

SLAVERY, SLAVE INSURRECTIONS, AND WHITE PARANOIA IN PRE-CIVIL WAR AMERICA

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Introduction

Roughly between the years of 500 to 1450 AD, the world languished in a period of economic and cultural regression, known as the Middle Ages; a time when human culture was organized around the institution of feudalism. With the feudal system at its center, a social system emerged which promoted the status quo, based upon barter and agriculture, and resistant to most any form of technological advancement. The two most advanced civilizations to develop during this period were located in the area of the Mediterranean and Northern Europe.

This period of economic and social stagnation made it possible for the church to rise in power to the point it was dominant over nearly every aspect of society. Not only did the church support feudalism as the cornerstone of society; it became an active participant, becoming the most active and ruthless institutional feudal lord in all of Europe. By 1450 AD the church had amassed enormous wealth and property, had become the seat of all political, economic, and spiritual power. The church ruled as a tyrant over economic life, labeling as sinful, any form of savings, working for profit, or investing, arguing that such endeavors would only detract one from the only acceptable prize for a man or woman to seek in life, the salvation of one's soul. Within this system, the only kind of wages not considered sinful were subsistence wages, with any form of material betterment in excess of subsistence labeled as sinful. In wielding almost absolute economic and spiritual power the church helped perpetuate a feudalistic cast-system, which would continue to influence European civilization long after the days of

Martin Luther. Not dissimilar to the revolutionary spirit which would engulf the American South four-hundred years later, the remnants of the cast system of the Middle Ages ultimately ignited a revolution which spread across Europe causing the most adventurous of men to seek their lot in the New World.

Social interaction during the Middle Ages was limited as few traveled or communicated with people outside their own community or social group. It not being uncommon for a man or woman to live to a ripe old age, and never have traveled more than ten (10) miles from their place of birth. In the Northern European climates, most all clothing was made from coarse wool, fine in the winter, but uncomfortable during the hot summer months. Foods were usually bland to the taste since cooking was done without the benefit of spices. New products and new ideas were literally unheard of. By the 10th Century, however, the security of the pastoral lifestyle became the first casualty of the New Age of the Crusades. Once the passion of adventure to seek one's fortune was unleashed, the fire and spirit of the Crusades spread across Europe as noblemen raised armies to storm the Holy Land and reclaim the region for Christianity. Men who had theretofore lived closed and simple lives now found themselves part of a great adventure, traveling for the first time outside their traditional homelands of Northern and Central Europe, destined to come into contact with new and strange cultures from the Orient and Middle East, and experience new products and ideas never before imagined. Not only did the crusades commercially open the door to the outside world; they also caused many to adopt new ways of thinking which would ultimately challenge the unquestioned authority and power of the church. By 1450 AD, Martin Luther and John Calvin came forward to challenge the power and authority of the church in both the

spiritual and economic realm. From a spiritual point of view, this challenge came in the form of the Reformation. Not only was the spiritual authority of the church challenged, likewise, many of the suppositions of church doctrine which had long consigned many average people to the economic slavery of feudalism fell into disrepute. The actions of Luther and Calvin caused the power of the church to erode, and in its place emerged an atmosphere of tolerance and a secular worldview, which came to be known as "humanism." A worldview which would ultimately restructure civilization.

During the period just preceding the Industrial Revolution, about 1450 to 1750 AD, several important forces concurrently emerged which would forever, and profoundly alter European society. The way had been paved, and the door opened for change by the virtual destruction of feudalism. Considering the isolation of society during the Middle Ages, contact with new cultures brought about by the Crusades now created a demand for new products that had never before been imagined. Europeans which had traveled to the Middle East as Crusaders brought back a myriad of new products never before seen in Europe, e.g., silks and fabrics, pepper, spices, woolen goods, meat preservatives etc. While some of the Crusaders fought in the Crusades and returned, others remained in the Middle East and intermarried with the local inhabitants. The civilized world of the 15th Century had been awakened and never would be the same again. This "re-awakening" of European culture marked a re-emergence of interest in science, medicine, art, and law, which had earlier been the purview of the ancients of Greece and Rome. Politically, as the feudal estates fell apart, new Nation States emerged. As society opened, the way was cleared for an emerging consumer demand, which began to drive a new interest for geographical exploration.

As the new commercial economy grew, a corresponding merchant class emerged. Soon it became apparent that a significant problem facing European trade was that all existing trade routes to the Far East were overland. This meant it took literally months for a caravan to overcome mountains, deserts, and bandits to transport goods from Asia to markets in Europe. As problems with trade routes worsened, the costs of transporting goods increased, prompting European merchants to seek more cost effective ways to get Asian goods to market, thus ending the control of east west trade by the Venetians and Genoans. The obvious answer was to find alternate and defendable sea routes for European merchant ships to the Near East and Asia. Responding to this new consumer demand, the Portuguese, Spanish, French, English, and Dutch explorers set about to find a route around the tip of Africa. One of the first of these explorers was Portugal's Vasco DeGamma. Financed by Prince Henry of Portugal, DeGamma discovered the first sea route around the coast of Africa at the Cape of Good Hope. DeGamma's discovery opened the way for a vast expansion of European trade, which in turn brought about many new businesses, e.g., banking. DeGamma's journey ushered in what became known as the "Commercial Revolution."

While the Portuguese were exploring the African coastline, an Italian mapmaker named Christopher Columbus set about on four (4) great voyages commencing in 1492. At that time, conventional wisdom held that the earth was flat, and if one sailed too far in any direction, he would simply sail off the edge of the earth into oblivion. Contrary to the learned men of his day, Columbus was convinced that the earth was round, and that if he sailed far enough west, he would eventually reach Asia. The future expeditions of Columbus ignited a hunger for exploration, ushering in a period identified by historians as the "Geographic Revolution." While Columbus was right about the shape of the earth, he was wrong about its size. In fact, the world was much larger than any of the mapmakers of that day ever imagined, (maybe as much as twice as big), and thus, as a result of Columbus' journeys, the mapping of the earth changed dramatically.

The Geographic Revolution set off an age of technological achievement, which witnessed the invention of the compass and the development of larger, more seaworthy ships, capable of long journeys. In addition, the art of mapmaking made great strides, developing more comprehensive and accurate maps of the earth's surface opening the way for long-range exploration. Advancements in exploration technology increased exponentially, leading to new discoveries by explorers like the Spaniard Balboa, who, while searching for gold in the Americas, crossed the Isthmus of Panama, and discovered a new sea. At the time, Balboa could only guess that he had discovered another ocean, and was later proven correct by the Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan.

Magellan set sail from Spain in 1519 on one of the greatest voyages in human history. One year after leaving Spain, Magellan sailed through a narrow waterway, (later named the Strait of Magellan), at the southern tip of South America. It took more than a month for Magellan to sail through the stormy Strait, but once through the Strait, he found himself upon an immense sea, a sea so vast and calm, he named it the Pacific Ocean. Two years later, in September, 1522, Magellan's small ship returned to Spain, carrying 18 of the original 237 sailors who had begun the historic journey. Killed and buried in the Philippines, Magellan was not among the survivors. Although he did not live to witness the end of the historic feat, Magellan's expedition proved that the lands Columbus had discovered were indeed part of a new world of continents, previously unknown to the Europeans of that day. In the years that followed, the Spanish sent soldiers to conquer the peoples of these new worlds, missionaries to convert them to Christianity, and merchants to open trade.

This new Age of Exploration gave rise to the institution of Mercantilism, an institution every bit as important to that day as feudalism had been to the Middle Ages. Mercantilism was an economic and political policy whereby one country would, by colonization, accumulate power and wealth. The bitterest rivalries of the day were centered around mercantilism and involved the Portuguese, Spanish, French, and British. The mercantilism of 1600s and 1700s was aimed at building a powerful, self-sufficient empire capable of competing in a world divided by religious wars and commercial rivalries. As these rivalries intensified, the power of each country was determined by the size of its army and navy. In

order to maintain a sufficient power base, a great deal of money was needed. An important part of a successful mercantile system was to develop and maintain a favorable trade. As in a modern economy, if a country had a favorable trade balance it could be (i) self-sufficient; (ii) wealthy, (its citizens could enjoy a high standard of living) and (iii) could build a strong navy, and consequently a strong merchant fleet maintaining its hold on power. A successful mercantile system was not defined just by the amount of goods exported and imported, but the type of goods. An important signature of a mercantile system was to import lower value raw materials from the colonies, and export higher value manufactured goods for sale back to those colonies. Thus, colonies became both a vast source of cheap raw materials, as well as markets for manufactured goods. It is understandable how the economic incentives of mercantilism became the catalyst for the economic rivalries that came to define the exploration of the New World.



