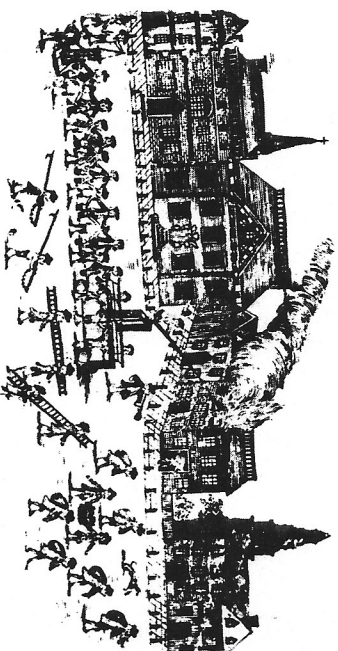


New York Burning

LIBERTY, SLAVERY, AND
CONSPIRACY IN EIGHTEENTH-
CENTURY MANHATTAN

JILL LEPORE



Vintage Books
A DIVISION OF RANDOM HOUSE, INC.
NEW YORK



FIRST VINTAGE BOOKS EDITION, AUGUST 2006

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The Library of Congress has cataloged the Knopf edition as follows:

Lepore, Jill, [date]

New York burning : liberty, slavery, and conspiracy in eighteenth-century Manhattan / Jill Lepore.—1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

1. New York (N.Y.)—History—Conspiracy of 1741. 2. Slave insurrections—New York (State)—New York—History—18th century. 3. Fires—New York (State)—New York—History—18th century. 4. African Americans—New York (State)—New York—History—18th century. 5. New York (N.Y.)—Race relations. 6. New York (N.Y.)—History—Colonial period, ca. 1600–1775.

I. Title.

Fr28.4.L47 2005

974.7'102—dc22 2004057623

Vintage ISBN-10: 1-4000-3226-1

Vintage ISBN-13: 978-1-4000-3226-6

Author photograph © Dari Michele

Book design by Virginia Tan

Map of New York in 1741 by David Lindroth

www.vintagebooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Tim

Preface

“LIBERTY and SLAVERY! how amiable is one! how odious and abominable the other!” wrote James Alexander in the pages of the *New-York Weekly Journal* in 1733. When Alexander championed liberty and condemned slavery, he meant the liberty of the press and the slavery of tyranny. “No Nation Antient or Modern ever lost the Liberty of freely Speaking, Writing, or Publishing their Sentiments,” he warned, “but forthwith lost their Liberty in general and became Slaves.”¹ By slaves, Alexander meant a nation ruled by a despot; he did not mean the two thousand men, women, and children who toiled as human chattel in the bustling city of eighteenth-century Manhattan, a number that included not only the five people who lived in Alexander’s own elegant house but also the one black man who had escaped from its attic, carrying a pass he had penned himself, in an act of forgery that defined, better than anything Alexander could put to paper, the liberty of freely writing.

Political liberty was the most cherished blessing in the British realm, and political slavery its most dreaded specter. “Rule, Britannia, rule the waves; / Britons never will be slaves,” wrote an English poet in 1740, in lines that became the empire’s anthem. But throughout that empire, and especially in its American colonies, dark-skinned people lived under worse than the slavery of tyranny; they lived in the slavery of human bondage. In the colonies, “liberty” and “slavery” tripped off tongues, and nearly slipped into meaninglessness. “Though Liberty and Slavery are words which incessantly vibrate on the ears of the Public,” wrote one colonist, “yet we have few terms in the English Vocabulary so generally misunderstood.”² Everywhere, liberty was passionately celebrated, and slavery just as passionately condemned, by men like James Alexander, Americans who owned Africans.

not fail to remark upon it. "How is it that we hear the loudest *yelps* for liberty among the drivers of negroes?" Samuel Johnson famously complained in 1775, in a reply to American revolutionaries' protest of parliamentary taxation. Nor have historians quieted their astonishment, and rightly so. "The paradox is American, and it behooves Americans to understand it if they would understand themselves," wrote Edmund Morgan in 1975.³ Three decades and Thomas Jefferson's twenty-three chromosomes later, Americans are now quite aware of the American paradox, but it remains, somehow, impossible to understand. That abject bondage contributed to the creation of the world's first modern democracy, however true and even self-evident, is, finally, so painful a truth as to be nearly unfathomable.

This book tells the story of how one kind of slavery made another kind of liberty possible in eighteenth-century New York, a place whose slave past has long been buried. It was a beautiful city, a crisscross of crooked cobblestone streets boasting both grand and petty charms: a grassy park at the Bowling Green, the stone arches at City Hall, beech trees shading Broadway like so many parasols, and, off rocky beaches, the best oysters anywhere. "I found it extremely pleasant to walk the town," one visitor wrote in 1748, "for it seemed like a garden."⁴ But on this granite island poking out like a sharp tooth between the Hudson and the East rivers, one in five inhabitants was enslaved, making Manhattan second only to Charleston, South Carolina, in a wretched calculus of urban unfreedom.

New York was a slave city. Its most infamous episode is hardly known today: over a few short weeks in 1741, ten fires blazed across the city. Nearly two hundred slaves were suspected of conspiring to burn every building and murder every white. Tried and convicted before the colony's Supreme Court, thirteen black men were burned at the stake. Seventeen more were hanged, two of their dead bodies chained to posts not far from the Negroes Burial Ground, left to bloat and rot. One jailed man cut his own throat. Another eighty-four men and women were sold into yet more miserable, bone-crushing slavery in the Caribbean. Two white men and two white women, the alleged ringleaders, were hanged, one of them in chains; seven more white men were pardoned on condition that they never set foot in New York again.

What happened in New York in 1741 is so horrifying—"Bonfires of the Negroes," one colonist called it—that it's easy to be blinded by the brightness of the flames. But step back, let the fires flicker in the distance, and

the 1735 trial of the printer John Peter Zenger.

In 1732, a forty-two-year-old English gentleman named William Cosby arrived in New York, having been appointed governor by the king. New Yorkers soon learned, to their dismay, that their new governor ruled by a three-word philosophy: God damn ye. Rage at Cosby's ill-considered appointment grew with his every abuse of the governorship. Determined to oust Cosby from power, James Alexander, a prominent lawyer, hired Zenger, a German immigrant, to publish an opposition newspaper. Alexander supplied scathing, unsigned editorials criticizing the governor's administration; Zenger set the type. The first issue of Zenger's *New-York Weekly Journal* was printed in November 1733. Cosby could not, would not abide it. He assigned Daniel Horsmanden, an ambitious forty-year-old Englishman new to the city, to a committee charged with pointing out "the particular Seditious paragraphs" in Zenger's newspaper. The governor then ordered the incendiary issues of Zenger's newspaper burned, and had Zenger arrested for libel.

