There Is a River
THE BLACK STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM IN AMERICA

VINCENT HARDING

"DEMONSTRATES ONCE AND FOR ALL THE RICHNESS AND THE COMPLEXITY OF THE HISTORY OF BLACK AMERICANS."
—AMERICA
Reason and Revelation join to declare that we are the creatures of that God, who made of one Blood, and kindred, all the nations of the Earth; we perceive by our own Reflection, that we are endowed with the same Faculties with our masters, and there is nothing that leads us to a Belief, or Suspicion, that we are any more obliged to serve them, than they us, and the more we consider of this matter, the more we are Convinced of our Right . . . to be free . . . and can never be convinced that we were made to be Slaves.

Prime and Prince, “in behalf of themselves and the other Petitioners,” 1779

And the black seed of Africa was ruthlessly cast into the winds, into the hungry soil, into the mines, into the furrows, into the forests, into the rivers and the sands, into the eyes and minds and white nightmares of North and South America. And the harvest has not yet fully come.

Just as we had been cruelly gathered from many places along the coasts of the homeland, so by the end of the seventeenth century the prison ships were making their stops at many ports in the New World, from Brazil and Barbados to New England, bringing us to coasts we had never dreamed of, moving us into rivers far from home.

Though the coasts and rivers of North America were unfamiliar, the racism and economic greed of Europe had arrived there before us. They had already begun to prepare a way, driving the natives of this continent relentlessly from the grounds of their ancestors, from the mounds of their spirits. That was the meaning behind the words of Peter Stuyvesant, the Dutch governor of New York, when in 1660 he wrote: “It is evident
that in order to possess this country in peace and revenge affronts and murders we shall be forced into a lawful offensive war against [the Indians].”¹

That was the meaning behind the traditional Indian version of the earlier New Amsterdam massacre in 1643, as told by Chief Flying Hawk:

The Indians had befriended the helpless adventurers when they came among them, and for their kindness the settlers attacked them one night and killed more than a hundred and twenty men, women and children while they were asleep in their wigwams. This was about the first massacre. But it was a white-man massacre of Indians. They ran their bayonets through the stomachs of little babies and flung them into the river. They cut off the hands of the men and cut open the women with their swords. They went among them with a torch of fire and burned their homes until no Indians were left; and these all were friendly Indians who sold the white people their island for needles, awls, and fish-hooks, and brought the furs to them.²

Between that massacre and the time of Peter Stuyvesant’s righteous words, certain patterns had been established, preparing the way for the coming of the Africans.

Europeans had declared themselves owners and governors of the lands of others—nonwhite, heathen others. Then, when these others finally and inevitably resisted, Europeans were regularly “forced into a lawful offensive war” against them to “revenge affronts and murders.” Since the Europeans had brought the laws of their churches and states with them, they could decimate the others legally and morally, in apparent quietness and righteousness of conscience. The Euro-American search for “peace” by means of legal genocide had begun, and the drive to possess this country was on. For better and for worse, it developed concurrently with the campaign to possess the bodies and spirits of the children of Africa—and neither the search nor the campaign has yet ended. So the way had been prepared when Brotherhood and John the Baptist, when Justice and Integrity, when Gift of God and Liberty and Jesus arrived in the New World, carrying the burden of our people’s captivity.

Meanwhile, the shipboard struggles which had begun in the rivers and on the coasts of Africa continued right to the shores of the Americas. Rebellions, suicides, and in a few cases capture of the vessel, occurred in sight of the new land. But the overwhelming majority of those who neared the strange coasts had no such alternatives. By the tens, then the hundreds, then the thousands, we walked onto the new shores and wept by the new rivers, forced by the men and the systems of Europe into a new history, a history to be shared in relentless struggle with them, a history we never wanted. At first, many entered the new North American settle-
ments by way of the West Indies, often experiencing a period of "seasoning" in a place like Barbados. Later the connections were direct, unmediated, and stark.  

It was a new time and place, yet it was not. The middle passage had ended, yet it had not. We were no longer on the slave ships, yet we were. We were plunged into a new era, yet we were heirs of untold thousands of years of our past. In the midst of such contradictions, what was the nature and meaning of our struggle in the New World? Now that we could no longer fiercely possess the ships on the ocean, no longer turn them back to our shores, now that the African birds were gone, and all the familiar scents of our rivers were captured only in our dreams, now—in America—what was black struggle, that one river which we could not leave behind?

The answers to these questions did not come easily, but were worked out in all the actual situations where we found ourselves, were developed in harsh dialectic with the varying circumstances of this new bondage. Well into the midst of the seventeenth century, the situation we discovered was fluid and uncertain, for colonists like the early Virginians seemed at first unclear about the status of the black people they were purchasing from the traders and pirates. Although the landing of the first group of captive Africans in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619 is traditionally considered the beginning of the institution of black slavery in the North American colonies of England, the fact is that the category of "slave" was not yet clearly defined at that time. Nor were the Africans who arrived in the early period limited to or by that status. For several decades, indeed, blacks in Virginia and elsewhere had a status within the laboring classes that varied from indentured apprentice and servant to free man and free woman; the nature of the quest for justice, the definition of the struggle for freedom, was also fluid. But within less than a generation the circumstances had changed, the options were narrowed, and the early mold of oppression was formed.

In this change the Southern colonies—especially Virginia and later South Carolina—played a crucial role. As the number of Africans increased, as they indicated their firm desire for the privileges of other men and women, they became more visible, more of a troublesome presence. At the same time the European demand for Southern crops such as tobacco, indigo, and rice was sharply rising, opening up to white men and women new visions of the vast profits to be made from slave labor. Then, as blacks began to be chosen for that role, all the recently imported, constantly developing legal system of Anglo-America was brought to bear, forcing a clearer, sharper definition of the black (and therefore the
white) status, building slavery into the heart of the new society, confirming the chosen people in their anguished calling.

So in the course of the seventeenth century, the freedom-loving English colonies developed a series of laws and judicial rulings to define the black situation. Beginning in Virginia at the end of the 1630s, laws establishing lifelong African slavery were instituted. They were followed by laws prohibiting black-white intermarriage, laws against the ownership of property by Africans, laws denying blacks all basic political rights (limited as they were among whites at the time). In addition, there were laws against the education of Africans, laws against the assembling of Africans, laws against the ownership of weapons by Africans, laws perpetuating the slavery of their parents to African children, laws forbidding Africans to raise their hands against whites even in self-defense.

Then, besides setting up legal barriers against the entry of black people as self-determining participants into the developing American society, the laws struck another cruel blow of a different kind: they outlawed many rituals connected with African religious practices, including dancing and the use of the drums. In many places they also banned African languages. Thus they attempted to shut black people out from both cultures, to make them wholly dependent neuters.

Finally, because the religious and legal systems were so closely intertwined, everywhere in the colonies a crucial legislative decision declared that the Africans’ conversion to Christianity did not affect their enslavement. Some whites had expressed scruples on this matter, others fear. For while they wanted to introduce their slaves to the blessings of the Gospel, they were concerned lest such Good News disturb the sensitive workings of the new black-white society as a whole, and the marked advantages of their own role as slaveholders. Again, Virginia led the way: in 1667 its Assembly passed an act declaring that “the conferring of baptism doth not alter the condition of the person as to his bondage or freedome.” Such laws freed many whites to do their Christian duty of evangelization and to reap the profit and the social standing of slave ownership at the same time. Blacks could be at once Christians and slaves—a status unique for that age.