In the 15th Century, the Spaniards conquered and destroyed the Inca, Aztec, and Mayan civilizations of Central and South America, and the Portuguese accomplished much the same in their colonies in Brazil and the Caribbean. In addition, numerous wars were fought between the French and British throughout the 16th and 17th Centuries over colonies and sea routes ranging from North America to India. In fact, in her long and glorious history, Great Britain seldom enjoyed a prolonged period of peace, largely due to the need to acquire and protect colonies acquired under the system of mercantilism.

Probably the most historic outgrowth of mercantilism was the birth of America, as a result of the American Revolution in 1776.

The Beginning of Black Slavery

Nearing the end of the Middle Ages, the northwestern coastline of the African Continent was home to three great empires located in the countries of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai. This region was home to a diverse population, speaking more than 250 different languages, including the three basic West African tongues, Sudanic, Bantu, and Hamitic. Different communities practiced distinct customs and developed their own distinct civilizations. It was from here that the slave trade would develop and flourish by the end of the 15th Century. By 1494 the intense competition between the Spain and Portugal to add colonies caused Pope Alexander IV to issue the Treaty of Tordesillas, granting Spain control of all of South America except for Brazil which was reserved to the Portuguese. During this period, the Portuguese began to trade with African tribal chiefs. Over the next 50 years, the emphasis of trade would shift from the production of natural resources to trading in human resources. As the New World continued to be settled by Europeans, demand grew for free labor in their new colonies. 1

Early in the sixteenth century, Africans and Europeans stood on pretty much equal footing. Kings exchanged pleasantries across color lines and addressed each other as colleagues. Europeans had become linked to the African continent by an economic structure dependent upon trade with distant merchants who provided spices, cloth, and other necessities. Initially, European

involvement in human bondage was minimal, however, by the end of the century, the need for labor in the colonial empires began to fracture this relationship. As Portuguese wealth dramatically increased due to its trading posts, which it had established along the African coastline, the Spaniards began to take notice, and take interest in the new developing market in human slaves. 2

The voyages of Columbus opened up an entirely new demand for human slaves. In 1500 the Portuguese had established a permanent settlement in Brazil. The settlement, comprised of Jesuit missionaries and native Indians, living side by side, had created a highly successful economy based upon the production of sugar. There was not enough manpower in Portugal, Brazil, or the entire Spanish Caribbean to satisfy the demand for labor created by the colony. Early efforts to enslave the Indians were not successful. Unlike imported slaves, they could flee into the jungle and disappear. Not only were they difficult to control, the Indians were not suited to the backbreaking work demanded by plantation life, and withered quickly in the fields. Also, European diseases, such as diphtheria, tuberculosis, and other diseases ran rampant through the Indians who had theretofore lived in isolation for centuries.

The Spaniards recognized sugar as the solution to the economic problems of their Central American and Caribbean settlements. But to operate efficiently, a sugar plantation needed a large, unquestioning workforce. The obvious answer was in African slaves, and by the mid-sixteenth century, African slaves were being used on the island colonies of Maderia and the Canaries. In 1505 African

1 Smead, Howard, The African-Americans, (Chelsea House Publishers, New York, 1989) pg. 21.

slaves arrived on the island of Hispaniola, and soon the Antilles sugar plantations were manned by African slaves. As European capital flowed into these sugar economies the entire complexion of the colonies changed. The die was cast. This marked the beginning of European involvement in the trafficking of slaves. 3



Having been long established in African trade, the Portuguese had the advantage of more connections along the coastline, and as a result, controlled the initial outflow of slaves. As trade flourished the price for slaves was driven upward, thus causing more intense competition. It was at this point the Atlantic slave traders entered the market exchanging European goods such as guns and textiles for African captives who were shipped to the New World at enormous profit. 4 As demand grew, African traders willingly obliged. In fact, the system worked much to the interest of the tribal leaders, allowing them to dispose of people they deemed undesirable, most often taken prisoner during battles with other tribes. 5 After being excluded from Africa by papal arbitration in 1493, Spain had to rely on these European merchants for its supply of slaves in their colonies.

In 1562, funded by English merchants, adventurer John Hawkins sailed to what is today Sierra Leone, where he and his men rounded up about 300 slaves and sailed with his cargo for Hispaniola. Hawkins traded the slaves in Hispaniola for ginger, pearls, and sugar, clearing a profit of about 12 percent. On a second

2 Johnson, Charles, and Smith, Patricia, Africans in America: America's Journey Through Slavery, (Harcourt Brace & Company, New York, NY 1998) pg. 8

3 Johnson and Smith, Africans in America, pg. 9

4 Johnson and Smith, Africans in America, pg. 9

voyage two years later, this time financed by Queen Elizabeth, Hawkins took more than 400 slaves to Panama, realizing a 60 percent profit. Hawkins would make three more trips to Africa, but his interference in the slave market infuriated the Spaniards. In the fall of 1568 a Spanish force overwhelmed Hawkins' fleet and confiscated his cargo. It was very clear, there were profits to be made, but those were to be the privy of the Spaniards, and there was no room for the likes Hawkins or the British. Hawkins fled, and England would essentially be excluded from the slave trade for another century, but when it returned, England would dominate the slave trade until its abolition in 1807. 6

The Evolution of Slavery in Colonial America

Early on, as a class, blacks in Colonial America were generally treated as indentured servants, but over time their status was destined to evolve into that of property. Some Africans were brought directly to the colonies as victims of the "slave trade," while others were unfortunate victims of the evolution of slavery, which would occur over many years.

Servitude was a common practice in England when the first 104 settlers reached Virginia in 1607. One of the more common types of English servitude was that of apprenticeship, which was an arrangement in which a young man contracted with a craftsman, through an indenture, for a specific period of service. During this time, the apprentice was supported financially while learning a skilled trade, but bound to work for his benefactor for a specified period of time after his training had ended until his debt had been repaid. For many a young

5 Smead, The Afro-Americans, pg.21.

6 Johnson, Africans in America, pg. 12.

man, this practice came to be a means of escaping the deplorable economic, political, and religious conditions in England, while supplying the needed labor for the developing colonies. Over time, as labor intensive tobacco plantations became more financially profitable, indentured servitude developed into a simple means of supplying agricultural laborers, not as a means intended to teach a craft. ⁷

The seed of slavery likely took root in the practice of indentured servitude in early Colonial Virginia. Early statutes in the Colony were used to transform the relationship of apprenticeship into that of indentured servitude, thus permitting English servants to be bought and sold freely, used as gambling stakes, transferred by will, and even taken by the Sheriff in satisfaction of a master's debt. Although it was common for a servant in England to have his services transferred to another master sometime during his term of servitude, the idea of selling servants en masse, was shocking to some early 17th Century Virginians. Captain John Smith denounced the practice as the "*pride, covetousness, extortion, and oppression*" of men who sold "*even men, women, and children for who will give most.*" ⁸

In 1619, John Rolfe wrote that the "*buying and selling [of] men and boies*" was "*held in England a thing most intolerable.*" ⁹ In 1625, Thomas Weston even refused to carry servants in his ship from Canada to Virginia because "*servants were sold heere upp and down like horses, and therefore he held it not*

⁷ McIlwaine, H.R., ed. Minutes of the Council and General Court of Colonial Virginia, 1622-32, 1670-1676, With Notes and Excerpts from Original Council and General Court Records, Now Lost, (Richmond, VA, 1924), pg 117.

unlawful to carie any" 10 Nonetheless, poor English men and women steadily supplied the demand for labor in Virginia's growing tobacco economy. Many saw the exchange of a few years of labor for transportation to the New World to escape the dismal living conditions in England as a good deal.

There is little evidence to clearly show the development of slavery from indentured servitude during the first half of the 17th century. There were, however, many important court decisions and events that allowed the English to adapt their civil laws to accommodate slavery. 11 According to sporadic records, the first Africans recorded in Virginia arrived on a Dutch ship off Point Comfort (today Hampton, Virginia), in August, 1619. Two officials from Jamestown, Governor George Yeardley and cape merchant, Abraham Piersey, purchased them in exchange for needed food. 12 Beyond this, there is very little information which would tell us who these Africans were, or how they were treated. However, a few years later, the census of 1624-25, lists all twenty-three (23) black residents of Virginia as servants, including those of Yeardley and Peirse. The consensus of opinion among historians, seems to be that the early black immigrants to Virginia were held as indentured servants, not as slaves.

Court records give historians an interesting glimpse into the life of the black indentured servant in 17th century Virginia. There were a few, like Anthony Johnson, who were not only given their freedom, but also eventually became

8 Arber, Edward ed. Travel and Works of Captain John Smith, President of Virginia and Admiral of New England, 1580-1631 (Edinburg: John Grant, 1910) pg. 618.

