

Fires of Discontent:

Arson as a Weapon of Slave Resistance in Colonial New England, 1650-1775

By

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Abstract

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The dissertation offers a new look at the study of slave resistance in the Atlantic world. Centered in the New England colonies of Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New Hampshire and Maine, the project examines how enslaved Africans used the crime of arson to contest their captivity during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Aspects of the West African Diaspora are addressed by highlighting the consanguinity shared between Africans in New England and those in the West Indies. Although separated by the expanse of the Atlantic Ocean, these ‘captive cousins’ were of the same ethnic origin as far as language, culture, kinship and spirituality. Such cultural relatedness shows that the rebelliousness often attributed to enslaved Africans in the Caribbean must also be applied to those Africans enslaved in New England.

Compared to their counterparts in the West Indies and the southern American colonies, enslaved persons in New England enjoyed certain limited rights that included being able to legally marry, to sue and defend in court as well as give testimony and retain counsel in legal matters. There was also an opportunity to learn to read and write, to hire out their labor and even make arrangements to purchase their freedom. It will be argued that such glimpses of liberty only made some enslaved persons more determined to be totally free. Despite these negotiated openings in the system of slavery in New England, some enslaved persons pushed for a broader liberty in a myriad of ways. They contested the restrictions that remained on their lives with acts of resistance from the more common running away and typical stealing to more violent acts which included poisoning, assault, murder, suicide and of course, arson. In fact, arson was the weapon of choice for enslaved persons in New England as it was for those enslaved across the Atlantic world since the act could be committed without detection.

The ambiguous nature of New England slavery with its truncated liberties provided enslaved persons with the means and opportunity to set deadly fires. Often the lone domestic servant in slave owning households, slave women in New England were often isolated and their lives restricted because of close monitoring as far as their having to complete inordinate household duties. Relegated to these roles as domestic servants, enslaved women in New England were not able to travel freely like enslaved men. Some of these women grew so desperate they used their access to flammable materials in their master's kitchens to start dangerous fires. In contrast, it was enslaved men in New England working in such gendered occupations as maritime workers, skilled artisans, personal valets, coach drivers and errand boys who had a level of independence and mobility that allowed them to jointly plan acts of arson.

Importantly, all enslaved persons shared a level of intimacy with their New England masters since most often they lived in the homes of their owners. Living in such close proximity not only gave enslaved persons the access to their owner's valuables including money, guns, gunpowder and flammable materials to start a fire, this intimacy in the living environment also facilitated a slave's ability to monitor a master's whereabouts so that these fires that were often set in retaliation were ignited at the appropriate time. Consequently, the flexibilities in the system of slavery allowed this rather small and dispersed slave population to set dangerous fires across New England.

Whites, in turn, grew nervous and fearful of the blacks in their midst who increasingly exposed them to the destructive forces of fire. Taking advantage of this fear, enslaved persons set numerous fires in and around the urban towns of New England including Boston, Newport and New Haven. Fires occurred rather frequently in the town of Boston with its closely built wooden houses on overcrowded streets where less than adequate fire-fighting practices were utilized to fight acts of arson. New Englanders responded proactively to these recurring conflagrations by passing even more laws to control their slave population, organizing fire wards headed by fire warden, increasing the number of men in their common watch as well calling out a military watch, if need be, increasing their use of fire engines and other technology as well as organizing fire clubs or mutual fire associations to protect the property of private citizens.

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Introduction

The Birth of the Slave Arson Project

It was during my last semester at New York University School of Law in 1986 that I became interested in the early legal history of African Americans. Enrolling in an elective course African Americans and the Law during my last semester introduced me to Derrick A. Bell's *Race, Racism and American Law*. This course not only increased my understanding of the jurisprudence of African Americans from slavery to the Civil War, it provided an in-depth analysis of well-known legal cases such as *Dred Scott vs Sanford* and *Plessy vs. Ferguson*.¹ The discovery of Judge A. Leon Higginbotham's *A Matter of Color: Race and the American Legal Process*, a compilation of criminal cases involving enslaved defendants during the colonial period only solidified my interest in this early period of American law. I

was so inspired by these books that I began to do my own historical research at the law school's library as well as at local public libraries, including the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem, New York. While completing this preliminary research I stumbled across the case of an enslaved Elizabeth Key who sued for her freedom in colonial Virginia on the basis of having a white father before the 1662 law that gave children born to an African slave mother the status of slave.² I soon uncovered freedom suits brought by African Americans in other colonies including suits brought by the enslaved descendants of an African slave man Charles and his Irish wife Eleanor "Nell" Butler, an indentured servant of Lord Baltimore of St. Mary's County, Maryland who married in 1681.³ I came away amazed at how enslaved individuals who were denied basic human rights found ways to bring law suits in courts of law that did not recognize their humanity.

Exploring this period of American legal history led me to explore other experiences that enslaved blacks had with the colonial court system. My interest never subsided so after I became a practicing attorney I continued my outside research while pursuing my legal career. Since my desire to learn about this area of legal history would not die, I decided to take my first graduate course in Early American History with Professor Jane Merritt at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia in 1999, more than a decade after graduating from law school. Here began my journey to officially uncover the early legal history of enslaved African Americans. I went on to take a course with Professor Ira Berlin, the well-known authority on American slavery at the University of Maryland, College Park in 2004 while taking part-time courses at the University of Maryland at Baltimore County and working full time in a legally related position in Washington, D.C. By this time, I was totally convinced that studying history was something I wanted to do on a full time basis.

¹*Scott vs. Sanford* 60 U.S. 393 (1856)

²Extant court records on the Elizabeth Key case are found Warren M. Billing, ed., *The Old Dominion in the Seventeenth Century: A Documentary History of Virginia, 1606-1681* (1975), 165-169.

³ To address the problem of interracial unions during the early years of the Maryland colony, the legislature passed a law that not only made free white women who married enslaved Africans slaves for the lifetime of their husbands but the children of these unions were to be slaves as well. This law enslaving the children of interracial unions was repealed in 1681. *An Act Concerning Negroes and other Slaves*, Proceedings and Acts of the General Assembly of Maryland (September, 1664)

When the University of Iowa accepted my application for their graduate history program in 2005, I packed my bags, said good bye to my family and went off to study with the hopes of learning even more about the history of African Americans and the legal system during this early period. It was while attending graduate school in Iowa from 2005 to 2007 that I narrowed my focus to the criminal activities of enslaved persons during the colonial period.

My research in the area of criminality became more defined when I took a History of Crime and Punishment course with Dr. Wendy Schneider at The University of Iowa Law School in the Fall of 2005. I not only found criminal cases involving slaves in New England, I located slave arson cases in the well-respected work of Lorenzo Johnston Greene's *The Negro in Colonial History in New England*, first published in 1942, which noted that "Negroes were frequently guilty of incendiarism...deliberately perpetrated...as a protest against their enslavement."⁴ Additionally, Herbert Aptheker's classic work, *American Negro Slave Revolts* published in 1943 reported that the rash of fires in Boston and New Haven from 1721 to 1723 was attributed to Negroes.⁵ Also relying on the multivolume work of Helen T. Catterall's *Judicial Cases Concerning American Slavery and the Negro* I wrote a research paper for my History of Crime and Punishment class at the University of Iowa Law School on the history of enslaved African Americans who set fires across the American colonies during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As a result of completing this initial project, I went on to take a Frontier Law course at the law school during the next semester where I wrote a paper on acts of slave arson on the American frontier during the nineteenth century. My research project for this class explored the occurrence of slave arson in such states as Missouri, Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana and Texas. Attending the University of Iowa led to my taking a class on U.S. Slavery with Leslie Schwalm and an American Colonial History class with Mark A. Peterson. Both of these courses stirred my interest in the history of slavery in colonial New England. Thus, it was under the guidance of Professors Schwalm and Peterson that I honed my research and writing skills while completing a Master's thesis on slave arson resistance in colonial New England in the Spring of 2007.

Researching this area of American legal history over the past six years has been a slow and painstaking task. Knowing that enslaved people left almost none of their own writings during the colonial period, I set out to uncover any slave arson incidents documented in the archives of colonial New England. Grateful for electronic access to colonial newspapers, I searched for reports of "fire" and "negroes" in every newspaper published in New England before the American Revolution. To my surprise, I found account after account of "villainous Negroes" being accused of arson in colonial Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Maine and Connecticut. Having decided to follow Professor Peterson when he joined the faculty at the Department of History at the University of California, Berkeley in 2007, I became even more committed to exploring the topic of slave arson as I began the research for my dissertation.

Taking my research to the next level during a research trip to New England in fall 2009, I looked for reports of slave arson in hundreds of local town histories at the Boston Public Library. This method of research was tedious and not as fruitful, however; since I found that many of these early town histories did not even mention slaves or slavery, for that matter. For example, there was no discussion of African slavery in the local history of the town of Roxbury while

⁴ Lorenzo Johnston Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, Inc., 1966), 154.

⁵ Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York: International Publishers, 1993), 178

court records document an enslaved Mariah being accused of setting fire to two houses in a rather well known slave arson case in 1681.⁶ Time after time, I found that little discussion of enslaved persons in many of these histories of New England towns. For example, the town of Watertown, Massachusetts did not discuss enslaved persons even though they reported having 13 slaves to the Massachusetts Slave Census in 1754.⁷ And the town histories that did offer a minimal discussion of the sale and manumission of a few enslaved persons by name or included the name of slave owners did not generally provide information on the criminal activities of these persons of color. Thus, the report of Caesar, a servant of Richard Moore, Jr. of Oxford who was arraigned at Worcester Court does not reveal the crime in question.⁸ I remember my excitement of finding a slave arson case while reading the transcript of interrogations conducted for the trial of three slaves indicted for poisoning their master John Codman of Charlestown in 1755.⁹ And then there was the unexpected discovery of a rather serious case of slave arson in a local history that was not located in a newspaper or in court records. This incident in Malden, Massachusetts in 1730 involved an enslaved man who burned down the house of his master John Hutchinson after being sold for causing the accidental death of the master's son.¹⁰

It was the research completed at the Massachusetts State Archives and Massachusetts Historical Society, however; that expanded my understanding of the legal aspects of slave arson cases in colonial New England. Elizabeth Bouvier, the Legal Archivist at the Massachusetts State Archives helped me locate the court record for several slave arson incidents reported in the newspapers of Massachusetts, including the cases related to the rash of slave arson fires that broke out in Boston in 1723. Being awarded a short term Mellon fellowship at the Massachusetts Historical Society in the Fall of 2011 gave me the time and opportunity to perform in-depth research of the legislative records of the Massachusetts colony as well as perform detailed research of the personal papers of individuals connected to slavery in Massachusetts. Sometimes legal resources were uncovered in the most unexpected places such as when a copy of the confession of Mariah, the African woman who set two houses on fire in Roxbury, Massachusetts in 1681 was discovered during my search for maritime records at the New Hampshire State Archives and Libraries in Concord, New Hampshire.

The research also helped me understand how slave arson was an Atlantic wide phenomenon that took place wherever Africans were held in bondage during this early time. Male and female bondservants were setting fires in protest of their enslavement in colonial settlements across the world. One of the earliest instances occurred when three indigenous female slaves on the Gold Coast in Guinea, West Africa set fire to their ruler's granaries in the 1640s before the transatlantic slave trade had taken hold in the region. I had the fortune of sitting next to Professor Martin A. Klein of the University of Toronto during a field trip sponsored by the *Bicentennial Conference on the Abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* hosted by Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture Summer Institute in

⁶ Charles M. Ellis, *History of Roxbury Town* (Boston: Samuel Drake, 1848). John Noble, ed., *Records of the Court of Assistants of the Colony of Massachusetts Bay, 1630-1692*, v. 1 (Boston: Published by Suffolk County, 1901), 197-198.

⁷ G. Frederick Robinson and Ruth Robinson Wheeler, *Great Little Watertown, Massachusetts: A Tercentenary History* (Watertown: Watertown Historical Society, 1930).

⁸ George F. Daniels, *History of the Town of Oxford, Massachusetts* (Oxford: Published by Author, 1892), 44.

⁹ Abner Cheney Goodell, Jr., *The Trial and Execution for Petit Treason of Mark and Phillis, Slaves of Capt. John Codman* (Cambridge: John Wilson & Son University Press, 1883), 13.

¹⁰ Deloraine Pendre Correy, *History of Malden, Massachusetts, 1633-1785* (Published by Author, 1899), 521-522.

Elmina, Ghana in July, 2007. Always ready to discuss my research, Professor Klein listened intently before telling me about his student Afua Cooper who was also working on slave arson. Her book concerned the life of an African Portuguese slave woman Angélique who retaliated against her mistress by setting a deadly fire that nearly destroyed colonial Montréal in 1734.¹¹

I was particularly interested in the occurrence of slave arson in the British West Indies due to the ethnic connections between Africans in New England and those in the West Indies. It can be argued that these were ethnically the same Africans since New England slave ships took the bulk of the Africans they purchased in West Africa to the Caribbean but always brought a few home to New England. Not to mention those West Africans who were shipped from the Caribbean to New England as parcels in the provisions and carrying trades, sold by West Indian merchants directly to New England masters or those who were relocated by West Indian masters who shared familial and business relations with whites in New England. In Spring 2010, my studies took me to the archives in Barbados and Jamaica where I concluded that an overcrowded Boston with its closely built tinderbox houses was very much like Bridgetown, Barbados as far as their experience of frequent fires often attributed to an enslaved population. On the other hand, Jamaica seemed to have learned from the experiences of Bridgetown and instituted rather impressive fire prevention measures in Kingston that would be increasingly adopted by the town of Boston. It was in the more rural and outlying areas of Jamaica where conflagrations erupted that were started mostly by warring Maroons during four decades of fighting the British from the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries.

Not to forget the southern American colonies that also had problems with on-going slave arson but not in the same manner experienced by New England. The plantation system made for totally different relationships between master and slave and for different incidents of slave arson. New England slaves tended to set fires in the close living quarters they shared with their masters while enslaved persons on southern plantation who lived quite a distance from their master's mansion tended to set fires to outbuildings such as barns which housed the staple crops that were the fruit of their labor. Thus, as rice production intensified between October and January, the number of barns which burned in South Carolina increased suspiciously.¹² In addition, the large concentration of African in South Carolina led to large scale resistance like the Stono Rebellion of 1739 where large groups of enslaved men and women set fires to houses and buildings during a very deadly slave insurrection.¹³ Without question, arson was a weapon of choice in the arsenal of tools used to resist enslavement. At the same time, the research helped me understand how unique the nature of New England slavery was in comparison to systems of slavery organized across the British American colonies. It is through the examination of slave arson that the dissertation seeks to understand slavery in New England.

The nature of New England slavery is examined through the lens of the arson activities of its enslaved population. And despite the available liberties to legally marry, learn to read and write, have legal counsel, sue or be sued in court, hire out their labor and purchase their freedom,

¹¹¹ The author of *The Hanging of Angélique: The Untold Story of Canadian Slavery and the Burning of Old Montréal*, Professor Afua Cooper is the James Robinson Johnston Chair in Black Canadian Studies at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada.

¹² Peter Wood, *Black Majority* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing, 2012), 293.

¹³ In South Carolina enslaved Africans outnumbered whites by 3 to 1 at the end of the seventeenth century. *Ibid.*, 131.

New England's small slave population still resorted to arson to contest their enslavement.¹⁴ Even with a more expansive liberty, acts of arson occurred over most of the colonial period. Given that arson was a crime of intimacy that generally took place within the confines of a master's household, **Chapter One** looks at how enslaved individuals who lived rather isolated lives as the only slave or one of two slaves in a New England slave owning household had the means and opportunity to set fires in or near the homes these intimate environments they shared with their masters. **Chapter Two** focuses on group slave arson incidents by showing how working in the occupations of maritime workers, fishermen and coach drivers gave enslaved men a freedom of mobility that allowed them to jointly plan and set fires which sought retribution for ill treatment received at the hands of whites. **Chapter Three** which concerns female slave arsonists argues that, unlike their male counterparts, enslaved women were often the only domestic slave in a household and it was the isolation, restriction and surveillance around the completion of household chores that led to some of these women setting deadly fires out of desperation. **Chapter Four** addresses how whites responded to the incidents of slave arson in New England with a deep fear of the strange fire setting Africans within their midst by passing additional slave laws, increasing the number of fire wards, wardens and common watch members, improving firefighting methods and organizing fire clubs to protect the property of individual members. Additionally, officials indicted, prosecuted and sometimes executed black arsonists for any and all fire setting activity in a swift and deadly manner.

The dissertation fits within a revisionist framework of African American history that reevaluates the African American response to enslavement from the position of agency and retribution. Thus, the arguments reflected in the dissertation clearly refute the unrealistic notions of Ulrich B. Phillips that African American slaves did not resist slavery because they had docile and content natures. Rather the project is more in line with the ideas of Eugene Genovese who found that African Americans offered resistance to slavery and Herbert Aptheker who saw this this unending unrest during this early period of American history as a revolutionary tradition among African American slaves.¹⁵ Even the more contemporary work of John Wood Sweet discusses how the intimate nature of New England slavery provided a level of flexibility which allowed slaves to threaten violence or resist authority.¹⁶ Catherine Adams and Elizabeth H. Pleck are more on point with their finding that colonists in New England recognized slave arson as a threat to people, property and the stability of the community.¹⁷ In an effort to highlight the humanity of individuals held in bondage in colonial New England I refer to the enslaved person by name, where possible and relate their feelings and concerns, where available. Putting a face to these early Africans has also involved showing how they often negotiated the terms of their bondage. When such negotiations failed, enraged Africans would sometimes seek retribution for the mistreatment they endured. Throughout this project, I have tried to tell the untold story of

¹⁴ New England's slave population reached just over 16,000 on the eve of the American Revolution. Lorenzo Johnston Greene, *Negro in Colonial New England*, 74,

¹⁵ Eugene Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 587. Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, 9

¹⁶ John Wood Sweet, *Body Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730-1830* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 74

¹⁷ Catherine Adams and Elizabeth H. Pleck, *Love of Freedom: Black Women in Colonial and Revolutionary New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 56.

the persons of African descent who never stopped striving for a more total freedom by setting deadly fire to the homes and businesses of their New England masters.

Chapter One

One Fire at a Time: Individual Acts of Slave Arson in Colonial New England

The clamor of chiming church bells and screams of “fire” “fire” would have alerted the residents of Newport, Rhode Island to the roaring flames that engulfed the Long Wharf on the night of February 19, 1763. Whenever a fire broke, the neighborhood bellman ran to ring the church bells while simultaneously yelling “fire” “fire”. Hearing these cries was the signal to toss out your leather buckets to any individuals rushing to the site of the fire. . A hastily organized bucket brigade was one of many firefighting efforts used to contain out of control fires during this early period.¹⁸ The fire wardens took charge giving directions to the expanding group of volunteers to ensure that fire buckets were filled, dumped and filled again. Within moments the town’s Newsham fire engine appeared on the scene.¹⁹ The Newport community frantically tried to make sense of this massive disaster which left over £80,000 worth of property totally destroyed.²⁰ The investigation that was started amidst the smoldering embers revealed that the fire originated in the storehouse of the local merchant, Thomas Hazard.²¹ The news that “...the stores at the wharf were set on fire by a Negro Fellow...” did not come as a surprise.²² Rhode Island, like most of the New England colonies, was familiar with rebellious blacks among its slave population.

As early as 1718, a master in Narragansett advertised for the return of his twenty five year old slave who was dressed in a new homespun suit with an old torn black hat when he ran away.²³ In his Letter Book written from 1743 to 1751, the Anglican minister, Reverend James McSparran, also from Narragansett County, discussed how he assigned inordinate amounts of work to his six slaves.²⁴ He also discussed how he stripped, tied and whipped Hannibal when he stayed out at night and how he whipped Maroca for bearing two illegitimate children.²⁵ Even

¹⁸ Benjamin L. Carp, “Fire of Liberty: Firefighters, Urban Voluntary Culture, and the Revolutionary Movement,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, Vol. 58, No. 4 (Oct. 2001), 783. Paul C. Ditzel, *Firefighters: The Men, Equipment and Machines from Colonial Days to the Present* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1976), 10.

¹⁹ Newport residents formed a fire club in 1726 to purchase a Newsham engine that was patented in England in 1725. Water was pumped through a goose neck nozzle by manually operated brakes or by stepping on pump levers. Enginemen also carried ladders and iron hooks to pull down houses in order to isolate a fire. Robert S. Holzman, *The Romance of Firefighting* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1956), 14-16.

²⁰ *The Boston Evening Post*, March 1, 1762, Issue 1383, page 3.

²¹ Known as “Virginia Tom,” Thomas Hazard (1726-1804) was descended from a long line of Hazards who held large plots of land in Narragansett, Rhode Island. His ships which exported farm products to distant markets always returned with exotic spices and teas. Caroline E. Robinson, *The Hazard Family of Rhode Island, 1635-1894: Being a genealogy and history of the descendants of Thomas Hazard* (Boston: Printed for author by D.B. Updike, Merrymount Press, 1895), 45.

²² *Boston Evening Post*, March 8, 1762, Issue 1384, page 3.

²³ Bancroft Gillespie, *A Historic Record and Pictorial Description of the Town of Meriden, Connecticut* (Meriden: Journal Publishing Co., 1906), 248.

²⁴ McSparran’s slaves were responsible for gathering and shelling of beans, gathering and grinding apples, cribbing, cutting and carting corn to plowing wheat fields, winnowing and threshing rye, storing wheat straw in barns, digging potatoes, mending baskets and digging up stones to build walls. Reverend James McSparran, *A Letter Book and Abstract of Our Services Written during the Years 1743-1751* (Boston: The Merrymount Press, 1899), 6-49.

²⁵ Lorenzo Johnston Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1966), 232.

with the amount of work they completed, the Reverend did not see why enslaved persons needed to socially interact with family and friends.

Rebelliousness was not confined to staying out late at night or having illicit sexual contact since some bondservants went as far as setting deadly fires to retaliate the ill treatment they received from their masters. In 1747, the young slave of Captain James Holmes of Newport grew so angry about how he was treated he made plans to torch his master's house. Living in the same residence as the Holmes family not only gave the young man access to flammable materials, he had no difficulty monitoring the whereabouts of the family. It was, therefore, on a day that the Captain was absent from the home that the young enslaved man carried out his fiery scheme. Not only did he physically assault the occupants of the home, the enraged young man ignited enough gunpowder to destroy part of the house and to seriously injure himself.²⁶ By committing these acts outside the master's presence, he was able to physically harm vulnerable women and children in the Holmes household. Igniting the explosion during a time when he was unsupervised, the slave boy did not have to overpower or fight the Captain and he increased the possibility that his scheme was carried out without detection.

Living in a society where Africans were a small portion of the labor force not only made slavery less essential to the overall economy, it gave enslaved persons like the boy in Newport a degree of freedom that provided opportunities to set deadly fires. As compared to their southern counterparts, New England's slaves enjoyed certain liberties which increased their independence and their freedom of mobility. They were able to legally marry, learn to read and write, hire out their labor and even arrange to purchase their freedom. Working as maritime workers, coach drivers and personal valets also gave enslaved men a freedom of movement during the course of their work day. However, enslaved woman in New England did not enjoy mobility to the same degree since they were, for the most part, relegated to slave owning households as domestic servants. These "tastes of freedom" were not enough to keep black bondservants in New England totally compliant and wedded to a life of slavery. Rather, it will be argued that such glimpses of liberty made some enslaved persons more determined to be totally free. Despite these negotiated openings in the system of New England slavery, some enslaved persons pushed for a broader liberty in a myriad of ways. They contested the remaining restrictions on their lives with acts of resistance from the more common running away and the typical stealing to more violent acts that included poisoning, assault, murder, suicide and of course, arson. Living in close proximity with their New England masters gave enslaved persons access to flammable materials and an ability to monitor the whereabouts of the family to set these fires at the most opportune times.

In fact, arson was the weapon of choice for enslaved persons across the Atlantic world since it was possible to commit the act without detection. This was particularly true in New England where fires occurred rather frequently in a town with closely built wooden houses on overcrowded streets where less than adequate fire-fighting practices were utilized to fight fires. Enslaved persons understood they could intentionally set a fire and later claim that it was accidental. An intentionally dropped candle could be explained away as flames accidentally touching flammable materials. Similarly, a fire that was purposely set by a slave woman in the kitchen could also be attributed to a mishap related to cooking food. Enslaved persons appeared to use the deep seated fears that whites in New England had of fire to their advantage. Although they set dangerous fires that were not detected, there were occasions, when the authorities were

²⁶ The young man succumbed to the life threatening injuries he received in the fire. *Boston Post Boy*, April 27, 1747, Issue 649, page 1.

able to determine that a conflagration was not only intentional, that it was, most likely, set by the enslaved person connected to a New England household.

Such was the case of Jack, the enslaved man charged with burning the house of Lieutenant William Clark in Northampton, Massachusetts in July, 1681. Enslaved by Samuel Wolcott of Wethersfield, Connecticut, Jack used his semi-independent status as a male slave to travel fifty miles from his master's home in Wethersfield to Northampton on the day of the fire.²⁷ While it is not totally clear why Jack chose to go to William Clark's house on that day, it does not appear that he had his master's permission to make the trip. Jack likely traveled during the dark of night or during the early hours of the morning to avoid detection by the night watch or constables. Or maybe Jack made the trip during a time he believed the Lieutenant would be absent from his home. While the particular relationship between Jack and Lieutenant Clark was not disclosed, the archival record indicates that the Lieutenant was an early settler of Wethersfield before he moved on to Northampton in the 1660s. After helping to lay out streets in Northampton in 1660, Lieutenant Clark received a grant of 20 acres from the town before he served on the Committee charged with building a new Meeting house in 1661.²⁸ Thus, it is plausible that this military officer, landowner and town leader was also a slave owner in colonial Northampton. Whether he was Jack's former owner is a question that remains unanswered.

We do know that Jack did not plead guilty to the charge of felony arson under the Arson Law of 1652 which reads, in pertinent part, as follows:

And if any person...willingly and feloniously set on fire any dwelling house, meeting house, store house or shall in like manner set on fire any out-house, barn stable, leanto, stack of hay, corn or wood...the party parties shall be apprehended by warrant...and committed to prison, thereto remain, without, bail until the next Court of Assistants, who upon legal conviction by due proof, or confession of the crime shall adjudge such person or persons to be put to death...²⁹

Not only was Jack free enough to travel miles from his master's home on that fateful day; he had the right to plead not guilty to the criminal charges he faced in a Massachusetts court.³⁰ Although enslaved persons in New England had the legal right to give testimony as well as sue and to defend civil and criminal charges, they were not allowed to serve as jurors. Jack explained to the court how he took "...a brand of fire from the hearth and swinging it up and down, to find victuals..."³¹ Thus, Jack denied intentionally setting fire to the Clark home because he broke into the residence to look for food. If this was so, it lends credence to the idea that Jack was formerly owned by the Lieutenant. In addition, there is some evidence to suggest that Jack's

²⁷ John Noble, ed. *Records of the Court of Assistants of the Colony of the Massachusetts Bay, 1630-1692* (Boston: Published by Suffolk County, 1901), 198-199.

²⁸ James R. Trumbull and Seth Pomeroy, *History of Northampton from its Settlement in 1654* (Northampton: Northampton Press of Gazette Printing Co., 1898).

²⁹ Arthur Wellington Brayley, *A Complete History of the Boston Fire Department, including the Fire Alarm System and the Protective Department* (Boston: John P. Dale & Co., 1889), 7.

³⁰ Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England*, 182-186.

³¹ John Noble, ed. *Records of the Court of Assistants of the Colony of the Massachusetts Bay, 1630-1692*, 198-199.

current slave owner may not have treated him humanely. In 1690, Samuel Wolcott was hauled into court for beating an Indian servant.³² If Wolcott was physically abusive or failed to provide his slave with adequate food, Jack had good reason to travel a long distance to a safe and familiar place where he knew food was available. Insufficient food or clothing was the unfortunate reality of too many enslaved persons in New England just as it was for those held in slavery in colonies across the Atlantic world.³³

If Jack was looking for food, then the fire was clearly an accident since it was the result of him swinging the lantern to see while he searched the Clark home. Lacking the requisite intent to start the fire, Jack did not willingly commit an act of felonious arson as defined by the statute. More importantly, it seems logical that Jack would not have been put to death for an act of arson that did not result in human injury. And although arson was generally not punished by death in colonial New England, this rather severe sentence was handed down to this enslaved man because there were a number of recurring fires taking place in the Boston community at this time. In fact, the firing of the Clark house in Northampton occurred just a few days after an African slave woman Mariah was sentenced to death for torching two houses in Roxbury in 1681.³⁴ After being hung, Jack's lifeless body was taken down and burnt with Mariah's body on September 22, 1681.³⁵

Living in a society where fires not only erupted sporadically but were sometimes intentionally set by rebellious blacks and Indians made life an unnerving experience for many whites in colonial New England. Not knowing when and if slaves and servants would strike with the deadly force of fire made whites suspicious of the persons of color within their midst. And hearing of the intentional firing of houses throughout New England only increased these fears.

Certain towns in New England where these fires took place were becoming "societies with slaves" since an increasing number of Africans were being held in lifetime servitude and forced to toil in a range of occupations. For example, in 1755, there were 83 enslaved blacks in Salem, 62 in Ipswich and 50 in Cambridge while Boston had the largest enslaved population in Massachusetts with 811. This is in comparison to Newport, Rhode Island who had 1,234 enslaved blacks at that time. And despite these relatively small numbers, Lorenzo Greene explained that "Negroes were identified with every phase of New England's economy" from agriculture, fishing, whaling, trade, shipbuilding, manufactories and maritime pursuits.³⁶ This widespread occupational diversity was in contrast to the other British American colonies where thousands of African laborers cultivated the lucrative staple crops of tobacco, rice and sugar. So while it is true that the majority of bondservants in New England worked as domestic servants for elite families or as agricultural workers on small farms, there were some enslaved men who

³² Henry R. Stiles, *The History of Ancient Wethersfield*, Vol. II (Somersworth, N.H.: New Hampshire Publishing Company in collaboration with the Wethersfield Historical Society, 1975), 700.

³³ Persons of color appeared to suffer more severe sentences for crimes in New England. For example, the mulatto slave, Johnson Greene, a confirmed thief was convicted and hanged for pilfering food, money, clothing and liquor. Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England*, 152.

³⁴ New England law allowed "a burning for a burning" and Mariah was either burned at the stake or her body was burned after she was hung, John Noble, ed. *Records of the Court of Assistants*, 198-199.

³⁵ *Bill of Charge for Time and Expenses* submitted by Joseph Handley for transporting Jack from Wethersfield in September, 1681 included expenses totaling £3 for traveling and caring for his horse as well as his boarding costs in Roxbury for 15 days. (Massachusetts State Archives).

³⁶Lorenzo Johnston Greene, *The Negro in New England, 1620-1776*, 84 and 100-101.

held skilled positions as blacksmiths, coopers and iron workers or they worked as maritime or distillery workers.

New England towns were considered “societies with slaves” because slavery never became the mainstay of the region’s diversified economy. Rather, fishing, shipbuilding, rum production and small-scale agriculture were the primary modes of production in most towns. According to Ira Berlin “societies with slaves” with its comparatively smaller slave populations were generally located in the North as opposed to the “slave societies” with its substantially larger slave populations which were located in the southern and West Indian colonies.³⁷ The more than modest contribution of African slave labor to the region’s developing economy should never be overlooked or devalued despite its small slave population.

Among the advantages to being held in bondage in a society where slavery was less entrenched included the enjoyment of far more liberties than was available in the southern and West Indian colonies. As previously discussed in the case of Jack, those enslaved persons who charged with capital crimes in New England were not summarily executed as was often done following slave revolts in the south and West Indies. Rather, those accused of crimes in New England, including enslaved Africans, had a right to be tried in a court of law. A few fortunate enslaved Africans, like Venture Smith, of Connecticut, even made arrangements with their masters to purchase their own freedom or the freedom of their relatives.³⁸ Despite the less restrictive nature of their bondage, some enslaved blacks never stopped contesting their bondage. In fact, blacks in New England used some of the same methods of slave resistance used across the Atlantic world including flight, theft and the deadly force of fire. Or a few really desperate slaves resorted to self-mutilation or suicide. Desperation was the reality of enslaved persons forced to endure a life of bondage sometimes fraught with physical and emotional abuse from cruel and inhumane masters.