It was all very convenient and very ironic. The great collections of colonial law—landmarks of early American liberty—shut the door in the face of black freedom. Whether it was the highly lauded Massachusetts Body of Liberties or the Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina, presumably wrought by John Locke, or Virginia’s colonial statutes, the intentions of the propertied white rulers were unvarying: a formal denial of black rights, an affirmation of African slavery, all providing a clanging antiph-
only to their own gathering struggles for self-determination, posting a
guard against their own very real internal class conflicts.8

This last element was of great importance, for as the laws sought to
provide legal sanction to the economic, political, and cultural domination
and definition of the black captives from Africa by the whites from Eu-


orpe, many of those laws at the same time, as part of the same objective,
aimed at building a new, fundamentally false solidarity between the upper
and lower classes of the white population—a solidarity based on race and
racism. For the laws which placed the onus of perpetual bondage and
subordination on black shoulders were also meant to help many whites
forget that they had only recently been victims of the Anglo-Saxon law
themselves, had barely escaped from debtors' prisons, poorhouses, inden-
tured service, and the cold underside of English society. By defining the
black workers as permanent slaves held out of the mainstream of human
development; by defining Christian whiteness as automatically privi-
leged; by developing a situation in which the economic welfare of every
white seemed to rest on enslaved black labor—by all these means and
more, the dominant classes of the colonies consciously worked to create
a white laboring force isolated from and antagonistic to black concerns.
Such a white group, it was rightly assumed, would be more prepared to
serve as an armed force for social control against the expanding African
population.

Thus the planters and commercial leadership, especially in the South,
were free to bring in ever larger numbers of Africans, to increase their
own profits and status, and to share some minor part of these benefits
with their white laboring group, knowing that the dangers of black-white
solidarity at the bottom of society were decreased as poorer whites were
legally and socially defined in a distinctly favorable status relative to
Africans, and as Africans were forced to become the slaves and the subal-
terns of the entire society. By such means the leadership of a colony like
Virginia was able to defuse and redirect some of the dangerous class
tensions building up in the last quarter of the seventeenth century. At
the same time, there and in South Carolina especially, the colonial leaders
were creating a white armed guard against the possibility of insurrection
by these ever more numerous and very profitable African slaves.9

From the outset, then, European laws for African people meant black
subjugation and repression, arbitrary advantages for whites, and racist
distinctions among laboring forces. Always behind the laws were the
whips, the scaffolds, and the guns, buttressed in turn by the ever deepen-
ing layers of fear and mistrust. In this way, many of the essential experi-
ences of the slave ships were transferred to the shores of American
slavery, to the fields of Virginia and South Carolina, to the crooked streets.
of Boston and New York. There, in the heart of the prison states, the experience was elaborated and expanded. Gradually, the black awakening from the dreams of the middle passage became an unrelenting reality in the New World.

Before long, through laws and social practice, our forebears in America were being pressed into three basic categories, just as they had been packed into the kennels of the ships. Roughly, the categories were political, economic, and cultural; but there was constant interpenetration, lack of consistency, and much contradiction. First, Africans were defined as the prisoner-slaves of all Euro-American society and its legal-political structures. Second, as the slaves of individuals, families, and companies, they were often looked upon as semianimal labor-producing property. Third—a more agonizingly subtle and confused conception—they were defined as a combination of overgrown and witless children, lost heathen in need of salvation, and fearful, untrustworthy, but fascinating and often desirable sensual savages whose African roots would soon wither away.

Thus the power that whites sought over the people of Africa was not only the power to hold them as prisoner-laborers for their life and the life of their children's children: even more profoundly, it was the power to define them in North American terms according to Euro-American social, political, and economic needs. Whites in this way attempted to deny millennia of African history, pressing the tragic ironies of European names, faiths, and categories upon the black present, seeking in that and other ways to guarantee black co-operation and submission far into any future created by white racism and greed.

But many African men and women were no more ready to accept the imprisonment of white categories and laws in Virginia, South Carolina, and New York than they had been prepared to submit peacefully to the life of the kennels on the ships. Indeed, in the face of such concerted legalized attempts at political, economic, and spiritual enslavement, it is not surprising that the movement of black struggle quickly leaped from the slave ships to the North American prison-states. Nor is it strange that its shapes and forms often corresponded to the categories of white oppression and invoked memories of the shipboard experiences. Soon the struggle for black freedom in the colonies began to resemble a small river gathering its early force, moving against the domination of white power, against the debilitating definitions of white society, against the control of black lives by Euro-America and its systems of slavery and racism. Within that young river, the black radical streams were those which posed the most basic challenges, offered the most fundamental and wide-ranging resistance, raised the most profound questions about the nature of white society and the legitimacy of its power to control and define black people.
By the middle of the seventeenth century, as the laws of slavery fell into place like ponderous nets of words and deeds, and the laden slave ships poured their cargo onto the shores, the freedom struggles of the black forerunners often followed the patterns of rebellion established earlier. Steadily the number of fugitives increased, as African men and women denied the power and legitimacy of white laws and white enforcers. Some engaged in individual acts of outward rebellion before breaking free; most simply ran to the wilderness, to the rivers, to the docks. At times the runaways attempted to consolidate their strength and their gains by developing what were essentially small guerrilla bands, maintaining a constant opposition to the surrounding white society and its laws. (Occasionally these bands contained white and black members alike.) Everywhere in the Western Hemisphere, where they usually operated in large numbers, these bands were called “maroons.” In North America they were most often called “outlyers,” and the colonial laws of slavery and bondage were filled with persistent concern for runaways and insurrectionists, an early “troublesome presence.”

Thus in Virginia, as early as the 1650s, there were reports of fugitive Africans attempting “to form small armed groups in various sections of the colony and to harass neighboring plantations, at the same time creating bases to which others might flee.” Every year the reports were repeated in all parts of the colony, becoming even more threatening when, as in Glouster County in 1663, blacks and whites were discovered together in a conspiracy to overpower their masters and make a break for freedom. Joint action of this sort was not exceptional, and helped explain why the wedge had to be driven between blacks and poor whites. Indeed, the urgency for such racial separation became clearer in 1676, when scores of blacks joined a motley group of white indentured servants, unemployed workers, and other lower-class and not-so-lower-class whites in Bacon’s Rebellion, Virginia’s closest approximation to a large-scale, class-based insurrection. Although the motives of Bacon and many of his white comrades now appear ambiguous, and there was unmistakable anti-Indian racism and much greed for plunder mixed in, the available evidence nevertheless indicates that blacks in the rebellion believed themselves to be fighting for their freedom. The black participants in this seven-month antigovernment and sometimes anti-upper-class revolt seem to have been among its staunchest supporters. In the fall of 1676, even after its leader was dead and its potentially revolutionary course corrupted, armed black members of the rebellion held out until, heeding false promises of freedom, they were betrayed, captured, and re-enslaved.

However, as the laws and the mores isolated the African captives more effectively from white laborers, the essential black thrust had to become
increasingly independent and self-reliant, taking many forms. In 1687 a plot was uncovered in which blacks in one part of the colony planned to use the occasion of their funerals to stage an insurrection. A few years after that, an African named Mingoe and his guerrilla band of fugitives were stirring many fears among the whites in Virginia’s Middlesex County, especially since the black men were stealing not only livestock and clothing but guns.12

In 1694 Sir Edmund Andros, the English governor of the colony, lamented the lack of adequate slave-control laws in Virginia, “in consequence of which, negroes had run together in certain parts of the Colony, causing assemblages so dangerous as to threaten the peace of the whole community.” Blacks were not simply a troublesome presence. In Virginia, where by the beginning of the eighteenth century they comprised more than twenty-five percent of the population, they were considered a dangerous, a potentially radical presence, especially when gathered and moving about together—especially, that is, when seeking to define their own lives. Virginia society, presaging the future of white America, could find peace only by keeping black people under surveillance and control, unallied with lower-class whites.13

A similar testimony developed out of South Carolina, where the English planter-colonists from Barbados had established a new colony, with its inevitable backbone of captive black laborers. Steadily, as a part of their struggle to break the white power and be free, these workers ran away, stole their own labor, deprived the colonists of invaluable lifelong investments, and in many cases made their way to Saint Augustine, the center of Spanish influence in Florida. As Carolina’s rice and indigo plantations spread, as a largely absentee ownership gave over the semitropical areas to their African laborers, running away became an even greater option than in Virginia, and the environs of Saint Augustine soon began to build up with Carolina’s fugitive blacks. By 1710 South Carolina’s whites were expressing fears about more than runaways. For blacks had so begun to outnumber whites throughout the colony that the threat of insurrection was a constant source of conversation and, as in Virginia, a motivation for policy.14