9 Arber, Travel and Works of Captain John Smith, pg 542.

10 McIlwaine, Minutes of the Council and General Court of Colonial Virginia pg. 82.

11 Billings, Warren, "The Laws of Servants and Slaves in 17th Century Virginia" Magazine of Historical Biography, Vol. 99, January, 1991) pgs. 54-55. 54-55.

landowners, and owned servants of their own. There are several cases, some dating as late as 1680, where black servants brought their masters to court and won suits that limited their indentures, or in a few cases, even won their freedom. From these cases, historians have concluded that lifetime servitude began for some blacks around the middle of the 17th century. The earliest recorded case of enslavement is July, 1640, when three (3) indentured servants, two (2) of which were white, and one black, were tried by the General Court for running away. The white servants were punished by adding four (4) years to their terms, while the black servant (John Punch) was to serve his master for the rest of his life. ¹³ In another case in 1654, John Casor, a black servant, filed suit against his master Anthony Johnson, a free black landowner. Johnson claimed however, that he had "*ye Negro for his life*" and won the case, thus extending Casor's term to a life indenture. ¹⁴

Historians agree that slavery in Virginia began through usage and custom, as one by one, the terms of black indentured servants were extended to life. Once established, the slave trade took over and slavery became a major institution in Colonial America. By the 1660s, the custom of slavery was recognized by law through statutes passed by the General Assembly at Jamestown. The laws that developed over the following three (3) decades reveal how it became increasingly difficult for black servants or slaves to gain their freedom. By 1683, eighteen (18) percent of Virginia's bondsmen were slaves,

¹² Kingsbury, Susan Myra, A.M. Ph.D. Records of the Virginia Company of London, Vol. 11, pg 243.

¹³ Decisions of the General Court, Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, (Vol. IV, 1898), pg. 236.

while in just twenty five (25) years later, this proportion had increased to forty (40) percent.¹⁵ By the close of the 17th century, slavery was the norm for all Africans coming to the tobacco colony of Virginia. With its roots planted at Jamestown, slavery in Virginia began gradually through practice and custom, and finally became established through law.

The Slave Trade

Every group in colonial life regarded the black man inferior. Slaves were taught only the simpler skills in farming, building, and manufacturing. As the colonies grew, the demand for slaves also grew. Many were captured by enemy tribes in central and western Africa, forced to march long distances over land, and sold to European slave traders at African ports. To prevent escape, they usually were shackled with iron collars, and linked together by chains. Many did not survive the trip to the African seaport. But, for those who did, European slave buyers would only select the strongest and most healthy. Upon being selected, the slaves were branded and packed into slave ships for transport to the New World. This journey came to be known as the *Middle Passage*, and would last for weeks. Conditions were so terrible that some killed themselves by jumping overboard, while others died of disease, and spoiled food. Up to one-third of the slaves on any ship would not survive the trip to the New World. The rate of death aboard the slave ships was so great, that sharks would trail along behind the ships. Through all of this, the slave traders and colonial shipping companies

14 Foner, Philip S., History of Black Americans: From Africa to the Emergence of the Cotton Kingdom, (Greenwood Press, Norwich, CT 1975) pg. 191.

15 Toppin, Edgar A., A Biographical History of Blacks in America Since 1528, (David McKay Company, New York, NY., 1969) pg. 41.

(many from northern states) made enormous profits. Upon arrival in the New World, the slaves were first taken to the West Indies where they were "*seasoned*" or broken in by overseers before they were imported into the colonies.

By the late 1760s, the English alone had shipped 3 million slaves to America, add to that number 250,000 which had died during the journey or been thrown overboard. By 1770, due to the economic success of slavery, the institution had gained official sanction when the British government granted an annual subsidy of 10,000 pounds sterling to the African Company and its successor, the Regulated Company, towards the maintenance of forts and posts in Africa. If there was any doubt as to the official position of the crown in this regard it was washed away in 1770 when King George III prohibited the Governor of Virginia to "*assent to any law by which the importation of slaves should be in any respect prohibited or obstructed.*"¹⁶ This official sanction of slavery would continue until Parliament officially ended the trafficking in humans in March 1807.¹⁷

Slavery in America

Eighteenth century slavery in America was not confined to the South. By the 1770s about 12,000 slaves lived in New England. Farms in New England were usually small, and would not economically support as many slaves as would the larger plantations of the South, thus, most slaves living in New England worked as household servants for wealthy families, while some worked

¹⁶ Durant, Will and Ariel, The History of Civilization: Rousseau and Revolution, (Vol. X, Simon & Schuster, New York, NY., 1976) pg. 732.

¹⁷ Durant, Will and Ariel, The History of Civilization: The Age of Napoleon, (Vol. XI, Simon & Schuster, New York, NY., 1995) pg. 526.

as farm laborers, lumberjacks, carpenters, barrel-makers, blacksmiths etc. Contrary to their brethren in the South, slaves in New England held some political rights. They could buy and own property, and they had the right of trial by jury. They could attend church as long as they sat in slave pews, but they could not become church members since membership included political rights, e.g., the right to vote, hold office etc. As a matter of practice, New Englanders regarded their slaves as adopted children, and in rare instances they were taught to read and write, even though it was against the law in most states. Even though, the slaves in New England had it much better than their counterparts in the South, they very much resented their condition.

In the Middle Colonies, i.e., New York, Pennsylvania, Delaware, New Jersey, slavery was not a common practice. The relatively small number of slaves in the Middle Colonies was small, maybe reaching no more than 35,000. In New York, household slaves were strictly separated from whites, and reports of violence between white owners and slaves were common. In Pennsylvania, and parts of New Jersey, Quakers were influential, and challenged the morality of slave labor as well as its usefulness, and began to speak out against it.

In the Southern colonies, slavery was a completely different matter. Of the 300,000 to 400,000 slaves who lived in North America in 1765, the vast majority lived in the Southern colonies. They labored in an almost indescribable existence on tobacco, sugar and rice plantations making an enormous contribution to the development of the South. As did the Portuguese in Brazil, at first Southern planters tried to enslave the Indians but it didn't work; then they

tried white indentured servants, but they were hard to get and keep. Black slaves were a more dependable source of labor, and thus, the demand that supported the slave trade escalated. Throughout 1600s and 1700 slavery grew rapidly in the southern colonies.



As the proportion of black slaves increased to white settlers in the colonies, whites became nervous. There was a growing fear that this large number of black slaves could, undermine the basic principle of "*white supremacy*." In response to this threat state legislatures passed a series of laws known as slave codes. These codes had dual purposes. The first was to safeguard the slave-owner's investment. The planters had a significant investment in their slaves, and it was realized that to educate them, or to allow them access to Christianity, etc., would only serve to raise expectations and eventually promote rebellion. The second purpose was to protect slave owners against the wrath of rebellious slaves. To prevent revolts, the codes provided that no white person could teach a slave to read or write, or introduce the slave to Christianity. Not surprisingly, the rigid enforcement of the slave codes often brought about resistance among the slaves. This resistance would often take the form of work slow downs or feigning illness, but sometimes slaves would strike back, or even run away. Unfortunately, due to the color of their skin, a runaway slave would not get far. Most slave-owners were paranoid, and as their paranoia grew, the punishments for all crimes became extremely cruel. Under slave codes, punishment was even worse. Minor crimes would often result in beatings,

while major crimes would likely result in death. Often, slave-owners kept control of slaves by the threat of selling a family member should a valued slave fall into disfavor.

A few freed slaves lived in every colony. Descendants of early indentured servants often inherited their freedom. As a matter of law, children of a white mother regardless of the father's race were free. Occasionally, masters would free a slave for years of faithful service. Most free blacks earned their living as skilled workers, some owned small farms and some even owned businesses. Although they were considered free, no black could vote in any colony, except for a short period of time in North Carolina. In short, blacks were regarded as a class apart whether slave or free.

Slavery in Early South Carolina

During a four-year period from 1735 to 1739, eleven thousand Africans passed through Sullivan's Island. Most were from the region of Angola, and it was rumored that these slaves were particularly prone to rebellion. The conditions under which these people lived on South Carolina's rice plantations were terrible. 18

In 1739, a slave by the name of Jemmy decided it was time for the suffering to stop. Jemmy was a recent import from Angola, and had been accepted immediately and had become very popular with the Africans on Sullivan's Island. Using this popularity Jemmy was able to build important alliances between the Angolans, as well as people from other African countries, and those blacks borne in America. Finding these people shared the

fundamental language of slaves, Jemmy hatched a plan and the people listened.