As early as 1685, Nathaniel Keene of colonial Maine became the only slave master in New England’s history to be tried and convicted of murdering a slave. After fatally beating Rachel in a boat in clear view of spectators, the court found Keene guilty of murder, however, he only had to pay a five pound fine and court costs for committing this heinous act. The case tragically highlights how the lives of enslaved persons were devalued even in more liberal New England.³⁹ More shocking was an incident that occurred on the eve of abolition of slavery in Maine in 1780 when a minister from Bristol, Maine caused a young slave girl to freeze to death after repeatedly sending her out in the extreme cold weather to look for a missing cow.⁴⁰

Having to endure such brutalities explains why some blacks in New England refused to give up their quest for a more total freedom. This personal desire for freedom can also be gleaned from runaway notices. A notice in 1767 announced that 22 year old Cuffee, who spoke good English, ran away from Boston’s Neck dressed quite nicely in a jacket, short skirts, red

³⁷ Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge; The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), 8.

³⁸ Each of Venture Smith’s three masters agreed to let him purchase his freedom and each of the three masters reneged on their agreement; one even stole Venture’s savings and the others sold him to new owners. John Wood Sweet, *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730-1830* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 95.

³⁹ Rudolph Stakeman, “Slavery in Colonial Maine,” *Maine Historical Society Quarterly*, vol. 27, no. 2 (Fall 1987), 68.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

waist coat, white shirt and hat.⁴¹ However, learning the King's English and dressing in fine clothes could not keep this Gold Coast African in bondage. Having their slaves run off in this manner must have perplexed New England slave owners. Surely, Cuffee's master tried to make sense of his urge to run when he did not work as hard as slaves in the southern or West Indian colonies. After all, Cuffee was able to travel during the course of his work day, had already learned to read and write and he might have even obtained his freedom sometime in the future, that is, if he had not run away. Like most slave owners, those in New England were also baffled by defiant slaves who stole from them, ran away and attempted to physically harm them or destroy their property. Even with limited liberties, enslaved blacks demonstrated a desire to obtain a more complete freedom. They wanted to move about freely at all times of the day, be paid for their labor as well as be able to permanently live with their spouses and children. Most importantly, enslaved persons wanted to be completely released from bondage and accorded the dignity of living as a "free human being." And since slavery was not abolished until the 1780s freedom seeking slaves never stopped running away from their New England masters. In 1758, Nathaniel Curtis of Wallingford sought the return of Jack, his middling in stature, small pox marked slave who knew how to read and write. Another enslaved man, Cyrus, was described as a "...very black, active and ingenious" slave who not only spoke good English but also knew a little French. Being literate was did not stop Jack or Cyrus from running away. In fact, Cyrus was an incorrigible runaway since the iron collar and chain that he wore around his neck was placed there because he had run away on previous occasions.⁴²

In addition to escaping from their masters, enslaved blacks also resorted to more violent forms of resistance to contest their enslavement. These were the individuals who really believed they could free themselves from bondage by destroying their master or their master's family. In 1756, an enslaved man named Toney confessed to purposely drowning his master's child in order "...to put an end to a life which he was weary of by reason of hard usage."⁴³ Living in or near their master's house gave Toney access to the Master's infant daughter who was drowned in a well.⁴⁴ Another person who desired to destroy someone who subjected him to mistreatment was Fortune, the enslaved man who set fire to the Long Wharf in Newport, Rhode Island in 1762. The case of Fortune will be discussed later in the chapter. It was the truncated freedom available in New England that provided the means and opportunity to commit such crimes. Not only did Fortune have access to live coals to ignite a fire but he had no difficulty traveling back to the Wharf later that night for the sole purpose of setting fire to the warehouse of Thomas Hazard, the white merchant who abused him.

Enslaved Africans were not the only persons committing violent crimes during this early period. A few enslaved Africans joined forces with local Indians in a fiery uprising that left several houses destroyed in Hartford, Connecticut in 1657.⁴⁵ Put on the same footing as enslaved and free blacks, Indians in New England struggled to survive. Suffering catastrophic losses from war and diseases as the century progressed; a declining population of Indians were increasingly impoverished, stripped of their culture and displaced from their land. Debilitating

⁴¹ *New Hampshire Gazette*, July 24, 1767, vol. 11, Issue. 564, page 3.

⁴² *New York Mercury*, April 14, 1760, Issue 400, page 3.

⁴³ *Boston Evening Post*, June 28, 1756, Issue 1087, page 2.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Record of the Particular Court of Connecticut, 1639-1663* (Hartford: Connecticut Historical Society, 1928), 175-176. See page 31 and 38 Of Chapter Two for further discussion of this multiracial slave arson incident.

conditions left them barely standing by the eighteenth century and so, Indians protested their dehumanization in ways reminiscent of enslaved Africans. Many of the laws restricting enslaved blacks targeted Indians and free blacks who were both excluded from political participation.⁴⁶ Indians also sought redress for on-going maltreatment from whites by setting fires.

Unsurprisingly, Indians who toiled along with enslaved Africans in the homes of white New England masters were also charged with the crime of arson. On September 14, 1685, an Indian was jailed as a suspect in the burning of the Medfield Mill in Marlborough and a young Indian servant girl, Hittee was hung in 1712 for burning her master's house.⁴⁷

While Indians made arson a key component of their retaliation, enslaved Africans continued to commit acts of arson through the decades of the eighteenth century. In 1705, Samuel Sewall reported in his diary that an African servant, Rochester, was condemned to die for firing Mrs. Savage's house.⁴⁸ As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three, a young slave girl Sabinah allegedly ignited a deadly explosion destroying part of her master's house in 1709.⁴⁹ As will be discussed in Chapters Two and Four, Bostonians awoke to alarms from April to July in 1723 for at least six fires that were attributed primarily to enslaved black men⁵⁰ It follows that the authorities first suspected blacks of arson when suspicious fires erupted in the town. Given the region's long history of Great Fires and its concomitant fear of such conflagrations, these slave arson fires only intensified the anxiety whites experienced in colonial New England.⁵¹

Whites were fearful of fire setting blacks because most incidents of slave arson took place in or near slave holding households. Whites understood that disgruntled slaves would retaliate against mistreatment. In July 1729, a despondent slave responded to his master, John Hutchinson's decision to sell him by torching his home in Malden, Massachusetts. The decision to sell the slave was made after he caused the death of Hutchinson's son by intentionally frightening the horse the boy was riding. Reportedly the slave was sold to an individual that he did not particularly like. Disagreeing with this choice of a new master, the enslaved man returned to set the house ablaze while Mr. Hutchinson was away at church. With his former master away from the premises, this unsupervised slave had the 'time and opportunity' to enter the house and steal money before starting a fire that resulted in the complete destruction of the Hutchinson home. Climbing up a tree to escape authorities, the black arsonist eventually fell to his death.⁵²

There were also times when innocent blacks were accused of setting fires in New England. When examined on November 5, 1730, an Indian servant Julian implicated an enslaved man Jeffrey in the burning of his master's barn and house in Bridgewater,

⁴⁶ Yashuhide Kawashima, *Puritan Justice and the Indian: White Man's Law in Massachusetts* (Middletown, CT.: Wesleyan University Press, 1986), 97.

⁴⁷ M. Halsey Thomas, *Diary of Samuel Sewall, 1674-1729* vol. I (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1973), 77.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 531.

⁴⁹ For discussion of Sabinah's case see page 46 of Chapter Three.

⁵⁰ *New England Courant*, April 29- May 26, Issue 92, page 4. Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York: International Publishers, 1993), 178

⁵¹ Recurring fires began from as early as 1630 when Governor John Winthrop's noted the burning of Thomas Sharp's thatched roof. The Boston Selectmen ordered each resident not to build a wooden chimney and not to cover a house with a thatch roof. Brayley. *A Complete History of the Boston Fire Department*, 5-6. Dennis Smith, *History of Firefighting in America, 300 Years of Courage* (New York: The Dial Press, 1978), 3.

⁵² Deloraine Pendre Corey, *History of Malden, Massachusetts, 1633-1785* (Malden: Published by Author, 1899) 521-522.

Massachusetts. Julian accused Jeffrey of being near the barn on the night of the fire; essentially refusing to admit his own complicity in the arson.⁵³ Both of these men had the freedom to be out late on the night of the arson event. One wonders whether Julian accused Jeffrey because he thought the court as well as the community would more readily suspect a black of committing such an act over an Indian. The court did not see it this way since Julian, and not Jeffrey, was executed on February 22, 1733.⁵⁴ Immediately taken into custody when fire destroyed the home of his master, Isaac Bemis, in October, 1734, an enslaved man named Answer was subsequently acquitted of arson charges in February, 1735. Slaves like Answer were forced to languish in jail while others were executed for acts of arson they did not even commit. Due to chronic slave arson in the towns of New England, there were times when innocent individuals were also hauled in as suspects in fires.

While most fires started in or near the homes of slave masters: there were occasions when blacks set fires in other locations. Reuben was an enslaved man who broke out of jail in Salem, Massachusetts in 1730. It was after being caught and returned to his cell that Reuben set a fire that did extensive damage to the jail.⁵⁵ Although it appeared that Reuben set the fire for the purpose of escaping punishment for his crime however, he could have also been trying to escape the intolerable conditions of the Salem jail. A frequent inmate of the jail in Salem petitioned the court for release in 1679 citing the offensive odor and poor ventilation in a place that "...was not fit for a Christian man to breathe."⁵⁶ Unlike enslaved persons in the southern colonies who could be punished for the crime of arson without a trial in a court of law, those enslaved in the New England colonies were generally thrown into jail before being brought before a judge or a jury in trials.

It was the close and intimate living arrangements of slave holding households that provided Africans with the means and opportunities to set deadly fires. Enslaved persons in New England usually served out their lifetime servitude in homes with only one or two other Africans.⁵⁷

"...most African Americans or Native American servants lived as far upstairs in the household as there was room for them...in the back upper Chamber, in the kitchen garrets of the meal garret – rooms just below the roof used for food storage, lumber, and beds, bedding and boxes."⁵⁸

⁵³ *Superior Court of Judicature Court of Assize and General Gaol Delivery, Plymouth County, Massachusetts*, November 4, 1730. (Massachusetts State Archives Files #30449 and #31330).

⁵⁴ *New England Weekly Journal*, March 5, 1733, Issue 311, page 2.

⁵⁵ Benjamin Marston, Sheriff of the Salem jail requested reimbursement in the amount of £6 18s for expenses related to pursuing and apprehending Reuben who was still confined in 1736. Defendants' breaking jail was a recurring for this Sheriff since another request for reimbursement was made on June 26, 1737. *Essex County Court of General Sessions, Salem, Massachusetts*, February 2, 1730 and June 26, 1737. (Massachusetts State Archives Files #470)

⁵⁶ Thomas Gatchell's petition indicated that he could not survive much longer "in so pestiferous stink." Edgar J. McManus, *Law and Liberty in Early New England: Criminal Justice and Due Process, 1620-1692* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 178.

⁵⁷ Peter Benes, "Slavery in Boston Households, 1647-1770," *Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife Annual Proceedings* 28 (2003), 20.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

Having such proximity with a master was quite different from the experience of enslaved persons in the lower southern colonies of North and South Carolina. Except for a small number of domestic servants, field workers on southern plantations in the lower south lived in slave quarters some distance from the master's mansion. The separate slave quarters where plantation slaves lived were small crude buildings that resembled the structures which housed animals. These quarters were two hundred yards or more from a Great House that were built to symbolize a planter's hegemony.⁵⁹ On the other hand, enslaved persons in the colonies of Maryland and Virginia lived in separate cabins or huts that were generally closer to the master's house than those in the lower south; they did share the close proximity of masters and slaves in New England.⁶⁰ This is not to say that arson did not occur in the homes of slave owners in the southern colonies, however, the evidence seems to show that more fires were set outside the home in outbuildings like barns as compared to the North.

Living in such close quarters allowed enslaved persons in New England to know the whereabouts of a master and his family. In addition, this closeness gave bondservants access to an owner's valuables, including money, firearms and gunpowder. Having access to weapons and ammunition proved deadly for a twelve year old slave boy in New London in 1758. Based on how he ended his life, the boy must have grown really desperate over the conditions of his enslavement. He put the small end of a gun in his mouth while simultaneously putting the larger end filled with gun powder into a fire. The ignited gunpowder caused such a powerful explosion that it broke the boy's jaw and severed his jugular vein. Living in the master's residence had given this young individual the gun and gunpowder he needed to carry out such a deadly suicide.⁶¹

Living so intimately with a master and his family was not; however, the optimal situation. Not only did slaves live in a culturally alienating environment, many had to sleep on homemade pallets in the garret or attic space where food and other items were stored. Others slept on the hard cold kitchen floors where smells of cooked food and grease lingered long into the night.⁶² It is not surprising that some enslaved persons grew so agitated over how they were treated that they resorted to such desperate means. Although the historical records are rather scanty as to why black arsonists set these many fires, we do know that enslaved women who worked as domestic servants had to complete an inordinate amount of chores while under constant surveillance. More importantly, some enslaved persons were even subjected to emotional, physical and even sexual abuse from their master or members of his family.⁶³

Just as the enslaved man burned the Hutchinson home in Malden when he was sold to a master he did not like, other blacks sought similar retribution for the ill treatment they received. For example, in 1753, an enslaved man in Newport turned to arson out of frustration when he was unable to change the conditions of his hired employment. As previously discussed, the contractual hiring of slaves was a regular employment practice in colonial New England since

⁵⁹ Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 97, 131. Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth Century Chesapeake & Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 120.

⁶⁰ Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth Century Chesapeake & Low Country* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 121.

⁶¹ *Boston Evening Post*, November 6, 1758, Iss. 1210, Page 3.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ House servants lived in torment because they had little chance to avoid the constant demand for steady service. In addition, domestic servants were subjected to incessant supervision as well as the wrath of their superiors. Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll: The World that Slaves Made* (New York: Random House, 1974), 333.

owners who did not have enough work for their slaves generally hired them out to individuals in need of surplus workers.⁶⁴ When the slave found distillery work too distasteful, he sought out a local doctor to purchase him. Soliciting a white individual to become your new master would have been unheard of in the southern or West Indian colonies. The doctor's refusal to acquiesce to this request only sent the disgruntled man over the edge. He sought his revenge by setting several fires in the doctor's kitchen while occupants were in the home. After barricading himself in the doorway, the knife wielding slave threatened to kill the doctor's family. Running away from the house while the family frantically tried to extinguish the fires, the escaping black arsonist cut the throat of a white youth he encountered along the way. The out of control slave then jumped into a nearby river where he subsequently drowned.⁶⁵

Apparently, the hired out slave in Newport believed he could have some control over his life despite his permanent slave status. Like John Hutchinson's slave in Malden, this enslaved man also felt he should have a say in choosing his next master. Only a New England slave would think that he had the right to seek out another employment opportunity when the current one proved disappointing. The idea of being able to control some aspect of one's life may have resulted from working in a hired out capacity.⁶⁶ Living away from his master and being paid wages would have given the man a sense of independence and autonomy. Particularly if he had previously toiled on a farm or worked as a domestic servant before experiencing the semi-independent status of being hired out. A hired out slave who lived in an urban town such as Newport, Rhode Island during the eighteenth century would have interacted with persons who were not slaves, including persons of the doctor's caliber. Enslaved persons would have also been in contact with free blacks and urban slaves who, being of like mind might have provided lighted coals or gunpowder to start these dangerous conflagrations. Obviously aware of the white community's fears about destructive fires, it seems that some black arsonists like this hired out slave man chose a strategy of retaliation that destroyed both person and property. Arson was a sure way to bring harm to the source of their oppression. In most slave arson cases, it was the master's property that was set ablaze. However, in this case, the enslaved man directed his ire at the individual who refused to rescue him from his misery. The damage inflicted by this individual did not, in any way, compare to that done when a most deadly fire engulfed the Long Wharf in Newport in 1762.

It did not take long for the authorities to identify a suspect in the massive Long Wharf fire. The investigation that followed revealed that the culprit was Fortune, the enslaved African of Simeon Price, a local blacksmith.⁶⁷ Fortune was a member of a rather populous slave community since there were just over 1,200 blacks living in Newport among 5,519 whites at the time of the fire.⁶⁸ On the night in question Fortune had worked along with other enslaved men

⁶⁴ The agreement to hire out a slave specified the length of service, nature of the employment and the compensation to be paid in a contract signed by the owner and the renter of slave services. Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England*, 120-121.

⁶⁵ *Boston Gazette*, February 13, 1753, Issue 7, page 3.

⁶⁶ Twenty-two of the thirty distilleries in Rhode Island were in Newport. Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England*, 25-26.

⁶⁷ *Summons for Fortune from Martin Howard, Justice of the Peace to the Sheriff, his Deputy, Town Sergeants or Constables in Said County of Newport*, February 20, 1762. State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, Supreme Court Judicial Records Center, Pawtucket, Rhode Island.

⁶⁸ In 1755. North and South Kingston in the Narragansett region had the highest concentration of enslaved blacks with 805 blacks and 3070 whites. While the slave population in Providence ranked third with 262 blacks and 2,897

who were hired to unload a brig that belonged to the merchant Thomas Hazard. Although some newspaper reports erroneously identified Fortune as “an abandoned Negro,” it appears that he was just another slave who was temporarily hired by Mr. Thomas Hazard.⁶⁹ Was Fortune thought to be abandoned because he had the freedom to travel freely and hire himself out at night? With the continuous demand for surplus labor in New England, enslaved men like Fortune had no difficulty finding work for themselves in the evenings and weekends.⁷⁰ The option to work part-time unloading ships was just one type of flexible opportunities available to enslaved men in New England.

Shipped from West Africa to Newport by way of Barbados in 1737, Broteer Furro, known in slavery as Venture Smith, also had an opportunity to work as a hired out slave. Venture regularly offered out his labor to cut wood or to do other miscellaneous farm work in order to purchase the freedom of himself as well as that of his wife and children.⁷¹ So although demanding work duties took up most of their work day, some male bondservants enjoyed the limited freedom of working during off hours provided they had their master’s permission.

An enslaved man’s ability to do temporary work would have been hampered by the curfew laws enacted in most New England colonies. Thus, if Fortune was stopped by the local constable, he could have been detained until seen by the justice of the peace who might have whipped him with fifteen stripes for being out after 9:00 p.m. without the requisite work certificate.⁷² Returning to the wharf around 10:00 p.m. on the night of the fire shows that Fortune successfully worked around the curfew law when he traveled through the streets of Newport without detection. It was difficult to enforce the curfew laws since the nocturnal hours were the ideal times for enslaved persons to run away and/or commit crimes like theft and arson. It is not known whether Mr. Price provided Fortune with the certificate he needed to work for Mr. Hazard or if he just took a chance and worked that evening without the required document.

Fortune was able to successfully put his arson plans into place by exercising the freedom of mobility normally denied to enslaved women in New England. The live coals that Fortune put down the side of the Hazard warehouse were easily retrieved from “a little House near the Long Wharf.”⁷³ It also appears that enslaved persons had no difficulty locating flammable materials to start fires in New England. When questioned by the authorities, Fortune not only admitted to setting the fire but he explained how he went about it. With a confession in hand, the authorities moved to indict Fortune for “...feloniously maliciously & voluntarily...” igniting the fire that destroyed the Long Wharf.” The King’s Attorney added that the aforesaid felonious

whites living together. Edgar J. McManus, *Black Bondage in the North* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1973), 203.

⁶⁹ “This was no accident: but was perpetrated by an abandoned Negro...” *Boston Evening Post*, March 8, 1762, Issue 1384, page 3.

⁷⁰ Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England*, 123.

⁷¹ Venture was paid over two hundred pounds for cutting several thousand cords of wood over a four year period. Venture Smith, *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, Native of Africa* (Middleton, CT: J.S. Stewart, 1897), 18.

⁷² Rhode Island also restricted householders, including free blacks, from entertaining slaves in their home after 9:00 p.m. unless permission was obtained from the slave owner. “An Act Prohibiting Negroes and Indians from being Abroad at unseasonable times of the Night and for Punishing those that shall Entertain them contrary hereto.” *The Earliest Acts and Laws of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, 1647-1719* (January 1704), 52, 188.

⁷³ *Examination of Fortune, A Negro Man belonging to Simone Price*, February 20, 1762. State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, Supreme Court Judicial Records Center, Pawtucket, Rhode Island.

act was "...against his said Majesty's Peace his Crown and dignity."⁷⁴ According to newspaper accounts that followed, the fire only burned Hazard's property with sundry goods valued at fifty thousand pounds, it destroyed other properties and goods valued at an additional thirty pounds. . The fire that destroyed the Long Wharf in 1762 was just as destructive as the Great Fire which raged so uncontrollably in Boston two years earlier on March 20, 1760 leaving a total of 174 dwelling houses and tenements as well as 175 warehouses and shops totally destroyed. Although the perpetrator of Boston's Great Fire of 1760 was never uncovered, it is irrefutable that it was an enslaved man who set one of the most destructive fires in the history of Rhode Island.

Too often the historical record is silent as to the reasons why black arsonists committed their fiery deeds. However, the motivation behind Fortune's acts of crime can be gleaned from his *Dying Confession & Declaration* dictated days before his execution on March 14, 1762. The defendant reported that his life in slavery began when he was taken out of his own country (an undisclosed location in Africa or the West Indies) some twenty years ago. Exposed to Christianity after arriving in New England, Fortune's remorseful apology is grounded in the religious ideology of the day. Fortune admitted that his criminal behavior resulted from his was not following the firm discipline and good counsel of his Master and Mistress. Acknowledging that he like, most other enslaved blacks in his community, often sought revenge from abusive whites without fully considering the consequences. Although sorry about destroying the property of the other victims of the Long Wharf fire, Fortune expressed no remorse for bringing harm to Mr. Hazard for the "...underserved usage" he exercised against him.⁷⁵

Fortune provided the details of how Mr. Hazard mistreated him and the rest of his temporary employees. They had unloaded the ship as instructed but instead of being compensated for their labor, Thomas Hazard whipped them. Fortune's believed that Mr. Hazard had intentionally not used whites for just that reason. That is, the merchant used enslaved men because he could get away with not paying them. He could physically abuse them without legal repercussions. Not only would Thomas Hazard have to pay whites, there was no way he could abuse a white person without being reported to the authorities. More importantly, hired whites would have exposed Thomas Hazard's illegal smuggling of goods into the Newport harbor. Some New England merchants unloaded ships under the cover of darkness to avoid paying the import duties due on imported goods.⁷⁶ Fortune's words clearly explained the "underserved usage" that he and the other blacks received at the hands of Mr. Hazard:

⁷⁴ *Superior Court of Judicature Court of Assize and General Goal Delivery held at Newport in & for the County of Newport on the first Monday in March in the Second Year of Our Sovereign Lord George the Third of Great Britain Annoq Dui 1762*. State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, Supreme Court Judicial Records Center, Pawtucket, Rhode Island.

⁷⁵ *Dying Confession and Declaration of Fortune, a Negro Man; &c.* (Attested G. Lawton) Permission to use this document granted by Irene Axelrod of the Peabody Essex Museum Library.

⁷⁶ The Newport estate of merchant Godfrey Malbone reportedly had a tunnel that allowed him to smuggle in goods. John King Van Rensselaer, *Newport Our Social Capital* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1905), 298.

...and in such service as white men were denied employ though they offered their service, and from which they were excluded, by reason that they could not impose upon them as they could use poor Negroes and for fear their Doings should come to Light, and yet after their turn was served... they refused to pay the Hirelings their wages... and instead of an ample award, nothing but hard Words, Oaths, Blows, Kicks, and the like...⁷⁷

Angered about being treated in this manner, Fortune took matters into his own hands. He gambled on not being caught after the 9:00 p.m. curfew returning to the Wharf for the sole purpose of setting the Hazard warehouse on fire. Although free to travel at night in order to work as a hired out slave, Fortune was still denied his earned wages and subjected to an unjustified beating. It is for this reasons that he retaliated by setting Thomas Hazard's property ablaze on that fateful night in 1762.

Unlike the Long Wharf fire which destroyed an untold number of commercial properties, other incidents of slave arson usually took place on the domestic front in slave holding households. One incident that took place in Rocky Hill (Wethersfield), Connecticut in 1764 was strikingly similar to the previously discussed arson incident that occurred in Newport in 1747.⁷⁸ Both men waited until their master left the home to physically threaten the occupants and ignite enough gunpowder to cause a fiery explosion. In Newport, a member of the master's family was actually attacked while only threats were made in Rocky Hill. Living in the same household as the family gave the men access to members of the household and to the gunpowder used to start the explosions. Since most slave owning families only had one or two slaves, a master had no other choice but to leave their family members with enslaved servants. Knowing when the master would be out of the house allowed the men to commit their crimes. It was after Mr. Brandigee left the house that the slave in Rocky Hill warned the family he would stab anyone who tried to stop him from striking a half-barrel of gunpowder with a flint. The family members backed off and the enraged man ignited enough gunpowder to not only blow off the roof but to fatally injure himself as well.⁷⁹ Similarly, after physically attacking family members with a knife, the man in Newport also set fire to a barrel of gunpowder which destroyed part of his master's house before fatally injuring himself.⁸⁰

The above mentioned cases demonstrate how sharing living space with African slaves put some families in New England at risk. Generally known to the local community, black arsonists were easily identified, pursued and taken into custody. However, there were times when identification of the arsonist proved more difficult. A raging fire that put the lives of two tenant families in danger in Newport in 1773 occurred in a farm house where a black woman who

⁷⁷ *Dying Confession and Declaration of Fortune, a Negro Man; &c.* Used with permission granted by Irene Axelrod from the Peabody Essex Museum Archives.

⁷⁸ See discussion of arson set by the slave of Captain James Holmes on page 3 above.

⁷⁹ Both black arsonist sustained injuries so serious they died within hours of the fire *The Providence Gazette and Country Journal*, August 4, 1764, Vol. II, Iss. 94, Page 3. *Newport Mercury*, August 6, 1754, Iss. 309, Page 3.

⁸⁰ *Boston Post Boy*, April 27, 1747, Issue 649, page 1,

belonged to one of the families froze to death the week before.⁸¹ Such was the case when fire destroyed part of the Point Poppasquash estate of William Vassall in Bristol, Rhode Island in 1766. The newspapers reported that the fire was "...supposed to be set by a Negro Fellow." Although the suspect was never identified, it is likely that the suspect belonged to the slave owning Vassalls. After making his fortune in Jamaican sugar, William Vassall's father, Leonard migrated north; bringing African slaves with him to New England in 1722. Despite their refractory ways, Africans from the Gold Coast were preferred imports of Jamaican sugar planters and so the Vassall Africans were arguably rebellious as well.⁸² What is known is, however, is that at 3:00 a.m. an unknown black man inconspicuously ignited a fire at William Vassall's estate destroying two large barns, a coach house and a large quantity of hay for a total loss of £1,000. There is no indication that a suspect was taken into custody for setting the Vassall fire.

There was no question as to who set fire to Dr. Silvester Gardiner's house in frontier Maine in 1766. Born in 1708 on a plantation in Narragansett, Rhode Island to William and Abigail, Dr. Gardiner grew up in a slave owning household where nine Africans were held in bondage.⁸³ Educated in the medical schools of London and Paris, the Rhode Island native went on to become a successful surgeon in Boston who also operated an apothecary that sold drugs imported from England. One of several investors in the more than million acres of undeveloped land initially owned by the Plymouth Company, Dr. Gardiner laid out farms, houses, saw mills, a fulling mill, a potash factory and a grist mill on more than 400 acres he purchased in the Kennebec River Valley in rural Maine in 1755.⁸⁴ Apparently his Boston household was a hectic place with a wife, eight children, several physician apprentices, servants as well as slaves.⁸⁵

⁸¹ *Boston Post Boy*, March 22, 1773, Issue 813, page 4.

⁸² Despite a reputation of rebelliousness, Gold Coast Africans were highly prized in Jamaica. This is further supported by Gwendolyn Midlo Hall who found that 631 voyages went from the Gold Coast to Jamaica as compared to 231 that went to Barbados from 1650 to 1807. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 10.

⁸³ Olivia E. Coolidge, *Colonial Entrepreneur: Dr. Silvester Gardiner and Settlement of Maine Kennebec Valley* (Gardiner, ME: Gardiner Library Association, 1999), 3-4.

⁸⁴ Settled in 1755 as Gardinertown Plantation, the town was incorporated as Pittston, in honor of William Pitt, Earl of Chatham, in 1779. West side of Kennebec River incorporated as the town of Gardiner in 1803. Robert J. Erskine, *The Gardiner Story, 1849 to 1949* (Published by City of Gardiner, Maine, 1949).

<http://.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~megardin/early.html>. J.W. Hanson, *History of Gardiner, Pittston and West Gardiner, 1602 to 1852* (Gardiner: William Palmer, 1852), 46-47.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.



Dr. Silvester Gardiner, age 65
Portrait by John Singleton Copley, 1773
(Permission granted by Seattle Art Museum)

Although Dr. Gardiner knew that his slave, Isaac “Hazard” Stockbridge started the fire that destroyed his property in Maine, he did not have Hazard prosecuted for the crimes he committed. Such a passive response seemed out of character for the Boston physician known for being a bully and for having a fiery temper.⁸⁶ It is said that Dr. Gardiner once threw an enslaved man out of his house with a flurry of blows and kicks after an argument. Olivia E. Coolidge, the author who wrote Dr. Gardiner’s biography believed that Hazard, who carried the doctor’s surgical implements, was treated in an even more abusive manner.⁸⁷

Moving Hazard and his family from Boston to frontier Maine was the ultimate abuse suffered at the hands of Dr. Gardiner. Having to leave Boston with its relatively large African American population to live on an unimproved settlement with a total of three other enslaved persons would have been particularly disorienting for this enslaved family.⁸⁸ In fact, by 1764 there were only 322 persons of African descent living in all of frontier Maine.⁸⁹ Such a move not only severed familial and personal relationships, it likely removed the black family from their local church and other social institutions in the wider Boston community. Without a doubt, life in this cold, rural and sparsely populated frontier community was socially and culturally isolating to a black family who lived previously in an urban town. Additionally, living in Maine curtailed the freedom of movement that Hazard likely enjoyed as Dr. Gardiner’s personal

⁸⁶Coolidge, *Colonial Entrepreneur: Dr. Silvester Gardiner*, 7, 26.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 33.

⁸⁸ Also living in the Gardiner home were Pomp and Black Nance. J. W. Hanson, *History of Gardiner, Pittston and West Gardiner, 1602 to 1802*, 77.

⁸⁹ The just over 300 persons of African descent living in frontier Maine in 1764 was small as compared to the over 5, 000 black persons living in Massachusetts at the same time. The number of enslaved persons never exceeded five hundred or 2% of colonial Maine from 1677 to 1820. McManus, *Black Bondage*, 199. Randolph Stakeman, “Slavery in Colonial Maine,” *Maine Historical Society Quarterly*, vol. 27, no. 2 (Fall 1987), 73-74

attendant. In addition to working as an attendant, Hazard also had responsibility for caring for the horses and for running errands for the doctor.⁹⁰ It was while running errands that Hazard would have met up with other enslaved persons while also taking a few moments to handle his own personal business. Olivia Coolidge explains that Hazard knew and interacted with the slave attendants of other Boston physicians who provided the arsenic that poisoned John Codman in 1755. Mark eventually obtained vials of arsenic from Robbin, a slave of Dr. William Clarke of Boston.⁹¹ Isolated in rural Maine on the Gardiner estate with only two other blacks, Pomp and Black Nance, was too much for Hazard to bear. He, therefore, acted out his frustration and destroyed his master's property while also attempting to physically harm the doctor and his family.⁹² It was the freedom experienced as Dr. Gardiner's personal attendant that was taken away from Hazard on the frontier. Like enslaved female domestics confined to urban slave owning households, restricting Hazard to an undeveloped frontier settlement with just a few other blacks only intensified his despondency over being held as a slave.

