

1712-1719. The New York Slave Revolt

In 1712, as a result of its involvement in trade with the Caribbean, New York City had a large population of enslaved Africans. Conditions in the city were somewhat different than those for slaves on large plantations or in isolated rural areas. Many Africans lived in concentrated areas where they had some freedom of movement and could meet with each other. They also lived and worked in close proximity to free and indentured Whites.

While the historical record has many gaps, there is a generally accepted narrative of events. The uprising probably involved twenty-three Africans (some reports claimed Native Americans were also involved) who gathered on the night of April 6, 1712. They were armed with guns, hatchets, and swords and set fire to a building in the middle of town. When White colonists tried to extinguish the blaze, the Africans attacked them. At least nine Whites were shot, stabbed, or beaten to death and another six were wounded. Militia units from New York and Westchester and soldiers from a fort at the foot of Manhattan responded to the insurrection and twenty-seven African rebels were captured. Twenty-one were executed, some of whom were burned alive, and six are reported as having committed suicide. Shortly after the rebellion, New York's legislature toughened its slave codes. Africans gathering in groups of three or more, found with a firearm or gambling would be whipped. Property crimes, rape and involvement in a conspiracy to kill were punishable by death. Owners were given greater leeway in punishing enslaved Africans and there were new restrictions on manumitting slaves.

Robert Hunter was the royal governor of New York and New Jersey from 1710 to 1719. In a letter to the Lords of Trade in London written three months after the insurrection, Hunter described the slave revolt. Other documents describe new laws passed to more effectively control the colonies African population and the procedure for paying for executions.

A. Letter from Governor Robert Hunter, June 23, 1712

Source: E.B. Callaghan, ed. (1885). *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York*. Vol. V, p. 341-342.

a. I must now give your Lordships an account of a bloody conspiracy of some of the slaves of this place, to destroy as many of the inhabitants as they could. It was put in execution in this manner, when they had resolved to revenge themselves, for some hard usage they apprehended to have received from their masters (for I can find no other cause) they agreed to meet in the orchard of Mr. Crook in the middle of the town, some provided with fire arms, some with swords and others with knives and hatchets. This was the sixth day of April, the time of meeting was about twelve or one clock in the night, when about three and twenty of them were got together. One . . . slave to one Vantilburgh set fire to [a shed] of his masters, and then repairing to his place where the rest were, they all sallyed out together with their arms and marched to the fire. By this time, the noise of the fire spreading through the town, the people began to flock to it. Upon the approach of several, the slaves fired and killed them. The noise of the guns gave the alarm, and some escaping, their shot soon published the cause of the fire, which was the reason that not above nine Christians were killed, and about five or six wounded. Upon the first notice, which was very soon after the mischief was begun, I order'd a detachment from the fort under a proper officer to march against them, but the slaves made their retreat into the woods, by the favour of the night. Having ordered sentries the next day in the most proper places on the Island [Manhattan] to prevent their escape, I caused the day following, the militia of this town and of the country of West Chester to drive [to] the Island, and by this means and strict searches in the town, we found all that put the design in execution, six of these having first laid violent hands upon themselves[committed suicide], the rest were forthwith brought to their trial before ye Justices of this place, who are authorized by Act of Assembly to hold a court in such cases. In that court were twenty seven condemned, whereof twenty one were executed, one being a woman with child, her execution by that means suspended. Some were burnt, others hanged, one broke on the wheel, and one hung alive in chains in the town, so that there has been the most exemplary punishment inflicted that could be possibly thought of.