But it was not in Virginia and South Carolina alone, not only among white Southern society, that the fear of a black quest for freedom existed; the same attitude permeated much of Northern colonial life. In the Northern colonies blacks had already given evidence of their struggle for freedom. As early as 1657 Africans and Indians in Hartford “joined in an uprising and destroyed some buildings” in the settlement. Such incidents were regularly repeated. In 1706 Lord Cornbury, the English governor of New York, put forth an edict “requiring and commanding [all officers]
to take all proper methods for the seizing and apprehending of all such Negroes as shall be found to be assembled—and if any of them refuse to submit, then fire upon them, kill or destroy them, if they cannot otherwise be taken. I am informed that several Negroes in Kings County [Brooklyn] have assembled themselves in a riotous manner, which if not prevented may prove of ill consequence.” The English governors provided a critical insight for any proper understanding of black struggle and black radicalism in America: they appeared to believe that in a racist society built on white domination, black submission, and black invisibility, the unsupervised black presence itself, especially in the aggregate, was a threat, a challenge, an element of the struggle for control. Later their white Revolutionary opponents and successors would agree totally—which suggests, of course, that more than white revolution is necessary to break the power of white racism.\(^{15}\)

The official statements of colonial governors were not simply ravings of racist minds; they knew whereof they spoke. The record of black rebellion and resistance, of arson and flight, was already written in the private papers and public journals of the land. In New York early in 1712—a few years after the warning from Lord Cornbury—“some Negro slaves of the Cormantine and Pawpaw nations, together with a few Indians, resolved to revenge themselves for ‘some hard dosage they apprehended to have received from their masters’ and to obtain their freedom,” and so on March 25 formed a plot “to destroy all the whites in the town.”\(^{16}\)

On April 6, when the plans were put into motion, centuries of African tradition could not be broken, especially in such a crisis of struggle: the rebellious Africans swore themselves to secrecy by sucking the blood of one another’s hands, and “a free Negro who pretended sorcery gave them a powder to rub on their clothes to make them invulnerable.” Then they set fire to an outhouse and waited for the white inhabitants of the area to respond to the alarm, being “prepared to slay each person who came to put out the blaze.” Their resolve, their weapons, and the element of surprise made it possible for the conspirators to kill nine persons and wound seven others before soldiers were ordered out. Then the insurrectionists retreated and scattered into the night. The next day the colonial troops were joined by the local militia. In the course of the ensuing battles, some black rebels committed suicide rather than submit to capture, one of them a husband who first killed his wife. Among those Africans who remained alive to face the consequences, several were burned alive and one was broken on the wheel.\(^{17}\)

Men and women who joined such allies, risked so much and fought so hard, were surely seeking more than revenge, and it is likely that the keepers of white power knew that. Even when there was no open, costly
confrontation, white men and women understood that black struggle was a radical challenge and might take many forms. A decade later in Boston, Lieutenant Governor William Dummer thought he saw black hands behind a rash of fires which had just swept the city, and claimed that they were "designedly and industriously kindled by some villainous and desperate Negroes."18

Still, the major struggles by these "villainous Negroes" were based in the South, especially in South Carolina, where by 1720 they outnumbered the white settlers two to one, and in Virginia, where the demand for tobacco had increased the total number of blacks to more than 26,000, nearly a third of the population. In South Carolina there was never a time when organized attempts at black uprisings did not seem a part of the landscape, a subject of white fears. In 1720 authorities in Charleston discovered a plot "of the negroes with a design to destroy all the white people in the country and then to take the town." A few years later a minister in Goose Creek Parish complained of "secret poisonings and bloody insurrection by certain Christian slaves." On the frontiers there was constant word of blacks and Indians coming up from the Florida area to attack planters, "to rob and plunder us," to capture (or rescue) enslaved blacks.19

As noted earlier, the threat of black struggle was used as a means to solidify white people, to array lower-class whites into a colony-wide police force against the black quest for freedom. In South Carolina in the 1720s, the local slave patrols were merged with the colony’s militia, reflecting a shift from concern with an outer enemy to increased surveillance of the enslaved, resisting blacks. Similarly, in Virginia in 1727 a special slave patrol was established to deal with "the great dangers that may happen by the insurrection of negroes." Thus in the life of the Southern colonies the military system became at once a testimony to, and defense against, the reality of the black struggle for freedom.20

Even when there were no open confrontations, white men and women dreamed of them, expected them, feared them, sometimes expanded actual events to epic proportions. Thus an African named Samba, who had already attempted insurrection struggle in the coastal baracoons, was credited in 1730 with trying to organize a conspiracy from Virginia to Louisiana. Could this have been true? No one can now be certain, but what seemed most important, distorting all reality, was the black presence itself, unnerving and troubling: a subterranean, self-fulfilling part of the struggle which raged through the minds of white people wherever Africans were in bondage. So in the same year it was reported from Charleston that "the Negroes . . . had conspired to Rise and destroy us, and had almost bro’t it to pass." And in South Carolina several years later,
the threat of black and white solidarity had still not passed, for the white authorities complained that "several white persons and Blacks, have committed many Outrages and robbery and lye in the swamp at the Head of Wando River, where they bid defiance to the chief Justices warrant."21

In Virginia such fears were sharp. In 1736 Colonel William Byrd expressed his apprehensions: "We have already at least 10,000 men of these descendents of Ham fit to bear Arms, and their Numbers increase every day as well by birth as Importation. And in case there should arise a Man of desperate courage amongst us, exasperated by a desperate fortune, he might with more advantage than Cataline kindle a Servile War. Such a man might be dreadfully mischievous before any opposition could be formed against him, and tinge our Rivers as wide as they are with blood." Thus while Africans dreamed of the black and beckoning waters of the homeland, guilt-seared Americans lay down in darkness and were overwhelmed by rivers of blood. In the movement of black struggle, in the development of our convulsively joined black and white history, the two dreams were destined to merge more than once.22

Three years after the colonel had written his letter, in a place far (yet not so far) to the south of his native Virginia, the dreams merged in a minor stream, a tentative, suggestive streaking of blood. The place was Saint Paul's Parish, near the western branch of the Stono River, some twenty miles from Charleston. Blacks in this area and elsewhere had already run so often for freedom that their "desertion" had been anxiously broached in the colonial legislature. But here at Stono, early on a Sunday morning in September 1739, there was more than running, and no question of hiding, as an enslaved African named Jemmy led some twenty of his fellow captive workers in an uprising against their white masters. Having first successfully raided a store for arms and ammunition and executed the two storekeepers, they elected a captain and set out boldly in search of freedom. Moving "at a slow pace," they marched toward the southwest, heading for the relative safety of Saint Augustine. "With colors flying and two drums beating," the black men advanced "like a disciplined company," and it is said that on their way "they called out liberty." Also they killed every white person who came within their reach, burned and sacked houses and barns, and eventually built up a company of some seventy to eighty marching Africans.23

In the annals of our struggle for freedom in America, this tradition of black men marching flamboyantly in military formation is persistently repeated. On the surface, such a formal though deadly parade may have been mere imitation of the military forces of oppression; but at Stono and elsewhere it was more likely a radical statement of identity, a message of self-possession, for what was ultimately at work was a movement
toward self-transformation. A group of black people whom the white world had identified as slaves chose to organize and see themselves as soldiers of liberty, crusaders for freedom. Sounding the forbidden drums, they were warriors again. Living under the white man's menace, but no longer in his time, they had declared their own small but significant revolutionary war.

Of course all the marchers could not open themselves equally to such a new direction for their lives. Late that Sunday afternoon, when the militia discovered them celebrating victory prematurely, there were varied responses among the African marchers of Stono. Some stood their ground and fought to the death, whereas others ran away and became outlaws, attempting to maintain their new identity as long as possible. For a variety of reasons, still others returned to slavery, choosing that over death or outlawry. In the case of a large group of the marchers, their choice could not be known, for death surprised them on the way to freedom and offered no choice but its own. When all the marching had ended and the dead were counted, at least twenty whites and more than forty blacks had lost their lives.