19

The year 1739 was a year of particular discomfort to the slave-owners in South Carolina. A steady stream of slaves had been running away from their masters and fleeing to St. Augustine, Florida seeking freedom offered by the Spanish. In February, rumors of a slave uprising were rampant throughout the colony. In April, four slaves joined an Irish indentured servant, stole horses, and in the process killed one white man and wounded another while riding to St. Augustine. In July, Spanish troops were rumored to taking up positions off the South Carolina shoreline, but in September, England and Spain went to war and the immediate threat to the slave-owners in South Carolina abated. 20

On September 9, 1739, driven by the freedom promised by the Spaniards, Jemmy led about twenty slaves, most of them Angolan, to the Stono Bridge, south of Charleston on their way to St Augustine. At Stono they overwhelmed the proprietors of the general store and took firearms and gunpowder. The runaways killed the proprietors, (Mr. Robert Bathurst and Mr. Gibbs) severing and leaving their heads on the doorstep as they made their way south. While retribution was the driving force behind this rebellion, its purpose was to send a clear message to whites that had become rich on the backs of the slaves. Along the way, Jemmy and his renegades killed the Godfrey and Lemy families, but conspicuously spared the lives of several other families who had a reputation of having been good to their slaves. By day's end, Jemmy and his followers had

18 Johnson, [Africans in America](#), pg. 94.

19 Johnson, [Africans in America](#), pg. 95.

killed more than twenty people. The following letter from South Carolina appeared in a London publication *Gentleman's Magazine*:

"They increased every Minute by new Negroes coming to them; so that there were about Sixty, some say a Hundred; on which they halted in a field, and set to Dancing, Singing, and beating Drums, to draw more Negroes to them, thinking they were victorious over the whole Province, having marched ten Miles, and burnt all before them without Opposition."
21

The expected support from the Spanish never materialized, and planning to eventually slip into the woods and disappear, the celebration by the rebels was short lived. Soon the runaways were being pursued by an enraged Carolina Militia, which was leaving the heads of dead rebels on fence posts along the route of their pursuit. Even with the obvious disadvantage of power, Jemmy's men stood their ground as if to say *"If I live, I live free. If I die I die free."* Although they were called slaves by white society, these men had shrugged off their lowly station in life to wage war against their captors. Jemmy's men stood strong in the face of the Carolina Militia and died free. At least fourteen of Jemmy's men were killed, while the remainder, and were shot after capture. Although the insurrection failed, with more men and time it is possible that Jemmy's rag tag army might well have prevailed. Had that happened, the white community of the South would have been forced to confront both the moral price as well as the inherent danger in holding slaves. By the same token, slaves would have had some encouragement that slave revolts could succeed. 22

20 Johnson, *Africans in America*, pg. 95.

21 Johnson, *Africans in America*, pg. 96.

22 Johnson, *Africans in America*, pg. 106.

Although the Carolina Militia quickly quashed the uprising, the insurrection sent a clear message to slave and slaveholder alike in South Carolina as well as throughout the south. To the slaveholder the message was that “as long as slavery exists, you will never be safe.” From that day forward, the slave population would have to be unconditionally controlled. As a result of this failed insurrection, the slave codes passed in 1740 restricted the movement of slaves, as well as communal gatherings and outlawed the teaching of a slave to read or write. To the slave the message was “you can’t win.” The power and will of the slaveholding elite in the South, would prevail and crush any future insurrections through brute power.²³

Slavery in New York City

At the time of the insurrection at Stono Bridge, New York City had the second largest population of Africans in the American Colonies. When the colonists in New York heard of the massacre at Stono Bridge their anxiety mounted, fearing that it was only a matter of time until similar violence spread throughout their city. The southern tip of Manhattan Island was home to eleven thousand people, one of five of which was a slave. Only Charleston had a denser slave population. This concentration of slaves had come about by virtue of merchant trade with the West Indies. New Yorkers traded foodstuffs for slaves, which were not a necessity, but were mostly used for domestic service. Slave women within the three square mile area of Manhattan were the largest segment of the city’s black population; African men worked mostly as man-servants, stable hands, drivers, or in some cases as craftsmen or merchants.

²³ Johnson, Africans in America, pg. 96.

There had been trouble with the slaves in New York before. In April 1712 rampaging slaves had burned buildings and laid in wait for the whites to come to extinguish the flames. Before it was over, at least nine white men were killed. Thus, whites in New York had good reason for concern as word spread of the rebellion in South Carolina. Whites were concerned by the strength of the many young black men in the city as well as their ability to communicate through their shared language, which none of the whites understood. There was a certain intimidation in the manner in which the blacks avoided many of the laws intended to control them. By law, slaves were not allowed to be on the streets of New York City after dark, have money, or gather in numbers greater than three. These laws were broken publicly, and for the most part, the whites failed to respond with enforcement action. Thus, lax control granted many slaves in New York City a good deal of independence. 24

Other factors also were to blame in fueling the paranoia of New Yorkers during the winter of 1740. Spain was at war with England, and it would take a fleet of Spanish ships less than ten days to sail from the tip of Florida into New York harbor, and the French could easily cross the Canadian border and approach the city from the north. Thus, during the winter of 1740, New York City was a pretty dismal place. Food and firewood were in short supply and grain prices had spiraled out of control. A special fund for the poor had been exhausted, and rumors spread that angry slaves planned to poison the water

24 Johnson, Africans in America, pgs. 107-08.

supply. The question was not if disaster would come, but when it would come.

25

Finally, in March 1741 the governor's residence at Ft. George on the southern tip of Manhattan Island was set afire. By mid afternoon the building had burned to the ground. The torching of additional public buildings over the next three weeks followed. While it could not be proven, most New Yorkers believed slaves bent on vengeance or by an open act of rebellion had set the fires. A black man named Cliff Philipse was seen running from the scene of a burning building, and according to many that was a signal that the long-expected uprising had begun. In response, every black male in New York City over the age of sixteen years was hunted down and locked up in the city jail. Solely on the basis of highly questionable testimony of Mary Burton, a sixteen year old indentured servant, two slaves named Caesar and Prince were charged with burglary and hanged. Additionally, slaves Cuff and Roosevelt's Quack were likewise convicted of arson and conspiracy. Although initially granted a stay of execution, an angry mob broke into the jail, took the men and killed them anyway. Mary Burton continued to talk; on July 1, 1741 Judge Horsmanden convicted five Spanish Negroes who were also hanged. Over the next few weeks, others were hanged or banished from New York. Burton also accused English schoolteacher John Ury of being a Jesuit priest in disguise who was inciting the slaves to violence. On August 28, Ury was also hanged. 26

25 Johnson, *Africans in America*, pg. 108.

26 Johnson, *Africans in America*, pg. 110.

The message was clear that Manhattan's slave population had to be brought under stricter control. In his report on the sad affair, Judge Horsmanden wrote that given their track record, the slaves would likely revolt again, and pled with New York City to free and expel all black people. A city populated only by white men was the only way to stop the development of a society that most New Yorkers did not understand, and feared. 27 But slavery did not go away in New York. At least not right away. Even after the "Plot of 1741" upon which most blamed on the Spanish, nothing could stop the spread of slavery. By the late 1740s there were over 150,000 slaves in British North America. In 1750 Georgia, the last holdout colony legalized slavery. Now, there was no place in British North America where slavery did not exist. 28

Rebellion in St. Domingue, 1791

In 1791 slaves rebelled against years of terrible treatment on the Caribbean island colony of Haiti, known then as St. Domingue. Conditions under which the slaves lived were so terrible that one in ten slaves who arrived there was dead within four years. Often death came to the slave on St. Domingue in horrible ways, but life was little better, often including torture, starvation, mutilation, and rape. A combination of anger and frustration over living conditions as well as voodoo mysticism eventually sparked insurrection. This was exacerbated by the fact that contrary to existing laws, slaves on St. Domingue

27 Johnson, Africans in America, pg. 111.

28 Johnson, Africans in America pg. 112.

moved and communicated freely, and had been relatively free to practice their voodoo rites. 29

By the end of July, an elaborate plot for rebellion had been developed in and around LeCap. The plot had been hatched and spearheaded by a voodoo priest, and headman on a local plantation named Boukman. The first act of rebellion came when a group of rebellious slaves confronted two French colonial deputies on their way to a Colonial Assembly. The slaves were soon overcome and arrested. During the investigation of the incident, some of the slaves questioned hinted of a coming rebellion, but the whites discounted the notion since few believed the blacks capable of organizing a rebellion of any significance.

On the night of August 22, 1791, the leaders of the rebellion met in a forest clearing where Boukman reviewed final instructions and led those present in a prayer that dammed the whites to eternal condemnation.

“The God who created the sun, which gives us light, who rouses the waves and rules the storm, thought hidden in the clouds, he watches us. He sees all that the white man does. The god of the white man inspires him to crimes, but our god calls upon us to do good works. Our god who is good to us orders us to revenge our wrongs. He will direct our arms and aid us. Throw away the symbol of the god of the whites who has too often caused us to weep, and listen to the voices of liberty, which speaks in the hearts of us all.” 30

According to Boukman and his revolution, the symbol of the white god was the cross.

29 Johnson, *Africans in America*, pg. 249.

30 Johnson, *Africans in America*, pg. 250.

Shortly after 10 P.M. the slaves on all plantations around LeCap from Acul to Flaville to Gallifet armed themselves with knives, swords, and torches and invaded the homes of their masters. They raped, murdered, and set fire to white homes and the fields, which they had been tending. Whites were dismembered, sawed in half, nailed to posts and fences, and women were raped as they lay on the bodies of their dead husbands. The most ghoulish act committed by the slaves was the impaled head of a white baby on a sword, which was then paraded through the streets of the capital. Most of this violence was directed against slave-owners who had been particularly brutal, and the rebelling slaves took care to protect the lives and property of those slave-owners who had treated their slaves with compassion.