b. Among these guilty persons severall others were apprehended, and again acquitted by the Court, for want of sufficient evidence, among those was one Mars a negroe man slave to one Mr Regnier, who was to his tryall and acquitted by the Jury, the Sheriffe the next day moving the Court for the discharge of such as were or should be soe acquitted, by reason hee apprehended they would attempt to make their escape but Mr Bickley who then executed the office of the Atter: Generall, for Mr Rayner opposed his motion, telling the Court that at that time, none but Mars being acquitted, the motion could be only intended in his favour, against whom he should have some thing further to object, and therefore prayed he might not be discharg'd. so the sheriff did not obtain his motion, Mars was then indicted a second time and again acquitted, but not discharg'd, and being a third time presented was transferr'd (the Court of Justices not designing to sit again) to the Supreme Court, and there tried and convicted on ye same evidence, on his two former tryals, this prosecution was carried on to gratify some private pique of Mr Bickleys against Mr Regnier, a gentleman of his own profession, which appearing so partial, and the evidence being represented to me as very defective, and being wholly acquitted of ever having known any thing of the Conspiracy by the Negroe witnesses, who were made use of in the trials of all the criminals before the Justices, and without whose testimonies very few could have been punished, I thought fit to reprieve him till Her Majesties pleasure be known therein. if this supream court were likewise tried, one Husea belonging to Mrs Wenham, and one John belonging Mr Vantilbourgh and convicted, these two are prisoners taken in a Spanish prize this war and brought into this Port by a Privateer, about six or seven years agoe and by reason of their colour which is swarthy, they were said to be slaves and as such were sold, among many others of the same colour and country, these two I have likewise reprieved till Her Majesties pleasure be signified. soon after my arrival in this government I received petitions from several of these Spanish Indians as they are called here, representing to me that they were free men subjects to the King of Spain, but sold here as slaves, I secretly pittied their condition but haveing no other evidence of wt they asserted then their own words, I had it not in my power to relieve them, I am informed that in the West Indies where their laws against their slaves are most severe, that in case of a conspiracy in which any are engaged a few only are executed for an example, In this case 21 are executed, and six having done that Justice on themselves more have suffered than we can find were active in this bloody affair which are reasons for my repreiving these, and if your Lordships think them of sufficient weight, I beg you will procure Her Majesty's pleasure to be signified to me for their pardon, for they lye now in prison at their masters charge, I have likewise reprieved one Tom a Negroe belonging to Mr Van Dam and Coffee a Negroe belonging to Mr Walton these two I have reprieved at the instance of the Justices of the Court, who were of oppinion that the evidence against them, was not sufficient to convict them.

Governor Hunter to the Lords of Trade (1712)

Source: E.B. O'Callaghan, ed. (1856). *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New-York; Procured in Holland, England and France*. Albany, NY: Weeds, Parsons, v. 5, p. 356-357.

Governor Hunter to the Lords of Trade.

Your Lordships will receive with this, the minutes of Council and all the Acts passed this last sessions, being nine. Publick and two Private ones, none of which want any observations only the Negro Act which thô much mitigated in its severities by the Council's amendments, I am apt to believe, your Lordships will still think too severe, but after the late barbarous attempt of some of their slaves nothing less could please the people; this leads me to acquaint your Lordships that by some private letters, I am informed that the Earl of Clarendon has given himself much trouble to obstruct the pardon of those I had reprieved, and that there was a pe[tition signed by many hands gone from thence for the same purpose; I am since sitisfy'd here, that there was such a petition secretly carry'd round by one Bickly a busy waspish man, who acted then as Attorney General; the grand design of that petition was to confirm some People in the belief of what he and his associates give out, that I have neither credit nor favour at home, the secondary one to give credit to his own infamous proceeding in that matter, for their being some Pique between him and Mr Regnier the master of one of the suspected Negroes after he had been twice acquitted by two different Jures of the most credible and substantial of the inhabitants here, he had him by some fetch of law try'd

again at the supream court, where he found a jury tractable to his purpose where he was found guilty: I solemnly protest to your Lordships that in what I have done I had no view but to save inôcent blood for by all the examinations and declarations of the evidence and the persons executed, I am convinced in my concience, that he is inocent of that fact or the contrivance of it as the child unborn, the others are spaniards unjustly kept in slavery here many years, and reprieved by that Bickley's own desire, but it was Clarke who came to desire the mistres of them to beg for a reprieve, about the time of their intended execution when the whole town seemed to acquiesce in their innocence and approve of the reprieve: Many who had signed that paper, have declared to several gentlemen that they knew nothing of contents thereof, but being told, that it was an address for a law to punish Negro Slaves, they signed it. I have in this acted according to conscience, and shall wait for the issue from her Majesty's determination, and only beg leave to observe upon this occasion, that if clandestine representations projected by an angry and designing man, and handed round to the unwary and ignorant for subscriptions, should gain credit and countenance at home, the Governor whoever he be, must have a very uneasy time of it, and knowing nothing of his accusation or accusors, and living remote from his equal and just Judges, suffers in his reputation and perhaps in his fortunes without a remedy.

C. Cost of the Execution

Source: Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York, Februray 4, 1713, vol. III, 27.

Order'd the Mayor Issue his warrant to the Treasurer to pay to Francis Harison ESqr Sheriff of the City & County of New York the sum of thirty Six pounds & ten pence Current Money of New York it being Money by him disburst and laid out for Iron Iron work Gibbitts Cartidge Labourers firewood and Other Materialls and Expences for the Executive of several Negro slaves for Murders by them Committed in April last as Appears by his Acct which is Audited and allowed

D. Restricting Night Time Movement

Source: Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York, Februray 28, 1713, vol. III, 28.

Order'd A Law be prepared to prohibit Negro and Indian slaves above the Age of fourteen years from going in the Streets of this City after Night without A Lanthorn and A lighted Candle therein under the penalty of Eight Shilings to be disposed of to the Person or Persons that shall Apprehend any such Negro or Indian slaves to be Recovered before the Mayor Recorder or any one of the Aldermen of this City who shall have full power to Committ such Negro or Indian slave to Gaol untill the Owner of such slave shall pay the said fine of Eight Shilings.