Just as it had been on the ships, so it was on the land: death could not stem the flow of the young black river. Later that fall, even while some of the Stono marchers were still being hunted, and the severed heads of Jemmy's defeated army looked down from mile posts on Pons Pons Road, new threats and rumors of black insurrection broke out in the areas surrounding Charleston. Then in June 1740 a group of from one hundred and fifty to two hundred Africans in the Goose Creek area "got together in defiance" of their white overlords. Like the Stono forces, they had no arms and were reportedly planning to break into a Charleston arsenal and then take over the city. As it happened, their plan was betrayed, an ambush was set, and fifty blacks were seized. All these were hanged, at the rate of ten per day, the aim being, as a white official said, "to intimidate the other negroes." Still the struggle continued, and some contemporary observers called the series of risings in South Carolina the "Gullah War," identifying elements of an armed conspiracy in Saint Paul's, Saint John's, and Charleston parishes.

Nor was such movement confined to the larger colonies. In 1740 in Maryland, the courts received depositions from several black persons in Prince George's County "relating to a most wicked and dangerous Conspiracy having been formed by them to destroy his Majesty's Subjects within the Province, and to possess themselves of the whole Country." Again, the white-kept record was vague but instructive. On the sea they had rightly understood black people to be fighting to possess the ships. On land, at least in this instance, the fight was for black possession of
"the whole Country." Although the words of the African participants themselves did not survive, their situation and their dilemma were obvious. The slave ships had once been the kennels, the prisons, the mini-states. Now, in eighteenth-century America, those institutions had been transferred to the plantations, the counties, and the colonies themselves. A struggle for freedom in a sprawling land where slavery prevailed throughout was a far more complex matter. Where was the river headed? Was it indeed possible that black men and women were forced to struggle to possess—or transform—"the whole Country," before any of the children of Africa could really be free?

These were not trifling questions for the forerunners in America—just as they are not trifling now. Slavery was cruel in all its forms; in some, it was savage. Nowhere did the savagery of the keepers emerge more clearly than in the face of African movements toward freedom. So black people could not afford to play with struggle in a land claimed by white men and women whose very lives seemed increasingly to depend upon the maintenance and justification of black slavery. By and large, in the middle of the eighteenth century, these realities of the cost of struggle were the same in the North and the South. In the late winter and early spring of 1741, while the British empire was carrying on a costly and unpopular war with Spain, New York City was struck by a rash of fires and robberies, including the burning of the governor’s residence. Immediately a large proportion of the two thousand enslaved Africans and the far smaller number of Indians came under suspicion—especially a group of blacks recently captured among the crew of a Spanish vessel. White citizens remembered the insurrection of 1712; some said that they recalled overhearing black threats to “set the houses on fire, and kill the white people . . . in order to be free.”

Although no white deaths were recorded in the wave of arson, the disputed evidence seemed to indicate a deep black involvement. Indeed, Mary Barton, a white indentured servant, claimed that she had heard three Africans planning with a white man to burn the town down, kill all the other whites, and establish a monarchy with the white conspirator as king and one of the blacks as governor. As a result of such testimony, coming in the midst of an extremely tense and fearful situation, thirteen Africans were burned at the stake, sixteen others hanged, and more than seventy banished to places as distant as Newfoundland, Surinam, and Spain. (The list of the dead and banished men carries a fascinating, already Europeanized, but still pan-African resonance, including such names as Antonio, Cuba, Cuffee, Africa, Diego, London, Sussex, Jamaica, Quamino, and Othello.) Meanwhile that same spring, just across the river in Hackensack, New Jersey, the militia stood duty day and night as
three black persons were burned at the stake for burning seven barns.\textsuperscript{28}

While such explosive, turbulent events periodically broke through to the surface, always there was a more quiet, less dramatic, but never-ceasing movement of black struggle against the rising walls of slavery, carrying its own high hopes and harsh penalties. By the middle of the eighteenth century, wherever the system of bondage had established itself in the North American colonies, the African captives were still running away, becoming fugitives from the repressive law, breaking toward freedom, still risking punishment and death. Men recorded now only as Dick and Jacob, Prince and Scipio, Esop and Thomas—or who on rare occasions bore a surname, like the brothers Prince and Crispus Attucks—decided to be free. Black women—in smaller numbers, but firmly present—added names like Lydia and Dorcas, Sobett and Elizabeth to those hundreds and thousands who became known as runaways. Often they ran off in sizable groups, as well as individually and in small parties.\textsuperscript{29}

The runaways left Charleston and Salinas Island; they left Newark and New Brunswick in New Jersey; they left Annapolis and Baltimore in Maryland; Culpepper and Stafford Courthouse in Virginia. Like solitary tributaries feeding into the river of struggle, these men, women, and children moved toward freedom. Leaving plantations, estates, private residences, farms, and factories, they headed toward the Virginia swamps, toward the caves by the Cooper River, toward the relative safety of Florida, to cities like New York and Boston, to relatives and “paramours” wherever they were—some as far away as London. Indeed, there were African people who were evidently “persuaded that they could find the way back to their native country,” if only they walked far enough. By every possible means, with many levels of hope, they broke loose from bondage and moved toward a new life.\textsuperscript{30}

Often these fugitives carried strange bundles and burdens. Some expropriated large sums of money from their masters’ coffers; others took guns and powder. A few even ventured to ride off on horses, and a good many black musicians took their violins—forrunners of the generations who would walk the roads with guitars strapped to their backs. Many times they stole as much clothing as possible, like the man named Sam who in 1755 left Prince George’s County in Maryland with “one Cotton Coat lined with blue, one red waistcoat and Breeches, one blue Silk coat, one light Cloth Coat, some five shirts, and one or two good Hats.” (If clothes indeed make the man, this man clearly meant to be free.) Some women took men’s clothing as a disguise.\textsuperscript{31}

Just as often, of course, the fugitives left with nothing but their own coarse apparel on their backs. Under the clothing, deep in their flesh,
many also carried scars and unhealed wounds from whips and sticks and branding irons, and some even had to bear certain irons, like Hercules who had “Irons on his feet,” and Bill who had “a chain and pad lock on his Neck” when they left South Carolina’s bondage. Fortunately, they all took more than that. In their minds and bodies they carried a variety of skills, some surely brought over from Africa and passed on, some acquired in the New World. Among the runaways were blacks, carpenters, barrelmakers, shoemakers, musicians, and a number who had a reputation “as a doctor among people of his color.”

Interestingly enough, in spite of the efforts to separate them, during the first half of the eighteenth century a number of black runaways left their bondage in the company of white indentured servants, again testing an alliance which had a painful future. In the spring of 1754, for example, a black man from Annapolis joined with two white “convict servants” to rescue another black and a white, murder a sea captain, and abscond toward freedom in the captain’s small boat.

For those who remained in bondage on the plantations and farms or in the towns, the range of resistance was significant. Arson was always a weapon, either by itself or in connection with larger plans. In addition, the colonial records bear consistent testimony of poisoning. In 1756 a well-known Charleston physician named Alexander Garden declared, “I greatly and do suspect that the Negroes bring their knowledge of the poisonous plants . . . from their own country.” So five blacks were sentenced to death in one parish for the “horrid practice of poisoning their masters.” Still, five years later, the word went out: “The negroes have again begun the hellish practice of poisoning.” Meanwhile, on less obvious, less dangerous levels, many Africans were resisting by simply refusing to learn how to use a tool without breaking it, how to work without setting up deep currents of quiet, persistent, noncooperation. Others, with great but silent determination, were learning how to re-create their religious experience, in order to possess their soul in the midst of a destructive and soulless situation.