Zenger was tried before the province's Supreme Court in 1735. His attorney did not deny that Cosby was the object of the editorials in the *New-York Weekly Journal*. Instead, he argued, first, that Zenger was innocent because what he printed was true, and second, that freedom of the press was especially necessary in the colonies, where other checks against governors' powers were weakened by their distance from England. It was an almost impossibly brilliant defense, which at once defied legal precedent—before the Zenger case, truth had never been a defense against libel—and had the effect of putting the governor on trial, just what Zenger's attorney wanted, since William Cosby, God damn him, was a man no jury could love. Zenger was acquitted. The next year, James Alexander prepared and Zenger printed *A Brief Narrative of the Case and Trial of John Peter Zenger*, which was soon after reprinted in Boston and London. It made Zenger famous.

But the trial of John Peter Zenger is merely the best-known episode in the political maelstrom that was early eighteenth-century New York. "We are in the midst of Party flames," Daniel Horsmanden wryly observed in 1734, as Cosby's high-handedness ignited the city. Horsmanden wrote in an age when political parties were considered sinister, invidious, and

A brief Narrative of the Cafe and Try- al of John Peter Zenger, Printer of the New-York weekly Journal.

A There was but one Printer in the Province of New-York, that printed a publick News-Paper, I was in Hopes, if I undertook to publish another, I might make it worth my while; and I soon found my Hopes were not groundless: My first Paper was printed, Nov. 5th, 1733. and I continued printing and publishing of them, I thought to the Satisfaction of every Body, till the *Tammany* following; when the Chief Justice was pleased to annul upon the Doctrine of Libels, in a long Charge given in that Term to the Grand Jury, and afterwards on the third *Tuesday* of *October*, 1734. was again pleased to charge the Grand Jury in the following Words.

'Gentlemen; I shall conclude with reading a Paragraph or two out of the same Book, concerning Libels; they are arrived to that Height, that they call loudly for your Annulverion; it is high Time to put a Stop to them; for at the rare Things are now carried on, when all Order and Government is endeavoured to be trampled on; Reflections are cast upon Persons of all Degrees, not these Things end in Sedition, if not timely prevented? Lenny, you have seen will not avail, it becomes you then to enquire after the Offenders, that we may in a due Course of Law be enabled to punish them. If you, Gentlemen, do not interpose, consider whether the ill Consequences that may arise from any Disturbance of the publick Peace, may not in part, lye at your Door?'

Hawkins, in his Chapter of Libels, considers three Points, 1st. *What shall be said to be a Libel.* 2^{dly}. *Who are liable to be punished for it.* 3^{dly}. *In what Manner they are to be punished.* Under the 1st, he says, §. 7. *Nor can there be any Doubt, but that a Writing which defames a private Person only, is as much a Libel as that which defames a Person invested in a publick Capacity, in as much as it manifestly tends to create ill Blood, and to excite a Disturbance of the publick Peace; however, it is certain, that it is a very high Aggravation of a Libel, that it tends to scandalize the Government, by reflecting on those who are entrusted with the Administration of publick Affairs, which does not only endanger the publick Peace, as all other Libels do, by stirring up the Parties immediately concerned in it, to Acts of Revenge, but also has a direct Tendency to breed in the People a Dislike of their Government, and incline them to Faction and Sedition. As to the 2^d. Point he says, §. 10. *It is certain, not only he who composes or procures another to publish it, but also that he who publishes, or procures another to publish it, are in Danger of being punished for it; and it is said not to be material whether he who publishes it is a T^h, I, or any Thing of the Contents or Effect of it or not; for nothing could be more easily**

ingbroke remarked in his 1733 "Dissertation upon Parties": "The spirit of party . . . inspires animosity and breeds rancour." Nor did the distaste for parties diminish over the course of the century. In 1789, Thomas Jefferson wrote: "If I could not go to heaven but with a party, I would not go there at all."⁵

Parties they may have despised, but, with William Cosby in the governor's office, New Yorkers formed them, dividing themselves between the opposition Country Party and the Court Party, loyal to the governor. Even Cosby's death in March 1736 failed to extinguish New York's "Party flames." Alexander and his allies challenged the authority of Cosby's successor, George Clarke, and established a rival government. Warned of a plot "to seize his person or kill him in the Attempt," Clarke retreated to Fort George, at the southern tip of Manhattan, "& put the place in a posture of Defence." In the eyes of one New Yorker, "we had all the appearance of a civil War."⁶

And then: nothing. No shots were fired. Nor was any peace ever brokered; the crisis did not so much resolve as it dissipated. Soon after barricading himself in Fort George, Clarke received orders from London confirming his appointment. The rival government was disbanded. By the end of 1736, Daniel Horsmanden could boast, "Zenger is perfectly Silent as to politics." ⁷ Meanwhile, Clarke rewarded party loyalists: in 1737 he appointed Horsmanden to a vacant seat on the Supreme Court. But Clarke proved a more moderate man than his predecessor. By 1739, under his stewardship, the colony quieted.

What happened in New York City in the 1730s was much more than a dispute over the freedom of the press. It was a debate about the nature of political opposition, during which New Yorkers briefly entertained the heretical idea that parties were "not only necessary in free Government, but of great Service to the Public." As even a supporter of Cosby wrote in 1734, "Parties are a check upon one another, and by keeping the Ambition of one another within Bounds, serve to maintain the public Liberty."⁸ And it was, equally, a debate about the power of governors, the nature of empire, and the role of the law in defending Americans against arbitrary authority—the kind of authority that constituted tyranny, the kind of authority that made men slaves. James Alexander saw himself as a defender of the rule of law in a world that, because of its very great distance from England, had come to be ruled by men. His opposition was not

to American independence. Because of it, New York became infamous for its "unruly spirit of independency." Clarke, shocked, reported to his superiors in England that New Yorkers believe "if a Governor misbehave himself they may depose him and set up an other." The leaders of the Country Party "trod very near" to what, in the 1730s, went by the name of treason.⁹ A generation later, their sons would call it revolution.