It did not take long for a disgruntled Hazard to retaliate against these added restrictions on his life. As in most slave owning families, Hazard worked and lived in or near the Gardiner house. With full access to his master's home and other property, he went about putting his criminal plans into operation. Having grown so desperate over his life on the frontier, Hazard began his rampage by killing a few of his master's horses. Since the feeding and grooming of the horses was done by Hazard each day, he had full access to the animals.⁹³ On the other hand, his attempt to poison the family's coffee proved more problematic because he was forced to reveal his misdeed after Mrs. Gardiner requested a cup of coffee. It appears that Hazard's anger was directed at Dr. Gardiner and not his wife. One can only imagine that Hazard told his Mistress that "I would not drink that coffee if I was you." Since only limited information is available about the poisoning incident, it is not known what kind of poison was used. Hazard could have had access to arsenic since he was a personal attendant to a physician and he knew Carr and Robbin, the other slave attendants of physicians who lived in Boston.⁹⁴ Apparently, Hazard could not bring himself to poison Mrs. Gardiner who bore no responsibility for his forced relocation. So when the poisoning attempt failed, Hazard resorted to torching either the recently built Gardiner house or a nearby outbuilding.

Although Dr. Gardiner was unnerved by the fire and Hazard's other criminal acts, he did not pursue prosecution but decided to show leniency to his disgruntled slave. The legend indicates that Dr. Gardiner provided Hazard with supplies and tools before banishing him and his family to a remote area of the estate near the Cabassa River. Given the undeveloped nature of the Maine settlement, it is possible that a court or jail had not yet been built in their frontier

⁹⁰ Coolidge, *Colonial Entrepreneur: Dr. Silvester Gardiner*, 33.

⁹¹ Elise Lemire, *Black Walden: Slavery and Its Aftermath in Concord, Massachusetts* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2009), 44. *The Last & Dying Words of Mark Aged about 30 Years (1755)* (Massachusetts Historical Society). See pages 54-57 of Chapter Three for further discussion of the Codman fire.

⁹² Ms. Coolidge goes as far to argue that stories of the Codman and Gardiner cases were conflated in the family legend of the Gardiner family. That is, she suggests that Hazard did not really attempt to poison the Gardiner family nor did he set fire to their property in Maine because the Codman incident was incorporated into the oral history of Hazard's life. Mrs. Coolidge did report that an outbuildings belonging to Dr. Gardiner was set on fire but she does indicate whether Hazard was accused or whether this occurred in Boston or in Maine. Coolidge, *Colonial Entrepreneur: Dr. Silvester Gardiner*, 34-35.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁹⁴ Mark was the Codman slave who obtained vials of arsenic from Robbin, a slave of Dr. William Clarke of Boston. Lemire, *Black Walden*, 44. *The Last & Dying Words of Mark, Aged about 30 Years (1755)*.

community. Putting Hazard in jail would have even more detrimental to Hazard's family. With Hazard no longer living in or near their house, the Gardiners must have felt much more secure. It appears that an act of slave arson essentially freed this enslaved man from lifetime bondage. Living and working some distance from the main estate, Hazard enjoyed the right to hire out his labor and keep his earnings. Remarkably, this bonded man spent the remainder of his life in relative freedom independent of his master's interference until his death in 1780.⁹⁵

Having moved Hazard as far away from their homestead as possible, the Gardiners avoided what David Ingersoll, Esq. faced in his Great Barrington estate in 1767. Likely sharing his household with his slaves and servants, the newspaper indicates that an enslaved woman intentionally ignited the fire which consumed both the large Ingersoll house and its very valuable furnishings.⁹⁶ Although the article offers no additional proof of how or why this was an intentional fire, such a conclusion is reflective of the general fears that New Englanders had of their slaves. That is, they were living in the midst of rebellious African slaves and Indian servants who took advantage of their intimate living situation and their limited freedoms to set these fires.

A fire that destroyed the contents of a barn in Fairfield, Connecticut on July 29, 1771 was similarly ruled intentional since it was set by a disgruntled young male slave.⁹⁷ The boy sought revenge for being wrongfully punished by his master by setting a fire which consumed the master's house and destroyed five to six loads of hay. After years of overwork and or physical abuse, young enslaved persons grew so desperate they carried out deadly acts of arson. A young Cato who was purchased by Dr. Stephen Powers of Middleboro, Massachusetts before 1772 was described as a "very mischievous" individual who set one or two fires in the neighborhood.⁹⁸ In 1773, a young slave of Thomas Randall of Stonington, Connecticut grew so despondent over the work demanded of him that instead of feeding the animals on the day of question, the boy ignited a fire in the barn which killed ten horses and a yoke of oxen. When asked about his crimes, the young boy admitted to setting the fire "...because he was tired of tending to the creatures."⁹⁹ Like Hazard in frontier Maine, these young enslaved boys labored under a system of slavery which provided opportunities to torch the property of their masters. After all, it was having this total responsibility for caring for the animals that allowed them to destroy barns as well as their contents.

Taken into custody for setting the barns on fire, the enslaved boys were likely whipped before being shipped off to the West Indies.¹⁰⁰ Of course, a punishment of this order was less severe than that the punishments traditionally handed down to black arsonists over past decades. Whether New England jurisprudence was becoming more enlightened or the lives of the boys were spared because of their age is not clear. Being sent to a sugar plantation, however; could be equivalent to a death sentence. Cultivating sugar cane was so labor intensive and physically exacting that most West Indian slaves lived an extremely poor quality of life. Vincent Brown

⁹⁵ H.H. Price and Gerald E. Talbot, eds., *Maine's Visible Black History: The First Chronicle of Its People* (Thomaston, ME: Tillbury House Publishers, 2006), 11. Randolph Stakeman, "Slavery in Colonial Maine," *Maine Historical Society Quarterly*, vol. 27, no. 2 (Fall 1987), 73-74.

⁹⁶ *Boston Evening Post*, September 14, 1767, Iss. 1668, page 3; *Connecticut Courant*, September 14, 1767.

⁹⁷ *Essex Gazette*, from Tuesday, July 30 to Tuesday, August 6, 1771, Vol. IV, Iss. 158, Page. 5.

⁹⁸ Thomas Weston, *History of the Town of Middleboro, Massachusetts* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1906), 105.

⁹⁹ *The Newport Mercury*, February 15, 1773, Iss. 754, Page 3.

¹⁰⁰ *Essex Gazette*, from Tuesday, July 30 to Tuesday, August 6, 1771, Vol. IV, Issue. 158, page. 5.

found that enslaved males on sugar plantations in Jamaica worked only work 13.2 years before their health broke down significantly. On the average, an enslaved man on a sugar plantation died at a mean age of forty-two. In the end, toiling on a sugar plantation in the Caribbean most likely shortened the natural lives of the enslaved boys who were shipped from New England.¹⁰¹

An enslaved Primus also lost his physical life after intentionally setting fires in Newport in 1772. Like most enslaved married couples in New England, Primus and his wife lived with their individual slave owners.¹⁰² Primus was owned by the wealthy merchant distillery owner Thomas Cranston, Sr.¹⁰³ His wife's owner, Evan Malbone, was the nephew of the wealthy slave trading merchant Godfrey Malbone.¹⁰⁴ Although not true for this slave couple, married slaves lived separately because slave owners in New England generally had a need for just one or two servants in their homes.¹⁰⁵ Since they lived apart, both Mr. Cranston and Mr. Malbone had to grant Primus permission to visit his wife.¹⁰⁶ Once the permission was granted, Primus was able to freely travel to the Malbone household on days designated for his spousal visits.

It was during one of these pre-authorized visits that Primus attacked his wife and ignited a series fires at the Malbone house and the Cranston distillery. Primus became angry after his wife demanded that he return money taken from her. Did his wife make such a bold demand because she knew Primus could not discipline or punish her in her master's house? Primus would have understood that white husbands were not similarly restricted in dealing with irate spouses. Having the freedom to just visit his wife on designated days was not enough for Primus. Like all enslaved men in New England, he wanted a more total freedom that did not restrict the interaction he had with his wife or the children he fathered. Additionally, Primus must have wanted a right to have control over his family's limited finances. More importantly, Primus wanted the same freedom to chastise or discipline his wife with corporeal punishment as white men enjoyed.

Angered by the refractory behavior of his wife, Primus began his fiery tirade by igniting a fire in the garret space which served as his wife's bedroom. Growing more perturbed, he proceeded to physically attack his wife. Mr. Malbone had to intervene to stop the violent attack. It was at this point that Primus redirected his vengeance to his wife's slave owner, the person who clearly exercised some control over his life. As an enslaved spouse in New England,

¹⁰¹ Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2008), 52.

¹⁰² Since the marriages of enslaved persons were duly solemnized and recorded, compulsory publication of the banns announcing the intention to marry was required of everyone, regardless of race. Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England*, 193-194.

¹⁰³ The merchant and distiller Thomas Cranston, Sr. was the great-grandson of John Cranston, Governor of Rhode Island from 1678 to 1680 and the grandson of Samuel Cranston, Sr., Governor of Rhode Island from 1698-1727. *Will of Governor Samuel Cranston, Filed 17 Mar 1726*. (Newport Historical Society File# 155424).

¹⁰⁴ A shipmaster, Evan Malbone was the son of Mary and Rodolphus Malbone and the nephew of the slave merchant Godfrey Malbone who shipped slaves to New England as part of his carrying trade business with the West Indies. "Malbone Family Collection, 1728-1825,(Rhode Island Historical Society File #MSS-549). Louis P. Masur, "Slavery in Eighteenth-Century Rhode Island: Evidence from the Census of 1774, *Slavery and Abolition*, vol. 6, no. 2 (1985), 143.

¹⁰⁵ There is no evidence that Primus and his wife ever shared a residence even though the 1774 Census for Newport indicates that Thomas Cranston, Sr. owned six blacks while Evan Malbone owned seven. Town of Newport Colonial Census(1774), County of Newport, Rhode Island, www.newhorizonsgenealogicalservices.com/1774-ri-colonial-census-newport.htm

¹⁰⁶If slaves belonged to two different masters, the man could receive permission to call upon the woman after his working hours. Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England*, 193.

Primus could not visit his wife without Malbone's consent; not to mention his feelings of powerlessness with not being able to chastise a wayward wife who was protected by her master. Thus, these acts of arson were personal since Primus focused his rage at the individuals who exercised power over existence. With a fire burning in the upstairs garret, Primus proceeded to ignite a second fire in the kitchen. Once Malbone's house was ablaze, Primus turned his anger toward the other white individual responsible for his enslavement. He traveled to the Cranston distillery where he set fire to the rum and wood rooms. Were these the rooms where Primus worked or were they just easy to set on fire? While flames were engulfing the distillery, a resolute Primus climbed into a large cistern filled with an unidentified liquid where he was subsequently drowned.¹⁰⁷

The fire ignited by the enslaved man of Parson Theophilus Hall of Wallingford, Connecticut sometime in the late eighteenth century sought to avenge the violent form of power exercised over his life. The enslaved man was known for his "...surly and unruly" disposition so the Parson believed it was necessary to chastise his slave with the lash on a regular basis. However, the frequent beatings only made the slave more recalcitrant. On one Sunday morning, the Parson whipped the man before he left for church. Freedom for this enslaved man would have been as simple as being able to live without being physically abused. Since this level of freedom was not on the horizon, the angry slave used the 'window of opportunity' made available by the Parson's absence to set fire to a nearby hayrick. After seeing the billowing smoke from the Meeting House, Rev. Hall adjourned the service early so that the congregants could help extinguish the fire. And although the firefighting efforts saved the minister's house that day, the black arsonist was not as fortunate. He fell from a tree and died while trying to escape the authorities.¹⁰⁸

While black arsonists in New England generally struck out against their slave owners for this kind of mistreatment, there was a white arsonist from England, James Aitken, who used dangerous fires to wage a political war against the land of his birth during the American Revolution. And although enslaved blacks in New England enjoyed some limited rights, their freedom was circumscribed by an array of rules and regulations. For example, although enslaved men had more freedom of mobility as a result of their assigned occupations, curfew laws could still subject them to jail and a whipping for being out past 9:00 p.m. or for visiting the home of free blacks without a master's permission in Rhode Island.¹⁰⁹ Other restrictive regulations included the local Boston law that required blacks and Indians to remain in their master's houses at the time of a fire and the Connecticut law that punished blacks with up to thirty stripes for "offering to ...strike a white person."¹¹⁰ And so while some enslaved persons in

¹⁰⁷ *The New London Gazette*, March 6, 1772, Vol. IX, Issue 434, page 3.

¹⁰⁸ The actual date of this slave arson incident is undetermined. There is some indication that enslaved man started the fire at Parson Hall's when the "...parish worshipped in the little church on Meeting House Hill." This would have been during the 37 year period when Rev. Theophilus Hall was the minister in Wallingford/Meriden, Connecticut from 1728 to 1765. There were no other pastors named Hall after Pastor Theophilus Hall died in 1769. Although the caption below the article is dated October 28, 1777, this may be when the incident was first reported in the Connecticut Journal of History. Bancroft Gillespie, *A Historic Record and Pictorial Description of the Town of Meriden, Connecticut* (Meriden: Journal Publishing Co., 1906), 248-249.

¹⁰⁹ "An Act Prohibiting Negroes and Indians from being abroad at unseasonable times of the Night..." Earliest Acts and Laws of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, 1647-1719 (January 1704), p. 188.

¹¹⁰ If seen near the place where the fire was located, the slave could be seized forthwith and whipped within. *Report of the Record of Commissioners of the City of Boston from 1700 to 1728* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill City Printers, 1883), 174-175.

New England had a limited freedom of mobility as well as truncated liberties including the ability to legally marry, receive a minimal education, hire out their labor and on occasion purchase their freedom, they would never be as totally free as James Aitken. It is for this reason that some enslaved persons in New England ran away, stole, and committed acts of murder, arson and poison. Never having his labor forcibly extracted, subjected to on-going physical abuse or constant surveillance, this free and unencumbered British subject ignited a series of fires which terrorized towns around London during the early days of the war. Remarkably, these crimes went undetected for two years. Able to slip in and out of government buildings without interception, James Aitken had no difficulty leaving his arson signature in and around London.

The elusive arsonist grew up in a working class family in Edinburg, Scotland during the 1750s. After the early death of his father, James received a limited education with the help of charity until he apprenticed with a painter.¹¹¹ Youthful adventure took James from Edinburg to London in 1772 and then to Virginia where he was working as an indentured servant by 1773. Among the inequities this free Englishman experienced as an indentured servant in America included eating minimally nutritious meals, wearing clothes made of coarse fabric and working alongside enslaved blacks in tobacco fields of Virginia. It was, most likely, this fine line between being a servant and being a slave which spurred Aitken to run away from a life of servitude.¹¹² Not pursued by unrelenting slave patrols that chased black runaways with blood thirsty dogs, the former indentured servant successfully made his escape to Philadelphia and possibly to New York.¹¹³ James Atkin's smooth escape from indentured servitude was not unlike that of a young Benjamin Franklin who while apprenticed as a printer, in 1723, ran away from a demanding, and harsh master who just happened to be his older brother James Franklin, the publisher of Boston's *The New England Courant*.¹¹⁴

Having also made a successful escape to Philadelphia like Benjamin Franklin did earlier in the century, Aitken would have become aware of the events of the American Revolution as they were unfolding. He would have heard of the Boston Tea Party taking place in late 1773 as well as the skirmishes at Lexington and Concord and the Battle of Bunker Hill because they took place before Aitken departed for England in the middle of 1775.¹¹⁵ Though it is not known whether these revolutionary events had a significant impact on the young Brit, we do know that he was constructing incendiary devices and igniting fires at Britain's five major dockyards by sometime in 1776.¹¹⁶ Questions still remain as to why Aitken waged this arson spree during the time of the American conflict. That is, did Aitken support the side of the Patriots and set the fires in retaliation for the deadly fires that British soldiers ignited while waging war in American towns? More importantly, did the Englishman witness enslaved blacks setting dangerous fires

¹¹¹ Jessica Warner, *The Incendiary: The Misadventures of John the Painter, First Modern Terrorist* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2004) 19, 32.

¹¹² Aitken ran off to North Carolina wearing a shirt made of uncomfortable coarse linen called ozenburg like that worn by enslaved blacks. *Ibid.*, 63-66.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹¹⁴ David Waldstreicher, *Benjamin Franklin, Runaway America, and the American Revolution* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004) 3-5.

¹¹⁵ Gordon S. Wood, *The American Revolution* (New York: Modern Library, 2002), 37, 53-54, 85.

¹¹⁶ Unsuccessful in winning political or financial support from Silas Deane, the American envoy in Paris in October, 1776, this lone supporter of the American cause went on to set his deadly fires in the Portsmouth Dockyard in December 1776, to three merchant ships and several warehouses in Bristol from January 1776 and January 1777. Warner, *The Incendiary*, 105, 153-155.

during his brief tenure as an indentured servant in Virginia? Not knowing why James used fire to carry out his political protests exemplifies how relatively powerless people often chose this form of retaliation. Although he was a white individual with far more rights than enslaved Africans, this lower class person with his limited education had few options during his lifetime. He had no other choice but to become an apprentice and then work in a low paying position as a painter in England or as an indentured servant in America. Just as enslaved Africans resented slave owning whites for the limitations they placed on their lives, James must have resented the upper and middle class in Britain for relegating him to a lower class position with few opportunities for improving his economic status. We do know that James entered and exited government buildings in England without ever being stopped for trespassing. Although enslaved Africans in New England had the means and opportunity to set dangerous fires not available to southern slaves; their relative ability to engage in acts of slave arson did not, in any way, compare to freedom James Aitken enjoyed during his fiery reign in the land of his birth during the late eighteenth century. And like many slave arsonists in colonial New England, John Aitken was eventually apprehended and executed on March 10, 1777.¹¹⁷

Conclusion

Living in a society where the need for slave labor was not essential allowed enslaved Africans in New England to enjoy an array of limited liberties. However, having some liberty was not good enough and some enslaved blacks used openings in the slave system to contest a denial of total freedom. Many sought a broader freedom on the same scale enjoyed by whites. Enjoying far more liberties than their enslaved counterparts in the south, enslaved men and women in New England used the intimacy of close living quarters to target slave owning families after easily accessing lighted coals, guns and gunpowder. As compared to female domestic servants, enslaved black men enjoyed a freedom of mobility made available by their work duties, granted by permissive masters or simply taken without permission during the day or night. However, living in such close proximity with their slaves also resulted in whites developing a deep seated fear of the blacks in their midst. They knew that blacks resented mistreatment and arson was a chosen option to retaliate against ill treatment. Thus, an enslaved Fortune who was physically abused by his temporary employer set one of the most deadly fires in New England's history.

Only having glimpses of liberty made blacks in New England seek a more total freedom devoid of control by white masters. It was a desire for total freedom in his marriage that drove an enraged Primus to set a series of deadly fires. Enslaved Africans sought a freedom on the scale of that enjoyed by whites. On the wrong side of Britain's political and military struggle with the American colonies, a totally free James Aitken, went undetected during a two year long fiery reign of terror in and around London. Enslaved persons in New England were not as fortunate as Aitken. They used the limited liberties at their disposal to start deadly fires to contest forced labor, repressive laws, emotional and physical abuse and forced separation from loved ones. In many cases, individual slaves worked alone to set dangerous fires that could harm masters and their families. On other occasions, they joined forces to start these fires in New England. Group slave arson will be examined in the next chapter as far as its group composition and motivations, methods of starting fires and level of success in causing physical or property damage to slave owning whites.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 225.

Chapter Two

Fighting Together with Fire: Group Slave Arson in Colonial New England

Awakened by the smell of smoke around 4:00 a.m. on April 2, 1723, the Boston merchant John Powell would have run to awaken his wife and children. Surely, the clamor aroused his neighbors who likely scrambled out of their beds to check for signs of fire in their own houses.¹¹⁸ In a half-awakened stupor, these “civic minded” residents who were living on Leverett Lane in the heart of central Boston dressed quickly, grabbed their leather buckets and ran out of the door.¹¹⁹ As Bostonians, they knew the drill. Fires were a routine occurrence in this seaport town. Just a week ago on March 30th a raging fire destroyed four or five tenements, including buildings belonging to Superior Court Judge Elisha Cook.¹²⁰ And the reports of slave men trying to set fire to Buttolph’s Cargo Shop on that same day did little to calm the fears of these urban residents. They were not surprised when fires erupted in a community which included rebellious slaves and bellicose Indians. And only three days later – the Powell fire - this was just too much to bear.

With leather buckets in hand, able bodied men headed for the Powell residence to quickly form themselves into a human chain in order to collect water.¹²¹ Cries of “need more water,” were most likely heard as hastily filled buckets were thrown on the billowing flames. Others would have thrown soaking wet blankets on the roof while flying sparks were swabbed with wet cloths draped on long poles.¹²² A water engine likely made its appearance within minutes since Boston’s selectmen had the fortuitous insight to purchase three water-engines in 1708.¹²³ Such courageous firefighting efforts definitely paid off. No Powell family members perished that night and only part of the house was damaged by fire.¹²⁴

Taken aback by such a brazen act of arson, the authorities turned their efforts to locating the villainous person or persons who ignited this fire. It did not take long to identify an enslaved African named Diego as the culpable party. He was one of about a thousand enslaved Africans living in Boston during the second decade of the eighteenth century. The number of slaves had

¹¹⁸ Repeatedly yelling “fire,” the neighborhood watchman also rang church chimes to sound an alarm at the first sign of a fire. Robert S. Holzman, *The Romance of Firefighting* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1956), 14.

¹¹⁹ Leather buckets were also tossed into the streets and picked up by persons rushing to a fire. *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ Among the tenements destroyed by the fire were buildings belonging to Judge Elisha Cook of the Superior Court of Judicature in Boston. *Boston News-Letter*, March 28 to April 4, 1723, p.1.

¹²¹ A fire warden directed two-sided brigades in filling up buckets at the public well. Filled receptacles were passed on one side and dumped into a large tub. The emptied buckets were then passed down the line again for refills at the well. Paul C. Ditzel, *Firefighters: The Men, Equipment, and Machines, from Colonial Days to the Present* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1976), 10.

¹²² Throwing wet blankets and draped wet cloths on the flames were some of the earliest fire fighting techniques. Dennis Smith, *History of Firefighting in America: 300 Years of Courage* (New York: The Dial Press, 1978), 6-7.

¹²³ The first water engine that Boston purchased in 1654 was a syringe pump that was filled up with water supplied by a bucket brigade. The water engines purchased from England in 1708 were constructed of wood. Arthur Wellington Brayley, *A Complete History of the Boston Fire Department, including the Fire Alarm System and the Protective Department* (Boston: John P. Dale & Company, 1889), 7. Smith, *History of Firefighting in America*, 6.

¹²⁴ *The Boston News-Letter*, March 28 to April 4, 1723, Issue 1001, page 1.

undergone a substantial increase over the last few years given there were only a thousand Africans living in all of New England during the latter decades of the previous century.¹²⁵ Like most enslaved persons living in New England, Diego came to the region by way of the West Indies from either West Africa or West Central Africa. In fact, the island of Barbados accounted for a third of the slaves imported into Massachusetts between 1720 and 1730.¹²⁶ And given his Portuguese or Spanish first name, Diego was probably either of Bantu origin from Angola or Kongolese from the Kongo in West Central Africa.¹²⁷ In either case, a Portuguese or Dutch slaver would have shipped Diego to the Caribbean before he was transshipped to New England.¹²⁸ He was just one of many recalcitrant Africans who arrived to the Bay Colony from the West Indies during this early period.

Diego lived his life toiling for white masters as did most other persons of African descent in New England. While some enslaved men in Boston labored as maritime workers, personal valets, painters, coach drivers, and distillery workers, Diego worked in the blacksmith shop of his master, John Harvey.¹²⁹ Whether at their master's homes, shops, on a wharf or on a small farm, a black bondservant had to complete a multitude of duties over the course of a normal work day. Laboring in such a diversified economy did give some urban male slaves a freedom of mobility not enjoyed by enslaved women in New England. And with such a demand for their labor, some of these men were able to hire themselves out in the evenings and week-ends for paid wages. This level of independence was particularly peculiar to urban New England. No matter the demands of working, enslaved men not only found ways to interact socially with each other, they sometimes stole away to plan acts of resistance. For example, the next chapter on Female Slave Arsonists discusses Mark, a slave of John Codman of Charlestown, Massachusetts. This enslaved man was fortunate to hire out his labor while living in Boston where he often stopped in taverns to drink with other male slaves. Enjoying this level of freedom also allowed Mark to obtain arsenic to later poison his master.¹³⁰ While working during the day, enslaved men found ways to meet outside the watchful eyes of their masters.¹³¹ Of course, many chose the nocturnal hours to plan and set fires that tended to cause minimal property damage. Not as

¹²⁵ By 1742, there were 1,514 enslaved blacks in Boston. Another source reports only 1,374 enslaved blacks in Boston at this time. This increase was due to increase importation and natural increase of the slave population, George H. Moore, *Notes of the History of Slavery in Massachusetts* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1800), 50. Lorenzo Johnston Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England, 1620-1776* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, Inc., 1942), 84.

¹²⁶ Robert S. Desrochers, Jr., "Slave-For-Sale and Slavery in Massachusetts, 1704-1781." *William and Mary Quarterly*, 59, no. 3 (July 2002), 1-16.

¹²⁷ Diego is an Iberian name like the name of Angola, the Bantu African who became the slave of the merchant Robert Keayne when he arrived in Boston from Angola by way of Barbados in early as the 1650s. Melinde Lutz Sanborn, *Memoranda and Documents Angola and Elizabeth: An African Family in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, New England Quarterly* (Mar., 1999), 120.

¹²⁸ The Spanish or Portuguese slavers who purchased Angola around 1650 would have branded him, baptized him and transported him with hundreds of other slaves to Barbados where he learned his first words of English before being shipped off to New England. *Ibid.* 119-129.

¹²⁹ Testimony of Diego Negro recorded at the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts, his Majesty's Court of the Assize (Massachusetts State Archives ID# 16899) on May 10, 1723.

¹³⁰ See discussion of the John Codman arson and poison cases on pages 17 in Chapter One and pages 56 and 58-61 in Chapter Three.

¹³¹ African servants "stole away" from their masters in order to drink and socialize in the evenings at taverns in New York City before the 1741 Slave Conspiracy, Jill Lepore, *New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery and Conspiracy in Eighteenth Century Manhattan* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 129.

desperate as female slave arsonists who, having endured years of isolation and unending domestic duties often set more deadly fires after reaching their emotional boiling point, black male arsonists tended to set smaller fires that resulted in less substantial property damage to whites. This was the case with Diego who set a low level fire that only destroyed a portion of the Powell house; black male arsonists did not always totally destroy a white person's property. Rather, these smaller fires appeared to show their discontent over the ill treatment they received as well as demonstrate the measure of power they had over others, including their masters.

The enslaved persons who set fires in New England during the colonial period were not the first Africans to seek revenge against cruel white masters. The first slaves to arrive in 1638 were not a docile group since a few of this inaugural group had already planned a revolt in the Caribbean before arriving to New England. Found guilty of organizing a slave rebellion on Providence Island on May 1, 1638, these black rebels were banished to Tortuga Island where the Africans on that island had already planned their own revolt in 1637. Exchanged for Indian captives of the Pequot war, these early Africans were brought to Boston by Captain William Pierce in 1638.¹³²

No matter how Africans arrived to New England, as shipments from the West Indies, direct shipments from West Africa, transshipments from Guinea slave voyages, cargo on provisions and carrying vessels, involuntarily migrants with relocating Caribbean masters or as the special orders of New England slave masters, it seems clear that they shared a close ethnic affinity with those enslaved in the Caribbean. Although separated by the expanse of the Atlantic Ocean, these captive cousins would have shared language, family and kinship connections as well as spiritual ideas.¹³³ Recognizing the cultural relatedness between these two groups support a finding that those in New England exhibited a propensity for resistance like that attributed to enslaved Africans in the Caribbean.

Some of this resistance came in the form of setting fires on slave ships anchored on the shores of West Africa or during the Middle Passage while crossing the Atlantic Ocean. Thus, rebellious Africans were joining forces to carry out fiery revolts long before they reached the Americas. It is estimated that more than 388 rebellions took place on slave ships between 1654 and 1865.¹³⁴ One such revolt took place on *The Polly* in 1759 when a pistol was discharged into the ship's magazine to cause an explosion that killed eighty Africans. While anchored in Anamabou on the Gold Coast in November, 1762, male captives held on the Rhode Island ship, the *Brig Royal Charlotte* conspired to carry out a rebellion that destroyed both lives and property. After being allowed on deck, the men threw Captain George Frost and a ship slave overboard before cutting the throat of another shipmate.¹³⁵ After gaining access to weapons the men shot into a barrel of gun powder instantly setting the ship ablaze.¹³⁶ The African men who were shipped with Outtobah Cugoano from the Gold Coast in West Africa to the island of

¹³² In 1638, Pierce exchanged Indian captives from the Pequot War for the first Africans who were brought to Boston from the island of Tortuga near modern day Haiti in the Caribbean. Karen Ordahl Kupperman, *Providence Island, 1630-1641: The Other Puritan Colony* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 167- 171.

¹³³ A third of the slaves imported to Massachusetts in the 1700s came directly from Barbados. Robert S. Desrochers, Jr., "Slave-For-Sale Advertisements and Slavery in Massachusetts, 1704-1781, *William and Mary Quarterly*, 72, no. 1 (March 1999), 119-129

¹³⁴ Stephen D. Behrendt, David Eltis and David Richardson, "The Costs of Coercion: African Agency in the Pre-Modern Atlantic World," *Economic History Review*, 54, no. 3 (2001).

¹³⁵ Ship slaves were selected from among the cargo of slaves to work for the Captain and the crew of a slave ship.

¹³⁶ *The Newport Mercury*, June 6, 1763, Issue 248, page 3.

Grenada in the West Indies also made plans to carry an arson inspired revolt as late as 1770. Cugoano's narrative poignantly describes how his fellow shipmates conspired to put an end to their captivity.

...[t]here was nothing to be heard but the rattling of chains, smacking of whips, and the groans of our fellow men. Some would not stir from the ground, when they were lashed and beat in the most horrible manner... And when we found ourselves at last taken away, death was more preferable than life, and a plan was concerted amongst us that we might burn and blow up the ship and perish altogether in the flames; but were betrayed by one of our countrywomen.¹³⁷

After suffering the pain of brutal whippings at the hands of a white crew, these despondent Africans saw no other solution but to seek retribution for the abuse they endured. Having been taken captive during wars in their villages before being shipped from the Gold Coast, the men understood how arson could destroy not only the cruel whites in their midst but also themselves, if need be. Although not always achieving the desired result of escape or return to their African homeland, revolting Africans risked injury and certain death in violent confrontations with European captors aboard slave ships. Revolts of this magnitude were consistently waged by determined and belligerent Africans during the transatlantic slave trade through the middle of the nineteenth century.

Acts of arson would continue on plantations in the Caribbean and southern colonies as well as in many northern towns. After all, these black arsonists had already committed daring acts of arson while fighting in wars in their homeland. As the Ghanaian historian, Akosua Perbi confirmed "...[p]risoners of war...constituted a large proportion of the total slave output" in the Gold Coast during the eighteenth century. Although vast numbers were kidnapped in slave raiding expeditions in the interior, a great majority of the African men who were shipped to the Americas were taken prisoner in West African wars.¹³⁸ John Thornton agrees that the incessant wars fought during this period became the impetus for the transatlantic slave trade since European slave ships stood waiting to receive this guaranteed supply of war captives.¹³⁹ Imported to the Americas against their will, some African prisoners of war continued fighting by setting deadly fires across the Atlantic world. Having already survived violent internecine wars in their homeland, the war captives who were able to survive over-crowded, unsanitary and

After being shipped to Grenada and then to London, Ottobah Cugoano was eventually freed. Like his friend, Olaudah Equiano, Cugoano was deeply religious, fought for abolition with Granville Sharp and published a narrative in 1787. Ottobah Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery* (London: Dawsons of Pall Mall, 1969), vi, 5, 9-10.

