But to those who gathered at Hughson’s, the “white people” were, in code or cant, the rich, the people with money, not simply the ones with a particular phenotype of skin color. Racial typing in New York remained fluid, open, often ambiguous. The lovers John Gwin and Peg Kerry typified and exploited the ambiguity: Gwin used an Irish name, pretending to be a soldier at Fort George; “Negro Peg” complained about “that bitch” Mary Burton, who had implicated her in several thefts and thereby “made me as black as the rest.” The slave Tom described his recruitment into the conspiracy in a way that would have been impossible a generation later: “The white men wanted him to join to help kill the white people.”⁷⁰ The “white” David Johnson rose before an assembly at Hughson’s, can of punch in hand, and pledged “to burn the town, and kill as many white people as he could.”⁷¹

Ruling whites reacted to the racial fluidity within the conspiracy with

terror and mercy, the combination of which was meant to produce new discipline and a different solidarity. First they demonized the people of European descent who were involved in the plot: Hughson and his ilk were said to be “monsters in nature,” the very “disgrace of their complexion”; indeed, they were “much worse than the negroes.” Hughson himself was “blacker than a negro”: he was “the scandal of his complexion, and the disgrace of human nature!” Such language predicted a violent fate, and four Euramericans were accordingly hanged; others were forced into military service in the West Indies, and still others banished from the province. Another six, however, were quietly and mercifully discharged by the court, almost without comment. The decision to let them go was expressed in a simple notation in the trial records: “No person appearing to prosecute.” This, too, was a message for and about “whites.” New York’s rulers thus divided and weakened the proletariat as they unified and strengthened a fictive community based on whiteness.⁷²

And yet when Horsmanden and his like tried to use the trial and the executions to popularize lessons about race, about the unifying advantages of whiteness, the rebels, even in death, refused to cooperate. After Hughson was hanged, his corpse was gibbeted so as to offer moral instruction to anyone who dared to betray his or her race. So, too, was the corpse of John Gwin/Caesar strung up in chains, so that people of African descent would think at least twice before challenging the system of slavery in New York. Both, so the message went, would be punished into the afterlife. But curious things began to happen. Within three weeks after the hanging, Hughson’s remains—his “face, hands, neck, and feet”—had turned “a deep shining black,” while the hair of his “beard and neck (his head could not be seen for he had a cap on) was curling like the wool of a negro’s beard and head.” Moreover, “the features of his face” had assumed “the symmetry of a negro beauty; the nose broad and flat, the nostrils open and extended, the mouth wide, lips full and thick.” Gwin/Caesar, in contrast, in life “one of the darkest hue of his kind,” had in death undergone the opposite transformation: his face “was at the time somewhat bleached or turned whitish.”

In the end, it was said, “Hughson was turned negro, and Vaarck’s Caesar a white”; they had “changed colours.” New Yorkers “were amazed at these appearances”—and not least of all Daniel Horsmanden, who once

upon a time had described an impossible task by saying, “The Ethiopian might as soon change his skin.” Word of what had happened to the bodies of Hughson and Gwin spread far and wide, “engaged the attention of many, and drew numbers of all ranks, who had curiosity, to the gibbets, for several days running, in order to be convinced by their own eyes, of the reality of things so confidently reported to be.” Seeing was believing, and many accounted the transformations “wondrous phenomenons.” Others spectators “were ready to resolve them into miracles.” Rebels to the end, Gwin and Hughson thus took some last revenge against the white people in wigs and ruffles. Even their dead bodies were capable of subversion.⁷³