While the rebellion initially caught the whites by surprise, it was not long before the shock wore off and they began to fight back. Believing they were made invincible by their god Ogun, (an African god of war) the slaves charged the muskets of the whites, and tried to stop cannon fire with their hands in an effort to overrun and destroy LeCap. As the whites began to take control, they formed cordons to contain the revolt and then began to invade slave strongholds. *(Johnson Pg. 251)* A soldier named du Rouvay, who had been placed in charge of the defenses of LeCap formed a squad of planters and militia, and during a battle at Gallifet plantation, 600 slaves were killed. After the whites had regained control, many blacks paid dearly on the gallows for their brutal attempt at freedom. In fact, the purge continued on and off on St. Domingue over the next thirteen years.

The Effects of St. Domingue in America

St. Domingue was only about a week's sail from America, and news of the rebellion spread quickly as a reminder to the White slave-owners of the potential dangers in owning slaves. To the whites, slaves always had an eye to freedom and were very capable of using brutality and violence to gain it. Many whites feared the violence in St. Domingue would become a precedent that would ultimately turn all blacks everywhere into enemies. If such an economic enterprise as St. Domingue could be brought to its knees, rebellion could easily spread to Virginia, Georgia, South Carolina, or New York. These fears were not entirely unfounded. In 1793 three slaves set fire to Albany, New York. Three years later, a series of mysterious fires broke out along the east coast, and the rumor quickly spread that the fires were an organized attempt to burn out urban slave-owners. 31

In 1799, a slave named Gabriel, caught stealing a pig, and was brought to the courthouse in Richmond to answer for his crime. Unfortunate for Gabriel, the crime went far beyond the theft of a pig. Gabriel was a very big man, well over six feet tall, and was well known to be an adept fighter. Unwilling to sit still and take the punishment he knew was coming, Gabriel wrestled the pig's owner to the ground and bit off a piece of his ear. Gabriel could have gotten away with a beating for stealing the pig, but assault on a white man was a capital crime. Although Gabriel escaped execution by a loophole in the law, he was branded with a hot iron in open court as a lesson to other slaves who might have the inclination in the future to assault a white man. Inspired by the rebellion in St.

Domingue, Gabriel began to hatch a plot to organize a rebellion among the slaves in Richmond. A skilled blacksmith, Gabriel was allowed by his master to hire himself out on his own time. Using that time, Gabriel began to enlist other slaves to join him in his plot. As the plan began to take shape, one of Gabriel's lieutenants told a potential recruit "*the Negroes are about to rise and fight the white people for our freedom.*" The recruit responded "*I was never so glad to hear anything in my life.....I could slay the white people like sheep.*" It was agreed between the conspirators that all whites were to be killed except the Quakers, Methodists, and the Frenchmen. They also agreed to spare all poor white women who had no slaves. 32

Although inspired by the uprising in St. Domingue as well as the American Revolution, Gabriel was not intent on sparking a widespread uprising, but wanted to keep his rebellion on a manageable scale, bringing about just enough havoc to bring the whites to the bargaining table. In short, he only wanted to put the freedom of the black slaves of Richmond on the negotiating agenda. Ultimately, two slaves betrayed the uprising and Gabriel and his comrades were captured. At his trial on October 6, 1800 Gabriel was found guilty; he and 27 other black men were executed. As a sidebar, the owners of the executed men were fully reimbursed for their losses. Gabriel's owner, Thomas Prossor was paid \$1,954.99.

31 Johnson, *Africans in America*, pg. 253.

32 Johnson, *Africans in America*, pg. 254.

In the aftermath of the Gabriel rebellion, paranoia swept through the white population of Virginia. At the same time, another disturbing trend was taking shape. The free black population was steadily on the increase. By 1810 more than thirty thousand freemen lived in Virginia; fifty years later, Virginia had the second largest number of free blacks of any state in the nation. Although the Richmond rebellion did not materialize, it did attract attention of whites throughout the south. As he traveled through the south, Jesse Torrey, a northern traveler recorded the following observations.

"[O]ne cannot go to bed in the evening without the apprehension of being massacred before morning!....[M]asters and overseers are obliged to retreat to some secure place during the night or employ armed sentinels....A gentleman of high respectability lately informed me, that he personally knew a master of slaves, who retreated every night into an upper room, the entrance into which was by a trap door, and kept an axe by his side for defense." 33

The fear was real. The violence of the rebels in St. Domingue scared American slave-owners. Not only did these rebels kill white men; they were setting in motion events, which would eventually eliminate slavery. An idea not lost on the white slave-owners. In 1801, the rebels of St. Domingue undertook took a bold step to write a constitution, built around the elimination of slavery. The former slave Toussaint L' Overture, who was now governor of St. Domingue was the author of that constitution.

Also, in 1801 Thomas Jefferson became President of the United States. At the time of his inauguration, the population of the United States was

33 Johnson, Africans in America, pg. 257.

5,308,000, 900,000 of which were slaves. 34 During the time he was Vice President, and fearing the influence of Haiti on events in the United States, Jefferson had urged the government to cease trade with Toussaint, but Congress overrode Jefferson and continued the profitable trade relationship. Jefferson had called Toussaint and his rebels cannibals, fearing the revolution begun in Haiti might find its way to the United States. In one of his first official acts as president, Jefferson named Tobias Lear his consul to St. Domingue. Toussaint was not impressed with Lear when his credentials were presented, but finally reluctantly accepted him and appointment as consul. 35

Believing that only whites of European descent were entitled to advancement through revolution, Jefferson dismissed the Haiti revolution as an illegal attempt by property to obtain freedom where it was not deserved. Jefferson outlined his fear of a similar revolution in the United States in a letter to St. George Tucker saying,

“[W]e shall be the murderers of our own children.....[T]he revolutionary storm, now sweeping the globe, will be upon us....[O]nly a single spark is wanting.” 36

In 1802 the French again tried to recapture what they had lost in the revolution by invading St. Domingue but were soundly defeated. In the battle, Napoleon lost 35,000 troops, and on January 1, 1804 the rebels established a country that was free and independent. 37 The revolution took thirteen years and cost more than 100,000 lives. Since Napoleon could no longer use Haiti as a

34 Johnson, *Africans in America*, pg. 257.

35 Johnson, *Africans in America*, pg. 258.

36 Johnson, *Africans in America*, pg. 265.

military post to protect French interests in the New World, he abandoned the New World altogether, less some presence in Canada. Benefiting from the misfortune of the French, Jefferson was able to purchase 830,000 square miles of territory known as the Louisiana Purchase for a mere \$15 million. 38

Freedom in Philadelphia

There was certainly nothing benevolent about slavery. In the South a virtual police state had been established to keep the slaves in their place. This was done with a vast network of overseers and militia, as well as federal troops and hired guards. In Philadelphia conditions were different, but not a whole lot better. A former overseer Thomas Branagan circulated a pamphlet suggesting that all free blacks, which he termed the “poison fruit” of slavery, be shipped to Louisiana Territory. Conditions under which blacks lived in Philadelphia had deteriorated rapidly. On July 4, 1805 black citizens were driven away from Independence Hall by whites as they were trying to observe the celebration of the country’s independence, and were not allowed to return until after the Civil War. The next year, 1806, a bill banning black migration to Philadelphia was introduced into the Pennsylvania legislature, but it didn’t pass.³⁹

To counter these efforts to limit their liberty, free blacks closed ranks and joined forces to protect themselves both physically and economically. Part of this effort was the formation of churches, which soon became the cornerstones of the black communities. On April 9, 1816, soon after the a decision Pennsylvania Supreme Court removing the Bethel Church from white Methodist authority, the

37 Johnson, *Africans in America*, pg. 265.

38 Johnson, *Africans in America*, pg. 266.

African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church united congregations from Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey into what would become the most visible and powerful African American institution in the country. 40

Real trouble began for the AME on January 1, 1817 with the founding of the American Colonization Society (ACS). The purpose of this organization was to re-settle blacks in colonies outside the United States. The ASC included many prominent southern slaveholders, e.g., Henry Clay, John C. Calhoun, and Bushrod Washington. Francis Scott Key, the man credited with writing the Star Spangled Banner was a member of the organization's constitution committee. Although black Massachusetts merchant Paul Cuffe had advocated such a move for years, membership in the ASC was restricted to whites. 41

Cuffe was a Quaker convert who was a native of New Bedford, Massachusetts who had a vision of Christianizing West Africa and providing America's free blacks a place where they could live, and truly be free. With the support of Quaker merchants, he sailed to Sierra Leone in late 1810, and upon his return attempted to organize the Philadelphia branch of the Friendly Society of Sierra Leone, a group interested in promoting trade between black Americans and the people of that nation. Suddenly, the War of 1812 erupted and his plans were put on hold. 42