At the same time the sharper, more pointed confrontations regularly ripped their way to the surface, forever facing black people with the brutal necessities and cruel costs of open rebellion. Near Christmastime in 1769, a group of blacks on a plantation in Hanover County, Virginia, decided to turn on their new steward and a neighboring overseer. They tied up the two men and, perhaps remembering their own experiences under the lash, whipped their white bosses “till they were raw from the neck to the waistband.” Some forty to fifty persons were involved in this action, and when armed whites called upon them to surrender they refused, until their leader and several other rebels were killed.
Not long after, in Louisiana, several men and a woman, including at least one who was African-born, killed their master and attempted to organize a larger insurrection. They failed, and the penalties were brutal. Two of the leaders were "condemned . . . to death by hanging . . . dragged to the gallows from the tail of a pack-horse with an . . . halter tied to the neck, feet and hand." By some strange coincidence the black leader of this movement was called Temba, evoking memories of Captain Tomba from Sierra Leone. It was decreed that Temba was "to remain on the gibbet and to have his hands cut off and nailed on the public roads. . . . Pedro is to receive 200, and Mariana 100 lashes at the foot of the gallows, and their ears cut off close." 

When black men and women had constantly to ponder such punishments as a regular price of their freedom struggle, it seems amazing that the forward movement of the river was not halted in those earlier days. Nevertheless it was not. Instead, incidents that had occurred on slave ships were repeated, as when a young black woman in Boston tried to blow up her master's house by dropping a live coal into a cask of gunpowder. She succeeded, and one can only conclude that she had counted the cost of the serious injury she sustained. Consistently, blacks in struggle confirmed the judgment of the colonial official who had called them "a people whom no example can reclaim, no punishment deter, or leniative appease."

Rather than faltering, some major currents of black resistance were only beginning to come into focus. By then it was obvious, for instance, that the continuing attempts at insurrection made by small groups like the one led by Temba and Mariana were essential to the struggle. In addition, there were the armed bands of outlyers. In 1772 a grand jury document from Georgia provided a glimpse of one such group when it complained "that a Number of fugitive slaves have Assembled . . . on or near the borders of the River Savannah and are frequently committing depredations . . . with impunity." Only after the Georgia authorities set up a strong system of patrols were they finally able to drive many of the runaways deeper into Florida.

The outlyers in fact had a significant role in the struggle everywhere. Throughout the history of slavery, their existence and widespread activities demonstrated the willingness of relatively large numbers of black men and women to live outside the nets of white law and order, especially when that system mandated their degradation. In essence, their very existence was an act of radical disobedience. But of even greater importance than their radical witness as individuals was the fact that these runaways organized as groups. Hidden in swamps, caves, and forests, they often created tentative new communities outside the domination of
the masters, summoning up memories of Africa and adapting them to the hard realities of the new land. So their rebellion was not only an act of negative will, and their organizing not only a source of strength to their active resistance: their action moved forward into the creation of alternatives. Admittedly, these alternatives were often temporary, rugged, and dangerous, but they clearly challenged the existing order of slave society with another, self-determining black way.

This may have been their greatest significance. For as more than one white official noted, the countercommunities of fugitives became bases to which others might flee. Even beyond that, they became a living message for the enslaved people of the plantations, farms, and homes. The organized existence of the runaways meant that those black men, women, and children who lived within the apparently total institution of slavery could not view its power as all-encompassing so long as they knew of the black outlaws. And there was no doubt that they knew. Their own relatives and close friends were often among the outlaws. At night many of the fugitives found physical and spiritual sustenance in the cabins of the farms and plantations. Thus the outlyers represented a hidden, submerged black power that the masters could not break. They were a radical presence, challenging blacks and whites alike.39

However, in those days—as in all other times—most participants in the movement toward freedom were not really organized. Rather, the mainstream of the river was filled with innumerable individual acts of protest and rebellion. Today there is a tendency to place such individual action outside the compass of black struggle, but that is wrong. From the earliest times in America the quest for a new and self-determining life has been measured not only by the organization of black hope and black rage, but also by individual, private lives whose number was legion and whose only link was the river of struggle itself.

There were men like Caesar, a New England slave who had somehow lost both legs, but who in 1769 still managed to join the relentless company of runaways. In 1772 a black captive named George was giving much trouble to a slave dealer in Reading, Pennsylvania. The dealer wrote to the Philadelphia slave-trading firm that had sent George to him:

I took your Negro George some time ago home, thinking I might be the better able to Sell him: who after being with me a night behaved himself in such an insolent manner I immediately remanded him back to the Gaol. About a week since I put him up at Public Sale . . . where there was a number of Persons who inclined to Purchase him. But he protested publickly that he would not be sold, and if any one should purchase him he woud'be the Death of him and Words to the like purpose which deter'd the people from bidding. I then sent him back with Directions to the Gouler to keep him at Hard Labor
which he refuses to do & goes on in such An Insolent Manner that's impossible
to get a Master for him there.40

Understandably, the dealer's letter asked for instructions on what to do
with George, who at that point was “almost Naked and if not furnished
soon with some Cloathes I fear he'll perish. . . . He's now Chain'd &
Hand cuff'd on Account of his Threats.”11

George's fate is not known, but his words and actions helped to il-
minate a significant part of the growing tradition of the struggle. For
he represented that body of individuals who stood alone but insisted on
public protest, on refusal to co-operate lightly with the system of their
slavery—individuals who in their splendid isolation were willing to take
the worst the system could offer in return for relentless personal resis-
tance. George represented the many who were unlikely to be mastered
except in death. Later in black history George would be identified as a
"bad" or "crazy" nigger, and the system of oppression would often at-
ttempt certain accommodations to avoid confronting him, anxious to keep
his rebelliousness from infecting other black people.

The year of George's imprisonment, 1772, was a year in which the
white colonists intensified their own talk of freedom from tyranny—
a year in which they organized the Committees of Correspondence for
serious discussion of their common means of defense against the op-
pressive acts of the British Parliament, while the name of another George
grew increasingly unpopular among them. For any Africans who could
see and hear the discussions of white men, the colonies were clearly in
crisis. From the time of sickness and death among the white crews on
slaving ships to the burgeoning experiences of enslaved and colonized
men throughout the New World, the black struggle for freedom had never
failed to benefit from white crises. So in those pre-Revolutionary days of
the 1770s, many black men and women carefully appraised the rising
struggle and searched for opportunities, advantages, cracks in the wall.
As the patriot slave traders and the patriot slaveholders moved to break
their colonial bonds to the English Crown, the captive Africans also
moved—not in massive insurrections, as some later observers think they
should have done, but in growing daily defections from the system. It is
not clear at this point how many black captives used this time of white
struggle to break for freedom, but we know that thousands escaped to
Florida, Canada, and the Indian lands, or to service in the merchant
marine, and that many finally boarded departing British ships. Later
Thomas Jefferson estimated that by these means Virginia lost some thirty
thousand in one year alone.42

There were, of course, thousands of black men who considered service
in the Revolutionary armies as a possible path to their own freedom and, eventually, to the freedom of their people. But it was not until the British colonial governors—especially Virginia’s royal governor, Lord Dunmore—began appealing for black support, that George Washington and other American leaders saw fit to permit blacks officially to enlist. Even then, there were fewer blacks fighting for white American Independence than were engaged in the large, unorganized, fugitive army in flight toward their own independence.43

However, while the confusion, crisis, and chaos of the Revolutionary period opened an escapeway for many thousands of black fugitives, and at the same time drew some five thousand black men into the American army, it is likely that other results were even more significant for the long-range development of black struggle: specifically, the ideology of the white American Revolution and the uses that blacks made of it. As democratic dogma and revolutionary rhetoric filled the colonial legislatures and reverberated through the Continental Congress, and were proclaimed in local communities seeking justification for armed rebellion for the sake of Independence, many black people took careful notice. Was it so hard to grasp that the ideas of no taxation without representation, the equality of all men under God, and the divine right of humankind to freedom and self-government had some direct reference to their own lives? Indeed, in the fall of 1774 word spread among them that the Continental Congress had formally approved a resolution pledging the colonies to forsake the African slave trade altogether. Before long the radical rhetoric, promises, and ideas were firmly grasped by Africa’s children in America and transformed for the purposes of their own freedom struggle.44

