

# 18th Century Colonial America: Slavery

## Colonists' Worst Fears: Slave Rebellions in the Colonies

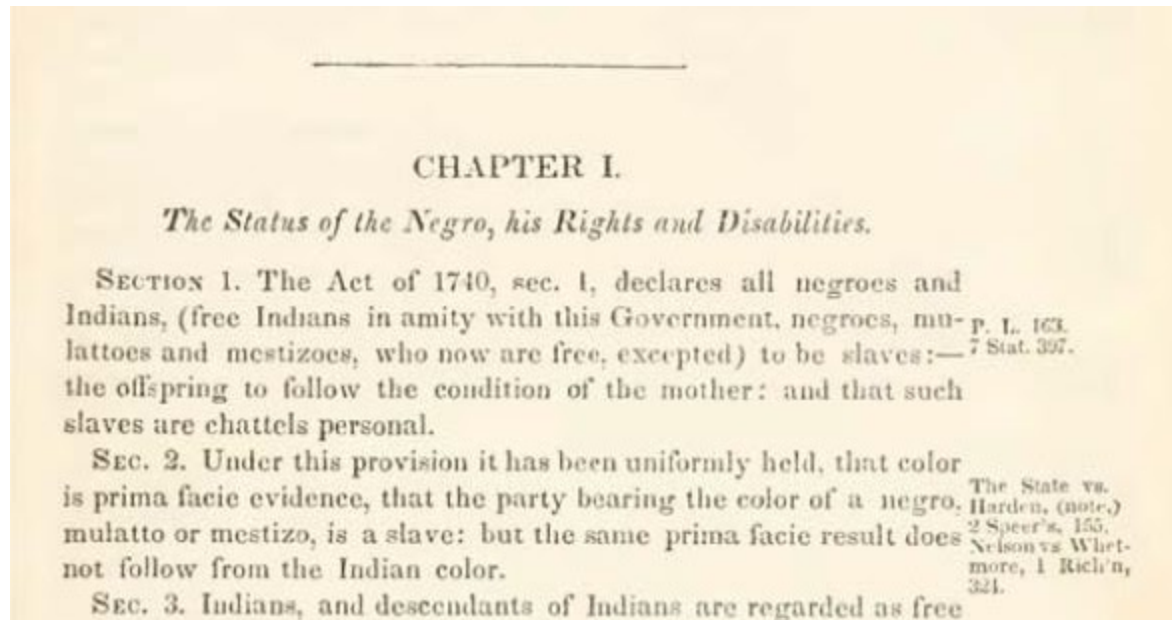
Marching throughout the day, the group grew in numbers every mile—twenty, then forty, then sixty people. They held their banner high as they chanted one word, “Liberty!” The enslaved African Americans marched south to Spanish-controlled Florida, where they would be free. And they were determined not to let anything, or anyone, get in their way. The insurrection began early on September 9, 1739, when a small group of enslaved people met by the Stono River. They looted a nearby store, gathering weapons and killing two storekeepers. Then they marched “in a Daring manner out of the Province, killing all they met, and burning Several Houses as they passed along the Road.”

To the slaveholders in South Carolina, this was serious. At the time, enslaved African Americans outnumbered whites nearly three to one in the colony, and slave rebellion was their worst fear. Just nine years earlier, another would-be rebellion in Charleston had been prevented—just barely. “I Shall give an Account of a bloody Tragedy which was to have been executed here last Saturday Night . . . by the Negroes, who had conspired to Rise and destroy us, and had almost [brought] it to pass,” wrote one Carolinian in 1730.

Nine years later, the Stono group got further than just planning an insurrection. They were rebelling, and they were armed. They had already killed dozens. So, about one hundred alarmed militiamen rode south, hoping to catch up with them. When they did, the groups clashed. The insurrectionists “gave two Fires, but without any Damage. We returned the Fire, and [brought] down 14 on the Spot; and pursuing after them, within two Days kill’d twenty odd more, some hang’d, and some Gibbeted alive.” As a warning, they “stuck their Heads upon Poles in the Path-way as a Terror to the other Slaves.”

The retribution didn’t end with those who had revolted. All enslaved African Americans in the state were punished. The South Carolina legislature acted quickly, passing laws that made killing a slave only a fineable offense. On the other hand, should an enslaved person even attack a white person, the crime could be punishable by death. But they went even further, passing laws that gave harsher penalties for rebellions, restricted gatherings, and even controlled the fabric of enslaved people’s clothes. The Stono Rebellion had been a result of growing tension between colonists and the African population that increasingly outnumbered them. For years, stories of resistance—often exaggerated and always shocking—circulated through word of mouth and newspapers, putting colonists on edge. The Stono Rebellion had confirmed their fears. To stem further insurrections, increasingly harsh punishments were decreed across the colonies. In 1741, New York City executed 34 people for conspiring to burn down the city. Thirteen African American men were burned at the stake and another 17 black men, two white men, and two white women were hanged. An additional 70 blacks and seven whites were banished from the city. Colonists believed that these oppressive laws and punishments were necessary to prevent further slave insurrections. But colonists continued to import Africans into lives of bondage, relying on their labor to cultivate the crops that generated private wealth for planters. “On new land a Negro can work 6 to 10 acres. . . . On old land, however, he has his hands full with 6 acres. From this one can easily compute how many Negroes are required for 1,000 acres,” Johann Martin Bolzius advised a prospective colonist.