IN EARLY 1741, less than two years after Clarke calmed the province, ten fires swept the city. Fort George was nearly destroyed; Clarke's own mansion, inside the fort, burned to the ground. Daniel Horsmanden was convinced that the fires had been "set on Foot by some villainous Confederacy of latent Enemies amongst us," a confederacy that sounded a good deal like a violent political party. But which enemies? No longer fearful that Country Party agitators were attempting to take his life, Clarke, at Horsmanden's urging, turned his suspicion on the city's slaves. With each new fire, panicked white New Yorkers cried from street corners, "The Negroes are rising!" Early evidence collected by a grand jury appointed by the Supreme Court hinted at a vast and elaborate conspiracy: on the outskirts of the city, in a tavern owned by a poor and obscure English cobbler named John Hughson, tens and possibly hundreds of black men had been meeting secretly, gathering weapons and plotting to burn the city, murder every white man, appoint Hughson their king, and elect a slave named Caesar governor.

This political opposition was far more dangerous than anything led by James Alexander. The slave plot to depose one governor and set up another—a *black* governor—involved not newspapers and petitions but arson and murder. It had to be stopped. In the spring and summer of 1741, New York magistrates arrested 20 whites and 152 blacks. To Horsmanden, "it seemed very probable that most of the Negroes in Town were corrupted." Eighty black men and one black woman confessed and named names, sending still more to the gallows and the stake.

That summer, a New Englander wrote an anonymous letter to New York. "I am a stranger to you & to New York," he began. But he had heard of "the bloody Tragedy" afflicting the city: the relentless cycle of arrests, accusations, hasty trials, executions, and more arrests. This "puts me in mind of our New England Witchcraft in the year 1692," he remarked,

our Witchcraft about.

Here was no idle observation. The 1741 New York conspiracy trials and the 1692 Salem witchcraft trials had much in common. Except that what happened in New York in 1741 was worse, and has been almost entirely forgotten. In Salem, twenty people were executed, compared to New York's thirty-four, and none of Salem's witches was burned at the stake. However much it looks like Salem in 1692, what happened in New York in 1741 had much more to do with revolution than witchcraft. And it is inseparable from the wrenching crisis of the 1730s, not least because the fires in 1741 included attacks on property owned by key members of the Court Party; lawyers from both sides of the aisle in the legal battles of the 1730s joined together to prosecute slaves in 1741; and slaves owned by prominent members of the Country Party proved especially vulnerable to prosecution.

But the threads that tie together the crises of the 1730s and 1741 are longer than the list of participants. The 1741 conspiracy and the 1730s opposition party were two faces of the same coin. By the standards of the day, both faces were ugly, disfigured, deformed; they threatened the order of things. But one was very much more dangerous than the other: Alexander's political party plotted to depose the governor; the city's slaves, allegedly, plotted to kill him. The difference made Alexander's opposition seem, relative to slave rebellion, harmless, and in so doing made the world safer for democracy, or at least, and less grandly, both more amenable to and more anxious about the gradual and halting rise of political parties.

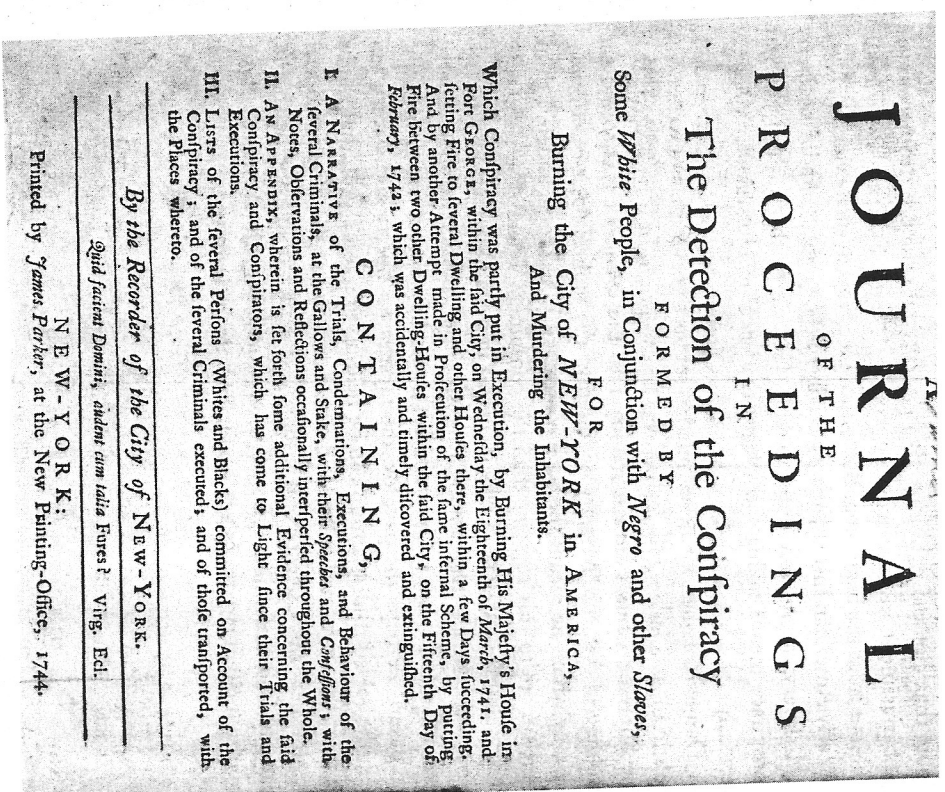
Whether enslaved men and women actually conspired in New York in 1741 is a question whose answer lies buried deep in the evidence, if it survives at all. It is worth excavating carefully. But even the *specter* of a slave conspiracy cast a dark shadow across the political landscape. Slavery was, always and everywhere, a political issue, but what happened in New York suggests that it exerted a more powerful influence on political life: slaves suspected of conspiracy constituted both a phantom political party and an ever-threatening revolution. In the 1730s and '40s, the American Revolution was years away and the real emergence of political parties in the new United States, a fitful process at best, would have to wait until the last decade of the eighteenth century. (Indeed, one reason that colonists only embraced revolution with ambivalence and accepted parties by fits and starts may be that slavery alternately ignited and extinguished party flames: the threat of black rebellion made white political opposition palatable, even as it established its limits and helped heal the divisions it cre-

in political opposition, attempted to douse party flames by burning black men at the stake. New York is not America, but what happened in that eighteenth-century slave city tells one story, and a profoundly troubling one, of how slavery destabilized—and created—American politics.