When the American Colonization Society held its first organizational meeting in Washington D.C., Richard Rush, the son of Benjamin Rush, one of

39 Johnson, *Africans in America*, pg. 275.

40 Johnson, *Africans in America*, pg. 276.

41 Johnson, *Africans in America*, pg. 276.

42 Johnson, *Africans in America*, pg. 276.

the signers of the Declaration of Independence, was Vice President. The ACS felt that blacks in America walked a tightrope. They were no longer subjected to the indignities of their slave counterparts in the South, but they also didn't share the same social position as white men. A dilemma which gave rise to the argument that they should be deported to black colonies in Africa. The plan was for the organization to purchase a large tract of land in Sierra Leone, then try to entice American blacks to emigrate. Once the idea of colonization spread, chapters of the ACS sprang up in the Carolinas, Virginia, Maryland, and Georgia. The goal of the ACS was to remove "free people of color" from their colonies, but the legal or moral status of slavery was never challenged. The ACS vowed to not interfere with the rights of slave-owners. 43

On January 15, 1817, a meeting among free blacks in Philadelphia was scheduled at the Bethel Church to discuss the ACS proposal. Three thousand men packed the pews (no women were present). The meeting was headed by Ministers Richard Allen, Absalom Jones, John Gloucester, and James Forten, all black men favoring leaving Philadelphia and returning to Africa. In reality, these men realized that all of their efforts to end slavery had failed, and that the territory acquired via the Louisiana Purchase was only aiding the spread of slavery. Ultimately, however, it was the ordinary citizens of the community that would set the course of action, not the leaders. In short, there was not a soul present, other than the leaders, who favored returning to Africa. After the meeting in

43 Johnson, Africans in America, pg. 278.

Philadelphia, signs of growing black independence began to appear everywhere.

44

The AME Church in Charleston an the Vesey Rebellion

Following the lead of Philadelphia's black leadership, black Methodists in Charleston began to move towards independence from the white Methodist Church. The idea was that the church would be the most ideal institution to guide America's blacks toward emancipation. To many whites, this was a frightening development in the only state in America in which blacks held the majority population. To the white Methodists, this action was seen as rebellion, and they immediately moved to take away the autonomy from the black church. However, instead of weakening the black church, the act of rebellion sparked an overall movement of secession within the church membership based upon the ideal of independence. In 1817, 4,376 black Methodists resigned from the mainstream church and formed a new AME church that in just one year, would grow to be second only to Bethel as the largest black church in America. 45

Now, for the first time, new doors, long closed to blacks began to open. Suddenly blacks were part of a world in which the same God who cared about everyone else, cared for them as well. This was an idea that could not be tolerated by the white Christian establishment in Charleston. White ministers had long taught a gospel that was definitely pro-slavery; after all, Jesus had not openly condemned slavery.

44 Johnson, *Africans in America*, pg. 279.

45 Johnson, *Africans in America*, pg. 286.

In 1818, the city of Charleston closed the Hamstead church, which had become the focal point of the movement. When this happened, a black man by the name of Denmark Vesey and other church members began to talk about outright rebellion. Vesey, a polygamist, was an enterprising mulatto and former slave who purchased his freedom with lottery money. He had long been incensed by the treatment of the black community by whites. Vesey was known by those closest to him as ornery, hot headed, and a man lacking compassion. Vesey was a voracious reader and an outspoken critic of blacks who kowtowed to white authority. Vesey viewed the God of the Old Testament as a God of vengeance who raised His sword for justice, rather than a God of love, and this was the God he was going to call upon. 46

As a former slave, Vesey had been the property of Joseph Vesey, a slave-ship captain, and during his bondage had experienced the most brutal existence as a slave. He was in St. Domingue briefly before the rebellion, and later in South Carolina. At a time when he was in South Carolina, Vesey was forced to bring slaves ashore and transport them to the slave pens of Charleston. Although he had been able to purchase his freedom, at least one of his wives and all of his children were in bondage, and remained such when Vesey died. But as a free man, Vesey was a strong leader in the African church, and as such, decided that it was high time to free the blacks of Charleston from their shackles. For at least four years, Vesey had been hatching a plan for rebellion, and when it came time to put his plan into motion, he called upon a huge imposing black man from Angola named Gullah Jack, who had remained close to the homeland,

46 Johnson, Africans in America pg. 287.

continuing the practice of ancient tribal rituals. In issuing their call to action, the rebels employed a combination of traditional African beliefs and Scriptural principles taken from Exodus 21:16. Excluded from their plan were those slaves who had received gifts from their masters as well as AME pastor Morris Brown, with whom Vesey had many disagreements. Brown was concerned with the spiritual welfare of his congregation and was trying to keep his flock in focus with the Charleston community. To Vesey, Brown had simply sold out to the white establishment. 47

Although probably one of the best planned of the American slave rebellions, Vesey's uprising was over before it began. In May of 1822, just prior to the commencement of the plan, a Charleston slave revealed the plot. Soon Vesey and his fellow conspirators were rounded up, and their trials lasted over the next two months. The white citizens of Charleston were shocked at the scope of the rebellion, and felt betrayed that so many trusted servants of high standing were involved. More than one hundred men and women were jailed, questioned, and released. Overall, thirty-five black men were executed. In July, the state of South Carolina executed twenty-two of Vesey's men, all slaves, at one time. All were sentenced to hang, but because the platform upon which they stood was so low, their necks did not break when they fell, and instead of an instant death, each of the men dangled agonizingly from the end of their ropes as they strangled. Seeing the mess the affair had turned into, the captain of the guard rode past each man and shot them in the head, ending their suffering. 48

47 Johnson, *Africans in America*, pg. 288.

48 Johnson, *Africans in America*, pg. 289.

During Vesey's trial, magistrate Lionel Kennedy spoke of a lack of understanding why Vesey, a free man, would become involved, much less hatch such a plan. However, in his failed attempt at insurrection Vesey had proved that the fates of free blacks and slaves were inextricably linked. At the trial of Gullah Jack, the court took particular exception to his open and frequent boasting of invincibility.

"In the prosecution of your wicked designs, you were not satisfied with resorting to natural and ordinary means, but endeavored to enlist on your behalf, all the powers of darkness, and employed for that purpose the most disgusting mummery and superstition...Your days are literally numbered. You will shortly be consigned to the cold and silent grave, and all the powers of darkness cannot rescue you from your approaching fate."
49

When the trials were over, the white citizens of South Carolina insisted upon the passage of public laws designed to control the movement of, and communication between blacks. Church assemblage was monitored, reading and writing was forbidden, and mail was censored. Again, the anger of the white community focused upon the AME church, as an angry mob tore down the Charleston church, brick by brick. To the blacks the church had always represented a sense of autonomy, and to the whites, autonomy meant danger. However, the destruction of the church building did not bring the church down, as its members continued to meet in secret. Finally, the church was re-built in 1865 by Vesey's youngest son. While the black citizens of Charleston continued their meetings in secret, the physical destruction of the church did have the effect of

49 Johnson, Africans in America, pgs. 289-90.

weakening the bond between AME's strongest congregation in Philadelphia and the branches of the church in the slave states. 50

The Nat Turner Rebellion

Five days before Gabriel was hanged in Virginia for his attempt to incite insurrection, a black woman slave gave birth to a baby son who became known as "Nat Turner." It is said that upon giving birth, the woman, unable to bear the thought of giving up her newborn son to slavery, tried to kill him, but was stopped at the last moment. Nat Turner was inspired by religion at an early age, as he grew up listening to sermons by white preachers who used the Word of God to justify keeping slaves. Turner's zeal for religion, mixed with the few discipline problems he seemed by nature to already have set the foundation for Turner's radicalization as an adult. Turner's pre-occupation with religion was so intense, he once returned to his master after a successful escape saying the spirit had come to him and told him to return. By the time Nat Turner had grown to manhood, the spirit of God's hand and revolution, coupled with an intense hatred of slavery and slave-owners burned deep inside him. According to Turner:

"I heard a loud noise in the heavens, and the spirit instantly appeared to me and said the Serpent was loosened, and Christ had laid down the yoke and had borne for the sins of men, and that I should take it on and fight against the Serpent, for the time was fast approaching, when the first should be last and the last should be first. And immediately.....the seal was removed from my lips, and I communicated the great work laid out for me to do....I should arise and prepare myself, and slay my enemies with their own weapons." 51

50 Johnson, Africans in America, pg. 290.

51 Johnson, Africans in America, pg. 309.

Visions were nothing new to Nat Turner. He had them regularly, and had come to believe that God had appointed him as His executor on earth. Turner firmly believed he had been sanctioned by God to strike out against the evils of slavery, and soon began to speak of himself and his vision almost in a prophetic manner.