¹³⁸ Akosua Perbi, *A History of Indigenous Slavery in Ghana: From the 15th to the 19th Century* (Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2004),

¹³⁹ Wars of expansion were fought in the Gold Coast from 1701 when the Asante began its push southward annexing smaller nations in armed confrontation over 70% of the land before reaching the coast in 1811. Successful in its "drive to the sea," the Asante became the principal African traders in the transatlantic slave trade after overpowering the Fante people who had profited as middlemen in the slave trade on the coast for over a hundred years.

F.K.Buah, *History of Ghana* (Oxford: MacMillan Education Publishers, 1998), 9-12.

disease-ridden slave ships during a tortuous Middle Passage only kept after arriving in the Americas.

Some of the Africans who arrived to New England also participated in or witnessed violent slave rebellions in the British West Indies where arson was the primary method of attack.¹⁴⁰ Those who labored on large sugar plantations in the Caribbean lived some distance from their master's mansions so they did not share an intimate living space like those enslaved in New England. Moreover, being totally restricted to sugar plantations in rural areas of the island did not allow these blacks to experience the freedom of mobility enjoyed by enslaved men in the urban towns of New England. Life in the West Indies was primarily centered on the cultivation of sugar where punitive overseers and violent slave drivers closely monitored and brutally enforced the labor production of multitudes of enslaved African workers. Despite living such far distances from their masters, being watched under close surveillance and enduring brutal whippings and mistreatment, enslaved persons on large sugar plantations found ways to resist slavery.

This extremely large African population was a persistent threat to the system of slavery in the West Indies since thousands of black insurgents always stood ready to rebel. To counter the unending menace of slave revolts, Caribbean authorities did not rely on the constables or night watches so popular in New England or on the slave patrols organized in the southern colonies. Rather, regiments of the British Army were hastily shipped to the islands to assist local militias in putting down the bellicose Africans who rose up during slave insurrections.¹⁴¹ One uprising that needed a strong showing of force was planned in Barbados in 1675. The rebellion, which was to enstool an Akan King over the island's slave population, was foiled when an enslaved woman Fortuna reported hearing two Gold Coast men discuss plans to burn cane fields and kill whites.¹⁴² Knowing the fear that whites on the island had of slave insurrections, the authorities summarily executed thirty-five alleged conspirators for planning a rebellion that never took place.¹⁴³ As compared to enslaved blacks in New England who had the right to defend criminal charges with the assistance of counsel in a jury trial or before a judge, the Africans in Barbados who just planned a rebellion were put to death without the benefit of a trial in a court of law. Despite the speedy execution of these would-be rebels, the spirit of resistance died a slow death in colonial Barbados. A revolt that was to take place in 1686 included plans to steal weapons to kill the whites before torching ships in the harbor and reducing Bridgetown to ashes.¹⁴⁴ Those conspiring in Barbados in 1692 thought it advantageous to organize an African army to carry out

¹⁴⁰ John Thornton, *Warfare in Atlantic Africa* (London: University College London Press, 1999), 15, 60, 64.

¹⁴¹ British Army troops played a critical role in maintaining white control over the slave population from capturing runaway slaves, performing policing duties and suppressing slave revolts throughout the Caribbean islands but particularly during the Maroon wars in Jamaica. Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy, *An Empire Divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 51-52.

¹⁴² When taken into custody, the would-be rebels revealed plans to make an elderly Coramantee named Cuffee, the King of Barbados by enstooling him on a "chair of state..." in accordance with the traditions of the Akan people. F.K. Buah, *A History of Ghana*, 24-6. Kwasi Konadu, *The Akan Diaspora in the Americas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 131.

¹⁴³ Richard Dunn, *Sugar & Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1625-1713* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1972), 257.

¹⁴⁴ Jerome Handler, "Slave Revolts and Conspiracies in Seventeenth Century Barbados," *New West Indian Guide* (1982), no. 1, pages 5-42.

their attack.¹⁴⁵ Seizing horses and weapons to murder white planters, the would-be soldiers planned to sexually assault white women before setting a torch to Bridgetown.¹⁴⁶ Although these insurrectionary efforts to bring down the system of slavery in Barbados were not successful, arson remained a viable strategy of resistance among the thousands of African on the island. Individual Barbadian slaves set fires through the eighteenth century beginning in 1702 when three slaves were executed for setting a fire that killed a white woman and her three children through the year of 1757 when a night watch was organized and more stringent slave laws were passed to put an end to unruly blacks setting repetitive fires in Bridgetown.¹⁴⁷

Arson was also an essential component of slave resistance on the island of Jamaica where large groups of Africans had been escaping since the British arrived in the mid-seventeenth century. The fugitives, who were known as Maroons, found ways to permanently escape a most dehumanizing system of slavery by running in droves to the distant Blue Mountains where they built African-based communities in well hidden enclaves. The large groups of fugitives who formed independent, self-sustaining and inaccessible communities permanently undermined the plantation system in Jamaica.¹⁴⁸ Efforts to survive in the mountains included carrying out well orchestrated surprise attacks on nearby plantations where guns, food and sometimes slaves were clandestinely secured. Sometimes these attacks included the burning of houses and cane fields.¹⁴⁹ Gold Coast Africans, also called *Coramantees*, were generally the leaders of the Maroon armies who used fire as an essential strategy in their fight against the British army. The historian Kwasi Konadu indicates that the “Akan [from the Gold Coast] were habituated from infancy to war ...and were dangerous inmates on West Indian plantations.”

There were definitely dangerous inmates among the three hundred Coramantees who rose up on Major Selby’s plantation in St. Anne’s Parish in 1673. Leaving Selby and thirteen whites dead, this rebellion began the long and protracted Maroon War which spanned over forty years. Unlike New England where individuals and small groups of Africans committed acts of arson in the homes and businesses of slave owners, large groups of Africans were rising up in Jamaica killing numerous whites and setting ablaze innumerable properties with fire in Jamaica. The over 150 Africans who revolted in 1685 followed their Akan leader Cuffee’s command to kill whites and destroy several plantations before making their escape from St. Mary’s Parish. Four hundred mostly Gold Coast Africans in Clarendon Parish murdered the overseer and set fire to several houses before fleeing in July 1690.¹⁵⁰ The group joined up with a band of Maroons

¹⁴⁵ Although Hilary Beckles found the regimental structure planned for the 1692 rebellion imitative of English military structure, he does not consider that the army was reminiscent of the armed *asafo* military bands composed of young men in the villages and towns of the Gold Coast from the seventeenth century. Ansu K. Datta and R. Porter “The Asafo System in Historical Perspective,” *Journal of African History* vol. 12 no. 2 (1971), 279, 293. Hilary Beckles, *Black Rebellion in Barbados: The Struggle against Slavery, 1627-1838* (Bridgetown: Antilles Publications, 1984), 44-46.

¹⁴⁶ Dunn, *Sugar & Slaves*, 258. Beckles, *Black Rebellion in Barbados*, 27.

¹⁴⁷ *Boston Evening Post* (April 5, 1756), Issue 1075, Page 4. Martyn Bowden, “The Three Centuries of Bridgetown: A Historical Geography,” *Journal of the Barbados Museum & Historical Society*, Vol. XLIX (November 2003), 35, 89. Beckles, *Black Rebellion in Barbados*, 20.

¹⁴⁸ Maroons engaged in *grand marronage* as opposed to *petit marronage* which involved escaping from slavery for brief periods of time. Richard Price, ed., *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas* (Baltimore; The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 3, 5.

¹⁴⁹ Karla Gottlieb, *the Mother of Us All: A History of Queen Nanny, Leader of the Windward Jamaican Maroons* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2000), 8.

¹⁵⁰ Militias from three parishes could not halt the terror wrought by Cuffee’s Maroons, *Ibid.*, 256-258.

under the command of Cudjo, known for his Akan style fighting ability. While Cudjo laid waste on the Leeward side on the island, his courageous Coramantee sister Grandy Nanny wreaked havoc on the Windward side.¹⁵¹ Adopting the *asafo* military structure of the Gold Coast, the warrior/obeah woman organized her followers into fighting units led by captains who used arson in their attacks. Taking advantage of the island's vulnerability during the War of Spanish Succession in 1704, thirty Windward Maroons plundered plantations and burned houses. When hundreds of Nanny's Maroons decided to attack the Hobby plantation in 1733, they instructed their women to set fire to the houses on the estate if British soldiers overwhelmed them.¹⁵²

Not all of the prisoners of war brought from West Africa were imported to the West Indies. Rather some of these war captives found themselves in the American colonies. There must have been prisoners of war among the Africans who formed an interracial alliance with local Indians to destroy the homes of white settlers in frontier Hartford in 1657.¹⁵³ That such an uprising was planned by Africans and Indians speaks to how colonial communities in New England facilitated cross-cultural exchange. These two cultural groups not only worked together in homes and on farms in New England, they socialized together and even married one another.¹⁵⁴ And as the arson incident in Hartford demonstrates, Africans and Indian also joined forces to resist oppressive white masters. Unnerved by the torching of these personal residences, the Court sitting at Hartford ordered a twenty man armed watch to protect the victims of the rebellion. The fire must have destroyed a substantial amount of property since the Indian arsonists were ordered to pay eight hundred pounds sterling in damages. Having only received twenty of the one hundred pounds paid by the Indians over a six year period, Mrs. Elinor Howell brought a second suit to recover damages in 1663. Believing she had been denied just compensation for the loss of her property in 1657, Mrs. Howell sued for £100 but was only awarded £12 in damages.¹⁵⁵ The extensive fire set by this interracial alliance of Indians and Africans in 1657 is the first known incident of slave arson in colonial New England.

Slave arson attacks were not just perpetrated by African men since one of the earliest fires was committed by a mixed gender group that included a woman. The group consisted of Mariah, an enslaved woman from Roxbury and her two male accomplices. Although this case is discussed in more detail in the next chapter on female slave arsonists, the arson activity of this mixed gender group demands attention. On the night that the Lamb and Swan houses went up in flames in 1681, Mariah was assisted by Cheffaleer, the slave of a local brick maker Thomas Walker and Cuffee who belonged to James Pemberton and was likely from the Gold Coast.¹⁵⁶ With the small number of slaves in most New England towns at the end of seventeenth century,

¹⁵¹ Since Akan culture values a woman's contribution to the community, Grandy Nandy was revered as an iconic heroine. Maroon folklore suggested Nanny caught bullets with her hand. However, her English enemies fostered the myth that the bullets were caught with her rear end. Gottlieb, *the Mother of Us All*, 12, 75.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England*, 160.

¹⁵⁴ Both the American Revolution hero, Crispus Attucks and Paul Cuffee, whaler, ship owner and abolitionist had an Indian parent. *Ibid.*, 200, 306.

¹⁵⁵ Elinor Howell was the widow of Edward Howell, a founding settler of Hartford who was a Governor's Assistant from 1647 to 1653, a member of the legislature, a Magistrate and the owner of the Water Mill. *Records of the Particular Court of Connecticut, 1639-1663* (Hartford: Connecticut Historical Society & Society of Colonial Wars in the State of Connecticut, 1928), 175-176. Emma Howell Ross, *Descendants of Edward Howell* (Winchester, MA: The University Press, 1968), v, vii and 1. Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England*, 160.

¹⁵⁶ Cuffee is a derivative of the Akan name Kofi which means born on Friday.

only a few of the families that occupied Roxbury's 120 dwelling houses in 1654 would have owned African slaves.¹⁵⁷ Thus, Mariah would have known and interacted with her accomplices in their small and close knit slave community long before she recruited them.¹⁵⁸

After coming together as a group, Maria and her partners proceeded to carry-out their fiery scheme to burn not one but two houses on the night of July 11, 1681. Having already accessed lighted coals from the kitchens of the houses, Mariah still needed to set the fires. Like most enslaved domestics, she had to get out of her master's house where she was closely monitored during her completion of assigned chores. Thus, this enslaved woman had to commit her crime at a time when she was not under surveillance. Like most black arsonists in New England, Mariah's plans involved setting the fires at night. Since the Swans lived next door to the Lambs where Mariah personally resided, she had first-hand knowledge of the whereabouts of the occupants of these houses. With the Lamb family away from their house, Mariah waited until the Swann family retired to bed on that fateful night to go into action. She could have easily distributed live coals in one house on her own, however, since her bold plan called for burning more than one property her use of an accomplice was necessary. Cuffee was stationed outside as the look-out person while Cheffaleer helped Mariah to set fire to the Swan house.¹⁵⁹

Despite their participation in this incident, the Grand Jury formally indicted Mariah on September 13, 1681 for her involvement in the double arson but her two accomplices were acquitted of the crimes. Cheffaleer's acquittal is perplexing since two witnesses put him out of his master's house around the time of the fires were set. Hannah Foster, a guest in the Walker household overheard Cheffaleer walking down from the garret space but did not hear from him again until after eleven or twelve o'clock that night.¹⁶⁰ Mr. Walker's daughter Susannah confirmed Ms. Foster's testimony by reporting she heard Cheffaleer walking between two and three o'clock in the morning.¹⁶¹ Perhaps recalling his involvement in the earlier fires made Cheffaleer pace nervously around the garret space until early in the morning. Just being outside of his master's house around 11:00 p.m. should have put Cheffaleer under suspicion. Although this arson event predates the colony's curfew law of 1703, slaves and servants were still be stopped by the constables or night watchmen if they were out past 9:00 p.m. in New England towns.¹⁶² Since female domestic servants could not readily leave the master's household, Mariah had no difficulty setting the targeted residences ablaze while Cheffaleer and Cuffee had little or no difficulty traveling across town to help her set these fires. Both Hannah and Susannah did not find Cheffaleer leaving and returning to the house before

¹⁵⁷ Among the original patentees of 1630 was Thomas Lamb, the father of Joshua Lamb who was born in 1642. Charles M. Ellis, *History of Roxbury Town* (Boston: Samuel Drake, 1848), 15, 123 and 143.

¹⁵⁸ Enslaved persons likely met and interacted at the corn mill, water mill, cow pasture, blacksmith shop or at the Meeting house attended by residents of Roxbury during this early period. *Ibid.*, 71, 82 and 87.

¹⁵⁹ Grand Jury Indictment of Mariah Negro on September 13, 1681, Roxbury, Massachusetts, Suffolk County Court Files, xxiv, 2023 (Massachusetts Historical Society).

¹⁶⁰ Deposition of Susannah Walker, age 36, before Anthony Stoddard, Commissioner. Suffolk County Court Files, ccxii. 26.559:6 cited in *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts, Transactions 1899, 1900*, vol. 6 (Boston: Published by the Society, 1904), 328-29.

¹⁶¹ Deposition of Hannah Foster, age 29, before Anthony Stoddard, Commissioner on the 16th day of the 5th month, Suffolk County Court Files, ccxii, 26.559:1 cited in *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts, Transactions 1899, 1900*, vol. 6 (Boston: Published by the Society, 1904), 328.

¹⁶² By 1662, constables supervised night watches in Boston from 9:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m. in the morning. In addition to superintending night watches, constables acted as the police during the day. Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness: The First Century of Urban Life in America, 1625-1742* (New York: The Ronald Press, 1938), 215.

11:00 p.m. as a problem. Rather, it seemed enslaved men's freedom of mobility late at night was acceptable. In fact, the two men did not appear to be worried about being detected by the authorities as they traveled to the Lamb and Swann house on that fateful night. Cheffaleer and Cuffee easily absented themselves from their masters' houses to help Mariah set the deadly fires. Nor did the court find Mariah's confession naming Cheffaleer and Cuffee as her co-conspirators persuasive since there was no finding of guilt or innocence by the court. After moving to acquit the named conspirators, the court did find that there was enough evidence of the men's involvement in the arson case to warrant their being sold out of the colony (likely to the West Indies). The court seemed content to find the main defendant, Mariah, guilty of arson for which she was sent her death at the gallows on Boston's Neck September 22, 1681.¹⁶³

African men in New England also risked certain death when they organized incidents of arson. Having fought in African wars and participated in or witnessed violent slave revolts in the Caribbean, these men tended to join forces in groups to set fires. This was the case when Diego set John and Anna Powell's house ablaze. It was during his interrogation on April 10, 1723 that Diego informed the authorities that a group of slave men helped him set the Powell fire. He named Will, Tom, Chambers, Sandy, Hercules and Cato as his co-conspirators in the crime. Consequently, the men so-named were brought before the Superior Court of Judicature for Suffolk County to answer charges of arson.¹⁶⁴ In a rather detailed confession, Diego explained how the group met up at Mr. Whitten's stable before going to the Powell house on Leverett Lane. These plans were prearranged since all parties were present at the designated place and time on April 2nd. Although the group argued about where to place the lighted coals; in the end they agreed to put "...the casket of coals on the path that lay in the yard between the cellar doors...and the garden gate." They also agreed to set fire to the barn in case the firing of the house failed. Although Diego accused the men of being his partners in this crime of arson, the jury thought otherwise. The six men were found not guilty as charged. Court documents do not explain the basis of the acquittals.¹⁶⁵ Like the case of Mariah, the court and the community seemed to accept the identified leader of the slave arson group receiving a sentence of death.

Diego was not as fortunate as his co-conspirators since he faced charges for setting the Powell house on fire as well as "...putting fire among the hay in Mr. Powell's barn, the court found him guilty of arson."¹⁶⁶ More unbelievable was Diego's confession that he had set fire to the Powell house on two previous occasions. Although Diego entered a plea of not guilty, his confession led to a jury of some of Boston's finest gentlemen finding Diego guilty of "feloniously setting fire to the Powell dwelling house."¹⁶⁷ Moreover, the jury's finding that

¹⁶³ The sentence meted out to Mariah was barbaric. Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England*, 158. John Noble, ed., *Records of the Court of Assistants of Colony of the Massachusetts Bay, 1630-1692*, v.1 (Boston: Published by Suffolk County, 901), 198-199. "Boston Neck Gallows, Quaker Hanging Place," www.celebrateboston.com.

¹⁶⁴ The *New England Courant* reported in May, 1723 that one of the members of Diego's group died while in prison however; there is no way to tell which of the above named individuals passed away. *New England Courant*, May 20 to May 27, 1723, Issue 95, page 2. Examination of Diego Negro on April 10, 1723, *Superior Court of Judicature, Suffolk Files Collection* (Massachusetts State Archives Case #16899).

¹⁶⁵ Examination of Diego Negro on April 10, 1723, *Superior Court of Judicature, Suffolk Files Collection* (Massachusetts State Archives Case#16899)

¹⁶⁶ *The New England Courant*, April 8 – April 15, 1723, Issue 89, p. 2.

¹⁶⁷ The jury included the wealthy slave merchant Charles Apthorp as well as Thomas Cotton, Robert Royall, William Payne, Sam Bullard and John Woods. Bernard Bailyn, *The New England Merchants in the Seventeenth Century* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1955), 197. Robert S. Desrochers, Jr., "Slave-For-Sale Advertisements and Slavery in Massachusetts, 1704-1781, *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 59, no. 3 (July 2002),

Diego's act was "...contrary to the Peace, Crown and Dignity of Our Lord the King," seemed to capture the community's intolerance for black arsonists. In pronouncing sentence, Chief Justice Samuel Sewall told the enslaved defendant "You shall be.... hanged by the Neck until your Body be dead, and then Lord have Mercy on your Soul." Diego was hung on June 20, 1723.¹⁶⁸ Boston's officials must have wondered why the home of John and Ann Powell was targeted and not that of Diego's master, John Harvey, a local blacksmith. What did he have against the Powells? Igniting the fire demonstrates that Diego harbored animosity toward these individuals. He apparently did not have acrimonious feelings toward his master since there is no evidence of Diego ever setting fire to Mr. Harvey's house or his blacksmith shop.

Although no records survive explaining Diego's motivation for the Powell fire, a search of the legal archives did uncover a civil law case in the *Suffolk County Inferior Court of Common Pleas* files which appears to shed light on why Diego may have made John and Anna Powell the targets of his ire. The case concerned the settlement of the estate of Jeremiah Dummer who died on May 24, 1718. His children, William Dummer, the then serving Governor of Massachusetts and Ann Dummer Powell (represented in the court proceedings by her husband John Powell) filed a plea of trespass and ejection to dispossess Jemmy Negro, an African who they believed to be illegally occupying a dwelling house, coach house and the garden on their late father's estate.¹⁶⁹ On July 5, 1718, Jemmy appeared with counsel to enter a plea of abatement in a proceeding that found him guilty of trespass.¹⁷⁰ Like Jack who set fire to Lieutenant Clarke's house in Weathersfield, Connecticut in 1681, Jemmy utilized his right to counsel to defend the civil charges he faced. The court ordered Jemmy to leave the Dummer property and pay a fifty pound judgment.

When the trespass action failed to dispossess Jemmy, the plaintiffs recovered a *Writ of Facias Habore* on August 5, 1719 which once again ordered the black defendant to leave the property and pay a fifty pound judgment as well as three pounds and seven shillings in court costs.¹⁷¹ The Writ ordered the Sheriff of Suffolk County to seize any chattel, lands or goods of Jemmy to satisfy the judgment or in lieu thereof, the African man was to be detained in a Boston jail until the judgment was satisfied or the debt discharged.

When Jemmy remained in the Dummer premises, a second *Writ of Facias habore* issued on April 22, 1720 once again granted possession to the plaintiffs along with a fifty pound judgment

23. Examination of Diego Negro on April 10, 1723, *Superior Court of Judicature, Suffolk Files Collection Case* (Massachusetts State Archives Case #16899).

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ William and Anna were the children of Jeremiah Dummer, the first American born silversmith who apprenticed with the merchant and silversmith John Hull. The son of Richard Dummer, a large landowner in Newbury, Massachusetts and the Treasurer of the Bay Colony from 1636-1637, Jeremiah was a successful merchant who was born on September 14, 1643 and died on May 24, 1718. Hermann Frederick Clarke and Henry Wilder Foote, *Jeremiah Dummer: Colonial Craftsman and Merchant 1645-1718* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1970), 8.

¹⁷⁰ By entering a plea in abatement Jemmy did not dispute the plaintiffs' claims but offered an alternate explanation that Jeremiah Dummer was not the rightful owner of the property in question at the time of his death ("died not seized in fee"). Judgment Order for Jemmy Negro, Case #12751, July 5, 1718. *Records of the Suffolk County Inferior Court of Common Pleas*, vol. 1718-1719, page 158 and vol. 1720-1721, page 68-69.

¹⁷¹ A *writ of facias habore* ordered the sheriff to put the rightful owner in possession of real property. *Inventory of Record Series: Writs of Execution* (Historical Society of the Courts of the State of New York), page 33.

and an additional two pounds, eleven shillings and six pence in court costs.¹⁷² Unfortunately, the final outcome of this legal case is not available in the archival records. Thus, there are questions which remain unanswered. Did the Sheriff eject and imprison Jemmy or was he sold into slavery in order to satisfy the accumulated judgments and court costs? Identified only as a porter, an impoverished Jemmy would have lacked the financial resources to pay what was now a hefty judgment and mounting court costs. More importantly, was the court proceedings against Jemmy the reason Diego to set fire to the Powell house?

Considering that about a thousand enslaved blacks lived in Boston in the 1720s, there is a good chance that Diego knew Jemmy.¹⁷³ Also, Diego's work for a local blacksmith and Jemmy's for a local silversmith may have put these slaves of local craftsmen into contact. It also seems possible that the two Africans shared a kindred relationship if they were both from West Central Africa.¹⁷⁴ Although more information is needed about the relationship of these two African men, it is more important to know about Jemmy's relationship to the Dummer family. Thus, it is possible that he was held as a slave sometime during Jeremiah Dummer's lifetime. Since the legal documents refer to "Jemmy Negro, the aforesaid Porter," it is likely that Jemmy was not a slave at the time of the legal proceedings.¹⁷⁵ Such wording infers that he was a free man who worked as a porter for William Dummer. What is clear is that Jemmy believed he had a right to occupy all of this property on the Dummer estate.¹⁷⁶ If Jeremiah Dummer manumitted Jemmy before this death, then this grant of freedom may have also included a bequest of the property in question. Was this bequest simply ignored by William Dummer and his sister? It was not unusual for surviving relatives to ignore grants of manumission and property bequests of their recently deceased relatives.¹⁷⁷ These important questions get to the heart of why Jemmy believed he could remain on the property and to why Diego sought retribution for the Powells helping to dispossess Jemmy. Unfortunately, the surviving portion of Jeremiah Dummer's will does not show that such a bequest was made to Jemmy. With the inventory portion of the will now lost, there is no way of knowing if the "real and personal property" provision included the property in question or the list of slaves owned by Mr. Dummer.¹⁷⁸ Diego's first attempt to burn the Powell house might have been done at any point in the legal action. If the fire was set at the

¹⁷² Writs of *facias habere* were issued in the case of *Dummer and Powell vs. Jemmy Negro* on August 5, 1719 and April 20, 1720, *Records of the Suffolk County Inferior Court of Common Pleas*, vol. 1718-1719, page 158 and vol. 1720-1721, page 68-69.

¹⁷³ There were 400 slaves in Boston in 1708 and 1,374 in 1742. Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England*, 84.

¹⁷⁴ The Stono Rebellion began when an African named Jemmy led twenty Angolan or Kongolesse Africans into battle on September 9, 1739. After stealing firearms, the African army killed twenty whites, plundered and burned several houses of their victims. Mark M. Smith, ed., *Stono: Documenting and Interpreting a Southern Slave Revolt* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005), 14, 63.

¹⁷⁵ *Records of the Suffolk County Inferior Court of Common Pleas*, vol. 1720-1721, page 68-69.

¹⁷⁶ The research revealed an interesting anecdote about William Dummer Powell, the grandson of Ann and John Powell. Of the Loyalist persuasion, William Dummer Powell became a lawyer in Montreal and a judge in Detroit after the war. When his behavior on the bench was criticized in a pamphlet in 1824, it is said that William Dummer Powell responded to his critics in an article that he signed with the pseudonym "Diego." *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online* www.biographi.ca.

¹⁷⁷ A provision that would have freed Harriet Tubman's mother and her descendants by age 45 was ignored by their master's surviving relatives. Tubman's mother remained a slave for most of her life. That is, until Harriet helped her escape. Beverly Lowry, *Harriett Tubman: Imagining A Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 2008), 32.

¹⁷⁸ Jeremiah Dummer was likely involved in the purchase of slaves since several of the vessels in which he had ownership interests traded with the West Indian islands. Hermann Frederick Clarke and Henry Wilder Foote, *Jeremiah Dummer: Colonial Craftsman and Merchant, 1645-1718* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1970), 30.

start of the legal proceedings in 1718, then Diego's gang may have even included Jemmy. The second firing could have occurred between 1719 and 1720 since the third firing of Powell's house likely took place in 1723 sometime after Jemmy was sold into slavery to satisfy the plaintiffs' judgment.

Knowing that recalcitrant slaves were often sold to the West Indies or the southern colonies, one can only wonder if Jemmy Negro from New England was the same Jemmy who led the Stono Rebellion sixteen years later in South Carolina. Support for such an idea is provided in an article which indicates that the Angolan Jemmy who led the Stono Rebellion was literate.¹⁷⁹ It seems possible that an enslaved person who spent part of his life in New England could have learned to read and write as opposed to a slave who was a recent arrival from Africa or one who spent most of his life in the south where literacy was never encouraged. Coming from West Central Africa by way of the West Indies made both Jemmy and Diego familiar with the waging of war in their homeland and the organizing of slave revolts in the Caribbean.¹⁸⁰ What is known, however; is that Diego definitely had his reasons for setting the Powell house on fire on not one but three separate occasions.

Therefore, it seems that Diego and his comrades joined forces to burn the Powell house out of revenge for the ill treatment that a member of the slave community received at the hands of the Powells. There is also evidence that this group of black male arsonists were putting plans into motion to set even more fires around the town of Boston. Diego reported that Hercules wanted to burn his master's house because threats were made to send him to Virginia." And Chambers wanted to burn the house of a previous employer who accused him of stealing during a short-term painting job. The Powell house was the first of a series of arson attacks that Diego's gang planned to carry out in and around Boston. These irate slaves saw arson as the best way to retaliate against whites who had wrongfully mistreated them.

Unlike the enslaved women in their midst, it does not appear that male bondservants working in groups used arson out of emotional desperation for the purpose of removing themselves from a life of bondage. As will be discussed in the next chapter, enslaved women in New England lived a far more restrictive life toiling as domestic servants in the homes of their masters. Not only were expected to be present in the home at all times, they were closely supervised as to the completion of domestic duties that included washing, cooking, cleaning, weaving or performing child or nursing care. On the other hand, enslaved men who worked as painters, maritime workers, valets or coach drivers enjoyed a freedom of movement during the course of their work day. For example, maritime workers had access to boats to travel; painters went from house to house to complete their jobs and coach drivers had free time after delivering masters to their designated places. Being able to travel freely around Boston provided Diego and his partners with opportunity to meet, plan and carry out these three arson attempts on the Powell house. It is important to note that each of these arson attempts at the Powell house resulted in low level fires that were easily extinguished leaving little or no damage to the house and the occupants' injury free. After damaging the side of the Powell house in this last attempt, the men were ready to move on with torching the home of Hercules master's and Chamber's

¹⁷⁹ J.D. Lewis, "The Stono Rebellion – 1739," http://www.Carolina.com/SC/Royal_Colony/sc_stono_rebellion.html

¹⁸⁰ Intermittent wars broke out in the Kongo after 1716. Considering that many slaves were captured in wars, it is reasonable to assume that some of the rebels in New England had been soldiers in their homeland. John K. Thornton, "African Dimensions of the Stono Rebellion," *American Historical Review* (October, 1991), pp. 1108-1109.

former employer. Their subsequent arrests for the Powell fire prevented the group of black arsonists from carrying out their future acts of arson.

Diego's gang was not the only group of African men who sought retribution by setting low level fires in the town of Boston. When interviewed by the authorities, Diego reported witnessing an arson attempt by a group of black men who tried to set fire to a local business in Boston. It was while working alone in his master's blacksmith shop on the morning of March 30, 1723 that Diego gave lighted coals to an enslaved man named Jack. With fireplaces being the only sources of heat in colonial homes, it would have been regular practice to ask neighbors or nearby acquaintances for lighted coals to start a fire. Diego's ability to give out coals from his master's blacksmith shop demonstrates how unencumbered some enslaved men were in their work places. Thus, it was not out of the ordinary for some slave masters to leave their slaves in charge of businesses during their absence. Lorenzo Greene indicated that a slave's ability to discharge his master's affairs was often rewarded with positions of trust and responsibility. He cited the example of a hired slave who managed a warehouse owned by Roger Darby in 1680 and an enslaved Mesheck who operated a store for his owner Colonel Hinsdale in Deerfield, Massachusetts.¹⁸¹

Working without supervision in the blacksmith shop not only allowed Diego to give out lighted coals, he was also able to leave the shop unattended to inquire into Jack's use of the coals. More importantly, running his master's shop gave Diego access to the coals he needed to set fire to the Powell house just a few days later. Having such access freed Diego from the customary dependence on enslaved women to provide lighted coals from their masters' kitchens. Upon leaving the blacksmith shop Diego observed Jack, Andrew and Cato at the backdoor of the Cargo Shop trying to start a fire. As was normal for enslaved men in Boston, the trio had no problem traveling from their homes or their masters' places of business for the sole purposes of setting the Buttolph Cargo Shop on fire on this particular morning. However, seeing Diego approach the shop made the men hastily extinguish the fire before running away.

This was one of several arson attempts which occurred across Boston during this most frightening time in 1723. Chapter Four will discuss how this series of conflagrations was viewed as a mini slave insurrection. And the arson attempt at Buttolph's Cargo Shop on March 30th was just the beginning. Fortunately, the coals found lying next to the Goat Tavern on King Street just a few days later on April 6th died out before igniting.¹⁸² Diego's confession on April 10th that he had set fire to the Powell house on previous occasions only added to the mounting fears of white Bostonians. Particularly since another report on April 12th reported finding "coals of fire and chips wrapped in linen breeches..." in Mr. Bridge's loft on April 12th just hours after a separate fire was extinguished in one of his out buildings.¹⁸³

The authorities in Boston completed their customary investigation of the Bridge fire by immediately questioning his servants and slaves. Having obtained useful evidence from their inquiry, the officials arrested one of Mr. Bridge's white servants and at least five of his enslaved men. Sleeping together in the loft allowed servants and slaves to collaborate on committing crimes, including the setting of fires. Joint planning of crimes would have involved assigning various tasks to different individuals in the group. While at least one person had to retrieve live coals, others were needed to secure the wooden chips and scraps of clothing that were to ignited

¹⁸¹ Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England*, 117-118.

