“A Bloody Conspiracy”: Race, Power and Religion in New York’s 1712 Slave Insurrection1

Anne-Claire Faucquez

The night of 6 April 1712, when twenty-five to thirty slaves resolved to win their freedom and take revenge on their masters in New York City, has failed to strike the collective memory.2 However, for the first time on the North American continent, a group of slaves assembled and killed nine Whites while wounding twelve others. The insurgents gathered at midnight and set fire to Peter Van Tilburg’s shed two hours later. Alerted by the flames, New York inhabitants were ambushed by the slaves, who attacked them with rifles, knives, clubs, swords, axes and hatchets. One Robin stabbed his master, Adrian Hoghlandt, in the back, one Tom shot Andries Beekman in the chest while a slave known as Peter the Porter hit Joris Marschalk, his master’s son, in the chest too.3 This uprising triggered off a real movement of panic in the city as Governor Hunter sent the New York and Westchester militias to search every corner of the town for the culprits. The fear even spread to the colony of Massachusetts where the Boston Weekly News-Letter published an account of the event, concluding “this has put [us] into no small Consternation the whole town being under Arms.”4

This revolt has generated remarkably little scholarly interest: only two articles have been devoted to it as opposed to the flow of works dedicated to the 1741 New York slave conspiracy, the West Indies or the Southern rebellions – the 1739 Stono Rebellion in South Carolina, Gabriel’s conspiracy in Virginia in 1800, Denmark Vesey’s alleged revolt in Charleston, South Carolina in 1822 or Nat Turner’s rebellion in Virginia in 1831.5

1 “A bloody conspiracy of some of the slaves of this place, to destroy as many of the Inhabitants as they could [...] to revenge themselves, for some hard usage they apprehended to have received from their masters,” E.B. O’Callaghan, Bertold Fernow (ed. and trans.), Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York, 15 vols. (Albany, 1853–1887), 5:349–350 (hereafter DRCHNY).
2 All dates are rendered in New Style with the year beginning 1 January.
However, the 1712 insurrection seems fundamental in many respects. First, it was the first revolt on the North American mainland which, following James G. Randall’s definition of an insurrection, may be considered as successful. An insurrection, Randall writes, is an organized armed uprising which seriously threatens the stability of government and endangers social order. ... [It] is distinguished from rebellion in that it is less extensive and its political and military organization is less highly developed. The term insurrection would be appropriate for a movement directed against the enforcement of particular laws, while the word rebellion denotes an attempt to overthrow the government itself.6

Indeed, even if these slaves neither secured the abolition of slavery in New York nor obtained their freedom, they managed to seek revenge for “some hard usage they apprehended to have received from their masters”7 and to kill New

---

7 DRCNY, 5:431.