“I saw white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle, and the sun was darkened....and I heard a voice saying, Such is your luck, such you are called to see, and let it come rough of smooth, you must surely bear it.”

At midnight, August 21, 1831, Nat Turner and a small group of co-conspirators set out on the road to Jerusalem, Virginia, killing as they went. In his own words, Turner began his killing spree with his own master.

“[A]rmed with a hatchet and accompanied by Will, I entered my master’s chamber; it being dark, I could not give a deathblow: the hatchet glanced from his head. He sprang from the bed and called his wife; it was his last word.”

Unlike Gabriel or Denmark Vessey, Turner had no clear plan. He had made no provision for eluding pursuers, and the small band of seven slaves had simply set out to kill as many white people as they could. In Turner’s own words:

“[W]e entered and murdered Mrs. Reese in her bed while [she was] sleeping; her son awoke, but it was only to sleep the sleep of death; he had only time to say..Who is that? And he was no more. Having murdered Mrs. Waller and ten children, we started for Mr. William Williams. Having killed him and two little boys that were there; while [we were] engaged in this, Mrs. Williams fled...but she was pursued, overtaken....after showing her the mangled body of her lifeless husband, she was told to get down and lay by his side, where she was shot dead.” 52

52 Johnson, Africans in America, pg. 311.

Turner's bloody rampage continued for thirty-six hours. As it went along, the rebellion grew and began to draw recruits. Soon the band of insurrectionists numbered 150-160 men. The most trusted 15 or 20 rode in front of the main body riding frantically at their victims causing horror and cutting off all escape routes. At times, Turner himself had not caught up with the advance riders at a home before the murders had been committed. That night, at least 57 white men, women, and children lost their lives. Putnam Moore, the young boy who was the legal owner of Nat Turner was killed in his bed. By August 23, Virginia Militia as well as federal forces from Fort Monroe, and detachments from the warships USS Warren, and USS Natchez had joined the hunt. In all, approximately 3,000 white men fought to crush the insurrection, and at least 100 innocent blacks died in the backlash which followed. Almost 50 of the insurrectionists were caught immediately, but Nat Turner continued to elude capture for 6 weeks. Finally, in October he was taken into custody. Unrepentant, Turner openly confessed to his murderous rampage, and was hanged on November 11, 1831. 53



As the population of black slaves grew in America, white paranoia continued to grow, especially after the Nat Turner affair. In 1800 there were 900,000 slaves in the United States; by 1830 the population had grown to over 2,000,000; by 1836 2.3 million; and by 1861, 4 million. For the most part, this paranoia was well justified. By its very nature, slavery created an environment for racial conflict. On occasion, slaves refused to work, demanded concessions,

53 Johnson, Africans in America, pg. 311.

rejected orders, threatened whites, and sometimes resorted to violence. Despite severe punishments, or maybe because of them, challenges to white authority remained a central part of the institution of slavery. 54

While there were merciful slave-owners, often slaves were cruelly punished for the slightest infraction. There is record of one woman in Virginia who punished her slaves by striking them with her heavy household keys until blood flowed. Other methods of punishment used to chastise slaves for “talking about white men’s business were manacles, stocks, pillories, iron neck collars, gags (a circular iron band which passed through the mouth and around the lower part of the head which a thick piece of metal that covered the tongue). Barrel punishment was reserved for runaways. The slave was placed in an upright barrel, which forced him to crouch while at the same time his arms were confined leaving his head exposed. Molasses was then smeared on his head and face to attract flies and intensify his misery. 55

As one might expect, slaves often reacted violently when they were traded or sold. Some might runaway, refuse to obey orders, threaten fellow slaves or overseers, or strike out against white authority. In this regard, open defiance by slaves was not uncommon. In fact, in most sections of the South slaves were generally distrusted by whites as being potentially violent. Confrontations were not restricted to the plantation; it being not uncommon for strife to occur in a

54 Franklin, John Hope, and Schweninger, Loren, Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation, (Oxford Press, Oxford, New York, NY, 1999) pg. 6.

55 Jordan, Ervin, Jr., Black Confederates and Afro-Yankees in Civil War Virginia, (University of Virginia Press, 4th Printing Charlottesville, VA 1999) pg. 160.

variety of settings —on streets, sidewalks, steamboats, trains, or country roads, anyplace where words might be exchanged and slaves might show contempt. 56

Black women had a unique perspective about what was tolerable behavior, especially when it came to protecting their children. In such instances, they were likely to disobey orders, refuse to do certain jobs, speak out, or react violently. Even slaves who were relatively mild-mannered and obedient sometimes reached the breaking point. Having never before been violent, a slave in a Louisiana household struck her master as she was being disciplined. Not satisfied with one indiscretion, the enraged slave threw her mistress to the ground and beat her severely. 57

Slaves often bore a particular resentment towards the overseers. While overseers were mostly white, like the slaves they were also subject to the owner's whims. Obviously, slaves deeply resented being scolded, chastised, punished, and whipped, as well as resented being supervised by young, relatively inexperienced white men. At times, tensions between the slaves and overseers, as well as between the slaves, overseers and drivers would erupt into verbal and even physical confrontations. Things were so tense on some plantations, overseers were afraid to scold slaves.



Whites throughout the South became terrified at rumors of slave conspiracies. Memories and stories of the overt rebellions of the past, e.g., Gabriel, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner spawned rumors of additional

56 Franklin, Runaway Slaves, pg. 9.

57 Franklin, Runaway Slaves, pg. 9

conspiracies. There were several instances where the white paranoia was well justified, as slaves secretly planned, or discussed among themselves, violence against their masters and other whites. In 1829, a plan was uncovered in West Feliciana Parish, Louisiana during the Christmas holidays. Slaves from several plantations along Thompson's Creek began to make plans for an insurrection. Before the plan could be carried out, a black woman, who had overheard the planning, reported the conspiracy to her master. Slave-owners responded quickly by hanging two black men. In addition, a search for several white men rumored to have been involved proved futile.

As noted above, while conspiracies such as these were very real, often scares of insurrections were the result of panic-stricken whites fearing the consequences of their own deeds. This was especially so in the days following the Nat Turner affair, when a Louisiana white woman spread the word that "all Negroes on Little Robert Barrow's plantation had armed themselves and had claimed their liberty." Upon hearing the news, one woman on a nearby plantation instantly began screaming and crying very loudly, causing the general of the local militia to ride out to the plantation where he found the slaves and overseer working in the field. A white man in the field noted that the slaves were near panic at the sight of the militia patrol riding in their direction. 58

In 1861 the *Douglass' Monthly* published a conversation between a young girl on a plantation and an older woman. The older woman was trying to assure the girl that the slaves had no interest in the war. To this the girl replied:

58 Franklin, Runaway Slaves, pg. 13.

“They are always whispering among themselves, and the other day one told me that in six months she would be as good as me. They say the war is going to set them free, and they are very anxious to come.” 59

As the war began to press into Virginia, a number of slaves in Petersburg interpreted Abraham Lincoln’s comments in his first Inaugural Address as the beginning of their freedom, and openly bade their masters farewell. As these misinformed slaves traveled down the road from their plantations, they were rounded up by a posse sent by their masters and ultimately sold further south. As the war progressed, other slaves in Virginia saw the Yankee successes on the battlefield as a sign their status was about to change and took the initiative to confiscate their masters’ farms for their own. In 1862, a Clarke County slave-owner placed his slave foreman Morgan Coxen in charge of his property before fleeing into the Confederate interior. The enterprising Coxen sold horses, brandy, bacon, and lumber to Union forces, pocketed the profits, and filed reimbursement claims when the property was raided by Union soldiers.

For the slave, there was often a high price to be paid for rebellion. Cruel and harsh punishment often caused blacks to flee the plantation. Slaves were beaten, chained, incarcerated, ironed, and whipped, and to make matters worse, slaves were often required to watch the punishment of members of their families. There were few slave-owners in the south that did not believe that a disobedient slave should be physically punished. Sometimes the master himself would administer the punishment, but most of the time this duty was delegated to the overseer. The amount and kind of punishment varied from one plantation to

59 Jordan, Black Confederates and Afro-Yankees, pg. 149.

another, but it was generally believed that severe punishment, especially for running away was the best deterrent. A household slave explained to a visitor the cracking of a whip from upstairs in the mansion house one evening. "It is just the overseer whipping the slaves, a common thing around here," she said. 60

John Brown's Raid on Harpers Ferry

In April 1859, Dr. Robert Kennedy, a well-known physician and landowner in the area around Sharpsburg, Maryland died. In addition to being a significant member of the community, and an active member of the Dunker Church, Dr. Kennedy owned a 200-acre farm located between what would become the Antietam Battlefield and Harpers Ferry. In the summer of 1859, a tall, slender man accompanied by his wife and daughter approached the administrator of Dr. Kennedy's estate, who introduced himself as one Isaac Smith. Mr. Smith told the administrator that he and his colleagues planned to engage in mining operations in the mountains to the northeast, and was interested in leasing the Kennedy farm as a base for their mining operation. In addition, Mr. Smith told the administrator that the family, as well as the community, should not become concerned by men coming and going or by wagons traveling to and from the farm hauling equipment. Both were to be used in their mining operation. The administrator, being anxious to see the property return income, leased the farm to the stranger. Of course the stranger really was not Isaac Smith. His real name was John Brown, and the only thing he and his men planned to mine was the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry.