¹⁸² *New England Courant*, April 8 to April 15, 1723.

¹⁸³ *New England Courant*, May 13-May 20, 1723, page 5.

in the building while others may have served as look-outs for Mr. Bridge and the night watch. This multi-racial group of arsonists used this level of coordination to set one of Mr. Bridge's buildings ablaze before attempting to do the same to another building on the very same day. From all accounts, multi-racial groups of arsonists were rare in New England. Given that Africans and a few Indians were the only persons enslaved in the colonies, most arsonists generally came from either of these races.¹⁸⁴ Just as the whites in colonial Hartford were unnerved when blacks and Indians joined forces against them, a white servant's collaboration with enslaved blacks to burn down Mr. Bridge's property must have been viewed as particularly egregious to members of the Boston's white community. The members of this multi-racial gang faced charges for "... attempting to set fire to houses in Boston." In the end, however, only an enslaved African member of the group received a death sentence for the arson attempt on Mr. Bridge's outbuilding and house.¹⁸⁵

Coals were mysteriously found under a stable on Pudding Lane and King Street where the former Bunch of Grapes Tavern was located on the morning Mr. Bridge's buildings were targeted on April 12th. The day was not even over when an alarm sounded at 11:00 p.m. to signal that Mr. Deming's barn on the South End of Boston was now on fire. Unlike the Bridge fire which used wood chips and scraps of clothes, this conflagration was started when bundles of faggots (sticks) were ignited on the side of Deming's barn. Such repetitive acts of arson occurring within hours of each other must have made some colonists suspect that there was a "...black combination to burn and destroy the town."¹⁸⁶ This was the opinion of the anonymous 'Old Master Janus' who concluded in a newspaper commentary in 1724 that it was "companies of Negroes" who were starting fires at night in Boston.¹⁸⁷

Like the individual slave arsonists discussed in Chapter One, groups of enslaved blacks also took advantage of the nocturnal hours to carry out planned arson events. Just as Fortune returned to the Long Wharf between 9:00 and 10:00 p.m. on February 19, 1763 to set fire to the Hazard warehouse on fire, Maria, Chefaleer and Cuffee settled on 10:00 p.m. on July 11, 1681 as the time to set fire to the houses of Mr. Lamb and Dr. Swan. Similarly, it is evident that Diego and his gang gathered in the early morning hours of April 2, 1723 since the Powell house was on fire by 4:00 am. A close knit slave and free black community provided the means and opportunity to set fires across Boston. Enslaved blacks solicited other persons to help them carry out acts of arson. Living in the same household as their masters allowed potential black arsonists to leave the premises as soon as they all occupants were soundly asleep. Nocturnal incidents of slave arson became such a problem that officials in Boston took such action as increasing the watch to organizing a make shift watch to pursue suspicious blacks. These additional measures must have been somewhat effective since two black men were committed to jail on suspicion of setting yet another fire at Bridgham's Tan Yard on April 14, 1723. Fortunately, the Tan Yard fire was extinguished before considerable damage was done.¹⁸⁸ More serious action was needed

¹⁸⁴ There is evidence that Gabriel Prosser wanted poor whites to join the rebellion he planned in Richmond Virginia in 1800. Eric Foner, *Give Me Liberty! An American History*, Seagull Fourth Edition, Volume I (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014), 301.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁶ Robert S. Desrochers, Jr., "Slave-For-Sale Advertisements and Slavery in Massachusetts, 1704-1781," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 59, no. 3 (July 2002). 15.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁸ *New England Courant*, April 15 to April 22, 1723, Issue 90, Page 2.

to stop these roaming groups of black firebugs. This time, the local officials ordered an armed militia of fifty men to be ready when an alarm of fire sounded.¹⁸⁹

Putting an end to dangerous acts of slave resistance became a priority of Boston's authorities. The threat of even more property being destroyed and additional lives being lost led to the town's selectmen to commission a report on slave arson on April 19, 1723. The final report that was enacted into the *Articles for the Better Regulating Indians Negroes or Molattos* (the "Negro Act") consisted of fifteen articles. One article prohibited Indian, Negroes and mixed race servants and slaves from gathering in groups of two or more since it was within such groups that slaves and servants conceived and put their arson activities into action. Acknowledging that "[s]undry fires have of late broke out among us to the great Terror & Affrightment of the Inhabitants, which we have just grounds to believe were wickedly contrived and designed by some evil instruments," the Act included another provision that forbade blacks and Indians from leaving their home at the time of a fire.¹⁹⁰ It was necessary to prevent enslaved persons from lurking around burning buildings since the valuables of fire victims were often stolen during the chaos of firefighting. More importantly, it was the blacks and Indians who went missing during a fire often turned out to be the villains who started the fire. Mariah and Diego and their respective accomplices all came up missing on the nights of the fires in question. And at least one servant and a few slaves went missing from the personal residence of Mr. Bridge when the outbuilding was set on fire and when combustible items were found at one of his properties on April 12th. Interestingly, this particular provision referred to both male and female slaves missing from their master's home. Clearly, Boston's officials were just as concerned about black women committing arson as they were about black men.

The authorities were not just concerned with persons of African descent threatening their lives and burning their property. Bands of New England Indians also went on fiery raids to retaliate against the ill treatment received from whites. The Indians who remained in the region in the eighteenth century were the descendants of indigenous tribes who had not only suffered catastrophic losses as a result of war and disease but had also lost untold acres of tribal land to white encroachment. Utterly defeated but not totally decimated as a result of European contact, some Massachusetts, Wampanoags and Narragansetts migrated north and west of New England to join up with other Indian clans, including the Abenaki of Canada.¹⁹¹ The few hundred who remained in the region were now living in the praying town of Natick as well as in other small enclaves around Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket.¹⁹² These remaining few Indians struggled to stay out of poverty, hold on to their land, retain their cultural practices and simply survive in New England towns that put them on the same legal footing as enslaved and free

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁰ An exception was made, however; in case of the master's house either being on fire or in great danger thereof. *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston from 1700 to 1728* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill City Printers, 1883), 174-175. Robert Means Lawrence, *New England Colonial Life* (Cambridge, MA: The Cosmos Press, Inc. 1927), 199-200.

¹⁹¹ Collin G. Calloway, *New Worlds for All: Indian, Europeans and the Harvard University Remaking of Early America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 146-147. Daniel K. Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country* (Boston: ity Press, 2001), 172-174.

¹⁹² Only 37 praying Indians remained in the town of Natick in 1764 following the Seven Years War. Collin G. Calloway, *New Worlds*, 105.

blacks.¹⁹³ Some Indians refused to be further dehumanized or to give up any more land without a fight. Like the bellicose Africans in their midst, warring Native Americans reacted to their plight by setting deadly fires. Arson remained an integral component of Indian resistance throughout this early period.

Consequently, individual Indians faced charges of arson in New England towns. The several Indian raids that took place often left several white colonists dead and their property consumed by fire. As early as 1676, Indians in Framingham burned down the property of Thomas Eames for a total loss of over £330 and either killed his wife and nine children or carried them into captivity.¹⁹⁴ One such raid in 1722 involved Indians who burned several houses and sloops before killing cattle and taking five white men hostage.¹⁹⁵ A raid of even greater proportion took place in September 1723 when Indians in Exeter, Massachusetts killed Mr. Rawlins, six of his children and nine other whites before setting fire to the family's home.¹⁹⁶ In 1738, a group of Indians made plans to burn the town of Nantucket at night before killing as many whites as they could, however; this scheme was revealed by another Indian.¹⁹⁷

As the eighteenth century progressed, Africans were still committing acts of arson while bands Indians planned and carried acts of a similar nature. Two cases which involved fires ignited by a mixed gender group composed of enslaved men and women in Charlestown Massachusetts in 1741 and 1749, respectively will be discussed in detail in the next chapter. In 1741, a domestic servant named Kate and an African boatswain joined forces to set fire to the home of Mrs. Snowden while in 1749, two domestic servants, Phillis and Phoebe, cooperated with an enslaved man, Mark, to set fire to outbuildings on their master's estate before poisoning him five years later. Unlike the mixed gender group headed by Mariah that committed arson in Roxbury in the seventeenth century, the fires in Charlestown in 1741 and 1749 were ignited by women under the direction of enslaved men. Whether these slave women believed they were incapable of igniting a fire sufficient to do the requisite damage is not clear. What is clear is that the female domestic servants in Charlestown, who remained tied to their master's homes during their work day, often needed the assistance of a male to carry out their acts of arson during the night. While it was the women who secured the coals, it was likely the men who looked for and obtained flammable materials used to start fires. After all, freely moving about town allowed these men to search for discarded materials such as wood shavings or broken branches or sticks. As the leader of her slave arson group, Mariah retrieved not only the lighted coals but also the pieces of linen on which the live coals were placed. Wood shavings and faggots were not used to start the Lamb fire because pieces of linen were more accessible to an enslaved woman. Burdened with the duties of domestic service, Mariah recruited enslaved men to help her set fires that consumed two houses. And when Kate grew so disgruntled with Mrs. Snowden for some undisclosed reason in 1741, she convinced an African boatswain to help her set a fire that almost destroyed the Snowden residence. In 1749, Phoebe and Phillis grew so

¹⁹³ Many of the laws restricting enslaved blacks also targeted Indians and free blacks who were basically excluded from the body politic. Yashuhide Kawashima, *Puritan Justice and the Indian: White Man's Law in Massachusetts* (Middletown, CT.: Wesleyan University Press, 1986), 97.

¹⁹⁴ Lemuel Shattuck, *A History of the Town of Concord: Middlesex County, Massachusetts from Its Earliest Settlement to 1832* (Boston: Russell, Odorne & Company, 1835), 51.

¹⁹⁵ In a short skirmish that followed, two of the whites escaped although wounded by the Indians. *New England Courant*, June 18 to June 25, 1772, page 3.

¹⁹⁶ *New England Courant*, August 26-September 2, 1723, Issue 109, page 2.

¹⁹⁷ *New England Weekly Journal*, October 10, 1738.

despondent with living under an abusive master they joined forces with Mark, an equally disenchanted slave, to burn down an outbuilding on their master's estate. Thus, enslaved women who became exasperated with their lives in bondage sometimes joined with enslaved men to set deadly fires that destroyed property and lives, including their own, if need be. However, there were a number of enslaved women who grew so despondent over the circumstances of their enslavement that they did not use male accomplices but set deadly fires on their own.

Conclusion

Enslaved Africans were forming groups to resist captivity long before they reached New England. Rebellious Africans were conspiring to resist in the Americas as early as 1638 when an insurrection was planned on Providence Island and as late as 1770 when the Africans who shipped with Ottobah Cugoana made plans to set their slave ship ablaze while anchored on the Gold Coast in 1770.

Not only did these early Africans find ways to meet, plan and carry out fiery schemes of resistance while on slave ships, they carried out destructive fires across the Atlantic world, both in North America and in the West Indian colonies. While the thousands of Africans enslaved in Barbados failed to bring their ideas of a fiery insurrection into fruition, the conspiracies that they did plan in the seventeenth century always included a plan to burn down the town of Bridgetown. This is in contrast to the war-like Jamaican Maroons who used fire as a military strategy to win their forty year war against the British. Strictly tied to rural sugar plantations where they toiled under the lash; Africans in the West Indies did not enjoy a freedom of movement that male bondservants experienced in the urban areas of New England. It was by virtue of the diversified occupations that enslaved men held in urban towns that they enjoyed a freedom of mobility unheard of in the colonies to the south. It was, in fact, this ease of movement which facilitated the setting of fires in around the town of Boston. The conflagrations set by groups of enslaved men in New England did not tend to totally destroy the property and lives of whites on a large scale. Rather, it appears that enslaved men generally set fires that did far less damage just to send the message that ill treatment from whites would not be tolerated without at least some retribution. As groups of black men were setting their low level fires, bands of angry Indians across the region were conducting fiery raids that sought more total destruction of whites and their property.

The independence enjoyed by enslaved men in New England was not experienced by enslaved women. Relegated to a life of lifetime servitude in a master's personal residence where close monitoring ensured the completion of domestic duties on a daily basis. With no hope of escape, the daily toil drove some enslaved women to a level of desperation that could only end with deadly fires that sometimes destroyed the lives and property of their masters.

Chapter Three

“I’ll bring the lighted coals:” Female Slave Arsonists in Colonial New England

In 1760, an African woman in Middletown, Connecticut was so intent on destroying the property of her master, Philip Mortimer; she set a series of fires over several days. Like most African women held in slavery in New England towns, she worked as a domestic servant in the Mortimer mansion located on Avenue of the Buttonwood Trees near Main Street in what is now downtown Middletown. [*See plan of Main Street on the next page]¹⁹⁸ Living in or near a master’s residence not only gave this rebellious woman access to lighted coals to start the fires, it allowed her to monitor the whereabouts of Mr. and Mrs. Mortimer in order to set the fires at just the right time. Knowing just when the couple went to sleep and when they awakened, the African woman set fire to the rope walk factory where Mr. Mortimer manufactured rope on the first night of her fiery attack. Determining that the late night was the best time to make her move; the woman burnt a barn full of hay sometime on the second night. Apparently, the unidentified slave woman was not quite done because another barn was set ablaze the following morning.¹⁹⁹ Taken into custody after the third consecutive fire, the enslaved woman surprised authorities when she revealed that it was also her intention to set fire to the Mortimer mansion.²⁰⁰

This unidentified African woman appears to have grown so despondent over her life in bondage under Philip Mortimer that she sought to hurt both her master as well as his family. This chapter argues that as a result of the difficult circumstances of their lives, desperate slave women set far more destructive fires than enslaved men. Life for female bondswomen meant having to complete inordinate chores while often living in isolation as the lone domestic in a slave owning household. This is in comparison to enslaved men who worked in an array of occupations that provided them more freedom during the day. This freedom of mobility allowed enslaved men to meet up socially and to jointly plan and set modest fires. These low scale fires appeared to be in retaliation to the harsh treatment they received at the hands of dominating whites. Enslaved women, on the other hand, were closely monitored and were expected to be working in the master’s residence at all hours of the day and on call at night, if need be. When this is taken into consideration, it is not surprising that some enslaved women reached a boiling point like the unidentified African woman in Middletown who ignited three destructive fires over the course of just a few days.²⁰¹ While the newspaper account does not explain why the woman in Middletown perpetrated her fiery attacks, it is not unreasonable to believe that the woman set the fires out of frustration over the particular circumstances of her life. She might not have been isolated in the Mortimer household since there is evidence that numerous slaves were owned by

¹⁹⁸The Mortimer Lodge was located on a private lane in the northern section of Main Street, a short distance from the ropewalk. Denis R. Caron, *A Century in Captivity: Life & Trials of Prince Mortimer, A Connecticut Slave* (Hanover: University of New Hampshire Press, 2006), 21-23. Permission granted to use plan of downtown Middletown from Debra J. Gray of the University of New Hampshire Press.

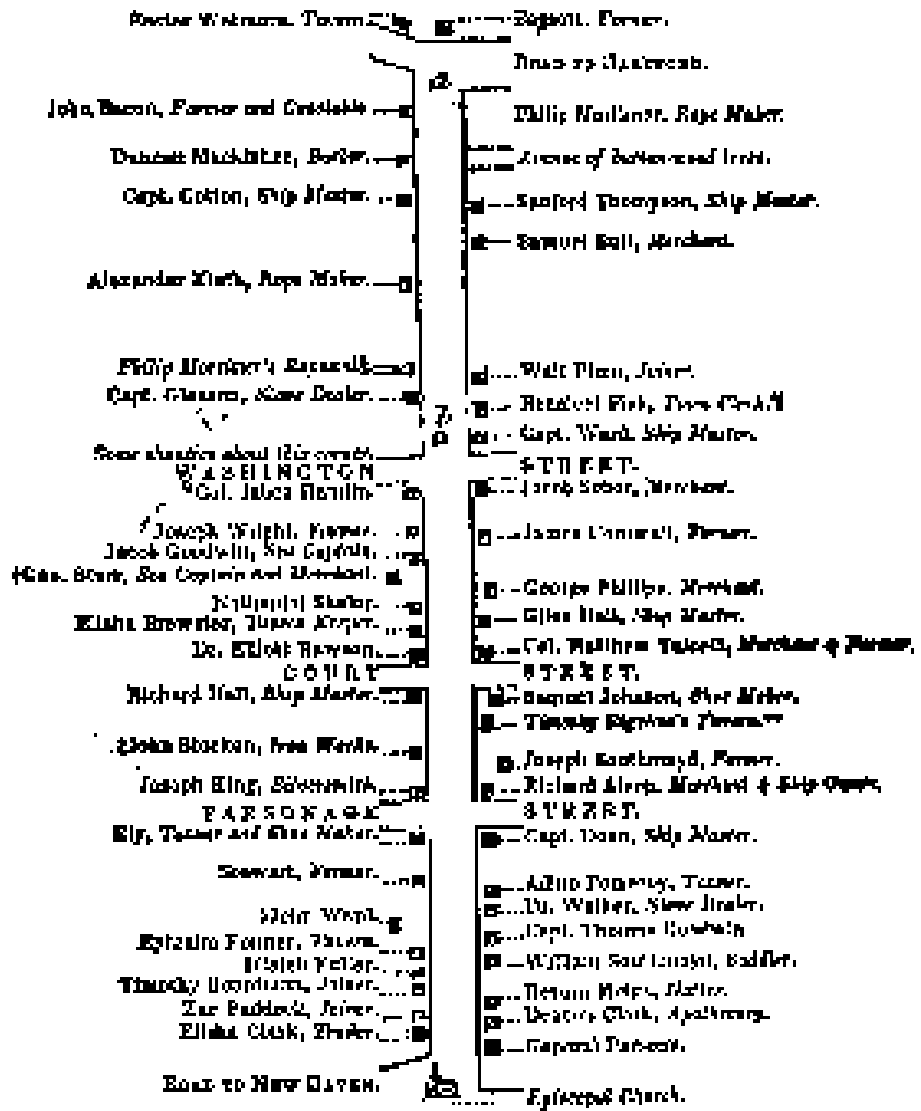
¹⁹⁹ *The Boston News-Letter*, January 24, 1760, Issue 2056, page 3.

²⁰⁰“These fires were perpetrated by a Negro woman with an intention, as she confesses, to have burnt her master’s house, which stood near these fires.” *Ibid.*

²⁰¹ Although further research is needed, it is also suspected that enslaved women in New England were just as subjected to physical and sexual abuse as enslaved women on southern plantations.

PLAN OF MAIN STREET, MIDDLETOWN, SHOWING THE SHIPYARDS AND OCCUPANTS, FROM ABOUT 1770 TO 1775.

(By Joseph Barnett, M. D., Middletown, Sept. 1836.)



Philip Mortimer, the woman might have been overburdened with cooking, cleaning, washing, spinning and weaving for a master and his wife who not only had an extended family consisting of a niece, her husband and their children but also employed a number of men to work at his ropewalk. We do know that this enslaved woman lived in close proximity to a master who had the authority to make unending demands on how she spent her waking moments.

According to Lorenzo Greene, the women who were enslaved in New England were general household workers who were "...finely accomplished for any sort of household business" from cooking, cleaning, sewing, spinning, weaving to preserving.²⁰² Other female slaves did more specialized tasks like dairy farming, child care or nursing the sick. So, having to complete a daily round of chores related to farming or even rope production would not have been out of the ordinary for any domestic servant in the Mortimer household. Did the woman target the ropewalk, barns and house because they were the sites of her daily toil? While it is likely the woman fed and took care of animals in the barns, it is not known whether she completed menial tasks in connection to rope making. By making the ropewalk her first target the unidentified woman either wanted to destroy the particular work site for an undisclosed reason or she aimed to cause great economic harm to a rather wealthy master who had prospered as a result of owning this business. It is not unreasonable to suggest that Mr. Mortimer's female slaves also helped out with manufacturing rope making during the busy times of production.²⁰³ For example, the women could have effectively performed hackling, the procedure for removing knots and dirt from hemp fiber. At a minimum, they would have cooked, cleaned and did the laundry for the twenty or so men who did work at the ropewalk.²⁰⁴

This African woman labored alongside other slave women and men in the large mansion owned by Philip and Martha Mortimer. Although it is not known how many Africans were owned by Philip Mortimer in 1760, we know he had seventeen slaves, including several women, at the time of his death in 1794.²⁰⁵ These Mortimer slaves were among at least 225 persons of African descent held in slavery in Middletown, Connecticut at a time when more than 5, 400 whites lived in the town in the middle of the eighteenth century.²⁰⁶ Located along the Connecticut River, Middletown was a bucolic community involved in the active trade of grain, livestock and wood for rum, molasses and sugar shipped from the West Indies.²⁰⁷ Thus, the Africans living in the Mortimer estate in 1760 would have come to Connecticut by way of the Caribbean or directly from West Africa.

One person who is known to have lived on the Mortimer estate at the time the woman set the fires was an enslaved African named Prince. Without doubt, these two individuals interacted with each other; perhaps telling the other about the good, bad and ugly experiences of living as Mortimer slaves. By chance, the woman may have discussed her plans to set the fires with

²⁰² Lorenzo Johnston Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England, 1620-1776* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1966), 110,119.

²⁰³ Once clean of the knots and dirt, the now hackled hemp fiber was then spun into strands of yarn which were tied together to make rope. Denis R. Caron, *A Century in Captivity*, 16.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 27-28.

²⁰⁶ The Census of 1756, Order of General Assembly of Connecticut (Hartford: Ebenezer Watson, Printer, 1774). *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁰⁷ Department of Planning, Conservation and Development, *History of Middletown, Connecticut*. www.middletownplanning.com.

Prince. Perhaps Prince told her about the pain he endured spinning rope with deformed hands.²⁰⁸ Since a similar level of demands was placed on the woman and on Prince in their respective work roles, they would have discussed how exhausting it was to work in these jobs. Confined to a factory floor spinning rope under his master's surveillance for long hours of a day, Prince did not enjoy the freedom of mobility experienced by many enslaved men in urban towns. Thus, further examination of how Philip Mortimer treated Prince during his years of captivity provides important insight into what this woman and the other slaves in the Mortimer household experienced during this time.

Shipped to Middletown from West Africa as a young child in 1730, Prince toiled as a farm hand for his first master until Philip Mortimer purchased him soon after arriving to the Connecticut River Valley from Ireland in 1750. Rope production became Prince's life-long vocation since his master kept him spinning rope for almost his entire life. And even after Prince served valiantly in the Continental Army during the American Revolution, Mr. Mortimer's will indicate that Prince was not to be freed until three years after his own death which did not occur until 1794, seven years after the war. Already in his eighties by the time of Mr. Mortimer's death, the enslaved man was still spinning rope when he was arrested for attempting to poison George Starr, the adopted son-in-law of Philip Mortimer. No doubt, Prince, like so many enslaved persons, reached a boiling point when George Star had his father-in-law's will invalidated essentially negating the grants of manumission made to the seventeen Mortimer slaves named in the will. Convicted of attempted poisoning at age eighty seven, Prince received a life sentence. Enslaved for more than eighty years by Philip Mortimer and imprisoned for another twenty-three years, Prince Mortimer died at age 103 having lived more than one hundred years in captivity.²⁰⁹ While little is known about how Mr. Mortimer treated his other slaves, we do know that he kept this revolutionary war soldier toiling in slavery until way past his eighties. And we also know that one of his slave women he owned grew so desperate about the conditions of her life in bondage that she set not one but three fires to destroy his properties.

Having grown tired from toiling for a master in Roxbury, Massachusetts in 1681, Mariah was another enslaved woman set similarly destructive fires. As has been discussed in Chapter Two, Mariah had the aid of two male accomplices when she burned down the house of the merchant Joshua Lamb but also that of his brother in law Dr. Thomas Swan.²¹⁰ Living in sparsely populated Roxbury where there were only a few African servants, Mariah could have set the fires because it was both isolating and culturally alienating to live in such an environment.²¹¹ With a Spanish or Portuguese first name like Diego, this female arsonist was likely shipped

²⁰⁸ Having developed yaws before his arrival in New England, scar tissue and nodules on Prince's hands inhibited his dexterity while spinning rope. R. Caron, *A Century in Captivity*, 18.

²⁰⁹ Dying in 1794, Philip Mortimer's will freed his seventeen slaves with the stipulation that 81 year old Prince work three more years before being given his freedom. Not wanting his property to go to his son-in-law, George Starr, Philip Mortimer left his adopted daughter (niece) a life estate in the property with her son Philip Mortimer Starr inheriting the estate after her death. George Starr had the will invalidated on the spurious grounds that the witnesses who signed the will were incompetent. Not only did he inherit all of his father-in-law's property by virtue of the laws of coverture; Starr refused to free the Mortimer slaves as stipulated in the will. *Ibid.*, 27-28 and 68.

²¹⁰ Joshua's father Thomas was one of the original patentees of Roxbury along with the better known William Pynchon. Charles M. Ellis, *History of Roxbury Town* (Boston: Samuel Drake, 1848), 15, 123 and 143. See pages 29-30 of Chapter Two for a discussion of the accomplices used in the Roxbury fires.

²¹¹ The town of Roxbury grew rather slowly with there being only 700 inhabitants living there in 1652 only doubled to 1,467 persons a hundred years later in 1756. Francis S. Drake, *The Town of Roxbury: Its Memorable Persons*

from the tropics of West Central Africa to a land that was not only foreign but both physically and emotionally cold. Even if Mariah was transshipped from Barbados like many other blacks in New England, she had been forced to leave a community in the Caribbean with hundreds of West Africans who not only spoke her native language but shared her cultural beliefs and traditions. One of several hundred African females living in seventeenth century Massachusetts, Mariah would have found working for English persons a culturally isolating experience since they spoke a different language, wore a lot of cumbersome clothing, ate strange foods and worshipped a different God.

Since most slave owning families in New England only needed one or two domestic servants, it seems likely that Mariah was the only domestic servant in the Lamb household.²¹² And with so few Africans in Roxbury, there is also the possibility that Mariah worked for the Swan family as well. In fact, there is no evidence of the doctor's family having their own servant. If another servant had been present in the Swan household at the time of the fires, not only would Mariah have mentioned another servant but she would have had maneuver around that person's presence in the house. In addition, the authorities would have interrogated the servant to obtain information about the fires. Thus, it seems likely these families shared the domestic services of Mariah since Dr. Swan was married to Joshua Lamb's sister and the families lived next door to each other. In fact, Mariah seems to have easily entered and exited both residences without alarm or notice on the night of the fires. Whether having to work for two families was the reason Mariah set the fires cannot be determined from the archival records but it is clear that some enslaved women in New England grew so desperate over their lives in slavery they set fires for many reasons including their being the lone domestic servant in a household where they were closely watched to insure that assigned household duties were completed. Living under such close surveillance limited the ability of enslaved women to leave the household and participate in social activities that included interaction with the opposite sex. And of course being closely watched during the course of the day limited an enslaved woman's ability to participate in slave resistance, including the setting of fires.

In their work on free black women, Catherine Adams and Elizabeth Pleck contend that enslaved women were sometimes unable to carry out resistance plans because they lacked the freedom of movement enjoyed by some enslaved men. Male slaves in urban New England towns could hire out their labor in their free time and by virtue of their assigned occupations had more free time available during their work day. Thus, they found time to drink at local taverns or attend to their personal business.²¹³ Their assigned occupations gave male bondservants a level of freedom and independence generally not available to enslaved women who had more difficulty leaving their master's residence. More importantly, the authors argue that since these men emanated from an African culture where men were honored as the superior sex, enslaved African men used their physical vigor and prowess to aggrieve mistreatment through acts of slave resistance. Enslaved men in New England were not afraid to retaliate against whites for the ill treatment they received. It was not so easy for enslaved women. Not only were some

and Places, Its History and Antiquities, with Numerous Illustration of its Old Landmarks and Noted Personages. (Roxbury: Published by Author, 1878), 52.

²¹² Slavery in Boston was predominately confined to single or paired domestic servants. Peter Benes, "Slavery in Boston Households, 1647-1770," in *Annual Proceedings of the Dublin Seminar for New England Folk Life*, vol. 28 (2003), 23.

²¹³ Catherine Adams and Elizabeth Pleck, *Love of Freedom: Black Women in Colonial and Revolutionary New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 14-15

enslaved women hindered by the demands of motherhood and marriage, those who toiled in slave owning households had few free hours in the course of their work day. James Wood Sweet agrees that female bondswomen ran away closer to home and for shorter periods than enslaved men who were not as tied down with family responsibilities.²¹⁴ Not only did a women's gendered occupation restrict her mobility during the day time, like all enslaved persons, she was required by local ordinance to be in her master's home by night-fall.²¹⁵

These limitations help explain why Mariah and the African woman in Middletown chose the night to sneak out and set fires with lighted coals easily retrieved from their master's kitchens. Very likely the only domestic servant for two families, Mariah's access to both houses allowed her to monitor the whereabouts and sleep habits of the two families in order to set the fires at the most opportune time. And that time was on around 10:00 p.m. on the night of July 11, 1681 when live coals were left at strategic locations in both houses. In her confession recorded by the Court of Assistants on July 12, 1681, Mariah admitted to waiting for Dr. Swan to retire to his chamber room before putting live coals near his kitchen door. Going straightway to the empty Lamb house next door, Mariah deposited live coals near the chamber room of that residence as well.²¹⁶ As the lone domestic, Mariah knew when the Swans would retire to bed and she knew when the Lamb family planned not to be at home.

After setting the two houses ablaze, Mariah initially escaped to Boston where she hid out in a cellar until discovered by an occupant of the home. As the enslaved servant who was connected to both the Lamb and Swan families, Mariah became the primary suspect in the arson. For some unexplained reason, Mariah returned to Roxbury where she was immediately taken into custody.²¹⁷ With both houses destroyed, an enslaved Mariah was indicted, prosecuted and executed within two months of her arrest. Certain archival records report that Mariah was burned alive at the stakes because a child in the Swan died as a result of the fire. However, other historians have questioned whether a child actually died in the Swan fire and whether Mariah was really punished in such a grotesque manner. Support for the position of Mariah being burned at the stake is found in the diary of Rev. Increase Mather which reported on September 22, 1681 that "...a negro woman who burnt 2 houses at Roxbury July 12th - in one which a child was burnt to death. The negro woman was burned to death - the 1st yet has suffered such a death in New England."²¹⁸ The journal of Rev. Peter Thatcher of Milton, Massachusetts noted that Mariah was burnt and Jack was hanged first.²¹⁹ However, a publication by *The Colonial Society* in the early twentieth century concludes that the court records did not reveal any evidence of a child actually dying on the night of the fire in 1681. That is, Mariah would not have been burned to atone the burning of the child. Rather, the publication argued that she received the customary death sentence for felony arson which was death by hanging. More specifically, Mariah and Jack of Wethersfield, Connecticut were both hung for their individual acts of arson and their

²¹⁴ John Wood Sweet, *Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730-1830* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 89-90.

²¹⁵ Catherine Adams and Elizabeth Pleck, *Love of Freedom: Black Women in Colonial and Revolutionary New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 14-15.

²¹⁶ *Memorandum of Mariah's Confession, July 12, 1681* (Massachusetts State Archives)

²¹⁷ Perhaps Mariah wanted to determine if she was actually a suspect in the fires. *Ibid.*

²¹⁸ The author noted that Rev Cotton Mather did not address this matter in his diary. *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts, Transactions 1899-1900*, Vol. VI (Boston: Published by the Colonial Society, 1904), 330.

