



Revolts and Runaways

Materials:

- PowerPoint: **Revolts and Runaways**
- Illustrations of Early Slave Resistance on Ships
- Illustrations of rebellions
- Excerpts of Advertisements for Runaway Slaves

Plan of Instruction:

1. Introduction:

One of the most insidious allegations made against the African slaves was that they were exceptionally “docile” or “content,” thus providing little resistance to their captors. There was resistance when Africans were first kidnapped when they were on shore, and when they were on board ships, insurrections occurred. This lesson’s goal is to consider how much the desire for freedom motivated blacks to resist their captors and masters.

2. Lecture: Background Information:

a. **Slide 1: Revolts and Runaways**

b. **Slide 2:** War and economic power are the roots of slavery. When American revisionist history is taught, America is portrayed as the villain on the world stage when it comes to the discussion of slavery. Slavery is a universal institution - older than the first human records. It flourished throughout the world: Arab Muslims enslaved Christians; Europeans enslaved other Europeans; China was the most celebrated merchant of human beings; and long before the Europeans arrived, Africans enslaved other Africans.

c. **Slide 3:** Read slide 3 with class discussion.

d. **Slide 4:** From the earliest days of slavery, slaves counterattacked at every opportunity, even while on board slave ships. The onboard insurrection was ordinary; some slaves took their lives by jumping overboard while others fought the crew. Once on shore, slaves tried to escape to the North, disrupted their work, or conducted outright slave rebellions.

e. **Slide 5:** Guiding Questions

What differences are there between the slaves and the captors?

What kind of weapons were used?



Who has the advantage in this fight? Why?

f. Slide 6: Read slide 6 with class discussion.

Once the ship departed, the crew, on all slave ships, was outnumbered; the captured slaves were outnumbered with superior firepower and equipment to repress any resistance. Also, the Africans were subjected to extreme punishments that kept other survivors in check. Some slaves would jump overboard or be thrown overboard by the crew. Historians do not know how many slaves died on the slave ships; the estimate is one million slaves were lost in the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

g. Slide 7: Herbert Aptheker wrote the *American Negro Slave Revolts* in 1943. He documented 250 slave uprisings over the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries that put an end to the myth that slaves were docile. Rebelliousness was exceedingly ordinary and the desire for freedom and hope were characteristic among American slaves. Here are seven slave uprisings to review.

h. Slide 8: New York City Slave Rebellion, 1712

The city had a large population of black slaves due to the years of trade with the West Indies. The slaves lived in a small area at the southern tip of Manhattan and worked with free men, far different from the situations on the southern plantations.

Conditions in New York City for the slaves were wretched and primitive. After a meeting on Maiden Lane in Manhattan, it was decided that they would revolt and hoped to incite other slaves to join in the rebellion.

On April 6, 1712, approximately twenty-five slaves armed themselves with guns, hatchets, swords, and clubs and set fire to a building on the northern edge of the city. The fire quickly spread, and when white colonists gathered to extinguish the blaze, the slaves killed nine colonists and another six were injured. Soldiers from a nearby fort were summoned. Eighteen slaves were brutally killed and eight committed suicide. The revenge far outweighed the crime committed by the rebelling slaves.

This event prompted action resulting in stricter laws concerning slaves. No longer could more than three slaves meet, any slave with a firearm would receive twenty lashes, and any involvement in a conspiracy to kill would result in execution. In the end, these laws would prove to be pointless, for in 1741, New York would see another uprising.

i. Slide 9: Stono Rebellion or Cato's Conspiracy, 1739

This rebellion originated in Stono, South Carolina, on September 9, 1739. Organized by a literate slave named Jemmy, referred to as Cato, led some eighty slaves that took up arms and attempted to march to Spanish-ruled Florida. England was at war with Spain at the time and the slaves were promised their freedom and land at St. Augustine, Florida.



Spain attempted to destabilize England's hold on North America by the offer of freedom for the slaves.

The rebels raided an ammunition store, stole guns, and proceeded to destroy plantations and kill whites as they marched south toward the promised freedom in Florida. A battle ensued, and the militia defeated them and executed forty-four of the rebels. Some rebels who survived were sent to the West Indies.

After the deadly Stono Rebellion, South Carolina reduced aggravations for the rebellion. Authorities penalized masters for imposing excessive work and punishments against slaves and imposed an extreme duty on the importing of new slaves from Africa and the West Indies. Then South Carolina passed the **Negro Act of 1740**, which restricted assembly, education, and movement of slaves. This act tightened control over the enslaved.

j. Slide 10: New York Conspiracy, 1741

After a series of mistrustful fires in New York City, inhabitants feared an arsonist plot and suspicion focused on the city's enslaved population and its multi-racial working-class community. The government offered a handsome reward and a pardon to anyone who would name names. A sixteen-year-old white female indentured servant, Mary Burton, claimed to know about a slave conspiracy. She was promised her freedom and 100 pounds if she revealed the plans for the conspiracy.

Those Burton named then implicated others avoiding execution. Judge Daniel Horsmanden, an ambitious British expatriate, saw nearly 200 people arrested and turned the proceedings into a witch hunt. Much of the dubious testimony from Burton was inconsistent with unfounded accusations and coerced confessions.