Especially in the North, on many occasions during the War for Independence—in petitions to legislatures, freedom cases in the courts, and speeches—black people resolutely turned the professed revolutionary faith of their captors into outright challenges to the system of American slavery. The deism of the white Enlightenment, the Natural Rights doctrines of the white philosophers, the pietistic religion of the white churchmen—all were marshaled in verbal and legal attacks against the bases of black bondage. In many instances this assault continued the tradition of oral protest established on board the slave ships. Eventually this sort of protest, based on American democratic principles and too often on naive faith, became the broadest single element—the mainstream—in the river of black struggle in America. In the short run such protest, especially when backed up by actual flight, seems to have helped break the power of Northern slavery.43

Needless to say, during the war there was something about such ideol-
ogy in the hands of black captives and their partially free comrades which was clearly radical and revolutionary in potential. The direction was often suggested in the black petitions and suits for freedom which appeared throughout the period. In May 1774, just as armed hostilities were mounting, a “Grate Number of Blacks” in Massachusetts petitioned that patriotic legislature, saying, “We have in common with all other men a natural right to our freedom without Being depriv’d of them by our fellow men as we are a freeborn Pepel and have never forfeited this Blessing by any compact or agreement whatever.”

Again, in 1779 two black men held as slaves in Connecticut submitted a petition to the state’s General Assembly “on behalf of themselves and . . . the Negroes in the Towns of Stratford and Fairfield.” In their petition they took the ideology of the white revolutionaries more seriously than did the whites themselves:

Reason and Revelation join to declare that we are the creatures of that God, who made of one Blood, and kindred, all the nations of the Earth; we perceive by our own Reflection, that we are endowed with the same Faculties with our masters, and there is nothing that leads us to a Belief, or Suspicion, that we are any more obliged to serve them, than they us, and the more we Consider of this matter, the more we are Convinced of our Right . . . to be free . . . and can never be convinced that we were made to be Slaves.

In seeking legal emancipation, they said, “we do ask for nothing, but what we are fully persuaded is ours to claim.” The petition itself was an act of challenge, but beneath it was an essential black radical consciousness which denied their definition as “slaves,” which refused to allow their captors to think for them. From that point on, petitions for freedom based on reason, revelation, and reflection became recurrent features in the history of black struggle, and black people remained unconvinced of their inherent fitness for slavery.

When the Connecticut petitioners referred to “Revelation” as an element of their position on black freedom, they were pointing specifically to the teaching of the Bible and the theoretical doctrines of the white churches. Black people knew, of course, that the contradictions between theory and practice were often as intense in this sensitive area as in any other, and they chose to struggle within the churches with such contradictions in mind. With certain notable exceptions, the white church, like every other institution in the North American colonies, had been used to defend white supremacy and justify black slavery. In many cases blacks had been brought into its precincts as part of the continuing assault on African history and traditions, as part of the attempt to root out all living connections with the homeland, as a program of pacification.
Consequently, there were also contradictions within the black community, especially in its adherence to the white-controlled churches. For in spite of the many crushing experiences of the slave ships and seasoning grounds, in spite of the attempts of America to deny them access to their own being, Africans continued to hold the religious experience at the center of their lives. Therefore the struggle in the churches was critical. So when black people moved beyond petitions to seize the time and break the white control over their lives in these religious institutions, they were obviously engaged in radical action on behalf of self-definition and self-determination. At its best, their struggle in the churches was to repossess their souls.

This movement in the churches took various forms. In the course of the War for Independence, there was a noticeable expansion in the number of independent black Baptist churches in the South, especially in Savannah, Georgia, and in Petersburg and other communities in Virginia, as black people moved out from under white ecclesiastical control. In essence, this was a sign of the larger attempt to break free, and it was not ignored. During the wartime confusion such black action was tolerated, but when the struggle for Independence had ended, white officials struck out against these attempts at African self-determination. In at least one church in Georgia the whites imprisoned a black preacher, Andrew Bryan, and whipped several of his members. However, with some crucial assistance from a leading white citizen, Bryan and his congregation persevered, and went on to become the organizational center for the black Baptists of Georgia.48

In the North the critical struggle in the churches came in Philadelphia. By 1787 Richard Allen, Absolem Jones, and their friends had discovered that the white institution in which they worshiped, Saint George’s Methodist Episcopal Church, was really another slave ship, christened with another deceitful name. Within the place of worship blacks were being pressed to accept white definitions of their place—definitions which had nothing to do with the spirit of a living and just God. So one Sunday morning when Allen, Jones, and others were yanked from their knees and denied their right to unsegregated prayer, they had already formulated their response: the creation of a new institution under black direction.49

It was no easy choice for Allen and his friends. They were making a sharp and costly break with a church which meant much to them. Allen, who had been born in slavery in Philadelphia and sold into Delaware, had been converted to Methodism while still an adolescent. Soon after purchasing his freedom, the ardent black Christian became a preacher and moved about in the itinerant Methodist manner, earning a living with
his hands, preaching the Gospel wherever he found an audience. This
double mission had brought him back to Philadelphia in 1786. There
Allen soon discovered that the white Methodist officials were quite pre-
pared to have him evangelize black people into their structures, but not at
all prepared to let him form a black Methodist church with significant
black control. So in the spring of 1787 Allen and his friends formed the
Free African Society as a temporary substitute for their desired church,
and were already conscious of their potential powers and dangers when
the Saint George incident took place that fall.50

The decision to form an independent black organization carried Allen
and his friends beyond the paternal relationships they had experienced
up to then with the white clergy. Essentially, this painful black step chal-
lenged the legitimacy of that white-controlled institution to govern them
in the all-important religious levels of their lives. In addition, they or-
ganized others to make the same move and then withstood the attempts of
the white church to reassert its right to govern. By 1787 many of the men
and women in the newly formed Free African Society of Philadelphia
had made their final break with white ecclesiastical power, had set out
on their own paths. Eventually these paths led to the creation of the
powerful forces of African Methodism in America, Denmark Vesey being
only the most obvious and immediate inheritor of their work.51

Meanwhile, in 1787 Philadelphia’s black people were given additional
evidence that white American political leaders were no different from the
religious leaders when it came to black freedom. For it was not hard to
see that the Constitutional Convention then meeting in the city did not
intend to take the rhetoric of their American Revolution into the threaten-
ing realms of black slavery, just as most white Christians did not intend
to take the love of Jesus out to the auction block. Thirteen years earlier,
in 1774, when some of these same white leaders had met in Philadelphia
for the First Continental Congress, in their revolutionary fervor they had
proclaimed: “We will neither import nor purchase any slave imported
after the first day of December next, after which time we will wholly dis-
continue the slave trade and will neither be concerned in it ourselves nor
will we hire our vessels nor sell our commodities or manufactures to those
who are concerned in it.”52

This had been a logical statement for patriot-philosophers preparing
to affirm the equality of all human beings as part of their Declaration of
Independence. But neither logic nor revolutionary fervor was finally able
to overcome white racism, fear, and greed—not even in the Declaration
itself. (There, Jefferson’s disingenuous claim about the slave trade’s hav-
ing been forced upon the colonies had been deleted from the final draft,
not because his colleagues hated lies, but because they—and Jefferson—
loved the gains of the Trade and feared the freedom of blacks.) Therefore it was not surprising that once the war was over and these momentary fervors had died away, and the Constitutional Convention met in 1787, America wrote both the institution and the benefits of slavery into its Constitution. This basic set of national laws shielded the slave trade against any legislative prohibition for a minimum of twenty years; at the same time it made provision for the federal government to levy import fees on each new African who survived the middle passage. In the document the black population was included in the determination of Congressional representation, based on a formula which allowed enslaved people to be counted as three-fifths of a person. The Constitution also guaranteed the right of slaveowners to track down black fugitives across state lines and have them delivered back into captivity. It promised the use of federal armed forces in any struggle against insurrections. In fact, so firmly etched was the guarantee of black bondage that only a grim and bloody war would begin to expunge it from the laws. Thus the revolution for white liberty ended with black slavery carefully protected in the basic document of the new, "free" nation.53