²¹⁹ Robert C. Twombly and Robert H. Moore, "Black Puritan: The Negro in Seventeenth Century Massachusetts," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., Vol. 24, No. 2 (April 1967), 224-242.

dead bodies were then put in a fire.²²⁰ Regardless of the manner of Mariah's execution, burning at the stake or death by hanging, the deaths of both of these enslaved individuals was intended to send a strong message of deterrence to other enslaved Africans who dared to torch the homes of their masters. Not even this gruesome execution of two enslaved persons in 1681 put an end to slave arson in New England.

Another slave arson event that took place in 1709 involved Sabinah, the young slave girl of Colonel Richard Saltonstall, an elite resident of Haverhill, Massachusetts. Both a Magistrate and an officer in the military, the Colonel was the great grandson of Sir Richard Saltonstall, an original patentee who arrived with Governor John Winthrop in 1630 but returned to England in 1631.²²¹ It is not hard to imagine that living with this older genteel white master was unbearable and culturally stifling since the elder statesman would not have understood young girls and understood even less about their African culture. Sabinah's experience as an enslaved African in 1709 was not unlike Mariah's in 1681 because Haverhill also had a very small slave population. There were only 25 enslaved Africans living in the town of Haverhill as late as 1764 when there were 1,955 whites.²²² Reaching her limit when Colonel Saltonstall reprimanded her for an undisclosed reason, the angry young girl stole one hundred pounds before proceeding to blow up part of her master's house.²²³ Living in servants quarters located in a nearby farmhouse, Sabinah had adequate access to her master's residence to not only steal money but to procure gunpowder and live coals to cause an explosion late in the night. Reportedly, the blast was so forceful a sleeping Colonel and his wife were blown out of their house.²²⁴ Immediately suspecting one of his slaves, the Colonel headed straight for the farmhouse where they all slept. He found most of the slaves awake having been alarmed by the commotion. A seemingly guilty Sabinah remained in bed pretending to be asleep. The Colonel reported the crime to the Court of General Sessions in Ipswich on the next day; however, there is no evidence that Sabinah was ever prosecuted for this offense. Perhaps this young angry girl saw the demise of her master as the only way to escape her life of slavery.

²²⁰ The publication concludes that there was no reason for Mariah to burn for a burning or to receive a more severe sentence than Jack who was executed for criminal carelessness. *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts, Transactions 1899-1900*, Vol. VI (Boston: Published by the Colonial Society, 1904), 329, 333. See pages 3-4 of Chapter One for more discussion of the case of Jack of Wethersfield, Connecticut who accidentally set fire to home in Northampton, Massachusetts.

²²¹ The Magistrate's grandfather was a Court Assistant who settled in Ipswich before returning to England as well. His father Major Nathaniel Saltonstall, who was born in Ipswich, was a Harvard College graduate, a Court Assistant and Council member and had relocated to Haverhill before the Colonel was born in 1672. The Colonel died several years after the explosion in 1714. His son, Colonel Richard Saltonstall also distinguished himself in government service before returning to England as a Loyalist. George W. Chase, *The History of Haverhill, Massachusetts* (Boston: New England Press, 1983), 108-109.

²²² "An Account of the Houses, Families, Number of White People, Negroes and Indians in the Province of Massachusetts Bay taken in the years 1764 and 1765," cited in George W. Chase, *Abstract of the Census of Massachusetts, 1860 from the Eighth U.S. Census* (Boston: Wright, Potter State Printers, 1863), 254, *Ibid.*, 242.

²²³ Although it was initially thought Sabinah had an accomplice, it was later determined that an enslaved man Essex only helped her steal the money. His name was removed from the indictment (undated and untitled document from Massachusetts Historical Society).

²²⁴ Neither Colonel Saltonstall nor his wife was injured as a result of the explosion. Clifford Kenyon Shipton, *New England Life in the Eighteenth Century: Representative Bibliographies from Sibley's Harvard Graduates* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 25.

Sabinah was not the only slave girl who set a deadly fire in colonial New England. Nancy, the slave girl of Philip Roswell of Salisbury, Massachusetts was detained by authorities in 1748 for not only setting fire to her master's house but for burning the barn of a neighbor, Jonathan Osgood. Just as Mariah had her reasons for burning two properties, a young Nancy had her reasons for burning her master's house as well as the barn of a close neighbor. Committed to jail in Newbury but never brought to trial, Nancy remained imprisoned for two judicial terms until a writ of habeas corpus filed on her behalf resulted in her release.²²⁵

Enslaved African women in New England were not the only women who engaged in acts of arson during this early period. Other enslaved African women across the Atlantic world sometimes resorted to setting deadly fires. One such woman Angélique, almost destroyed the entire frontier town of Montréal on April 10, 1734. The Portuguese African woman lived in a frontier community in Canada that shared some similarity with towns in colonial New England. With an economy based on fur trading, mining and agriculture, Montréal also lacked an extensive slave labor force. Angélique was one of 142 African and Indian slaves living in Montréal the 1730s.²²⁶ And similar to domestic slavery in New England, this small number of slaves was mostly owned by wealthy individuals who were merchants or fur traders. Angélique's mistress, Madam Francheville, was the widow of merchant who made his wealth from the fur trade and as an owner of iron ore mine during his lifetime.²²⁷

The small number of enslaved persons in this French society enjoyed certain rights like the enslaved Africans in slave owning New England. They could legally marry with permission from their owners, serve as witnesses in religious ceremonies, bring a petition against free persons and receive a Christian burial at death.²²⁸ More importantly, those enslaved in New France had limited ways to obtain their freedom. The procedure for manumission in New France involved a slave asking for congé or the permission to depart from slavery.²²⁹ After a request for congé was made, a French mistress or master was obligated to respond. Just as New England masters were not legally bound to free their slaves, French owners could either relinquish or retain their slave owning status by affirming or negating the enslaved person's request. It was after Angélique's request for freedom was denied by Madam Francheville that she began to threaten the lives of her mistress and the other servants in the household.²³⁰

Angélique had only been a slave in Canada for nine years before setting the deadly fire. Born in Portugal, she had spent her formative years in a country where slavery was not always a permanent condition. After the *Reconquista* ushered in an end of Moorish rule in 1492, even Moorish prisoners who were enslaved in the sixteenth century could pay a ransom for their freedom. Not only did Portugal allow enslaved persons to purchase their freedom but a master could issue a letter of manumission ("carte de alforia") that granted a slave's freedom during the master's lifetime or after his death. Coming from a society where freedom was the acceptable natural state not only made Angélique hunger for her freedom but it made her go to any length to

²²⁵ Superior Court of Judicature, Essex County, Salem, Massachusetts October 17, 1749 Session. Special thanks to Edward L. Bell, Senior Archaeologist at the Massachusetts Historical Commission for providing the information on this slave arson incident.

²²⁶ Afua Cooper, *The Hanging of Angélique: The Untold Story of Canadian Slavery and the Burning of Old Montreal* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 77, 144.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 116-117.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 78.

²²⁹ www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 9, 181 and 287.

obtain her freedom, including setting a fire.²³¹ The only African-Portuguese in the Francheville household, Angélique worked alongside two enslaved Indians or Panis and four white indentured servants.²³² Her life in New France was not unlike that lived by black bondswomen in New England since her home environment was culturally alienating and isolating for a woman of African descent who previously lived in an Iberian country where thousands of enslaved Africans resided.²³³ Living as a slave in cold New France was a quite different experience for this African-Portuguese woman who previously lived in a more temperate climate in Europe.

Even in the cold climate, female bondswomen in New France were relegated to the households of their master where they were required to complete assigned duties like those completed by slave women in New England. It seems to follow that male bondservants in New France also enjoyed a similar freedom of mobility working as mining workers, fur trappers, personal attendants and shop keeper assistants. Moreover, sharing the same living quarters as her mistress provided Angélique with the opportunity to start the fire. Lighted coals retrieved from the Francheville kitchen were placed under the cross beams of the roof of the attic where slept.²³⁴ One can only imagine how Angélique drifted off to sleep each night staring at the ceiling where intended to place the live coals.

And like the female bondservants in New England wedded to slave owning households, a similarly restricted Angélique had to choose the best time to set the fire. Her plans for setting this fire were well thought out since a previous arson attempt and escape in February, 1734 proved unsuccessful. It was after this failed bid for freedom that Angélique refocused and planned the fire which left Montréal in ruins. After her request for congé was denied, Angélique's threats made the lives of those in Francheville household quite uncomfortable. Tired of Angélique's recalcitrance and fearing she would "...burn the house down with her in it," Madam Francheville made plans to sell the belligerent slave woman.²³⁵

In the interim, Angélique and her equally rebellious white boyfriend, an indentured servant named Claude, were both sent to live with Madam Francheville's sister and brother-in-law, Alexis and Marie-Joseph Monière. Just as rebellious slaves in New England were sold to the British West Indies, Angélique feared that she would be sold to the French West Indies. Bearing this in mind, the servant couple made immediate plans to run away from the Monière household. Arriving to the Monière's on a Saturday evening, the determined duo was missing from their temporary lodgings by early Sunday morning. They also chose the dark of the night to make their exit from the residence. Unsurprisingly, fire was used as a decoy during their escape. Their respective beds were set ablaze as they made their exit out the door. Once on the road headed out of Montréal, the couple attempted to accomplish an almost impossible feat. After crossing a frozen St. Lawrence River, their goal was to walk to a port in either New England or New York. Having walked at least 60 miles, Angélique and Claude were stopped by a constabulary who promptly returned them to their mistress. It was not long after being returned

²³¹ A.C. de C.M. Saunders, *A Social History of Black Slaves and Freedom in Portugal, 1441-1555* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 138.

²³² Cooper, *The Hanging of Angélique*, 128, 193.

²³³ More than 12,000 Africans were imported to Portugal in 1539, a period before Brazil became a thriving colony and when Portugal was just beginning its involvement in the transatlantic slave trade. "Slave Routes-Portugal," *Breaking the Silence: Learning about the Transatlantic Slave Trade* www.old.antislavery.org.

²³⁴ The garret space in the Francheville household was used to store food like those in New England houses. Cooper., *The Hanging of Angélique*, 287.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 177.

to captivity that Angélique began putting her second arson attack into motion.²³⁶ She reportedly told others that if Madam Francheville sold her that “...she would make her burn.”²³⁷ Knowing that she could be shipped off to the French West Indies by early spring, Angélique worked quickly to put her plans into action. This time, however, she carried out her fiery scheme without an accomplice. Choosing what she believed was the most opportune time to strike Angélique put lighted coals in the attic beams while Madam Francheville was away at church on April 10, 1734. If it was Angélique’s intention to bring economic injury to her mistress and not to physically harm her, the deadly conflagration went way beyond that goal. The roaring flames of what became a most devastating fire not only destroyed the Francheville house, it destroyed forty-six other buildings in the town as well. And like the many enslaved persons in New England who were hung for setting fires, including those that were accidental, Angélique was tortured to not only to gain details about her crime including whether she had an accomplice but also to extract a confession for her dastardly deed.²³⁸ In all likelihood the execution of Angélique woman did not put an end to slave arson in colonial Canada.

Native Americans were among the women in the Atlantic world who retaliated against oppressive treatment by whites by setting fires. Hundreds of Indian women in New England were forced into servitude with their children after male captives of the Pequot and King Philips wars were sold into West Indian slavery during the eighteenth century. Fearful of Indian attacks, white New Englanders tried to rid themselves of this nuisance by exchanging warring Indians for rebellious African slaves.²³⁹ The break-up of families in this manner must have created frustration and rebelliousness among the Indian women who remained in New England. African and Indian women who labored alongside each other in colonial households would have helped each other plan and carry out acts of arson. Performing the same housekeeping duties, these women lived similarly isolated lives as domestic servants. Like enslaved women, Indian women did not enjoy the liberties afforded Indian and African bondsmen as a result of their working in certain occupations. Burning the property of enemies was a tried and true strategy of warring Indians so Indian women were familiar with fire as a tool of resistance.²⁴⁰ Indian and African female servants not only worked and socialized together; they suffered together at the hands of unkind masters. Therefore, they sometimes helped each other with destroying the property of whites. Whether by retrieving lighted coals or serving as look-outs, female servants of color resisted white oppression by setting deadly fires. In 1769, an Indian woman was taken off to jail as the primary suspect in a fire that destroyed Jeremiah Miller’s barn in New London, Connecticut.²⁴¹

Subjected to an inferior status in colonial society as a result of occupying a subordinate role in relation to their husbands, some white women also grew despondent enough to engage in arson. Although few in number, there were times when white females in colonial New England resorted to fires-setting like their African and Indian counterparts. An arson case in 1722 involved a white woman who was committed to a prison in Boston on suspicion of “...laying fire and combustible matters in two cellars near the Town Dock.” Although only limited information

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 179-181, 231.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 231.

²³⁸ To extract this information, Angélique was subjected to physical torture with instruments ranging from screws, wedges, wood boots and a hammer. *Ibid.*, 15.

²³⁹ Edgar J. McManus, *Black Bondage in the North* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1973), 6.

²⁴⁰ For a discussion of Indian raids see pages 37-38 in Chapter Two.

²⁴¹ *Boston Post Boy*, February 6, 1769, Issue 599, page 2.

was reported, the newspaper article does indicate that it was the woman's intention to burn down the houses in the vicinity of the wharf.²⁴²

A most interesting arson case involved a white indentured servant Sarah Peake who set fire to the house of her master, Benjamin Britnal in Chelsea, Massachusetts in 1753. Although the newspaper does not specify why Sarah went to such lengths, one can only imagine that the life of a female indentured servant could be just as demanding and stressful as that of enslaved women. Not only did white indentured women complete similar chores, they also had also had limited freedom of movement when compared to slave or indentured men. Just as wedded to the domestic front as their black counterparts, indentured women were subjected to a level of surveillance from New England masters. However, given the history of rebelliousness among African and Indian women, it seems to follow that white women would not have been subjected to the level of monitoring from masters and authorities experienced by servants of color. More importantly, white indentured women had a promise of freedom awaiting them upon completion of their terms of service. After serving a fixed term of 5 to 7 years, these women received freedom dues and a grant of land. The promise of freedom along with monetary incentives may explain why there were so few arson events involving white female servants.

With this light at the end of the tunnel, it does not appear that indenture women grew as desperate as African women. But while they waited for freedom, indentured women could not marry or to have children. And regardless of color or their servile status, female servants who dared to engage in sex outside of marriage could be charged with fornication. In fact, indentured and enslaved men found guilty of fornication could be ordered to pay "charges of the child."²⁴³ For indentured a conviction of fornication or a pregnancy outside of marriage could mean additional years of service as well as being subjected to a whipping. In contrast, enslaved women found guilty of fornication were whipped and if their illicit relationship was with a white man then they could be shipped out of the colony.²⁴⁴ While the difficulties which drove Sarah Peake to commit arson have been lost to history, but we do know she became so disgruntled she set her master's house on fire.²⁴⁵ We also know that Sarah was whipped with twenty stripes after having to sit on the gallows for an hour. However, with an expectation of freedom, Sarah's level of frustration would not have reached that experienced by enslaved women.

At the point of losing all hope some enslaved women resorted to committing other crimes of a destructive nature including suicide and even, infanticide. Needing to put an end to the misery that engulfed their lives, they viewed suicide as a sure way to escape bondage. Believing that she would return to "...her own Country..." after she died, an enslaved woman from Salem was so determined to end her life in 1733 she "...cut her belly so much that her guts came out." According to Adams and Pleck, slave suicide was a form of noncooperation with the system of slavery since the suicidal person "...forfeits living rather than insist on survival." Importantly, individuals of West African lineage believed that when their spirit was released at death it would

²⁴² *New England Courant*, August 26 – September 2, 1722, Issue 109, page 2.

²⁴³ Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in Revolt: Urban Life in America: 1743-1776* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), 121.

²⁴⁴ Enslaved men who fathered illegitimate slave children were also subjected to a whipping. Having a child with a white woman could result in the enslaved man being sold to another owner or being shipped out of the colony to pay the financial costs of rearing the child. Diane Rapaport, *The Naked Quaker: True Crimes and Controversies from the Courts of Colonial New England* (Beverly, MA: Commonwealth Editions, 2007), 57.

²⁴⁵ *Boston News Letter*, January 11, 1753, Issue 2636, page 2.

unite with their ancestors hovering over their homeland.²⁴⁶ Thousands of miles from the land of her birth and forlorn about her life in bondage, the slave woman from Salem prepared to return to Africa by performing a West African burial ritual that involved burying a bottle of rum and two biscuits; provisions of sustenance that would make the journey with her. Intent on returning to Africa, the woman endured the excruciating pain of self-mutilation in order to make this journey in death. Slave suicide remained a problem for many New England slave owners since enslaved men, women and children often chose to end their lives rather than continuing to live without freedom. Three years later in 1736, an unsupervised sixteen year old slave girl in Boston hung herself when the family left to attend weekly services at the Meeting House. Reportedly the despondent girl had only lived with the Hardcastle family for two to three months.²⁴⁷ Why was living with this particular family for this short period drive the young slave girl to such desperate measures? Although the circumstances of this case are not known, it seems possible that the girl had difficulty adjusting to living with yet another white family and she saw no other solution out of this misery but to end her life. Not even the limited liberties available to enslaved persons in New England could weaken this young African girl's resolve to forfeit her life in this manner.

Other bondswomen responded to the stress and anxiety of their lives by committing infanticide. In frontier Boston, an enslaved African woman Grace was hung for infanticide on December 25, 1692 after being indicted for the murder of her infant son.²⁴⁸ Although some of the enslaved women who murdered their children were punished with severe whippings, others were put to death for in infanticide in New England.²⁴⁹ It is important to note that women of all racial backgrounds committed this crime particularly when a child was conceived out of wedlock.²⁵⁰ However, it was a slave woman who would not have wanted to bring her offspring into their world of bondage. It was not enough that slave children could learn to read and write, enjoy some legal rights and might have a chance to be manumitted, the child would still be in bondage. These women knew all too well that most masters forced slave couples to live separate and apart. More devastating, however, was New England's custom of giving away slave children like they were puppies. Masters simply did not want the burden of supporting children who could not contribute economically to their household.²⁵¹ Instead of having their newborn babies adopted or sold away to strangers, some black women did the unthinkable. They murdered their infants by drowning them and even by throwing them into a fire.²⁵²

The stress of enslavement did not drive all slave women to take their own lives or the lives of their children. According to John Wood Sweet, enslaved persons generally focused on making the best of their lives in slavery by working hard and not challenging the status quo. He explains that slave violence was always a threat but the violence was not about total liberation

²⁴⁶ Adams and Pleck, *Love of Freedom*, 9.

²⁴⁷ *Boston Evening Globe*, October 4, 1736, Issue 60, page 2.

²⁴⁸ "Grace, a Negro Woman," *Superior Court of Judicature*, Suffolk County Files, vol. 1692-1695, 51-52 (Massachusetts State Archives).

²⁴⁹ Indicted for murdering their children, Rebeckah of Charlestown was sentenced to stand on the gallows for an hour before she was tied to a cart and whipped with 30 stripes while Kate of Hartford was sentenced to death in September, 1743 and Jenny of Boston was sentenced to die in 1767. Greene, *The Negro in New England*, 214. Adams and Pleck, *Love of Freedom*, 43.

²⁵⁰ An Indian woman was imprisoned in a Nantucket jail in May, 1737 for killing her bastard child. *Boston Evening Post*, May 23, 1737, Issue 93, page 2.

²⁵¹ Disruption of the slave family sometimes resulted from the giving away of Negro children like puppies or kittens, after the mother had weaned them. Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England*, 213.

²⁵² Slave woman throws her newborn into the fire. *Boston Evening Post*, May 14, 1747.

since open rebellion would have been fatal. He goes on say that conflict could lead to violence when passive resistance was discovered or when negotiations around slave and master roles broke down. Sweet indicates, however, that those enslaved persons who grew desperate in bondage would respond with uncharacteristic violence.²⁵³

Incidents of slave violence occurred across the Atlantic world including cases of slaves murdering members of their slave owning families in New England. Phillis was an enslaved woman living in Boston who grew so perturbed over her life in bondage in 1751 that she poisoned her master's child. Pleading guilty to the act, she was given a death sentence by the local court. There were, of course, other women who handled the perils of bondage by setting dangerous fires which sometimes destroyed the lives and property of white New Englanders.²⁵⁴

Such was the case of Kate and an African boatswain who set fire to the home of Mrs. Snowden in August, 1741 mentioned in the previous chapter.²⁵⁵ Located between the Charles and Mystic Rivers just north of Boston, colonial Charlestown was a sprawling area that covered several present-day towns including the town of Medford.²⁵⁶ It has been difficult to ascertain the exact number of enslaved persons in the expansive area that was known as Charlestown before 1750; however, we do know that the wealthy slave merchant Isaac Royall, Sr. of Medford had 39 slaves at the time of his death in 1739.²⁵⁷ Another resident of Charlestown, Captain John Codman, who will be discussed later in this chapter, owned five slaves in the 1740s. It is also known that "many Negroes" who lived in the vicinity of the Snowden residence were falsely accused as suspects during the investigation of the case but were released after their interrogation. In the end, only three enslaved persons were implicated in the arson, Jenny an older African woman who belonged to Mrs. Snowden, Kate who belonged to Francis Varambaut and an unnamed African boatswain who was the property of John Garnier.²⁵⁸

When fire engulfed the Snowden house, the above named individuals were the first ones to come under suspicion. There was an urgency to locate the culprits since the fire was believed to be part of a "...malicious and evil intent to burn down the town." Charlestown's officials must have thought a slave conspiracy was on the horizon since a few months earlier New York City had been besieged by at least thirteen fires attributed to black arsonists.²⁵⁹ Jenny reported hearing Kate and another person walk in the house just before she heard the cries of "Fire."²⁶⁰

²⁵³ John Wood Sweet, *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North 1730—1830* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 74.

²⁵⁴ *Boston Post Boy*, April 8, 1751, Issue 851, page 2.

²⁵⁵ *Boston Gazette*, September 28 to October 5, 1741, Issue 1023, Page 2. See discussion of the Snowden fire on pages 22-25 in Chapter Three.

²⁵⁶ Colonial Charlestown encompassed Everett, Woburn, Burlington and parts of Arlington and Cambridge. Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England*, 161.

²⁵⁷ Both a sugar planter and slave trader in Antigua, Isaac Royall brought 28 slaves with him when he returned to New England in 1737. Alexandra A. Chan, *Slavery in the Age of Reason: Archaeology at a New England Farm* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007), 49, 52 and 56.

²⁵⁸ *Boston Gazette*, September 28 to October 5, 1741, Issue 1023, Page 2. Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England*, 161.

²⁵⁹ The presiding justice, Daniel Horsmanden weaved a tale of lies and deceit that resulted in the arrest of 172 Africans who were either forced to confess or name other conspirators. In the end, 57 blacks and 3 whites were executed by hanging or burning while another 169 blacks were sold out of the colony. Jill Lepore, *New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery and Conspiracy in Eighteenth Century Manhattan* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), xvi, 246.

²⁶⁰ *Boston Gazette*, September 28 to October 5, 1741, Issue 1023, Page 2.

The archival sources do not explain why Kate was present in the Snowden home or even why she wanted to set fire to this particular house. It does seem likely that enslaved individuals, especially women, were hired out to neighbors when there were additional chores to be done.. Given the demands placed on enslaved domestics in New England households, another woman's assistance would have been welcomed. Even if loaned out, female domestics living in vicinity of would have tried to visit each other; helping each other out with arduous chores when they could. Those working as slaves in New England would have provided support to each other in the same way that enslaved women helped each other in the fields or with childcare on large southern plantations.²⁶¹ Thus, Kate's presence did not seem to alarm Jenny but the footsteps of a second unidentified person apparently startled the older woman.

If Kate's being in the Snowden home was a routine occurrence, the presence of the African boatswain was out of the ordinary. That the boatswain had no difficulty traveling to the Snowden home in the middle of his work day demonstrates the flexibility of certain male gendered occupations assigned to enslaved men. This particular man worked in a position of authority because he was in charge of the equipment and crew on a sailing vessel. As the person in charge, the boatswain did not need permission to leave the ship during the day. Whether he was traveling by land or by sea, the boatswain enjoyed a level of independence as a result of his occupational status. Not having to answer to anyone, the boatswain left the dock and traveled to the Snowden house on the day of the fire. This was unlike Kate or Jenny who was expected to be in or near their master's household and occupied with chores. This might be why Kate sought the assistance of an enslaved man who could travel to and from the Snowden house with ease.

Initially denying complicity in the crime, it was after the court threatened to execute Kate that she identified the African boatswain as her accomplice. After his arrest, the boatswain falsely accused other members of the Charlestown slave community.²⁶² The boatswain tried to deflect attention away from him by naming several other persons as the participants. More importantly, did the boatswain concoct this story about these other persons because whites readily suspected it was groups of black men who were setting these fires? After clearing these other individuals of any wrongdoing, the authorities refocused their attention on the boatswain. Not only did he finally admit his guilt, he confirmed Kate's involvement in the fire as well.

Kate and the boatswain committed a major error when carrying out their crime. Although started when the boatswain ignited wood junk under the Snowden roof, the fire was started when Jenny was in the house.²⁶³ Both Kate and the boatswain erroneously assumed that Jenny would remain silent about what she observed on that day. Normally protective of other members of the slave community, a code of silence was likely honored when a slave committed offenses against difficult whites. Thus, we know that masters were not always able to access information about a fugitive's plan of escape. Some slave owners resorted to extracting this information by whipping or threatening to sell a member of the fugitive's family. Walter Johnson explains how family and members of the slave community tried to insulate slaves from the racism and brutality of slave owners, however, slave owners used these same individuals as instruments of coercion

²⁶¹ Slave women had to help one another in order to manage the dual responsibilities of mother and laborer. Deborah Gray White, *Arin't I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (Boston: W.W. Norton & Co., 1999), 127.

²⁶² *Boston Gazette*, September 28 to October 5, 1741, Issue 1023, Page 2.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*

to discipline their slaves.²⁶⁴ Surely, black men and women in New England honored such a code of silence to protect members of their slave community. If Kate assumed that she had nothing to worry about as far as Jenny, she was sadly mistaken. In this instance, the older black woman did not follow the expected code of silence since she reported what occurred in the Snowden home to the authorities. That is, Jenny demonstrated a far greater loyalty to her mistress than to her sister in bondage.²⁶⁵ In the end, Kate's downfall was the result of her believing that Jenny would remain silent and the boatswain would not reveal her complicity in the arson. Both let her down.

Like Mariah sixty years earlier, the African boatswain received the ultimate punishment for his role in the Snowden fire. He was sentenced to death by burning.²⁶⁶ Although pardoned for her role in setting the fire, Kate was likely sold south to a West Indian colony like Mariah's accomplices. No doubt, the arrest of these two individuals reassured anxious whites since it invalidated the claim that the Snowden arson was part of a larger slave conspiracy. Although the idea of a slave conspiracy did resurface again in 1749 when four fires were attributed to enslaved women in Charlestown, including the one that destroyed outbuildings on Captain John Codman's estate.²⁶⁷

A sea captain and merchant and a life-long resident of Charlestown, John Codman owned three African men, Mark, Tom and Scipio as well as two African women, Phillis and Phoebe. Considered a "...stern taskmaster and rigid disciplinarian..." Codman reportedly hit Tom with a blow so forceful it damaged his eye.²⁶⁸ Living under such rigid discipline was hard for all of the Codman slaves and it this continued mistreatment that eventually led to the Captain's demise.²⁶⁹

Having lived with the Captain almost all of their lives, both Phillis and Phoebe had their own reasons for wanting to harm their master. Despite the day to day stress of living with a harsh master, Phoebe was the lucky one because she was a married woman. Her husband Quaco, however, lived across the Charles River with his master in Boston. Like most enslaved couples in New England, Quaco and Phoebe saw each other for weekly visits provided permission from their respective masters was obtained. Slave owners based this prohibition against the cohabitation of married slaves on a claim of not needing additional servants. Examining probate and church records, Gloria McCahon Whiting, a Harvard University doctoral student found that 389 out of 457 enslaved couples were living apart from their spouses when the slave population in Boston reached as high as 1,300 from 1690 to 1730.²⁷⁰ With slave masters controlling the extent of their physical contact, it was difficult for slave couples to develop strong emotional

²⁶⁴ Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001),

²⁶⁵ Slave owners were not usually able to penetrate the private world of women. Gray, *Aren't I a Woman*, 127.

²⁶⁶ Whether the African boatswain was hung and then put in a fire is not known. *Boston Gazette*, September 28 to October 5, 1741, Issue 1023, Page 2.

²⁶⁷ *Boston Gazette*, August 8, 1749, Issue 535, page 2.

²⁶⁸ Charles Chambers, a local Selectman, General Court representative, Common Pleas judge, land and business owner was John Codman's appointed guardian following the premature death of his parents. Margaret Mutcheler Martin, *The Chambers-Russell-Codman House and Family in Lincoln, Massachusetts* (Lincoln: Lincoln Historical Society, 1996), 27-33. Elise Lemire, *Black Walden: Slavery and Its Aftermath in Concord, Massachusetts* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 49.

²⁶⁹ Abner Cheney Goodell, Jr., *The Trial and Execution for Petit Treason of Mark and Phillis* (Cambridge: University Press, 1883), 4.

²⁷⁰ Gloria McCahon Whiting, "How can the wife submit"? African Families Negotiate Gender and Slavery in New England. (Unpublished paper presented on January 8, 2014 used with author's permission). Greene, *Negro in Colonial New England*, 84.

ties. Chapter One discusses the slave arson case of Primus in Newport, Rhode Island who resorted to physically abusing his wife and setting fire to the houses of both masters after an argument over money ensued during one of their weekly visits.²⁷¹ And of course, living separate and apart did not allow enslaved couples to rear their children in a two parent household. A very demanding, Rev. MacSparran of Narragansett went to great lengths, including applying the whip, to keep his slave Maroca from her slave lover Mingo. When Maroca defied her master by having another child with Mingo, Rev. MacSparran sold the child.²⁷²

Phillis never had the experience of becoming a mother like Maroca or even becoming a married woman like Phoebe since court records describe her as an unmarried woman or “spinster”.²⁷³ Living an isolated and work-filled life as one or two female servants in a New England household presented few opportunities to interact with the opposite sex. Also contributing to the social isolation of women like Phillis was a New England master’s discouragement of pregnancies in slave women. This was in sharp contrast to slave owners in the southern colonies who purchased enslaved women not only for their labor but also for their valued reproductive capacities.²⁷⁴ Essentially, Phoebe and Phillis and all of other female slave arsonists featured in these chapters never had the chance to develop a stable marital relationship or give birth to children before their crimes were committed. And after being sold to Captain Codman at a young age, Phillis endured the trauma of growing up without her parents. A longing for parents, spouses and children who were sold away was the experience of far too many enslaved persons across the Atlantic world.

More fortunate than his fellow female arsonists since he had a wife and children, Mark went to considerable lengths to make sure he could live with his family while hiring out his labor as a welder in Boston. He joined forces with Phoebe and Phillis to burn outbuildings on the Codman estate in an effort to accomplish his goal. That is, Mark convinced the two women that their master would be forced to sell them if he suffered a financial loss from the destruction of his buildings. Undoubtedly, Mark and Phoebe would have wanted to be sold to a slave owner in Boston so that they could finally live with their spouses. Desperate to move to Boston, Mark pressured Phillis and Phoebe to participate in his arson scheme. In fact, Phillis told the authorities that Mark gave her no rest until she agreed to start the fire. She reportedly put the live coals among the wood shavings that Mark left between two of the buildings during the night when Phoebe and Mark were asleep in the attic. Unfortunately, the act of arson they committed did not bring the desired results. Not only did Captain Codman rebuild his buildings, he did so without selling any of his slaves. Unaware of his slaves’ involvement in the fire, the Captain eventually relented and allowed Mark to live and work in Boston.²⁷⁵

Mark’s experience of living in Boston with his family for over six years was definitely outside of the norm of enslaved couples in New England. Having only lived with the Captain for a short period before the arson event, it is possible that Mark married and fathered children while living with a previous master in Boston. Giving Mark approval to work and live in Boston was

²⁷¹ See discussion of the slave arson case of Primus on pages 18-19 and 22 of Chapter One.