EVEN BEFORE the fires died to embers, New Yorkers began to wonder whether the city had suffered “in the merciless Flames of an Imaginary Plot.” More than a few began “to think it all a Dream, or a Fiction.” Some even “took the Liberty to arraign the Justice of the Proceedings,” declaring “that there was no Plot at all!” Daniel Horsmanden, who had staked his reputation on the investigation, was outraged. Inspired by Alexander’s success in publishing the record of Zenger’s trial, Horsmanden decided to bring the evidence before the public. In 1744, he published his *Journal of the Proceedings in The Detection of the Conspiracy Formed by Some White People, in Conjunction with Negro and other Slaves, for Burning the City of NEW-YORK in America, And Murdering the Inhabitants*, containing (as advertised on its title page) “A Narrative of the Trials, Condemnations, Executions, and Behaviour of the several Criminals, at the Gallows and Stake, with their Speeches and Confessions; with Notes, Observations and Reflections occasionally interspersed throughout the Whole.” It is one of the most startling and vexing documents in early American history.

Daniel Horsmanden’s *Journal* is many things: a diary, a mystery, a history, and maybe one of English literature’s first detective stories. By publishing it, Horsmanden hoped to persuade New Yorkers “of the Necessity there is, for every One that has Negroes, to keep a very watchful Eye over them, and not to indulge them with too great Liberties.” More, he sought to illustrate the brilliance of his investigation of this “Master-piece of Villainy.” Yet Horsmanden has convinced his few modern readers of nothing so much as his own unreliability to report on a conspiracy hatched by people he considered “degenerated and debased below the Dignity of Humane Species.” On every page of the *Journal*, Horsmanden’s fiery racial hatred testifies to his inability to offer justice to each black man and woman who came before his court, making it all too easy to conclude that New Yorkers did indeed suffer “in the merciless Flames of an Imaginary Plot.”¹¹

But the plot cannot be so easily dismissed, just as Horsmanden’s *Journal* cannot be so carelessly tossed into the trash bin of history. To place



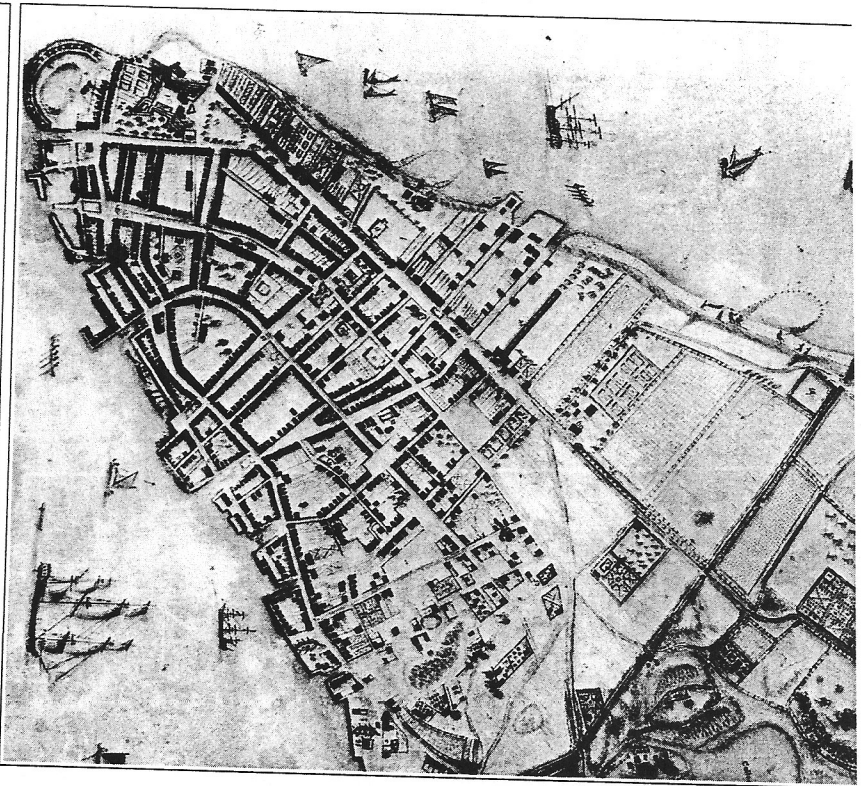
Opening page of A Journal of the Proceedings in The Detection of the Conspiracy, 1744. Collection of The New-York Historical Society.

both liberty and slavery, and not just one or the other, at the center of American history requires much more than a casual reading of what the *Journal* contains: page after page of what eighteenth-century lawyers called “Negro Evidence,” testimony elicited from slaves. “Negro & Spectre evidence will turn out alike,” that anonymous New Englander warned,

more than lies and delusions. By 1693, spectral evidence had become an embarrassment in Massachusetts courts; "Negro Evidence" was legally dubious from the beginning. But without recourse to such evidence, much of early American history, and especially of the tangled paradox of liberty and slavery, is probably unrecoverable. Getting to the truth of the 1741 conspiracy means taking the "Negro Evidence" in Horsmanden's *Journal* seriously.

Daniel Horsmanden never failed to set his sights high, as a writer, as a politician, as a judge. His *Journal* was no exception. In it he boasted that the Supreme Court's tireless inquiry into the events of 1741 solved the problem of evil, the "Mystery of Iniquity," the biblical *Mysterium iniquitatis*, by which he meant the slave conspiracy. Like Horsmanden, I think there's more to this mystery than the conspiracy. There's the iniquity of slavery, and the mystery of why it thrived in Britain's American colonies, even in the North, even among English settlers passionate about liberty. "LIBERTY and SLAVERY! how amiable is one! how odious and abominable the other!" Perhaps the paradox, the mystery, of liberty and slavery can never be solved. But a lantern can be held up to it, on a walk that might begin at the slave market on Wall Street and end at the Negroes Burial Ground near the Collect Pond, a long, cold walk through the harsh and beautiful and unfamiliar past of what would become America's most important city, a city that slavery built, and nearly destroyed.