The power of the king had been destroyed, but the slave trade which he had supposedly forced on the colonists had not ended. Indeed, since the Revolution it had markedly increased. So much so that in 1796 the British governor of Sierra Leone would write to a white American abolitionist: "You will be sorry to learn that during the last year, the number of American slave traders on the coast has increased to an unprecedented degree. Were it not for their pertinacious adherence to that abominable traffic, it would in consequence of the war, have been almost wholly abolished in our neighborhood."54

The Revolution had set the white Americans free to press on with their part in the breaking of African society and the raping of her children, just as white laborers in the Southern colonies had earlier been granted greater freedom in exchange for their aid in repressing black struggles to achieve the same liberty. Therefore, in spite of the onset of a gradual movement toward the freeing of the African slaves in the Northern states, and in spite of continued black uses of the Revolution's rhetoric and ideology, many blacks realized that they would have to look elsewhere for true revolutionary inspiration. The white American Revolution was not ours.55

Before the eighteenth century was over, the inspiration had come. Very near to them, in the immediate environs of the New World, in the French colony of San Domingo, all the shibboleths of freedom had exploded in bloody confrontation in a black revolution for freedom. There, beginning in 1794, Toussaint L'Ouverture, a trusted black plantation steward, with
a reputation for unshakable rectitude and courage, had moved to the leadership of a revolution which had begun a few years earlier. It was a revolution whose clear direction was to fulfill the Biblical promise of the last becoming first, for the slaves had arisen and seemed determined to break the power of their European masters. The black river on the mainland was in ferment. Along the grapevine that had already begun to connect the African community in North America, the words were passed: Toussaint . . . San Domingo . . . Liberty or Death. Freedom and honor and dignity for the slaves at any cost. Perhaps they heard the words of the island's revolutionary leader, Boukman, who said: "Our god, who is good to us, orders us to avenge our wrongs. He will direct our arms and us. Throw away [the cross], the symbol of the god of the whites who has so often caused us to weep, and listen to the voice of liberty, which speaks in the heart of us all." Africans were denying the power of mighty France, the invincible Napoleon, the Holy Church, responding to the inner voices of freedom.

While the white American community shuddered at the thought of similar ideas, words, and revolution among the Africans of their land, while they passed laws and wrote letters and published hundreds of thousands of words against the epidemic of this black revolutionary fervor, Africans in America listened, pondered, and passed on the word. In more places than can be known, they worked toward the day when it might be said of them, as it would be said of Toussaint, "he decided that the old life was over and a new one had begun." Of course black people in North America knew that they were not in San Domingo. They did not make up the vast majority of the population here. They were not separated by an ocean from the vital civil center and the military forces of the system of white oppression. So while San Domingo could provide continuing inspiration, it was not a final model. By and large, black people knew that the struggle here would have to grind out its own difficult and costly channels toward freedom.56

In many cases, the evidence of these post-Revolutionary black movements toward freedom was quickly covered over by white censorship and fear. Only brief, fleeting accounts of African-American rebellious actions during the period of the San Domingo uprising leaked out of Louisiana in 1791, 1792, and again in 1795. Similarly, reports seeped through about Africans in the area of Norfolk, Virginia, who had broken with slavery and were organized into bands to attack whites nearby. But little more was known. Even where documents endured, it was hard to assess their meaning in such an atmosphere of fear and repression. There is, for instance, a letter reportedly picked up on the street in Yorktown, Virginia, in August 1793, apparently sent from a black rebel
leader in Richmond to his coworker in Norfolk; it is signed, “Secret Keeper Richmond to Secret Keeper Norfolk,” but nothing more is known of them.57

By now a fresh stream of black fugitives from slavery had begun their movement toward the North, where the post-Revolutionary period had brought a series of state laws gradually abolishing slavery. Already the future of the black runaways had become a source of controversy between the Northern and Southern states, and within each section as well. The first federal Fugitive Slave Law, passed in 1793, was both a result and cause of this controversy. It grew naturally out of the language and intent of the fugitive slave clause of the Constitution (“[Any] Person held to Service or Labour in one State, under the Laws thereof, escaping into another . . . shall be delivered up on Claim of the Party to whom such Service or Labour may be due.”). It was a federal attempt to find some more effective way to deal with the self-liberating action of black men and women.58

Meanwhile many fugitives in the South continued to refuse to leave the section, joining the outlyer ranks instead. While their camps were often secret, their confrontations with white society were not. Indeed, one band of black outlaws, operating near the mouth of the Savannah River, appeared to be continuing their own version of the War for Independence. The group had served with the British during the siege of Savannah and now, years later, still called themselves “the King of England’s Soldiers,” while carrying on guerrilla activities in the Georgia and South Carolina countrysides, often with Indian allies. Toward the close of the century, many Atlantic coast outlyers were drawn to the vicinity of Wilmington, North Carolina. With the ocean on one side and swamps on another, Wilmington had become the scene for much significant black resistance activity. In the late spring and early summer of 1795, the white community of the area complained of being harassed by “a number of runaway Negroes, who in the daytime secrete themselves in the swamps and woods . . . at night committed various depredations on the neighboring plantations.” The leader of the outlyers was known as the “General of the Swamps,” and a price was placed on his head. Then, in the heat of that summer, special hunting parties were sent out to find the fugitives, and the General was caught and killed.59

But outlying would not die. It was a continual reminder to the masses of African captives in America that their freedom still lay outside white law and order. It offered a constant opportunity to both free and enslaved blacks to participate in the struggle, as they provided the fugitives with travel documents, food, shelter, and moral support. From prison ships to prison states, those black men and women who sought freedom were
compelled to move against the law, to defy the order of America, to organize independently in search of justice, challenging many of their brothers and sisters to help them. In their own ways, with the assistance of their silent black partners, the outlyers made signal contributions to the heritage of black radicalism and black struggle. As a result, though the white posses in a place like Wilmington did not know it, there were other fugitives and other generals to come before the issue of black freedom was settled, and it is not unlikely that the General of the Swamps had already become a hero to many black boys growing up in Wilmington—boys like David Walker, for instance.

Beyond the action and potent example of the outlyers, other forms of struggle persisted as well. One of the most universally popular was arson, which minimized the danger of direct confrontation and certain death. Fire could destroy the property held so dear by a property-based system, fire was challenge. In Albany, New York, three black persons were executed in 1793 for setting a major fire which swept the small city. In 1796 costly fires broke out in Charleston and New York City, in Newark and Elizabeth in New Jersey, and in Savannah and Baltimore. As the ubiquitous flames streaked the skies of the young nation, there was intense excitement concerning their mysterious origins. Almost without exception they were ascribed to the Africans in those cities. Although the accusations were never fully proven, it was not hard to agree with the suspicion, especially when men recalled events in San Domingo. Referring to the burning of the plantations there, C. L. R. James, the pioneer modern historian of that revolution, comments: “The slaves destroyed tirelessly. Like the peasants in the Jacquerie or the Luddite wreckers, they were seeking their salvation in the most obvious way, the destruction of what they knew was the cause of their sufferings; and if they destroyed much it was because they had suffered much.” In many times and places, fire was struggle. In America too, black fire was black struggle.60

By the end of the eighteenth century, America clearly invited black fire, demanded black struggle, required the continuing development of black radicalism, if the children of Africa were ever to be free. For by then America had fully committed itself, revealed itself. The slave ships were no aberration. The massacred Indians were no accident of history. Faced with the clear choice, both the patriot slave traders and the patriot slave owners had opted for slavery as an American institution. Experienced at the uses of names, they had decided to leave the “peculiar institution” unnamed in their Constitution. They had decided that Africans should be noncitizens, lesser beings, that the vast majority of black people should continue to be prisoners in a free land. By the end of the century the white Founding Fathers, led by Alexander Hamilton, had
also committed the federal government to the encouragement and protection of private business, including the burgeoning business of African slavery and the Indian-killing business of Western land speculation. In other words, America had committed itself to the practice of racism and to the eventual related development of capitalism.