²⁷² Adams and Pleck, *Love of Freedom*, 111.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁷⁴ Southern slave owners appropriated the reproductive lives of enslaved women by claiming their children as property. Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 1.

²⁷⁵ Elise Lemire, *Black Walden: Slavery and Its Aftermath in Concord, Massachusetts* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 47.

as far as Captain Codman went. When forced to leave Boston because of being warned out of the town by the authorities, Captain Codman made no effort to bring Mark's spouse and children to Charlestown. Apparently his wife's slave owner had no problem with Mark living with his family as long as he had permission to live in Boston. It is when this permission was rescinded that Mark's had to separate from his family.

Having to return to Charlestown without his family took away a privilege enjoyed by few enslaved men. Mark was the exception since he had been involved in the rearing of his children. Most enslaved children in New England usually lived with their mothers. Not living in the same household with their children only allowed slave fathers to discipline or show affection on a sporadic basis during weekly visits. Even worse, many enslaved children grew up totally without the love and guidance of both parents. Children as young as four years old were sometimes placed in apprenticeships in the households of unfamiliar whites. And as has been discussed, slave infants were an unproductive expense who were sold or given away at a young age.²⁷⁶ Mark had the good fortune of being a husband and father for a number of years until he encountered an unexpected problem in 1755.

Mark's problem was so much more serious this just being able to live in Boston. Having to sever physical contact with his family led Mark to conspire with Phillis and Phoebe to poison Captain Codman. Poisoning, like arson, was a crime of intimacy because it was carried out by persons who lived in close proximity with those who were targeted. Just as slave women set fires in and near their master's residences, they also prepared the meals that poisoned masters or members of their families. The Codman slaves believed they could get away with their act because seven slaves were never prosecuted for poisoning the Boston merchant, John Salmon, a number of years before. While Mr. Salmon's death was never officially ruled a murder, the slave community knew that he had been poisoned. As a result of the testimony given in the Codman case, not only was Salmon's death reclassified as a poisoning but two other slaves, Jack and Violet, were now suspected of murdering Benjamin Barron who also sickened and died.²⁷⁷ Things had really gone downhill for Mark having been warned out of Boston and forced to return to Charlestown. It was his master's refusal to relocate his family that led to a despondent Mark to take more desperate measures.

Mark used his freedom to come and go as a hired slave to put his poisoning plans into place. Access to a broader slave community in Boston allowed him to obtain the arsenic to put into the Captain's food. It was while on an errand to Boston that Mark stopped to buy a drink for Robin, the physician's slave attendant who would later supplied the poison. Not only was Mark drinking in the taverns of Boston he was also drinking in the taverns in Charlestown. In fact, he was drinking so much at the local taverns that the Captain directed the proprietors to stop serving him. Mark and Robin came to an agreement regarding the arsenic that would be provided. To avoid detection, Robin disguised himself when he traveled to Charlestown on more than one occasion to deliver the arsenic. On the day that Captain Codman was administered the

²⁷⁶ George Wingate Chase, *The History of Haverhill, Massachusetts* (Boston: New England Press in collaboration with Haverhill Historical Society, 1883), 240. William D. Piersen, *Black Yankees: The Development of the Afro-American Subculture in Eighteenth Century New England* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 27.

²⁷⁷ Elise Lemire, *Black Walden: Slavery and Its Aftermath in Concord, Massachusetts* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 48.

poison, Mark and Robin made three trips by ferry from their respective locations to insure that a sufficient amount of arsenic was available to end the Captain's life.

Restricted to the home with household duties to complete, Phillis and Phoebe could not travel back and forth to Boston nor did they ever enjoy a leisurely drink at the taverns in Charlestown. One enslaved woman in Boston who had to abscond in order to enjoy a night on the town. Her master, an unidentified gentleman from Boston found his missing slave after a diligent search led him to a tavern in Roxbury in 1740. Interestingly, it was after the 9:00 p.m. curfew when the slave owner located the missing woman with a group of about a dozen other blacks who were "...in a very merry humor, singing and dancing having a violin and store of wine and punch before them."²⁷⁸ Since it was out of the ordinary for enslaved woman to be out and away from the watchful eyes of their masters, this particular owner went to exceptional lengths to locate the woman since he visited several taverns over the course of the night. On the other hand, the owners of the several enslaved men in the tavern that night showed little interest in discovering their whereabouts. A freedom of movement allowed these enslaved men to frolic without interference. This same freedom facilitated the starting of deadly fires in the dark of the night. Perplexed by this nocturnal goings on in this local tavern, the slave owner from Boston wondered how so many blacks were missing from their respective households. His response was to rebuke public taverns for entertaining slaves without a master's permission, particularly during the nighttime hours.²⁷⁹ What the fine gentlemen failed to understand is that enslaved blacks found a myriad of ways to circumvent the restrictions that defined their lives in slavery. Not only did black women attempt to steal away at night to enjoy an occasional gathering, some used the cover of night to commit crimes that brought injury to whites.

Just as their domestic role gave Phillis and Phoebe easy access to lighted coals to set fire to an outbuilding in 1749, these same duties facilitated the poisoning of their master six years later. Both women admitted to putting arsenic in the porridge and chocolate beverage they prepared for Captain Codman on the morning of his death. And in the same expedited manner that Maria was brought to justice in Roxbury in 1681, Phillis was swiftly found guilty of violating a rarely used English petit treason statute that sentenced slave or servants who murdered their masters to death by burning. Mark was hung and his body gibbeted for his role as an accessory to the crime before the fact. That is, Mark was guilty of procuring the arsenic that was administered to the Captain. Since Phoebe testified against her co-conspirators, her life was spared but she, like most other slave arson accomplices before her, was likely sold out of the colony to the West Indies.

Conclusion

Living in or near a master's house not only gave enslaved women in New England access to lighted coals, they could monitor the whereabouts of the occupants in the home in order to set deadly fires. With slave owners retired to bed, enslaved woman used the dark of night as the most opportune time to start these fires. It was the circumstances of their bondage which drove some enslaved women to a point of frustration they set dangerous fires. And when setting fires

²⁷⁸ *Boston Evening Post*, January 14, 1740, Issue 232, Page 4.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

did not go far enough, some of the more desperate resorted to suicide, infanticide and poison to bring an end to the misery in their lives.

Often the lone domestic in a slave owning household, these women were socially and culturally isolated away from their slave community as they completed the inordinate chores connected with domestic service. Slave women who were fortunate enough to marry or have children only had the added demands of being a wife and a mother. Living in such a close intimate setting allowed New England masters to closely monitor both the work and whereabouts of black domestics. Consequently, the demands of work and the level of surveillance limited the mobility of enslaved women as compared to enslaved men. Able to hire out their labor and by virtue of their assigned occupations enslaved men enjoyed more freedom during their work day. And despite living in a society that provided the limited liberties to marry, achieve literacy and obtain legal rights, some enslaved women were driven to a level of desperation that resulted in their planning and carrying out dangerous acts of arson. Telling the story of slave arson resistance within the context of gender reveals how the system of slavery in New England was both flexible and restrictive during this early period. In the next chapter we look at how whites responded to the destructive fires set by enslaved persons in a myriad of ways from passing additional laws, improving their firefighting technology to organizing mutual fire associations.

Chapter Four

Laws, Watches, Fire Clubs & Fire Fighting Technology: Whites Respond to Slave Arson in Colonial New England

An opinion piece in the November 9 to November 16, 1724 edition of the *New England Courant* addressed to *Old Man Janus* and signed anonymously “*Your Humble Servant*,” claimed that the recent rash of fires which burned several buildings in Boston were villainies “carried on by Negro servants.” Having lived through these recent fires, many Bostonians would have agreed with the author that it was now necessary to reinforce the common watch and call up the military watch in order to address their acute slave arson problem. According to *Your Humble Servant* it had taken both watches to round up the black suspects recently hauled off to jail. He admonished the public not to interfere with the watchmen; warning that additional incidents of slave arson would surely take place. He also warned Bostonians not to confront or abuse these devoted public servants as they went about their duty of protecting property in the town.²⁸⁰ Having gone through recurring fires since its frontier days, the slave arson spree of the 1720s only intensified a primal fear that white Bostonians had of dangerous fires. Despite their anxiety, many New Englanders took a proactive stance against these intentional fires. They introduced laws to better control unruly slaves, organized fire clubs and militias to protect lives and property while steadily incorporating the latest technology into their firefighting methods. The authorities also tried to limit the occurrence of slave arson by promptly identifying black arson suspects who were chased down, hauled off to jail, indicted, prosecuted and given a swift sentence of death or banishment to the Caribbean.

This deep-seated fear of fire only heightened when the number of Africans imported to New England increased significantly during the first decades of the eighteenth century. The 2,150 enslaved Africans living in Massachusetts in 1720 increased to 2,780 by 1730.²⁸¹ And the just over 400 enslaved Africans in Boston in 1708 would multiply to 1,500 by 1742.²⁸² While 375 bondservants lived in Rhode Island in 1710, this number increased to 1,648 by 1730. The slave population in Connecticut grew more slowly with the 750 enslaved blacks in 1710 only doubling to 1,490 by 1730.²⁸³ This steady surge in imported Africans had a lot to do with an expanding triangular trade between New England, West Africa and the Caribbean. While small numbers arrived from places like the Gold Coast, Benin and Biafra as part of a small West African slave trade; most of the Africans who arrived to New England came by way of the region’s commercial dealings with the West Indian islands.

New England slave ships began selling West Africans to the Caribbean as early as 1644 when West Indian planters were more intent on cultivating sugar than on growing food. Thus, the region soon became responsible for providing grain, codfish and cattle for West Indian

²⁸⁰ “To Old Janus,” *New England Courant*, November 9 to November 16, 1724, Issue 172, Page 1.

²⁸¹ Edgar McManus, *Black Bondage in the North* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1973), 202. William Piersen, *Black Yankees: The Development of an African American Subculture in Eighteenth Century* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 15, 166-167.

²⁸² Lorenzo Johnston Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1966), 84-85. Piersen, *Black Yankees*, 15.

²⁸³ Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England*, 87, 89. Piersen, *Black Yankees*, 166-167.

sustenance as well as the lumber, cattle and horses so vital to the production of sugar.²⁸⁴ Each year throughout the eighteenth century, an average of ten slave ships sailed from Boston to West Africa while at least two hundred sailed to the Caribbean.²⁸⁵ After delivering shiploads of Africans to the islands of the British Caribbean, slave ships from Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut and even New Hampshire always brought a few home.²⁸⁶ Some Africans were shipped as special orders for prospective slave owners in New England, while others were sold by slave trade merchants in both locales. Small numbers were even shipped with rum, molasses and cotton via the provisions and carrying trade while others arrived with West Indian masters who relocated to New England.²⁸⁷

As the concentration of Africans increased in and around the towns of New England in the early decades of the eighteenth century so did the reported accounts of slave arson. Archival research to date reveals that a rash of fires in Boston beginning on March 30, 1723 when a group of enslaved men attempted to set Buttolph's Cargo Shop on fire.²⁸⁸ A suspicious fire at the lower end of King Street destroyed buildings belonging to Superior Court Judge Elisha Cooke later on the same day.²⁸⁹ A few days later on April 2th, John and Anna Powell's house on Leverett Lane was mysteriously torched. Although live coals left by the side of Goat Tavern on King Street died out before morning on April 7th, it was apparent that the black arsonists were not done.²⁹⁰ More arson attempts would be uncovered across the town over the course of the month. Map shows streets around King Street in Boston where the rash of fires took place in the 1720.²⁹¹

²⁸⁴ Slaves who spent some time in the West Indies were considered "seasoned" because they had some grasp of the English language and some familiarity with Anglo-European ways by the time they arrived to New England. McManus, *Black Bondage*, 20.

²⁸⁵ Hugh Thomas, *The Slave Trade: Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1440-1870* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1997), 271.

⁵Rhode Island led the way in the purchase of Africans with over 900 slave voyages to West Africa between 1725 and 1807. Jay Coughtry, *The Notorious Triangle: Rhode Island and the African Slave Trade, 1700-1807* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981),

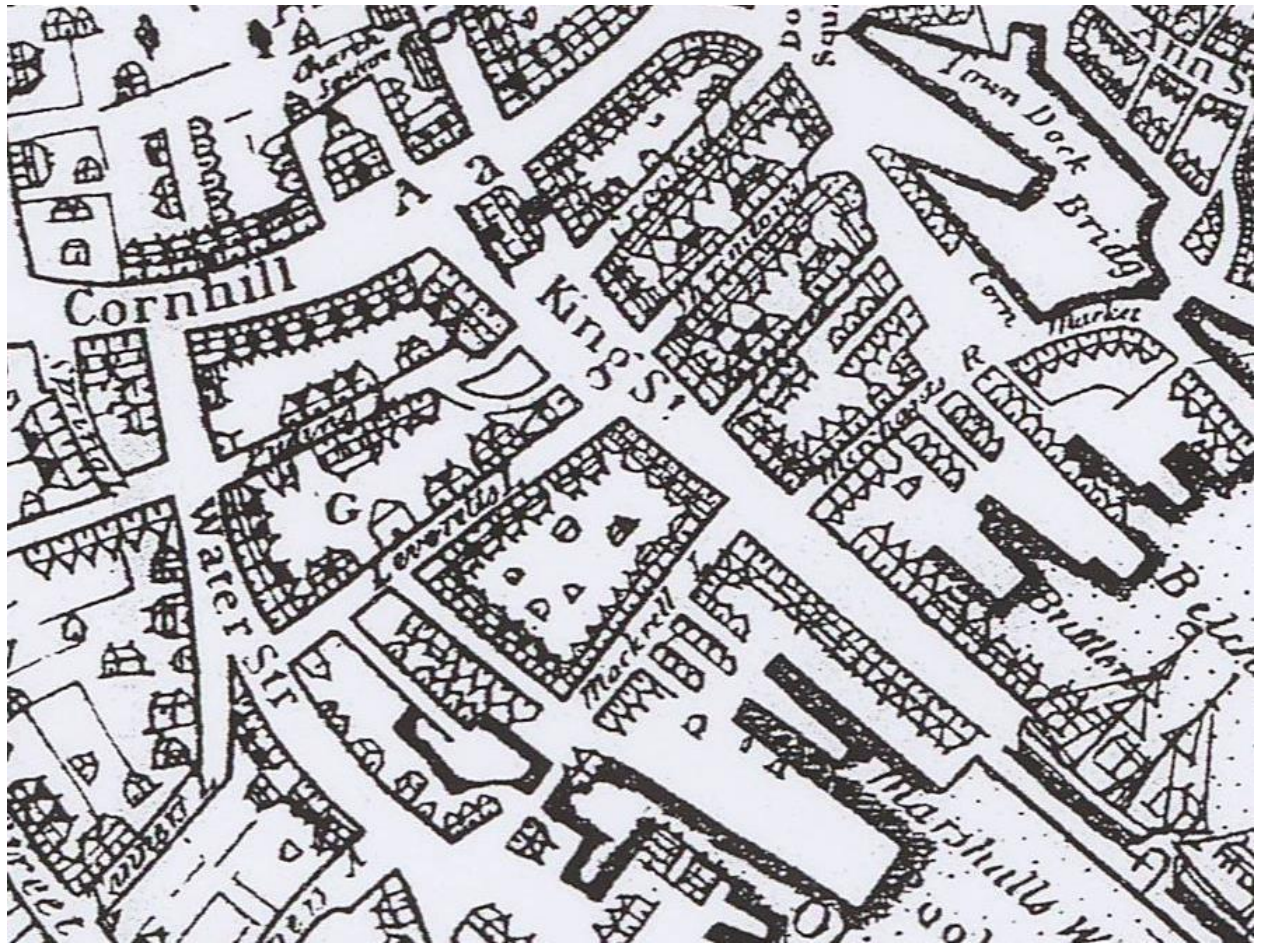
⁵A third of the Africans in Massachusetts during the 1700s came by way of Barbados. Robert S. Desrochers, Jr., "Slave-For-Sale Advertisements and Slavery in Massachusetts, 1704-1781, *William and Mary Quarterly*, 72, no. 1 (March 1999), 119-129. Edgar J. McManus, *Black Bondage*, 20.

²⁸⁸ The exact location of the Buttolph business cannot be ascertained. Most members of the sea faring Buttolph family settled in Hartford and Wethersfield, Connecticut, however, Nicholas Buttolph, a bookseller owned an establishment on what is now Washington Street in the Cornhill section of Boston in 1727 and John Buttolph, a wine merchant rented out the basement in Boston's Town Hall until 1740. Henry Reed Stiles, *Families of Ancient Wethersfield Connecticut Consisting of the History of Ancient Wethersfield* (Westminster, MD: Heritage Books, Inc., 2006). *Examination of Diego Negro* at Superior Court of Judicature, the Court of Assize on May 10, 1723.

²⁸⁹ *Boston News-Letter*, March 28 to April 4, 1723, Issue 1001, page 1.

²⁹⁰ *New England Courant*, April 8 to April 15, 1723, Issue 89, page 2.

²⁹¹ The first surviving map of the town of Boston done by John Bonner in 1722. www.mappingbostonorig/html/map



[Bonner Map of](#) the Town of Boston (1722)

Thankfully, the fire that engulfed Mr. Bridge's outhouse around 6:00 a.m. on April 12th was swiftly extinguished before it spread to nearby buildings.²⁹² Just a few hours later, coals were discovered under a stable near Pudding Lane as well as on the side of the former Bunch of Grapes Tavern on King Street. With this much activity on one day alone, the town's residents would have longed for the day to end. However; their rest would be short lived because yet another fire broke out at the Deming barn on the South End around 11:00 p.m. The embers had not even died out at Mr. Deming's when burning faggots (sticks) were discovered on the side of another house on the South End. A suspicious fire burning at Brigham's Tan Yard was quickly extinguished on Sunday, April 14th while most Bostonians were away at church. Things were not over, however; since live coals wrapped in a cloth were found in the cellar of a house on Wings Lane on two separate occasions on that same Sunday.²⁹³

Members of the Boston community took prompt action against such bold criminal acts believed to be the work of black arsonists. Within a matter of days, twenty men stepped up to organize themselves into an emergency community watch. This speedy makeshift watch

²⁹² *New England Courant*, April 29 to May 6, 1723, Issue 92, page 4.

²⁹³ *New England Courant*, April 8 to April 15, 1723, Issue 89, pages 2-3.

increased the number of watchmen on the roads of Boston. Their stated mission was to make “what discovery they could of the authors of this repeated villainy, who are supposed to be Negro servants.” Swinging into action, this hastily organized watch tried to capture a Negro seen fleeing with a lantern, but to no avail.²⁹⁴ The search for the black culprits was now on high alert. Boston’s selectmen moved to add more men to the common watch as well. Presently composed of a total of ten men, the five watch houses located ‘...at the most suitable places of the town’ were to have five men each for a total of twenty-five watchmen. These newly added watchmen were charged to “discover and prevent what in them lays fires...”²⁹⁵

So great at that time were the alarm and danger
in Boston occasioned by the slaves that in addition
to the common watch, a military force was not only
kept up, but at the breaking out of every fire, a part
of the militia were ordered out under arms to keep
the slaves in order.²⁹⁶

Adding the additional men to the already instituted common watch was still not enough so a military watch of fifty armed militiamen was also called up to pursue black suspects after six intentional fires and at least five arson attempts occurred over the course of two weeks.

With such a show of fighting manpower, it was not long before additional black men were being hauled off to jail. Whatever their methods, Boston’s officials had a way of apprehending those they suspected of arson. The first order of business was to interview the victims of the arson to get an idea of who could have possibly started the fires. Undoubtedly, the interviews included identifying any and all enslaved persons connected to the family. Such a conclusion is supported by the reports of fires in the newspapers which often included the words “...a Negro servant is suspected” or “a Negro servant has been taken into custody.” It was these well tested investigational procedures which led to the identification of Diego as the person who set the Powell fire on April 2nd. Taken into custody and questioned on April 10th, Diego was facing charges before the court by May 10th. It was during his interrogation that Diego provided the shocking news of having previously attempted to burn the Powell home.²⁹⁷ In fact, the fire historian Alexander Wellington Brayley reported that Diego tried to set fire to this particular house on two other occasions.²⁹⁸ Not only did Diego indicate that several other black men were involved in setting the Powell fire, he gave an account of witnessing the aborted arson attempt at Buttolph’s Cargo Shop on March 30th.²⁹⁹ With one black arsonist in custody, watchmen in

²⁹⁴ A shoemaker named Winter (race not specified) was taken into custody for the arson attempts at the Wings Lane residence on Sunday, April 14th. *New England Courant*, April 15 to April 22, 1723, Issue 90, page 2.

²⁹⁵ There were ten watchmen who made rounds during the night in Boston in 1701. Robert Means Lawrence, M.D., *New England Colonial Life* (Cambridge: Cosmos Press, 1927), 141. *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston Containing the Records of Boston’s Selectmen from 1700 to 1728* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill City Printers, 1883), 175.

²⁹⁶ James Coffin, *Account of Some of the Principal Slave Insurrections* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1860), 12.

²⁹⁷ *New England Courant*, April 8, 1723 to April 15, 1723, page 4.

²⁹⁸ Arthur Wellington Brayley, *The Complete History of the Boston Fire Department, including the Fire Alarm System and Protective Department* (Boston: John P. Dale & Company, 1889), 39.

²⁹⁹ See discussion of Diego’s slave arson case on pages 14-19 in Chapter Two.

Boston continued their pursuit of black suspects; hauling two more black men into jail for the Brigham Tan fire soon after Diego's arrest.³⁰⁰ More effort was definitely needed to address the town's growing problem with slave arson.

The authorities in Boston must have been pleased when the colonial government provided some assistance. Exercising his executive powers, the then acting Governor William Dummer issued an important Proclamation on April 16, 1723 [See copy of Proclamation on the next page]. After all, the Powell fire was personal to the Lieutenant Governor since Anna Powell was his sister. The Proclamation declared the recent fires to be "...designedly and industriously kindled by some villainous and desperate Negroes..."³⁰¹ Such a conclusion only fueled the fear of Bostonians that enslaved blacks were trying to burn down the town. The Proclamation went a step further by ordering all of his Majesty's subjects to help identify the black authors of these criminal acts.³⁰² Locating black suspects was such an imperative that the Governor gave the residents of the town a most enticing incentive. Any person who made an identification leading to the arrest and prosecution of a black arsonist was to receive a £50 reward.³⁰³ This was a lot of money since most wage laborers in New England made on average 10 shillings or a half pound a week which totaled £25 a year or half of the promised reward.³⁰⁴ Essentially, turning in black arsonists could lead to a colonist in Massachusetts receiving an award that equaled two years of their normal wages. Even this hefty reward could not eradicate Boston's slave arson problem. Additional action was definitely needed since suspicious fires continued to break out across Boston as well as in other New England towns.

On April 17, 1723 a black man attempted to set fire to Mr. Holbrook's house on Newbury Street close to Bartholomew Green's Printing House.³⁰⁵ This particular arson attempt was unsettling because the Printing House had just been targeted by arsonists a few weeks earlier. Burning down Green's business establishment was not surprising since this was the location where "likely Africans" were regularly sold to interested buyers in the Boston community.³⁰⁶ Slave arson was such a concern in Boston at this time that the minister of the Old South Church, Rev. Joseph Sewall, preached a sermon on April 18, 1723 which specifically referred to "...the late fires yt have broke out in Boston, supposed to be purposely set by ye Negroes." Rev. Sewall was well aware of the town's Negro problem since his father Samuel Sewall wrote *The Selling of Joseph* in 1700; the first anti-slavery tract published in the colonies. While Samuel Sewall's work expressed concern over slave families being torn apart, the well-known jurist, merchant and Puritan church leader did feel that the "numerousness of slaves" at the turn of the century was creating a crisis in the Boston community. Sewall had witnessed first-hand how the

³⁰⁰ *New England Courant*, April 15 to April 22, 1723, Issue 90, page 2.

³⁰¹ Sworn in as the acting Governor of the Province in 1716 after the seated Governor Shute went to England where he died while working on the revoked Colonial Charter. E.H.F. Clarke and H.W. Foote, *Jeremiah Dummer, Colonial Craftsman and Merchant* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1970), 45.

³⁰² *Proclamation by the Honorable William Dummer, Esq., and* (April 15, 1723).

³⁰³ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁴ Richard B. Morris, "The Emergence of American Labor," www.dol.gov

³⁰⁵ *New England Courant*, Monday April 15 to Monday April 22, 1723, Issue 90, page 2.

³⁰⁶ One advertisement in a newspaper read that persons interested in selling a likely Negro woman fit for country business were to repair to Mr. Green's Print House. *Boston News-Letter*, November 14 to November 21, 1723, Issue 1034, Page 2.



By the HONOURABLE
William Dummer Esq;

Lieutenant GOVERNOUR & Commander in Chief in & over
 His Majesty's Province of the *Massachusetts-Bay* in *New-England* :

A Proclamation.



HEREAS within some short Time past many Fires have broke out within the Town of **Boston**, and divers Buildings have been thereby consumed; Which Fires have been designedly and industriously kindled by some villanous & desperate **Negroes**, or other dissolute People, as appears by the Confession of some of them (who have been examined by Authority) and many concurring Circumstances; And it being vehemently Suspected that they have entered into a wicked and horrid Combination to burn and destroy the said Town :

I have therefore thought fit, with the Advice of His Majesty's Council to Issue forth this Proclamation. Hereby Commanding all Justices of the Peace, Sheriffs and Constables, and all other Officers whatsoever, and Calling upon all other His Majesty's good Subjects to use their utmost Endeavours to detect & make Discovery of the Authors & Actors in these villanous Practices & Designs; And engaging that Whosoever shall discover the said Offenders so as that they be rendered to Justice, and by Law convicted of the said Crimes, such Persons shall have as a Reward for their good Service therein the Sum of Fifty Pounds, to be paid to them out of the Publick Treasury; and if any Person who has been concern'd in the said Facts or an Accomplice therein, (Whether Negro or otherwise,) shall make Discovery as aforesaid, he shall be pardoned & indemnified as to his said Offence, and notwithstanding entitled to the above-mentioned Reward.

Given at the Council Chamber in *Boston* the Fifteenth Day of *April*, 1723. In the Ninth Year of the Reign of Our Sovereign Lord **GEORGE**, by the Grace of **GOD** of *Great Britain, France and Ireland*, **KING**, Defender of the Faith, &c.

By Order of the Lieutenant
 Governour, with the Advice
 of the Council,

W. DUMMER.

Josiah Willard, Secr.

G O D Save the King.

BOSTON. Printed by *B. Green*. Printer to His Honour the Lieut. GOVERNOUR
 and COUNCIL. 1723.

Massachusetts colony's slave population grew from only 400 in 1690 to just over 800 in 1700.³⁰⁷ Given that there was "strength in numbers," Sewall feared that this "numerousness" would only increase the rebelliousness of slaves. He wanted white indentured servants to replace slaves in New England since it was his belief that inferior Africans could never be a part of the body politic. Finally, Sewall thought the moral and legal ambiguities surrounding human bondage would always result in whites feeling uneasy about the institution.³⁰⁸ Joshua Coffin seemed to agree with Sewall's analysis that a growing slave population was indeed a threat. By including the quote from Rev. Joseph Sewall's sermon in his work on slave revolts in the Americas, Coffin considered Boston's slave arson spree of 1723 along the lines of a slave insurrection; the sort of rebellion feared most by Samuel Sewall in 1700.³⁰⁹

Perhaps Boston's selectmen also viewed the series of fires as a slave rebellion. They commissioned a special report on April 19, 1723 which aimed to control the perpetrators of this wave of arson. Embodied in legislation known as the *Articles for the Better Regulating Indians, Negroes or Mulattoes* ("the Negro Act"), the report acknowledged the overriding fear of Boston's residents by first instituting a 9:00 p.m. curfew for enslaved blacks and Indian servants and then outlawing group meetings that could result in the planning of such arson attacks.

That if more than two Indians, Negro, or Mulatto servants or slaves be found in the streets or highways in or about the town, idling or lurking together unless in the service of their Master or Employer, everyone should be punished at the House of Correction.³¹⁰

And just in case, any blacks defied the prohibition against meeting together in groups and coordinated an arson attack, the Act also ordered fifty militiamen to be ready with arms upon a cry of fire lest the "...Negroes should make an attempt upon the lives of people who go to extinguish it." Additionally, the twenty-five watchmen of Boston were mandated to discover potential fires while they walked "...the streets, lanes and alleys..."³¹¹ The idea that unruly blacks would threaten whites on their way to fight fires seemed to reflect a deep-seated fear that went beyond the general concern over slave arson. Did white Bostonians really believe that blacks would attack them at a time when they were most vulnerable? That is, while they were running to put out dangerous fires. Those who were suspected of attacking defenseless whites also stood accused of looting the property of fire victims. To prevent the plundering of furniture and personal belongings, the following provision was included in the legislation.

³⁰⁷ Pierson, *Black Yankees*, 166-167.

³⁰⁸ Mark A. Peterson, "The Selling of Joseph: Bostonians, Anti-slavery and the Protestant International," *Massachusetts Historical Review*, vol. 4 (2002), 1-22.

³⁰⁹ Coffin, *An Account of Some of the Principal Slave Insurrections*, 12,

³¹⁰ *A Record of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston containing the Records of Boston's Selectmen from 1700 to 1728* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, City Printers, 1883), 175.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*

“That no Indian negro or mulatto shall be permitted to leave his master’s house upon the breaking out of a fire in the nighttime; nor should he be found in the street near the scene of a fire, upon pain of being arrested and sent to the common jail; and afterward whipped at the House of Correction.”³¹²

Such a prohibition sought to allay white fears of being attacked in route to burning fires as well as to protect them from the looting that commonly occurred during the course of a fire. Keeping persons of color off streets during fire emergencies was needed to reduce the number of slave arson fires. To their dismay, the town officials soon learned that even this restrictive legislation and armed military watches did not stop the arson activity of black incendiaries. Already restricted to their homes by 9:00 p.m. by local ordinance or at the breaking out of a fire, bondservants in New England were now prohibited from meeting in groups outside of their home.³¹³

Wealthy slaveholders in Roxbury were so bothered by the slave disturbances taking place in Boston, they petitioned the colony’s legislators at Massachusetts General Court for restraint to be exercised against the unruly blacks in their midst.³¹⁴ The legislature responded to this high powered request by appointing a Committee on June 7, 1723 to consider ways to control these wayward servants of color. The Committee report known as an *Act to Better Regulate Indians, Negroes and Mulattoes* took particular note of “...the great disturbances and grievous damage being done “...to his Majesties good subjects, more especially in the town of Boston...” The Committee report was not approved by the Council so the proposed legislation did not become law as was done in Boston in April, 1723. Commissioning such a report demonstrates, however; how Boston’s slave arson problem was serious enough for the colonial legislature to propose legislation on the matter.³¹⁵ Perhaps the elite gentlemen were afraid that the blacks in their town would take lessons from their countrymen in Boston and create their own rash of fires in Roxbury during the late night hours. They knew that the blacks in Roxbury were just as capable of setting deadly fires. At the older of these men remembered the infamous case of Mariah, the enslaved woman who set two houses ablaze in their town in 1681. In addition, Boston had already experienced the unruliness of Roxbury’s blacks. As early as 1712, the town’s selectmen instituted a special day watch of eight men along the Boston Neck and the highway leading to Roxbury in order to “...prevent loose vain people, negroes &c unnecessarily traveling or walking to and from Boston...on the Lord’s Day.”³¹⁶ One can only wonder if blacks from Roxbury were

³¹² The only exception was when their master’s house was on fire. Robert Means Lawrence, M.D., *New England Colonial Life* (Cambridge: Cosmos Press, 1927), 199-200. *Ibid.*

³¹³ *A Record of the Record Commissioners containing the Records of Boston’s Selectmen from 1700 to 1728* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, City Printers, 1883), 175.

³¹⁴ Among the slave owners from Roxbury signing the petition were Edward Ruggles, John Holbrook, James Jarvis and Ebenezer Don. Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England*, 133.

³¹⁵ Reintroduced on December 7, 1723, the proposed law died in the House once again. *Ibid.* 133-134.