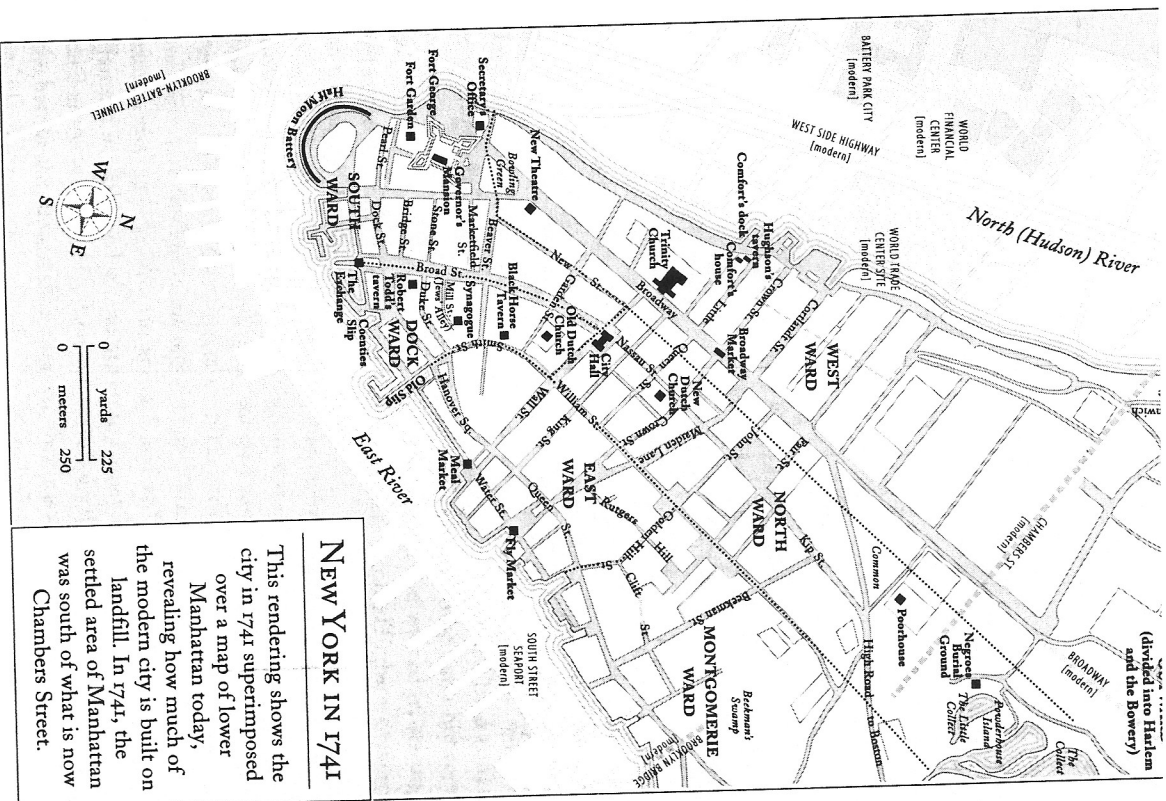
New York Burning



DAVID GRIM'S PLAN

In this plan of Manhattan made in 1813, a seventy-six-year-old New Yorker named David Grim mapped the densely settled city of the 1740s—with some eleven hundred houses—complete with references to sixty landmarks, including the “Plo’ Negro’s burnt here,” the best remembered event of the mapmaker’s childhood. Grim was just four years old in 1741, but he had “a perfect idea of seeing the Negroes chained to a stake, and there burned to death.”

Detail from David Grim, “A Plan of the City and Environs of New York as they were in the years 1744 1743 & 1744,” 1813. Collection of The New-York Historical Society.



NEW YORK IN 1741

This rendering shows the city in 1741 superimposed over a map of lower Manhattan today, revealing how much of the modern city is built on landfill. In 1741, the settled area of Manhattan was south of what is now Chambers Street.

PROLOGUE

The Plot

VEAL, DUCK, SALT PORK, a quarter of mutton, two loaves of bread, at least one goose, a flask of rum, two bowls of punch. It was a fine feast. Planks were balanced on low wooden tubs to make benches and a cloth was laid over three tables pushed together, like cobblestones down a narrow lane.

The guests began arriving at four o'clock in the afternoon, on a bitterly cold Sunday in January 1741. They came from all over the city. Bastian trudged up from Jacobus Vaarck's bakery on Broad Street. Captain John Marshall's slave Ben headed north on Broadway and then west to Gerardus Comfort's dock, where he called out to Comfort's slave Jack, "*Brother go to Hughson's*." In the Trinity churchyard, Emanuel, owned by a cordwainer named Thomas Wendover, met Quash, who worked at a brewery on Maiden Lane, and together they walked along the waterside, starting out at the meringue of ice on the Hudson River, to John Hughson's tavern on the edge of the city.¹

It had been a doleful winter. The "hard winter," it was called, the worst anyone could remember. And the "great snow" of that hardest of winters had come at Christmastime, three feet on a single night; seven more in the days that followed. "Our Streets are fill'd, with confused Heaps of Snow," the *New-York Weekly Journal* reported on December 22. Two weeks later, a canoe carrying "one Woman and a Child at her Breast and 5 Men" was jammed in with the Ice" and driven to Coney Island, where its passengers died of the cold. The Hudson was frozen for thirty miles upriver, while in the harbor abandoned ships creaked, their masts rising up from the glacial sea like inverted icicles. Birds and squirrels froze to death. Cows and deer, "unable to browse or escape through the depth of the snow," simply starved, their carcasses sinking under the white.

and there was so much snow—drifts buried dozens of houses—that even sleds and sleighs were dangerous. In the winter of 1740–41, ten thousand New Yorkers, two thousand of them slaves, tried to stop shivering, and they failed. “While I am Writing in a Warm Room by a good Fire Side,” wrote a correspondent for John Peter Zenger’s *New-York Weekly Journal*, “the Ink Freezes in the Pen.”²

As Cato, owned by city alderman John Moore, trudged to Hughson’s that afternoon from his owner’s house at Whitehall Slip, on the East River, he must have ached for the warmth of the tavern. Cato had come by invitation, but by the time he arrived there were already forty or fifty guests in the parlor of what was a suspiciously large house for such a poor cobbler as the Englishman John Hughson. Nearly all of Hughson’s guests were men, men born into bondage in Jamaica, Antigua, or Barbados, and traded to New York, or born in Africa, kidnapped or captured in warfare, marched to the Guinea Coast, packed in cargo holds, shipped to the Caribbean, and finally sold at auction in New York, at the market on the dock at the base of Wall Street. A few were born slaves on the banks of the Hudson. Now, they all felt the chill seep out of their bones as they sat in Hughson’s house, listening to the popping and spitting of his fierce fire.