60 Franklin Runaway Slaves, pg. 43.

In the fall, the stranger at the Kennedy farm would drop the façade of being a miner, and reverted to the fanatical, radical, and militant abolitionist John Brown. Brown had pursued a lifelong religious crusade to wipe out slavery, believing human bondage to be a moral evil that should be wiped from the sight of God. In support of his abolitionist beliefs, Brown planned to raid the federal armory at Harpers Ferry, arm the slaves of Virginia, and incite rebellion among the slaves in the region.

Born in Connecticut on May 9, 1800 (the same year as Nat Turner), Brown farmed in the Adirondack wilderness of North Elba, New York. When Kansas became a bloody battleground between settlers from the slave South and the free North, Brown went there, killed pro-slavery settlers, and led slaves to safety and freedom. To the radical abolitionist movement, John Brown was to become a hero. 61

In October 1859, Washington, and in fact, the entire South was gripped in constant fear of a slave uprising. At the time of Brown's raid, several rumors were circulating of slave uprisings, one such rumor being that 700 Virginia slaves had seized the federal gun arsenal and gun factory at Harper's Ferry, a mere 55 miles North of Washington and were on a killing rampage. Buchanan's bumbling Secretary of War, John Buchanan Floyd panicked and scrambled for troops as Washington's mayor called out all of the city's police and ordered the mounted men to guard all roads leading to the capital. Floyd sent Calvary Lt. J.E.B. Stuart

61 Moskin, J. Robert, The U.S. Marine Corps Story, (McGraw Hill Book Company, New York, NY 1977), pg. 198.

galloping away to fetch Lt. Col. Robert E. Lee, from his home just across the Potomac River at Arlington to put down the insurrection.

Prior to Lee's arrival at Harpers Ferry, a local Militia along with townspeople from a nearby village battled the raiders for most of the day of October 17. During the fighting, several of the raiders, as well as a number of local people, including the mayor, were killed. With the raid having gone bad, the raiders barricaded themselves in the engine house of a small brick building on the armory grounds, holding 13 hostages, one of whom was Col. Lewis W. Washington, a resident of the area, and the great grand-nephew of the nation's first president. Lee and his detachment arrived in the area of Harpers Ferry around 10:00 P.M., and marched his troops across the bridge into town. 62

As the standoff continued throughout the rainy night, and with all possible escape routes for the raiders clearly closed, Lee concluded that the best way to capture Brown and save the hostages was to strike swiftly. Rather than risk a stray bullet killing a hostage, Lee's men would use their bayonets, but only after Brown and his men had been given the opportunity to surrender. Lee wrote out a note, and gave it to Lt. J.E.B. Stuart to deliver to Brown. The note simply stated the obvious, that all escape routes had been cut off, and that if the raiders would surrender, Lee would guarantee their safety. On the other hand, if the raiders refused as expected, Stuart was to give the signal by waiving his hat in the air, and the small building in which they were barricaded would be charged.

Initially, Lee offered the Virginia Militia the opportunity to take Brown into custody since Brown's action was more a violation of the sovereignty of the

Commonwealth than federal law. However, the militia Colonel turned the offer down, stating, "*this is no job for civilians; use your mercenaries.*" According to the diary of First Lt. Israel Greene:

"at half past six in the morning, Colonel Lee gave me orders to select a detail of 12 men for a storming party and place them near the engine house in which Brown and his men had entrenched themselves. I selected 12 of my best men and a second 12 to be employed in reserve."
63

The federal raiding party moved into position around the engine house, taking care to remain out of Brown's line of fire. Three Marines carried sledgehammers to knock down the heavy twin doors, while the remaining men on the raiding party fixed their bayonets. By now, nearly ever living soul in Harpers Ferry was on hand to witness the climatic standoff. They jammed the streets, hung from windows, and sat on roofs. Lee stood calmly, unarmed, on a slight rise, about 40 feet from the engine house. After being ordered by Lee to deliver the note to Brown, Stuart approached the front doors of the engine house with a white flag. The door opened a crack, and a tall slender man with a white beard appeared in the opening. Stuart had met Brown before in Kansas, and recognized him as the leader of the hostage takers. Stuart handed Brown the note. Brown read it and began to argue with Stuart, wanting to be allowed to cross the bridge, where he would release his hostages, and then be on his own. As the discussion continued, Stuart could hear the hostages shouting and pleading that he bring Lee to the engine house to negotiate with Brown. Stuart knew that Lee would never make any concession to Brown, and finally cut off the discussion.

62 Moskin, The U.S. Marine Corps Story, pg. 198.

Stepping back a couple of steps from the door, Stuart waved his hat, which was the agreed signal for Greene to attack. 64

Armed only with a light dress sword, Greene was the first of the federal troopers in the door. The men inside had been firing as the Marines were ramming the door, and they were re-loading when Greene squeezed through the doorway. Major William W. Russell, unarmed, rushed in immediately after Greene. By now Brown's men had re-loaded, and the next marine to enter through the doorway, Pvt. Luke Quinn was shot through the abdomen, and killed. [624,511 Americans would perish during the Civil War: Pvt. Luke Quinn is thought by some to be the first] The fourth man, Pvt. Matthew Ruppert charged through the doorway and was shot in the face. Soon, three or four more of the attacking federals rushed through the door, bayoneting one man[Dauphin Thompson] and pinned another [Brown's lieutenant, Jeremiah Anderson] against the rear wall of the room. Both men were instantly killed.

Recognizing the hopelessness of the situation, the remainder of Brown's men surrendered immediately. The Marines drug the 4 dead and 2 wounded raiders, as well as the bodies of Quinn and Ruppert from the engine house, and laid them on the grass in front of the armory. Then the 2 remaining raiders, a Quaker and a former slave were led from the engine house in chains. Finally, the hostages emerged, Colonel Washington paused to put on his white gloves so the crowd could see that he had not soiled his hands. The Marines kept the curious and vengeful crowd away as they buried Pvt. Quinn. From the pallet

63 Moskin, The U.S. Marine Corps Story, pg. 199.

64 Moskin, The U.S. Marine Corps Story, pg. 200.

where he laid wounded, the bearded rebel John Brown, rejected his counsel's plea of insanity. As a result, there could be no doubt of the outcome. On October 31, after a 7-day trial, the jury brought in a verdict of guilty of murder, criminal conspiracy, and overall treason against the Commonwealth of Virginia. Brown was content as he faced death, writing to his children, *"to die for God's eternal truth on the scaffold as in any other way"* Brown was hanged in Charles Town on December 2, 1859. 65 Among the troops and civilians massed around the scaffold was a civilian agitator named Edmund Ruffin who many say would fire the first shot on Fort Sumter only 16 months later; Maj. Thomas J. Jackson, who would one day wear the name "Stonewall" and a volunteer militia private named John Wilkes Booth. 66(Moskin pg. 202)

Conclusion

While many people in the North condemned Brown's raid, many others hailed him a hero and martyr. Lydia Maria Child, a prominent writer and abolitionist, offered her help to Brown in prison. Although he had refused to join Brown's scheme because he thought it would fail, Frederick Douglass, hailed Brown's courage. Southern newspapers quoted the opinions of these abolitionists as *"typical of what the whole North was thinking."* To southerners, John Brown's raid was convincing evidence that the north was determined to abolish, not only the institution of slavery, but the culture of the South as well. If Southerners hoped to save their way of life, they would have to prepare to defend that way of life to the death if necessary. The irony of John Brown's raid

65 Morison, Samuel Eliot, The Oxford History of the American People, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York, NY 1965) pg. 602.

may well be that instead of bringing immediate emancipation to the slaves, it served to confirm the paranoia of many people and give support to the “fire-eaters” in the South who advocated secession. It is quite possible that the most direct contribution of John Brown to the history of the cause to which he served and died for, was the formation of militia units throughout the south, which served as the foundation for the Confederate Army two years hence.

Without a doubt, the institution of slavery was just as debasing to the white people of the south as it was oppressive to the blacks. White people found that because of slavery, they could not sleep at peace in their own beds a night, thus, they were in bondage to their fears. Possibly, the secession of the southern states in 1861 was really a counter revolution to what the leadership of the South saw as a revolution to abolish in the coming emancipation of the slaves, and was rooted in the paranoia which was bred by generations of human bondage. One thing for sure, the paranoia suffered by the whites in the South was the wages of slavery

66 Moskin, The U.S. Marine Corps Story, pg. 202.

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