E. Law for Regulating Negro & Indian Slaves in the Night Time

Source: Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York, March 14, 1713, vol. III, 30-31.

Be it Ordained by the Mayor Recorder Aldermen & Assistants of the City of New York convened in Common Council and it is hereby Ordained by the Authority of the same that from and after the tenth day of this Instant Month of March no Negro or Indian slave above the Age of fourteen Years do presume to be or Appear in any of the Streets of this City on the south side of the Fresh water in the Night time above an hour after sun sett, And that if any such Negro or Indian slave or slaves as Aforesaid Shall be found in any of the Streets of this City within the Stockadoes or Fortifications or in any Other place on the south side of the fresh water in the Night time above one hours after sun sett without A Lanthorn and lighted Candle in itt as Aforesaid so as the light thereof may be plainly seen that then and in such Case it Shall and may be lawfull for any of her Majesties Subjects within the said City to Apprehend such slave or slaves not having such Lanthorn and Candle and forthwith Carry him her or them before the Mayor or Recorder or any one of the Aldermen of the said City who are hereby Authorized upon full proof of the Offence to Committ such slave or slaves to the common Gaol for such has her or their Contempt and there to Remain untill the Master or Mistress or Owner of every such slave or slaves shall pay to the

person or persons who Apprehended and Convicted such slave or slaves the sum of Eight Shilings Current Money of New York for his or their pains and trouble therein with Reasonable Charges of prosecution. And Be It Further Ordained by the Authority Aforesaid that Every slave or slaves that shall be Convicted of the Offence Aforesaid before he or they be discharged shall be whipped at the publick whipping post fourty lashes save one if desired by the Master or Owner of such slave or slaves any thing before in this Law Contained to the Contrary hereof in any wise Notwithstanding

F. Governor Hunter to the Lords of Trade (London, 1715)

E.B. O'Callaghan, ed. (1856). *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New-York; Procured in Holland, England and France*. Albany, NY: Weeds, Parsons, vol. 5, p. 460-461.

Whilst your Lordships have the several Acts past in these two provinces under your consideration, I think myself obliged to inform you, that some inconveniences have been discover'd in some of them since they have been enacted, particularly an Act passed in the 11th year of Her Majesty's Reign, entituled an Act preventing, suppressing & punishing the conspiracy and insurrection of Negroes and other slaves, wherein, among other things, it is enacted that if any Negroe &c, shall be made free by the Will or Testament of any Person deceased, that the Executors of such person shall enter into security &c, immediately upon proving said Will or Testament, which if refused to be given, the said Manumission to be void of no effect, but there being no penalty on ye executor refusing to enter such security, nor any method to compel him, he is left at his liberty to render every such manumission fruitless, which cutting off all hopes from those slave who by a faithful and dilligent discharge of their duty, may at last look for the reward of a manumission by their masters will, will make 'em not only careless servants, but excite 'em to insurrections more bloody than any they have yet attempted, seeing that by that Act death is made more eligible than life, for the longer they live the longer they are slaves, which is already too well known from the following instance; one Norton a butcher of this Town, dyed lately, and by his Will manumitted one of his Negroes who by his faithful and dilligent service, had helpt to gain most part of his masters Wealth, and gave him a legacy in money, and another Negroe to help him pursue the same Trade as a reward for his good service; The executor after Norton's death, proved the Will, but absolutely refused to enter into the security directed by the Act, by which means the Negro is deprived of his liberty and his Legacy; the rage the people were in for that insurrection, could only justyfy ye passing that Act in other instances equally cruel, There is also another Act passed in this Province and Jersey for shortning of law suits, & regulating the practice of the law, another in this Province for preventing the multiplicity of law suits, which Acts the Judges and other Officers of the supream courts have represented to me as distructive of the jurisdiction of those Courts; and being perpetual if more inconveniencies should be found, we have no remedy. The Assemblies in the Jersey's also past another act confirming the Ordnanace for establishing Fees, which was drawn by a committee of the Council & Assembly and trenches much upon the fees & perquisites of the Secretaries office; It is apparent that it was the dislike of the person then in that office, against whom they had so often represented, which made 'em go these lengths.

G. Lords of Trade to the Lords Justices (1719)

Source: E.B. O'Callaghan, ed. (1856). *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New-York; Procured in Holland, England and France*. Albany, NY: Weeds, Parsons, v. 5, p. 525.

The 6000 ounces [silver bullion] paid to the Assembly and 950 ounces allowed for Negroes, might have been raised as usual by ye Representative places for which they serve, and by the Counties where the Negroes were executed but the Assembly having saw it fit to provide for these debts in this rather than in other manner it is to be presumed that they were were assured this would be the most acceptable method to this Country.