Hughson, his wife Sarah, their daughter, and a lodger named Peggy Kerry sat at one end of the table; next to them sat six dark-skinned Spanish-speaking sailors, “Spanish Negroes,” who had been sold into slavery after being captured by English privateers. Kerry, an Irish prostitute, was seven months pregnant, carrying a child fathered by Caesar, who was owned by John Vaarck, Bastian’s owner’s son. Hughson’s wife, Sarah, who had given birth to ten children, probably nursed a newborn. Ben sat “at the Head of the Table.” Jonneau, another of Jacobus Vaarck’s slaves, “stood at the Door a pretty while,” but when the meat was served, he came in and took a seat. The other men shifted their weight on the benches, making room, keeping warm. Finding no place for himself, Cato sat at a makeshift side table. “The Room was so full,” Emanuel said, “that several of the Negroes stood.”

When Bastian entered the crowded tavern, he must have nearly fainted at the sight of the feast. Meat, by God. The slave of a baker, Bastian was better fed than many New Yorkers, but he, too, felt the hunger that plagued the city’s poor that winter, when even bakers ran out of grain. Later, in March, ravenous New Yorkers would taste flesh for the first time in months, when flocks of pigeons darkened the sky and were “taken in

one unchristian way the F-b-c-u-m-m-e-n”³—one unchristian way the F-b-c-u-m-m-e-n—six weeks sooner than usual, their craws still full of undigested Carolina rice. Nor did anyone wonder for long; instead, while the birds roasted on the spit, the poor gave thanks for one of the hard winter’s few mercies.

Before Bastian, his mouth watering, could reach for the veal, or the duck, mutton, pork, or goose on John Hughson’s table, Caesar pointed a pistol at his chest. Would Bastian “join along with them to become their own Masters?” he demanded. “What would he have him join with him in?” Bastian asked. “In the Plot,” Caesar answered, “to take the Country.” At first Bastian refused. Caesar poured rum down his throat and warned that he “should not go alive out of the House.” Finally, Bastian, “very much daunted,” consented to the plot: to burn the city, kill the white men, and take the white women for their wives. He’s “*but a weak-hearted Dog*,” Caesar called over to Hughson, but “*set his Name down*.”

OR AT LEAST that’s what Bastian, Jack, Cato, and Emanuel confessed when questioned by their masters, by magistrates, and by a grand jury, after being jailed in the dungeon below City Hall in the spring and summer of 1741. And they, and many others, confessed to more, much more. Not only at the “Great Feast” but on other days and nights, John Hughson had fed them lavishly, and served them drinks: cider, rum, punch, and beer. Juan, the Indian slave of a Dutch sailor, “drank a Mug of Beer, and paid for it”; more often the drinks were free. York, the slave of an English miller, said “*Hughson* made him so drunk that he could not stand.” Cajoe, owned by a Portuguese Jewish merchant named Mordecai Gomez, complained that the drinks were spiked: Hughson mixed a mug of punch that was two-thirds rum “and made it so sweet, that he did not immediately feel the Strength of it.”

At Hughson’s—they confessed—they played cards and dice. They held cockfights. They danced. A man named Fortune had heard “they had a Dance there every other Night,” with music supplied by African drummers from the city’s militia and fiddlers from as far away as Long Island. “After Supper, were dancing,” Joshua Sleydall’s slave Jack recalled, “and Mr. Phillips’s Cuff plaid on the Fiddle.” Thomas Ellison’s slave Jamaica fiddled at Hughson’s, too, and Mary Burton, the Hughson’s sixteen-year-old indentured servant, said that Jamaica promised to play his fiddle for the city’s whites “while they were roasting in the Flames; and said, he had been Slave long enough.”

the tavern when he heard talk "of burning the Houses and killing the white people, and of taking all the Gentlemen for their Wives." "After they had done dancing, they made a Bowl of Punch," another man confessed. "And having for some Time drank, they said one to another, *Let us set Fire to the Town and kill the white People.*"

Next they swore. There were inducements: Hughson told his guests that if they swore, "they should never want for Liquor whether they had Money or not." And there were threats. "Boy will you stand by it?" Hughson asked York, a slave of Charles Crooke, the day after Christmas, in the warmth of the tavern. York said he would. Hughson said if he didn't, "he would stick him with a Sword, and pointed to one in a Corner of the Room." York said he would. "Boy, if you stand by it," said Hughson, "you must *kiss the Book.*" York pressed his lips to it, and declared he would not be a coward. They swore oaths by God and by thunder "*of Damnation to Eternity to the Failers.*" They were "*not so much as to tell a Cat or a Dog.*" Vintner Robert Todd's slave Dundee cursed, "*The D—I fetch him, and the D—I d—I him if he did.*"

John Hughson kept a list. When Joseph Murray's men Adam and Jack arrived at the tavern, Hughson "*produced a Paper*, and said it was an Agreement of the Blacks to kill the white Folks," and added their names to it; the ink, no doubt, freezing in his pen. Primus, owned by a French distiller named James DeBrosses, said Hughson "*put his Hand on a Paper, which he told him was a List of the Names of those who were to rise.*" Hughson used it to call roll.

Hughson swore, too. "By G-d, if they would be true to him, he would take this Country." How would they do it? Albany, the slave of an English butcher's widow, told Will, owned by a Dutch cordwainer, "he believed an Hundred and Fifty Men might take this City." They were to begin by burning Fort George, the city's crucial defensive outpost, behind the Half Moon Battery on the southern tip of the island. At this signal, each man was to kill his master and "*such of the Negroes as would not assist them.*" Hughson was collecting guns: he told Brash and Ben, slaves of the French merchants Peter and Augustus Jay (the father and grandfather of founding father John Jay), "that they should get what Guns, Swords and Pistols they could from their Master's, and bring them to his House; but if they could not get any, that he could furnish them with them himself." Still, guns were scarce. And knives were silent. Pedro, a "Spanish Negro" owned by Peter DePyster, knew that "*the Report of a Gun would immediately alarm*

were yours own.