As a result, thirty-one slaves were either burned at the stake or hanged and four whites were hanged. The trial resulted in the death of innocent men and women. To this day, no specific plot was uncovered or any certainty that a conspiracy ever existed.

k. Slide 11: Gabriel's Rebellion, 1800

Gabriel Prosser was a Richmond, Virginia blacksmith who opposed slavery in the rhetoric of rights of man and the Declaration of Independence. Gabriel was well informed about the world around him. He had several advantages over other plantation slaves because he had more autonomy when he was "hired out" to work in a various places.

Gabriel and his brother, Martin, a slave preacher, worked together to organize the rebels. Martin organized slaves at funerals, secret religious meetings, and used biblical stories to justify rebellion. Gabriel's autonomy allowed him to move around and contact slaves from surrounding plantations to plan an attack on Richmond to destroy slavery in Virginia. The rebels planned to seize the city arsenal and kill all white residents except Quakers and Methodists, who opposed slavery.



Prosser planned to initiate the insurrection on the night of August 30, 1800, but earlier in the day two slaves alerted the Virginia authorities about the plot: that same day, a storm washed out the roads to Richmond and delayed the uprising by 24 hours. Governor James Monroe alerted the militia. Realizing that their plan was thwarted, his followers scattered. No whites were killed in the revolt, 27 blacks were executed, including Gabriel.

The treatment of slaves became worse after Gabriel's Rebellion. Slave owners took steps to prevent future rebellions by prohibiting the education of slaves, slaves could no longer assemble in large groups and hiring slaves outside of the plantation was greatly restricted.

l. Slide 12: German Coast Uprising, 1811

The area known as the German Coast derived its name from the number of pioneers that settled there in 1721. The German Coast Uprising was a slave revolt located in parts of the Territory of Orleans on January 8-10, 1811. It was regarded as one of the most massive slave uprisings in American history.

One of the leaders of the uprising was Charles Deslondes a free person of color from Haiti who may have been inspired by the Haitian Revolution. Deslondes worked as a slave driver on the plantation and organized the other slaves. He united the slaves on the plantation where he worked and gathered other runaways who formed the maroon society in the nearby swamps.

The reason for the revolt was these sugar plantations on the German Coast were notorious for their brutal treatment and responsible for the shortened lives of the slaves. The rebellion occurred during the harvest time when slaves were given more free time, which allowed Deslondes an opportunity to organize the slaves.

Up to 125 slaves marched from the sugar plantations on the German Coast toward the city of New Orleans, and they collected more and more slaves as they burned five plantations, several sugarhouses, and crops in the fields. Some accounts reported that the slaves totaled between 200 to 500. The two-day, twenty-mile march ended when the militia captured Deslondes and killed many of the slaves.

Nearly one hundred slaves were brutally killed or executed.

m. Slide 13: Denmark Vasey Conspiracy, 1822

Denmark Vesey, a slave carpenter, was a resident of Charleston, South Carolina who purchased his freedom in 1800. He was a leading figure in the black church and felt that slavery and bondage were against the Bible. Vesey followed the debates in Congress over the expansion of slavery into Missouri. From 1821 to 1822, Vesey recruited more than 1,000 free and enslaved blacks from rural areas and plotted an attack on Charleston sometime in July 1822. The plot to kill all whites and free enslaved blacks



was betrayed by George Wilson, a loyal slave, who told his master about the plot to seize the city.

Following a lengthy trial, Vesey and thirty-six others were hanged. The executions were accompanied by massive protests from free and enslaved blacks. This conspiracy helped politicize black communities and leaders like Frederick Douglass against slavery.

n. Slide 14: Nat Turner Rebellion, 1831

One of the largest slave rebellions in American history took place in Southampton County, Virginia, in an area of small farms rather than on large plantations. It played an essential role in the development the antebellum slave society.

Nat was a slave preacher and something of a mystic. In the 1820s, he started seeing visions in the sky of black and white angels fighting. Nat felt God chose him to be the Moses of his people to liberate them and gain his own freedom. In 1831, without a plan or clear objective, he launched his rebellion with eighty slaves, and moved from farm to farm, killing nearly all women and children in his path. At the time, most of the area's adult males were at a nearby religious revival.

By the time the militia curbed the rebellion, approximately sixty whites had laid dead. Turner escaped and was finally captured and executed. The state legislature of Virginia considered abolishing slavery. However, but it continued to support a repressive policy against blacks, chose to tighten the slave codes which further limited the blacks' movement and made it illegal to conduct religious services without a white being present.

Afterward, fear spread through the white population, and white mobs turned on blacks who had played no part in the rebellion and murdered them. An estimated 200 blacks were killed after the rebellion.

o. Slide 15: Slaves Resisted by Running Away

Between 1736 until 1783, the Virginia Gazette carried more than 3,500 advertisements placed by slave owners to find their runaway slaves. These advertisements were a testament to the desire for freedom.

3. Summary: Read Slide 16 with class discussion

4. Sources:

Virginia Runaway ads:

<http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/enslavement/text8/virginiarunawayads.pdf>

Slave ship mutinies:

<http://slaveryandremembrance.org/articles/article/?id=A0035>

Rebellions:



<http://slaveryandremembrance.org/partners/partner/?id=P0025>

U.S. Census of 1830 <https://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/1830a-01.pdf>

Gilder Lehrman:

<https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/spotlight-primary-source/new-york-conspiracy-1741>

The Readers Companion to American History, by Eric Foner and John A. Garraty (Houghton Mifflin Company) 995 – 997

German Coast Uprising:

<https://ushistoryscene.com/article/german-coast-uprising/>