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The comprehensive Negro Act of 1740 (above) was passed in South Carolina, during Governor William Bull's time in office, in response to the Stono Rebellion in 1739. The act made it illegal for enslaved Africans to move abroad, assemble in groups, raise food, earn money, and learn to write. Additionally, owners were permitted to kill rebellious slaves if necessary. The Act remained in effect until 1865.

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## Runaway Slave Notices

*As slavery became more profitable, especially on rice and tobacco plantations, slaves became more and more of a financial investment for planters, who increasingly saw slaves as property to be owned and were willing to pay rewards for their return. Running away became a form of resistance for many slaves, especially if they had family members who had been sold elsewhere.*

From the South Carolina Gazette, Oct 28, 1732

RUN away from his Master's Plantation, in the Parish of St. James's Goose Creek, a lusty Negro Man named Hercules, he formerly used to wait on his Master in Charlestown, and is now by Trade a Cooper [barrel maker]. He had on when he went away a blue Duffils Jacket, a pair of ozenbrig Breeches, and speaks very good English. Whoever apprehends and brings him either to the said Plantation in Goose-Creek, or to his Master Robert Hume on Charlestown Neck, shall receive 5 [lb] reward, besides the usual Allowance for Mileage. Robert Hume.

From the South Carolina Gazette, August 13, 1737

RUN AWAY from the Plantation of Isaac Porcher on Wassamsaw, a new Angola Negro Man, named Clawss, he is a small Fellow, and very black, he had on when he went away a Breeches, Jacket and Cap of white Plains, pretty much worn and dirty, any Person who shall apprehend the said Negro Man, and bring him to his Master, or to Goal in Charlestown, or give Information so as he may be had again, shall receive 2 [lb] reward and all Charges paid by Isaac Porcher.


N.B. As there is abundance of Negroes in the Province of that Nation, he may chance to be harbour'd among some of them, therefore all Masters are desire to give notice to their Slaves who shall receive the same reward, if they take up the said Run-away.

From the *South Carolina Gazette*,  
October 28, 1732,  
August 13, 1737

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Charlestown, July 24th, 1769.

TO BE SOLD,  
On THURSDAY the third Day  
of AUGUST next,  
A CARGO  
OF  
NINETY-FOUR  
PRIME, HEALTHY  
**NEGROES,**  
CONSISTING OF  
Thirty-nine MEN, Fifteen BOYS,  
Twenty-four WOMEN, and  
Sixteen GIRLS.  
JUST ARRIVED,  
In the Brigantine *DEMBIA*, *Francis Bare*, Master, from SIERRA-  
LEON, by  
DAVID & JOHN DEAS.



TO BE SOLD, on board the  
Ship *Bance-Island*, on tuesday the 6th  
of May next, at *Afoley-Ferry*; a choice  
cargo of about 250 fine healthy  
**NEGROES,**  
just arrived from the  
Windward & Rice Coast.  
—The utmost care has  
already been taken, and  
shall be continued, to keep them free from  
the least danger of being infected with the  
**SMALL-POX**, no boat having been on  
board, and all other communication with  
people from *Charles-Town* prevented.  
*Austin, Laurens, & Appleby.*  
N. B. Full one Half of the above Negroes have had the  
**SMALL-POX** in their own Country.



Broadsides such as the ones above were frequently posted throughout the colonies, especially in the South, announcing slave auctions and new shipments of slaves from the West Indies or Africa. The advertisement on the right makes a particular point that these slaves were free of smallpox.



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## **“The Old Plantation,” John Rose, 1785**

This painting depicts slaves pursuing their own interests in a rare bit of down time on a South Carolina plantation. Slave religious and cultural traditions played a particularly important role in helping slaves survive the harshness and misery of life under slavery. In this painting, slaves play traditional West African instruments, like the Yoruba.



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Slavery existed in all colonies, but in South Carolina, they constituted over half the population, leading to increased fears of slave revolts.

<i>Colony</i>	<i>Slave Population</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
New Hampshire	654	1%
Massachusetts	4,754	2
Connecticut	5,698	3
Rhode Island	3,761	6
New York	19,062	12
New Jersey	8,220	7
Pennsylvania	5,561	2
Delaware	1,836	5
Maryland	63,818	32
Virginia	187,600	42
North Carolina	69,600	35
South Carolina	75,168	61
Georgia	15,000	45

**Table 4.1** Slave Population and Percentage  
of Total Population of Original  
Thirteen Colonies, 1770

*Give Me Liberty! An American History* (Foner)  
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