Not every recruitment succeeded. "D—I it," cursed Robin, when asked his opinion of the plot. "I'll have nothing to say to it, if they burn their Backsides, they must sit down on the Blisters." But most men eagerly agreed to cut their masters' throats. Jack and Adam were keen to "*destroy Mr. Murray, Mrs. Murray, and all the Family, with Knives.*" Dundee volunteered "to cut his Mistress's Throat in the Night."

After the butchery, the men would set fire to their masters' houses. Some of the Spaniards "*had black Stuff to set Houses on fire,*" but live coals would serve just as well. A man named London agreed to burn down Peter Marschalk's house (no mean trick, since Marschalk served as one of the city's firemen). Dundee was to set fire to his owner's tavern on Broad Street. Joe, owned by a dancing master, agreed to torch the city's only theatre, on the corner of Broadway and Beaver. Asked to burn his master's fall house on Broadway, Ben refused. "No, if they conquer'd the Place," he said, he would keep that house "to live in himself."

Their owners dead, the city in flames, the men who pledged to the plot were to assemble just north of the fort, into companies under their appointed captains—Ben, Jack, York, Dundee, and Othello—and burn their way up Broadway.

How would they know when to begin? "*Now was the best Time to do something.*" Hughson told his guests that winter, for it was a time of war. England's war with Spain, the War of Jenkins's Ear, had begun in the fall of 1739 and was even then merging with a broader conflict, the War of the Austrian Succession, pitting England against France. By autumn 1740, most of Manhattan's force of British regulars and provincial soldiers had been sent to fight against the Spaniards off the coast of Cuba, leaving the island nearly defenseless. Not only were the city's military ranks thinned, but the men who gathered at Hughson's expected England's enemies to come to their aid. At the "Great Feast" just after Christmas, they "agreed to wait a Month and half for the Spaniards and French to come," and if they did not, "they were to do all themselves."

And to what end? "*After they had conquered,*" Hughson told Tom, the slave of a French silversmith, "*they would know what it was to be free Men.*"

OF THE 152 enslaved and free black New Yorkers arrested in the spring and summer of 1741, 80—more than half—confessed to conspiring to destroy the city. (And one more man confessed who had never been

pour out, the confessions agreed both "minutely in the Circumstances of this Conspiracy"—the "Great Feast" at Christmas, the tablecloth, the rum punch, the veal—and broadly, in "the principal Things aimed at, *the burning the Town and assassinating the Inhabitants.*"

It made for an effective prosecution. In his closing argument in the conspiracy's first trial, attorney William Smith offered the jury a summary of this "most horrid conspiracy":

Gentlemen,

No Scheme more monstrous could have been invented; nor can any Thing be thought of more foolish, than the Motives that induced these Wretches to enter into it! What more ridiculous than that Hughson in Consequence of this Scheme, should become a *King! Caesar . . . a Governor!* That the White Men should be all killed, and the Women become a Prey to the rapacious Lust of these Villains! That these Slaves should thereby establish themselves in Peace and Freedom in the plunder'd Wealth of their slaughtered Masters! 'Tis hard to say whether the *Wickedness* or the *Folly* of this Design is the Greater: And had it not been in Part executed before it was discovered, we should with great Difficulty have been persuaded to believe it possible, that such a *wicked* and *foolish Plot* could be contrived by any Creatures in Human Shape.

It was horrid. It was monstrous. It was wicked. It was inhuman. But it was also hackneyed.

What those eighty-one New Yorkers confessed to was a plot dripping with plot, ripe to bursting with familiar characters and contrivances. Smith delivered his speech in the very era in which the novel was born; not surprisingly, his argument echoed conventions established not only in early English novels but also in England's vast store of quasi-fictional tales of rogues and pirates, whores and mutinies, and ruthless gangs of highway robbers, as well as in a growing literature of alarming reports from the colonies of rebellious slaves and bloodthirsty Indians.³

"What more ridiculous than that Hughson in Consequence of this Scheme, should become a *King! Caesar . . . a Governor!*" Ridiculous, but by no means unfamiliar. English ideas of what a slave plot looked like were fully elaborated as early as 1676, in a conspiracy detected by colonists in

1 THE ISLAND'S SLAVES HAD ALLEGORICALLY COMBINED A CONSPIRACY, . . .
was to choose them a King," who would lead them in killing white men, burning their houses, and taking white women as wives. In London, the account of the Barbados rebellion was sold stitched together with a narrative not of suspected but of actual rebellion: a violent Indian uprising in New England known as King Philip's War. In 1675 and 1676 Philip, an Algonquian "king," had plotted and conspired with Indian confederates to burn over half the towns in New England, killing one out of every ten colonists as they fled from houses set ablaze.

The plot detected in Barbados in 1676 looked like an Indian war. But in 1741, William Smith more easily called to mind more recent slave plots, published accounts of which were readily at hand. In the spring of 1737, John Peter Zenger had printed in his *New-York Weekly Journal* the "*full and particular Account of the Negro Plot in Antigua*, as reported by the Committee appointed by the Government." It was so long that Zenger used an extra small font to set it; even then, the tiny type cluttered the entire front page of three consecutive issues and spilled over several pages more. Readers of Zenger's newspaper learned that in Antigua in 1736, black men "had formed and resolved to execute a Plot, whereby all the white Inhabitants of this Island were to be murdered, and a new Form of Government to be established by the Slaves among themselves, and they entirely to possess the Island." Court, the leader of the conspiracy, "assumed among his Country Men . . . the Stile of KING." During "Entertainments of Dancing, Gaming and Feasting," he recruited conspirators who swore to a plot to set a fire to signal the start of the wholesale murder of the island's whites.⁴

Prosecutors called the 1736 Antigua conspiracy an "unparalleled Hellish Plot," but, hellish or not, it was hardly unparalleled. By 1741, it was utterly conventional. In Barbados in 1676, slave rebels sent signals using trumpets made of elephant tusks; in Antigua in 1736, dancing plotters swished an elephant's tail. The New York confessions seem so formulaic that, if pachyderm tusks and tails were plausibly to be had on the banks of the Hudson, they might have made an appearance in John Hughson's tavern, and in Daniel Horsmanden's *Journal*.

THAT SAID, there's no need to travel a thousand miles and more from Manhattan to places as far away as Barbados and Antigua to find disor-

derly men drinking, feasting, dancing, crowning kings, and plotting to overthrow the government. New York's slave plot bore a striking resemblance not only to earlier well-publicized Caribbean slave rebellions but also to what went on in New York's own fashionable gentlemen's clubs, just blocks away from John Hughson's house.