In the midst of such developments, what were the priorities of the black freedom struggle as the century ended? Especially in the South, for our ancestors the institution of slavery was the clear, present, and primary danger. As they faced the “new” America, as they became part and yet not part of the nation, that nation’s injustice was most fully manifested in the institution of black bondage. Because that institution so often appeared to promote the destruction and dehumanization of the Afro-American community, the mainstream of the struggle was often given over to the simple fight for survival. The maintenance of black life and spirit was crucial, and struggle was geared to that end, just as on the slave ships. Remaining alive; maintaining sanity, strength, and inner dignity regardless of outer poses; carrying children toward the future—these were major thrusts.

Out of that context, black radicalism continually developed. Though it is sometimes difficult to conceive of radicalism among the enslaved, the difficulty is more a testimony to the captivity of the observer’s imagination. In a setting where slavery was considered both a natural and a legal right, where it had clearly become part of the social, economic, and political structure of the nation, the fight of enslaved Africans for freedom was a critical and essential aspect of black radical struggle in America. Each person who broke with the system contributed to a rudimentary level of radical challenge. Such persons denied its legal and political power, chipped away at those parts of the economic system based on their own submissive bodies. They continued to run away, carrying clothing, instruments, scars, memories, and children, determined to meet the new century with new life.

Moreover, in the case of black men and women who encouraged, organized, and participated with others in the struggles for freedom, there was another level of radicalism at work. Here more fundamental threats were created, simply because they broadened the level of participation, expanded the questioning of white legitimacy. Wherever black struggle against slavery implied consciousness of a larger battle against the system itself, a larger and deeper radicalism was at work.

Finally, in some cases those who fought to break away from white domination were also creating new orders of the spirit and the mind within themselves and others. Therefore their goal was not simply the absence of chains but the presence of a new society, if only within their
own lives, if only within the narrow confines of their outlyer community. Paradoxically, for some of Africa’s children this newness involved returning to the older dreams of the slave ship holds, and discussions began among them in the North and South concerning the wisdom and means of return to the homeland. Still others recognized that they were forging a dream not yet dreamed in America, the dream of a truly new nation in which justice and not whiteness would prevail.

By the beginning of the new white century, then, many basic currents in the black river had been formed. Near its surface moved the wide mainstream of survival, nurturing the people, building their lives against the onslaughts of slavery. Coursing its way through this level and racing deeper were the various streams of protest and resistance, sometimes secret, often personal, and always necessary, if survival were to be on a human and not merely animal level. And beneath the quiet, sullen levels of visible black existence and struggle, ran the deeper and at times subterranean stream of black radicalism, challenging the masters and their society. The outlyers and the “bad niggers,” the insurrectionists and the arsonists, the poisoners and the creators of new hope—all these and more moved at various depths. Through their own lives the forerunners had established each current as part of the river. A new stage of movement was about to begin.
CHAPTER 2: AMERICAN BONDAGE, AMERICAN FREEDOM


4. There is still an important ongoing debate over the nature of the black (and laboring white) status in seventeenth-century America. For a time, Jordan's White Over Black, especially pp. 44–98, had been considered a standard treatment. During the 1970s that work came under renewed scrutiny; for instance, it was the main subject of a special session on "Sex, Racism and Democracy: Alternatives to the Jordan Hypothesis," during the Nov. 1974 Southern Historical Society meeting. See Journal of Southern History, 41 (Feb. 1975), 67–68. A significant new wrestling with the subject then appeared in Morgan's American Slavery. The major statement from a black historian is found in Bennett, The Shaping of Black America, pp. 5–80—a provocative and important treatment.


9. The class conflict between the white landowners and the laboring classes, especially in colonial Virginia, is a major theme of Morgan’s *American Slavery*. At times he seems hard-pressed to follow the logic of his own arguments, and his rather tortured and ambiguous treatment of the issue is challenged and clarified by the more direct approach of Theodore Allen, “They Would Have Destroyed Me”: Slavery and the Origins of Racism,” *Radical America*, 9 (May/June 1975), 41–63.


12. Aptheker, *Slave Revolts*, pp. 166–67. On Mingoe, see Aptheker, “Maroons,” p. 168. It appears that the enslaved people often used their funerals for certain African cultic renewals, as well as other activities which were best carried on beyond the sweep of white surveillance. See Howell M. Henry, *The Police Control of the Slave in South Carolina* (Emory, Va.: The author, 1914), pp. 143–44. See below, p. 55, for another creative nineteenth-century use of the black funeral.


15. In this early period even more than in later times, we depend heavily on reports and observations by white governing authorities for our picture of the movements of the African peoples. This carries the danger of much distortion, of course. But it also reveals much about the significance of the black struggle and its effects on those who would suppress it. Lord Cornbury is quoted in Ottley and Weatherby, *The Negro in New York*, p. xvi.


22. Donnan, IV, 132. It is interesting to note the assumption by Byrd—following his Cataline reference—that it would take a free white leader to give direction to black revolt in America. That belief did not die easily, living into the 1940s in the writing of an outstanding black Marxist, Oliver Cromwell Cox. See his discussion of the need of white leadership in *Caste, Class and Race* (1948); rpt. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1959), pp. 571-73.


Press, 1971), pp. i–xxv. The modern introduction to this work by Thomas J. Davis is enlightening.

28. On the plans for a black governor, see ibid., pp. 41–42. The list of names appears on pp. 467–73 of that volume. A number of writers have claimed that there was no conspiracy, merely a series of unconnected events. This view, with some modification, is put forward by Ferenc M. Szasz, “The New York Slave Revolt of 1741: A Re-Examination,” New York History, 48 (July 1967), 215–30. Szasz says that the criminal activities were more likely class-motivated acts directed by blacks and whites against the wealthy settlers. Even if such an interpretation proved correct, it would still not remove the black actions from the struggle for freedom and new definitions. Rather, it would simply remind us of the alliances between black and white servants and slaves in those days. Information on the New Jersey situation is in the Boston Evening Post of July 6, 1741, quoted in P. Foner, History, I, 266.


33. Ibid., pp. 211–16.


42. See any of the several competent histories of the Revolutionary period, such as Lawrence H. Gipson, The Coming of the Revolution, 1763–1775 (New York: Harper and Row, 1954), or John C. Miller, Origins of the American Revolution (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1959). For examples of the black activity, see Catterall, Judicial, I, 101–19. Also note Franklin, From Slavery, pp. 133–34, on the runaways and the estimate by Jefferson. In addition, see George W. Williams, History of the Negro Race in America, 1619–


Aptheker, Documentary, I, 9–10.

Ibid., pp. 10–12.


On Vesey and his connection to the African Methodist Church movement, see below, pp. 67–69.


Robinson, Slavery, pp. 81–83. It is revealing to compare the statements on slavery in the first draft of the Declaration with Jefferson’s even more cautious earlier position in “A Summary View of the Rights of British America” (1774). The full text of both documents appears, among other places, in Richard N. Current and John A. Garraty, eds., Words That Made American History, 2 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1965), I, 165–82. For the comparison between Jefferson’s draft of the Declaration and the final document, as well as his own comments on the struggle in the Continental Congress, see Adrienne Koch and


59. Aptheker, “Maroons,” pp. 168–69; Franklin, *From Slavery*, pp. 133–34. There were also numerous occasions on which Indians were hired to capture black fugitives. The story of the “General” is in Aptheker, *Slave Revolts*, p. 217. On the larger issue of outlyers and their activities, see also Aptheker, “Additional Data on American Maroons,” *JNH*, 23 (Oct. 1947), 452–60.


61. A most stimulating treatment of the interpenetration of economic, political, and ethical issues involved in the crucial choices of the young nation may be found in William A. Williams, *The Contours of American History* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1966), pp. 75–223. These are the same concerns raised throughout Robinson’s *Slavery*.