"New-York is one of the most social places on the continent," wrote William Smith, Jr., in his 1757 *History of the Province of New York*: "the men collect themselves into weekly evening clubs."⁵ (Smith, Jr., was the son of the William Smith who prosecuted slaves in 1741.) By the early eighteenth century, club life was the central social activity of urban gentlemen. "By Clubs I mean those societies, which generally meet of an evening, either at some tavern or private house, to converse, or look at one another, smoke a pipe, drink a toast, be politic or dull, lively or frolicsome, to philosophize or trifle, argue or debate, talk over Religion, News, Scandal or bawdy, or spend the time in any other Sort of Clubbical amusement," wrote the physician Alexander Hamilton in his "History of the Ancient and Honorable Tuesday Club," a club he had founded in Annapolis in 1745. "The main Intent and purpose of the meeting of these Clubs, was to drink and be merry, and among them all, it was hail fellow, well met." At "Royalist Clubs," whoever could drink the most was crowned king, and held "an absolute power to command any of his Subjects, to drink as often and as much as he pleased," although, as Hamilton wryly noted, "the Reigns of these monarchs were Commonly very short, for, they might perhaps hold up an hour or two, and then be fairly knocked under the table."⁶

When Hamilton visited New York in 1744, he dined with Daniel Horsmanden and the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, James DeLancey, and other members of the Hungarian Club, which met at Robert Todd's tavern on Broad Street, "next Door to the Coffee-house." "There was nothing talked of but ladies and lovers, and a good deal of polite smut," Hamilton wrote in his diary after an evening at Todd's at which two toasts were raised, "the first was to our dear selves, and the tenour of the other was my own health," leading Hamilton to dub Todd's place "the Selfish Club."⁷

Gentlemen joining clubs had first to be initiated. After nightfall, they were taken into a private room, asked a series of questions, and required to write their names in the book of rules. Freemasons, a mystical gentlemen's club whose first New York lodge was founded in 1737, required initiates to "kiss the book" to swear to secrecy. At Hamilton's own club, in Annapolis, a club rule prohibited talk of politics, and if anyone dared raise a political

topic, every man in the room was supposed to laugh "in order to divert the discourse."⁸ But such was far from the case in New York, where even the taverns were divided along party lines. At Todd's, Horsmanden, DeLancey, and other Court Party members convened meetings of the Governor's Council. One block east, at the Black Horse Tavern on Smith Street, the General Assembly, dominated by the Country Party, held committee meetings, and it was there that James Alexander and his allies had plotted a strategy to remove Governor William Cosby from power. (Not for nothing was Zenger's printshop just across the street, "opposite to the Sign of the Black Horse.") In New York's fashionable taverns, men who dared to speak of politics were never laughed into silence.

DRINKING, FEASTING, kissing a book, swearing an oath, crowning a king, holding meetings, talking of politics, plotting a strategy. It was all uncannily like what Bastian said happened by the warm fire at Hughson's tavern in the hard winter of 1741, when snow blanketed the city. Except that at Hughson's, all the roles were perversely reversed. In a winter blighted by famine, black men feasted on veal and goose, as if they were gentlemen; they pledged themselves to a secret society, as if they were Freemasons; they plotted to appoint a new governor, as if they were party politicians; all the while flirting with young white women who laid a tablecloth before them and served them meat and poured them drinks. What Bastian and every man who confessed described was a world turned upside down. A world where whites served blacks, the vulgar affected refinement, and slaves would be free.

Maybe what looked to white New Yorkers like an "unparalleled Hellish Plot" was in fact play, a topsy-turvy parody of gentlemen's clubs and politicians and Freemasons so insulting and unsettling to whites, still reeling from their own experiment in political opposition, that they mistook it for rebellion. Or maybe it really was a rebellion, inspired in part by all the talk of liberty in the city's newspapers and on the streets. Or maybe there never were any meetings at Hughson's and the whole plot was merely the awful product of Daniel Horsmanden's anguished imagination.

Maybe. But the truth can only be found in telling the story from the beginning, since what is wit and what is not cannot be discerned at a distance. Meanwhile, it is worth remembering that although Horsmanden easily saw the political dimensions of the feast at John Hughson's house—he called the slave conspirators "infernal Politicians"—the humor was lost

James Horsmanden expurgated when he copied the manuscript confessions for publication were the very last words uttered by Cato, owned by John Shurmur: if asked about the plot, the conspirators were to say "they were only Joking."⁹ And out of all the slaves Horsmanden interrogated in 1741, no one vexed him so much as a man named Othello, owned by Chief Justice James DeLancey. When told about the plot and asked to join, Othello said he would, "and laughed." What was so funny?

CHAPTER ONE

Ice

AFTER TEN FEET OF SNOW over Christmas, the skies cleared in January. In the brightening sun, poor widows and orphaned children hobbled through the snow to a house on Smith Street, across from the Black Horse Tavern, where a charity promised "To Feed the HUNGRY & Cloath the NAKED," or at least those "in Real Need of Relief." But in February, the fierce weather returned. "We have now here a second Winter more Severe than it was some Weeks past," Zenger's *Weekly Journal* reported on February 2, the feast of Candlemas. "The Navigation of our River is again stop'd by the Ice, and the poor in great want of Wood." At Peter DeLancey's farm outside the city, his "Spanish Negro" Antonio de St. Bendito, whose "Feet were frozen after the first great Snow," was still unable to walk. In the city, coals were passed out to the poor to help heat their humble homes. At John Hughson's tavern, his Irish servant girl, Mary Burton, dressed herself "in Man's Cloaths, put on Boots, and went with him in his Sleigh in the deep Snows of the Commons, to help him fetch Firewood for his Family." At David Machado's house, in the East Ward, his black slave Diana, driven to desperation by the ferocity of the cold and by the hopelessness of bondage, "took her own young Child from her Breast, and laid it in the Cold, that it froze to Death."

The first week of February, New Yorkers stared helplessly from piers along the East River as a boat was "taken by a large Cake of Ice in our Harbour, and carried by it through the Narrows, and out of sight." Watchers wondered, but could not discover, what happened to the people on board. Six more ships lay frozen in Long Island Sound, and another, sails set, crashed against the ice, abandoned. Meanwhile, from Charleston, South Carolina, came the shocking news that slaves had nearly destroyed that city, burning three hundred houses to the ground. But this turned out to