³¹⁶ This special watch for Roxbury was reinstated as late as September 8, 1732. Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness: The First Century of Urban Life in America, 1625-1742* (New York: The Ronald Press, 1938), 215. *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston Containing Records of Boston Selectmen, 1716 to 1736* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1885), 223.

sneaking across the Boston Neck at night to help their countrymen set fires during the arson spree of the 1720s.

We do know that most of the perpetrators of these arson crimes during this most critical period were enslaved men. Only one report of a black female arsonist setting a fire during this time has been uncovered to date. A black woman was executed in Boston for setting fire to an occupied house in Boston in July 1723.³¹⁷ Relegated to domestic duties during the day, the only opportunity this woman had to participate in arson resistance was during the night. However, a woman's participation in nocturnal acts of arson was not easily accomplished since she still would have had difficulty leaving their residence. Enslaved women were just as subjected to a master's surveillance at night as they were during the day. All the slave owner or his family member had to do was to wake up as the woman attempted to leave the residence or engage in an act of arson.³¹⁸ Like the lone female arsonist in Boston in the 1720s, some enslaved women grew so desperate over their isolated and demanding work lives they set destructive fires to destroy the property of their masters. And despite no one dying or sustaining injuries, the woman in Boston was executed for setting a fire to a house occupied by sleeping residents.³¹⁹

Thus, it was imperative for slave owning families to closely monitor slaves in order to minimize the occurrence of deadly fires. Although night watches served an important function, it appeared that on-going surveillance was needed at all hours of the day. After all, fires were ignited during the day and the night. As discussed in Chapter Two, the fire that destroyed Mr. Bridge's outhouse was set at 6:00 a.m. on April 12, 1723.³²⁰ Hence, the destructive capacity of fire remained a concern of most Bostonians. Devastating conflagrations had plagued the town since the days of wooden houses and thatched roofs. Thus, residents were always on constant alert for any signs of fire. An arson law was adopted as early as 1652 because some of the earliest fires were believed to be the work of arsonists.³²¹ Having lived through the fiery destruction of King Philip's War in 1676 only heightened white New England's fear of fire. Add to this, the recurring fires intentionally set by African slaves and Indian servants. Slave owning families must have been particularly afraid of fires since they shared their homes with their bondservants. New England was not like the southern colonies where enslaved persons live in remote slave quarters some distance from the master's house. Therefore, these masters lived with the fear of disgruntled slaves torching the very house they occupied.

With the haunting specter of fire hovering over the town from this early period, the selectmen moved as early as March 12, 1677 to increase the number of fire patrols and bellmen required to give an alarm as they "...walk through and about town from 12 o'clock at night to 5 o'clock in the morning...in search of any...extraordinary light or fire in any house or vessel,"³²² So fearful of roaming incendiaries within their towns, the Massachusetts General Court issued the following resolution on October 10, 1677:

³¹⁷ Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Revolts* (New York: International Publishers, 1983), 140.

³¹⁸ The problems encountered by black female arsonists are discussed in detail in Chapter Three.

³¹⁹ Diego was also executed for setting fire to the Powell house when the family was sleeping.

³²⁰ For discussion of the Bridge fires see pages 35-36 in Chapter Two.

³²¹ Arthur Wellington Brayley, *A Complete History of the Boston Fire Department*, 5-6.

³²² Donald J. Cannon, ed., *Heritage of flames: The Illustrated history of early American firefighting* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), 13, 58-60.

Whereas many secret attempts have been made by evil-minded persons to set fire to the town of Boston and other places tending to the destruction and devastation of the whole; this Court doth account it their duty to use all lawful means to discover such person, and prevent the like for time to come.³²³

The legislators were in fear of the "...destruction and devastation..." left by fires such as the one that erupted at *Sign of the Three Mariners* ale house on August 7, 1679. Believed to be the work of "...secret and determined gangs of arsonists," the uncontrolled inferno destroyed about £200, 000 worth of property.³²⁴ The torching of houses in Roxbury and Northampton by Mariah and Jack in 1681 did little to alleviate this growing fear of fire. Clearly, the court found Mariah more culpable since she was indicted, prosecuted and sentenced within a matter of two months, however; they also believed her accomplices were involved on some level. Selling Mariah's conspirators off to the Caribbean reassured the white community that these individuals would never participate in such a heinous act in the colony of Massachusetts again.

More importantly, it appears that the colonial courts in New England saw little difference between accidental and intentional fire setting in cases involving enslaved persons. Within days of Mariah's indictment on September 13, 1681, an enslaved Jack from Wethersfield, Connecticut set fire to a house in Northampton, Massachusetts while swinging a lantern to look for food. In the end, the hungry bondsman was hung for this accidental mishap. By requiring Jack's dead body to be put in the fire that consumed Mariah, the white community made clear its zero toleration policy against acts of slave arson in the Massachusetts colony. Finding Jack guilty of felony arson and sentencing him to death sent an unequivocal message to the slave community that fires started by enslaved persons would be punished severely, even if they were accidental.

The execution of Jack also demonstrates how colonial law enforcement held enslaved persons to a different standard of culpability than that established for whites. In fact, no evidence has been uncovered to date of a white ever being executed for arson in New England, for either an accidental or an intentional fire. The few white indentured servants who were found guilty of arson were often sentenced to work an additional twenty-one years for burning another person's property. This was the exact punishment handed down to Henry Stevens after he set fire to his master's barn in 1640 as well as to a farmhand who burned a barn in Lynn, Massachusetts in 1679.³²⁵ Surprisingly, the white female servant who accidentally started the Cornhill Fire of 1711 that destroyed government buildings, churches and over one hundred houses was never

³²³ Paul C. Ditzel, *Firefighters, the Men, Equipment and Machines, from Colonial Days to the Present* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1976) 58.

³²⁴ Increase Mather spoke of the ale-house fire in a sermon after the catastrophic Cornhill fire of 1711. Increase Mather, *Burnings Bewailed in a Sermon Occasioned by the Lamentable Fire which was in Boston, October 2, 1711* (Boston: Timothy Green, 1711), 17. Samuel G. Drake, *History and Antiquities of Boston* (Boston: Luther Stevens, 1856), 431. Brayley, *A Complete History of the Boston Fire Department*, 13.

³²⁵ Robert C. Twombly and Robert H. Moore, "Black Puritan: The Negro in Seventeenth Century Massachusetts," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., Vol. 24, No. 2 (Apr. 1967), 234. Donald J. Cannon, ed., *Heritage of flames*, 60.

prosecuted.³²⁶ After being acquitted of willfully setting fire to a local jail in Boston in 1769, white individuals by the name of Badger, Donnelly and Carmichael were found guilty of the lesser misdemeanor charge for setting a fire with the intention to make their escape.³²⁷ Since Donnelly and Carmichael were of Irish origin, the evidence show that even the sometimes despised Irish received more leniency from New England's courts than enslaved Africans who committed accidental fires.

Found guilty for the serious crime of felony arson, Jack was sentenced to death and executed for an act that did not result in the death or injury to others. In stark contrast, the trio of white arsonists who committed a similarly destructive act of arson received a far lighter sentence.³²⁸ When Jack was ordered put to death, the court clearly overlooked the legal precedence of earlier rulings which handed down far lighter sentences for white defendants charged in these types of cases. Clearly, the standard of culpability that applied to whites in New England was not applicable to black bondservants who set fires in Massachusetts.³²⁹ One reason for the court's harsh ruling had to do with the timing of Jack's crime, just days after Mariah set fire to houses in Roxbury.

The burning of Mariah and Jack's lifeless bodies served two purposes for the white New England community. First, it was hoped that this extremely cruel execution had a deterrent effect on the slave community. The execution was to serve as a warning to other slaves that they would face the same severe consequences if they dared commit acts of such violent nature in the future. Deterring further acts of slave arson was so important to the white community that Jack was driven over a hundred miles from Northampton to Roxbury where he was hung and his lifeless body placed in the fire with Mariah. Interestingly, the execution also served a religious purpose in Puritan New England since it was believed that destruction of the physical body would prevent the reuniting of the body and soul in the resurrection.³³⁰ Most importantly, the execution needed to arrest further acts of slave arson.³³¹ However, not even these gruesome executions put an end to the incidents of slave arson in the New England.

Consequently as the seventeenth century neared its end, Boston found itself relying on other means to get its slave arson problem under control. In 1698 the town organized a military watch at night to monitor disturbances and arrest 'persons of ill repute' which would have definitely included unruly blacks. This legislation entitled "An Act of Watches in Towns" charged constables to question persons walking abroad after ten o'clock at night as to why they were outside. If a reasonable response was not forthcoming or the individuals were believed to be "...persons of ill behavior or justly suspected to have any unlawful intention or design," they

³²⁶ There was never anyone charged for the Great Fire of 1760 which destroyed over 174 houses and 175 warehouses at a loss of £100,000. Brayley, *A Complete History of the Boston Fire Department*, 5-6. Dennis Smith, *History of Firefighting in America*, 20.

³²⁷ *Boston Evening Post*, April 10, 1769, Issue 1750, page 3.

³²⁸ Edgar J. MacManus, *Law and Liberty in Early New England: Criminal Justice and Due Process, 1620-1692* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 33.

³²⁹ Edwin Powers, *Crime and Punishment in Early Massachusetts, 1620-1692, A Documentary History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966).

³³⁰ Howard W. Allen and Jerome M. Clubb, *Race, Class and the Death Penalty: Capital Punishment in American History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 39, 42.

³³¹ Massachusetts was not the only colony that handed down death sentences by burning to slaves who allegedly committed capital crimes. In New York, four Africans were burned at the stake for the 1712 Revolt and thirteen were burned alive following the Slave Arson Conspiracy of 1741. *Ibid.* 35.

were to be held in custody until morning.³³² Constables in Boston were to be on the lookout for all persons of questionable repute with an unlawful intention or design, including the settings of deadly fires.

Therefore, constables were also charged to walk their rounds within the town "...to prevent any danger of fire..."³³³ That is, they to watch for signs of developing fires such as the one that erupted on October 2, 1711. Unfortunately, this fire was not detected early enough and massive flames raged out of control for eight hours devouring almost the entire Cornhill section of residences, commercial establishments and government buildings including the original Town House where officials of the colony's government met. When the monstrous inferno finally died down at least a dozen people had lost their lives and more than one hundred houses were destroyed leaving hundreds of persons homeless.³³⁴

Within a month of this major disaster, Boston's selectmen divided the town into fire districts with units of volunteer firemen assigned to ten fire wardens. Deemed respectable members of the community, wardens were considered "...prudent persons of known fidelity..." At the cry of fire, these virtuous men took charge of all firefighting efforts from organizing the two-sided bucket brigade to dousing burning buildings in an orderly and efficient manner.³³⁵ By the early eighteenth century, fire wardens were also supervising the use of pumper-type fire engines equipped with manually operated brakes.³³⁶ Fire wardens called fire breaks when it was necessary to pull down or blow up burning buildings in order to stop fast-moving flames from spreading.³³⁷ Charged with protecting the property of fire victims, wardens oversaw the removal of household goods to prevent the looting the sometimes occurred in the chaos of fighting fires.³³⁸ Appointing fire wardens, utilizing fire engines and authorizing fire-breaks are examples of the improved methods and technology that the local town of Boston incorporated into their current firefighting practices. Without question, these improved methods of fighting fires were also applied to fighting intentional fires set by recalcitrant blacks and Indians.

One firefighting practice which was used to fight all types of fires during the early decades of eighteenth century was the mutual fire association. Surviving conflagrations in and around Boston made white inhabitants want to better protect their lives and property against fire. In 1718, a group of twenty residents got together to form the "Boston Fire Society, the first mutual firefighting organization organized by local town residents."³³⁹ These civic minded individuals who joined fire clubs made solemn promises to each other to rush to any fire erupting

³³² "An Act for Watches in Towns," Acts and Resolves, Public and Private of the Province of the Massachusetts Bay (November 26, 1698) vol. 70, p. 393

³³³ *Ibid.*

³³⁴ This type of accidental fire was preventable if flicker of flames had been detected before they spread out of control. Ditzel, *Firefighters, the Men, Equipment and Machines*, 21.

³³⁵ When a fire was sighted, someone cried out "throw out your buckets" for residents to toss out their three gallon personalized buckets to individuals running to the fire. Once at the fire, they divided themselves into two lines with one line filling the buckets with water from wells, pumps or rivers and the other tossing water unto the fire or into the pumper style engine. Smith, *History of Firefighting in America*, 4. *Ibid.* 10.

³³⁶ Robert S. Holzman, *The Romance of Firefighting* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956),

³³⁷ It is ordered that in case of fire breaking out in any part of the town, which may possibly threaten ruin to a great part thereof if not seasonable prevented by pulling down some house or houses. *Second Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, 1634-1660* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, City Printers, 1881), 150.

³³⁸ Ditzel, *Firefighters, the Men, Equipment and Machines*, 21.

³³⁹ The fire club formed in Boston in 171 was replicated in other New England towns and adopted in the middle and southern colonies. Peter Clark, *British Clubs and Societies, 1580-1800* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 87.

at the home of another member.³⁴⁰ Upon reaching a burning structure, members provided the secret watchword to verify their membership in the fire club. They then joined the bucket brigade while others began disassembling beds or attempting to salvage the belongings of the victimized member.³⁴¹ All of the equipment, leather buckets, bed keys and salvage bags belonging to a member had to pass inspection before quarterly meetings. Failure to keep your equipment in your possession or in good repair could result in a two shilling penalty for each bucket or bag not available. The penalties were applied because these items were essential for collecting water, dismantling beds and safeguarding personal property. The Articles of Agreements for each association used boiler plate language to lay out rules, financial duties and penalties applicable to members.³⁴² [See copy of the Rules and Orders of the Anti-Stamp Fire Society, 1763 on page 73]. Association members also had to pay assessments to defray expenses and failing to attend a meeting could result in a one shilling penalty.³⁴³

Very much like the political clubs of the day, fire clubs had both a social and business function. The business of the organization was firefighting and the protection of club members' property while the social dimension included the serving of food along with alcoholic beverages. Fire clubs had a leveling effect since men of all persuasions from wealthy merchants and shop keepers to artisans and laborers came together for the purpose of addressing the problem of arson in their local communities.³⁴⁴ With many of the repetitive fires attributed to enslaved persons in New England towns, slave owners saw the value in joining an organization of this nature. Unsurprisingly, membership rosters include the names of slaveholding families including Coffin, Lamb, Fanueil, Hatch, Gerrish, Gardner, Rowe and Vassall.³⁴⁵

With slave arson activity continuing in Boston through the latter part of 1723, even more enslaved persons faced arrest and punishment for this crime during such a tense time. One such act of arson included an incident when "...one or more wicked instruments..." tried to set fire to Mr. George Shore's house on Queen Street in Boston in October, 1723. The Shore family escaped injury since an ignited cartridge was discovered before it did extensive damage.³⁴⁶ The other New England colonies were not immune to fiery attacks during this period of intense slave resistance. A Negro boy who confessed to setting fire to Mrs. Yale's house in Wallingford, Connecticut was hauled off to jail in early November, 1723. The newspaper account indicated that a week before the Yale house was consumed a house in Wallingford and a house in Lime were both burned down on the same night.³⁴⁷

³⁴⁰ Members carried a book with the names and addresses of the houses and businesses of other members. Brayley, *Complete History of the Boston Fire Department*, 37.

³⁴¹ Stephanie Schorow, *Boston on Fire: A History of Fires and Firefighting in Boston* (Beverly, MA: Commonwealth Editions, 2003), 8-9.

³⁴² Articles of a Fire Club organized June 2, 1724 (Revised and Amended on December 7, 1743).

³⁴³ Brayley, *Complete History of the Boston Fire Department*, 37. *Ibid.*

³⁴⁴ Expenses for a fire club organized in 1753 included costs totaling over £15 for bottles of wine and bowls of punch. *Ibid.* 37-38.

³⁴⁵ Jabez Hatch and John Rowe were identified as active members of a fire club. The other names are individuals connected to families known to have owned slaves in colonial New England. The membership rosters of several fire clubs were cross-referenced with the List of Slaveholding Families in Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England*, 353-356.

³⁴⁶ *Boston News-Letter*, October 10, 1723 to October 18, 1723, Issue 1029, Page 2.

³⁴⁷ The Yales of New Haven were the relatives of Elihu Yale, the benefactor of Yale College. His parents, David and Ursula lived in Connecticut before settling in Boston where Elihu was born in 1649. However, the family returned to England when their son was three. Elihu amassed a large fortune working for the British East India

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RULES and ORDERS

TO BE OBSERVED BY THE

ANTI-STAMP FIRE SOCIETY,

Instituted in *Boston, October 1763.*

I.

THAT this Society consist of a Number not exceeding Thirty; and that the Times of Meeting be on every first Wednesday of *October, January, April, and July*, at such Place as the Clerk shall appoint: At which every Member shall attend, if in Town.

II.

THAT the List of Members be called at Eight o'Clock P. M. at every Meeting in *April and July*, and at Seven o'Clock in *October and January*.—If any Member be then absent, he shall pay a Fine of *One Shilling*; and if absent the whole Evening, *Six Shillings*.

III.

THAT a Clerk be always chose at the Meeting in *October*, whose Duty shall be to keep a fair Record of all the Proceeding of the Society:—To give Notice of each Meeting by leaving, or causing to be left, a Ticket at the usual Place
of

http://infoweb.newsbank.com.ezproxy.bpl.org/lw-search/wf/Evans/?p_product=EAI&p_theme=eal&p_nbid=SS7F53RGMTO... 1/2

Company in India where he also served as Governor of Fort St. George at Madras (Chennai). At the request of Rev. Cotton Mather, Elihu made a donation to the Collegiate School which later became known as Yale College in 1713. The Yales who were living in New Haven in 1723 appear to be the descendants of Elihu's uncle Captain Thomas Yale and his aunt, Anne Yale Hopkins, the wife of Governor Edward Hopkins. Elihu made generous donations to Yale College until his death in 1721. John Ward Dean, ed., *New England Historical Genealogical Register*, vol. 5 (Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, 1998 facsimile reprint), 83. www.biographybase.com/biography/Yale_Elihu.html. *Boston News-Letter*, November 14 to November 21, 1723, Issue 1034, page 2.

New England towns continued to battle intermittent fires at the hands of its slave population during the second half of the century. As slave arson fires burned, whites responded with certain ‘tried and true’ methods of crime reduction. They enacted additional laws to regulate black recalcitrance and reinforced night watches to better control these potential arsonists. One item that remained on the selectmen’s agenda in Boston was the monitoring of unruly slaves and servants who roamed the streets at night in violation of the 9:00 p.m. curfew. A Boston town meeting in June 1740 admonished their watchmen to exert themselves to restrain the rude and disorderly Negroes and Indians who take liberty to walk the streets after nine o’clock at night. Apparently, the orders were taken to heart since a free black man, John Wood, was bound, imprisoned and fined thirteen shillings by a watchman for violating the 9:00 p.m. curfew while returning from his day job in the evening.³⁴⁸ Unsurprisingly, the liberty of free blacks was often curtailed by the rules and regulations that controlled the lives of the enslaved population.

While Boston’s watchmen were on the look-out for black curfew-breakers, those in charge across the Charles River in Charlestown, Massachusetts were busy investigating a fire set at Mrs. Snowden’s home in Charlestown in August, 1741 that was discussed at length in the previous chapter. As soon as suspicious fires erupted in slave owning homes in New England, the officials went on high alert in search of the arsonists responsible for setting the fire. Not only were black suspects promptly identified and rounded up, they were swiftly indicted, prosecuted and executed by hanging or burning or they were banished from the colony. Having heard how the colony of New York experienced a rather frightening slave arson conspiracy just a few months earlier in March 1741 made some folks believe that the Snowden fire was part of a larger slave conspiracy to burn down the town of Charlestown. This put pressure on the authorities to identify and arrest the black culprits responsible for the fire. It did not take the authorities in Charlestown long to weed through the false accusations of other enslaved persons to not only indict and banish the slave woman Kate to the West Indies but to indict and sentence to death by burning an African boatswain who took responsibility for setting the Snowden fire.³⁴⁹

Fires of this nature could only be prevented if the inhabitants of New England continued their vigilant monitoring of the recalcitrant blacks within their midst. Such vigilance would require a more effective watch system as well as increased supervision by the town’s slave owners. When there was no end to the annoying traffic of black Sabbath-breakers from Roxbury by 1743, Boston moved to reinstitute the special day watch first enacted in 1712 and then again in 1732. This time constables were to supervise the eight additional watchmen assigned to the Boston Neck highway on Sundays.³⁵⁰ A Boston town meeting in 1747 reported how the riotous behavior of a motley mob of foreign sailors, servants and enslaved men put terror in the hearts of the public, including the Governor and members of the Council.³⁵¹ Similar disturbing disorders

³⁴⁸ *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston containing the Records of Boston Selectmen, 1737 to 1767* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, City Printers, 1885), 244.

³⁴⁹ *Boston Gazette*, September 28 to October 5, 1741, Issue 1023, Page 2. For discussion of the Snowden fire see pages 22-25 in Chapter Three.

³⁵⁰ *A Report of the Record Commissioners containing the Records of Boston’s Selectmen containing the Records of Boston’s Selectmen from 1737 to 1767* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, City Printers, 1885), 30, 242 and 244.

³⁵¹ The riot was in response to the continued impressments of colonists by the British Navy. *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston Containing Boston’s Town Records from 1742 to 1757* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1855), 127

involving enslaved persons was the topic of town meetings in New England including one held in Boston on March 11, 1750 which left unanswered the poignant question:

Whether any more effectual method than is already prescribed by law can be taken, to prevent the disorders that are frequently committed by Negroes in the Night?³⁵²

Charlestown, Massachusetts must have asked the same question a few months earlier since in 1749 at least three fires were attributed to enslaved women believed to be under the control of enslaved men.³⁵³ One of these fires was set by the disgruntled slaves of Captain John Codman in 1749 discussed at length in the previous chapter. Believing their master would sell them if his property was destroyed; Phillis, Phoebe and Mark conspired to set fire to the outbuildings on their master's estate. To their dismay, the Captain did not sell any of his slaves. Interestingly, this case was not handled like most other suspicious fires in New England. That is, the fire-setting trio was never investigated or prosecuted for their fire-setting crime. Rather, Phillis, Phoebe and Mark remained under their master's rule until joining forces for one last time to poison Captain Codman in 1755.³⁵⁴

While Charlestown investigated fires set by enslaved women at the direction of enslaved men in 1749, Boston dealt with yet another incident of arson attempt by a young slave girl. The girl attempted to blow up the house of her master, William Thomas by dropping a live coal into a cask of gunpowder.³⁵⁵ By 1749, the town was much better prepared for explosions of this kind. The Great Engine Company (Engine No. 1) with its seventeen firemen had been established in 1733 along with the six other fire companies. To ensure a more speedy response to erupting fires, town officials paid premiums in the amount of five pounds to the first fire company to arrive on the scene. As was the norm in colonial firefighting, the firemen who were first on the scene proceeding to douse flames with water while others removed furniture or pulled down houses to isolate the fire.³⁵⁶

Boston tried to minimize the potential damage of large fires by adopting state of the art firefighting technology and enforcing fire regulations which outlawed buildings over seven feet unless they were constructed of stone or brick with slate or tile roofs.³⁵⁷ These high standards must have had some impact since fewer fires erupted in Boston after 1750. In fact, Arthur W. Brayley, the Boston fire historian found that no major fires were reported from 1748 to 1753.³⁵⁸ Were the slave arson fires that were still occurring not considered major? Or were the fires not publicized to minimize the fears of white inhabitants? Despite the noted reduction in repetitive

³⁵² *Ibid.*, 193.

³⁵³ For more discussion of the Charlestown fires of 1749 see page 52-54 in Chapter Three.

³⁵⁴ Abner Cheney Goodell, Jr., *The Trial and Execution for Petit Treason, of Mark and Phillis* (Cambridge: University Press, 1883), 13. For a more detailed discussion of the Codman case see pages 52-54 in Chapter Three.

³⁵⁵ Only the young girl suffered injuries as a result of the explosion. Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England*, 154-155.

³⁵⁶ Brayley, *Complete History of the Boston Fire Department*, 40-41 and 51. Benjamin Carp, "Fire of Liberty: Urban Voluntary Culture and the Revolutionary Movement," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d. Series, vol. 58, no 4 (Oct., 2001), 783,795.

³⁵⁷ Paul C. Ditzel, *Firefighters, the Men, Equipment and Machines*, 14.

³⁵⁸ No major fires were recorded from 1748 to 1753. Brayley, *Complete History of the Boston Fire Department*, 54.

fires, the town of Boston remained vigilant about its fire prevention measures. Officials thought it prudent to increase the number of fire wards from eight to twelve in 1752.³⁵⁹ But even increasing the number of fire wards did not stop some slaves from setting dangerous fires. In 1753, a hired slave in Boston set fire to his master's house after physically assaulting a member of the household.³⁶⁰ Memories of slaves starting fires must have lingered in the minds of Bostonians and so, the selectmen voted in 1757 to re-enact the law to *Prevent Mischief and Danger from Indians, Negroes and Mulatto Slaves* continuing the ban against blacks and Indians strolling in the streets after 9:00 p.m. and on the Boston Common on Sundays.³⁶¹

The attention of Boston authorities was diverted from restricting blacks and Indians when in March 1760 a most dreadful fire destroyed 350 homes along with shops and warehouses valued from £100,000 to £300,000. The torrent of flames which burned for ten hours devoured the buildings and businesses located on twenty acres of the South End. All available resources from fire engine companies to private fire clubs were utilized to arrest the inferno. Although the cause of the fire remains unknown, it was clear that the practices honed from fighting dangerous fires over the years helped the town of Boston survive this monumental disaster.³⁶²

Within two years of the Great Fire of 1760, the attention of the authorities focused once again on the fire setting activities of blacks. Suspecting enslaved Africans played a role in starting illegal bonfires, an anti-bonfire law enacted in 1762 included a special provision punishing black offenders with up to ten stripes for violations of the statute. Fearful of any blacks who possessed the materials to set fires, the law indicated that any black who set an illegal bonfire was to be whipped rather than fined forty shillings or imprisoned for one month like white violators of the law.³⁶³

Newport, Rhode Island could have benefitted from precautions of this manner before a deadly fire set by a disgruntled slave Fortune destroyed the Long Wharf in 1762. Roaring flames raged for hours totally destroyed numerous warehouses, stores and tons of merchandise. While Boston had instituted precautionary measures such as night watches from as early as 1635, the town of Newport only used a bellman to alert the residents when fires were discovered.³⁶⁴ Not having a community watch system in place in the town may have allowed Fortune to return to the wharf at 10:00 p.m. undetected for the sole purpose of setting a fire to destroy Thomas Hazard's warehouse.³⁶⁵

With its history of recurring fires that were spontaneous or either set by rebellious Africans or Indians, the town of Boston found it necessary to continually expand its firefighting resources. Not only did the town continually upgrade its firefighting equipment, it also steadily added more firemen to fight fires. After the number of fire wards was increased from twelve to sixteen in 1763, the town added thirteen to twenty men to maintain a total of eight fire

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 55.

³⁶⁰ *Boston Gazette*, February 13, 1753, Issue 7, page 3.

³⁶¹ *A Report of the Record Commissioners containing the Records of Boston's Selectmen from 1742 to 1757* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, City Printers, 1885), 315

³⁶² Peter Charles Hoffer, *Seven Fires: The Urban Infernos that Reshaped America* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006), 38-39.

³⁶³ *Boston Post Boy*, October 18, 1762, Issue 270 and page 2.

³⁶⁴ Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness: The First Century of Urban Life in America, 1625-1742* (New York: Ronald Press Company, 1938), 219.

³⁶⁵ For discussion of Fortune's case see pages 10 -13 of Chapter One.

engines.³⁶⁶ And while Boston made significant advances in its ability to fight fires, there is no evidence that few New England communities followed suit. Some towns instituted fire prevention activities early on but others could not muster the resources needed to improve their firefighting methods until later in the eighteenth century.

Salem authorized its selectmen to take command at fires as early as 1679 but did not organize a fire club until 1744 or purchase a fire engine from England until 1767.³⁶⁷ It was only after 1750 that a number of New England towns organized mutual fire associations. The town of Newburyport organized the Dernier Resort Fire Society in 1760, the Marine Fire Society in 1775 and the Union Fire Club in 1783. Lacking up to date firefighting equipment and the organizational warden structure of Boston, many of these smaller towns battled intermittent incidents of slave arson with its limited firefighting resources until the dawn of the American Revolution. The communities of Rocky Hill, Fairfield, Middleboro and Stonington in Connecticut as well as West Greenwich, Rhode Island, Great Barrington, Massachusetts, and frontier Gardiner, Maine all used their limited firefighting resources to fight individual fires set by enslaved individuals from 1764 to 1772.

And despite Boston's notable advancements in the area of fire prevention, the town was still dealing with suspicious fires during the early days of the American Revolution. One newspaper article announced in 1773 that "...the town has been alarmed ten times with the cry of fire..." from Thursday to Sunday.³⁶⁸ It was also around this time that fire insurance companies issued its first policies insuring home owners against the loss or damage from fire. Interested parties could purchase policies at Mr. Price's Insurance office by 1773.³⁶⁹ The article that announced the availability of fire insurance at Mr. Price's reported the occurrence of five different fires which took place in Boston and Stonington, Connecticut. Complicating New England's problems with slave arson were the dangerous conflagrations now being set at the start of the American Revolution.³⁷⁰ What remains unknown is how many of the fires that were ignited during this later period were actually ignited by courageous African Americans who risked their lives fighting for the Patriots or for the British.

Conclusion

With a history of recurring dangerous fires dating back to the frontier days, Boston intensified its firefighting activities after a slave arson problem erupted in the 1720s. The slave insurrection waged by mostly enslaved black men appeared related to the increased importation of West Africans that arrived in New England by way of the Caribbean. Although unnerved by the rash of fires attributed to the Africans in their midst, civic minded whites reacted proactively

³⁶⁶ John Hancock and Samuel Adams were among the prominent individuals appointed as fire wards in Boston. Peter Hoffer, *Seven Fires*, 38-39 and 51. Stephaie Schorow, *Boston on Fire: A History of Fires and Firefighting in Boston* (Boston: Commonwealth Editions, 2003), 10-11.

³⁶⁷ Additional engines were purchased in 1788 and 1796. Joseph B. Felt, *Annals of Salem*, Vol. II (Salem: W. & S.B. Ives, 1849), 32, 366-369.

³⁶⁸ *The Massachusetts Spy or Thomas's Boston Journal*, February 25, 1773, Vol. II, Issue 108, Page 217.

³⁶⁹ *Boston Evening Post*, February 22, 1773, Issue 1952, Page 4.

³⁷⁰ The war had just started when it was reported that British regulars burned three houses, one barn, two shops and a mill house during the skirmish at Lexington, Massachusetts on April 19, 1775. "An Account of the Commencement of Hostilities between Great Britain and America in the Province of Massachusetts, *Pennsylvania Gazette*, June 7, 1775, Issue 2424, page 4.

by passing laws to better control its slave population, appointing fire wardens to supervise the firemen who operated the latest fire engines, forming private fire clubs to protect the life and property of members and the steadily increasing the number of common watchmen as well as instituting a military watch, if need be. Authorities also applied swift justice by arresting, indicting, prosecuting and often executing the most culpable defendants in slave arson cases. Leaders of the community tried to reassure an anxious public through sermons, proclamations and newspaper commentaries that their slave arson problem was under control. While surrounding New England towns like Charlestown, Newport and Roxbury never developed the firefighting capabilities of Boston, some towns did purchase fire engines and formed fire clubs while others instituted common watches and fire engine companies to confront their own slave arson problem. Although Boston's improved efforts did little to stop the slave arson spree of 1723, the continued building of fire-fighting resources appeared to have had a positive effect since the occurrence of deadly fires slowed during ensuing decades. Always on watch for disorderly slaves, Boston remained vigilant in its efforts to control the fire setting activity of its slave population. They continued passing laws, organizing watches and fire clubs while incorporating the most advanced firefighting technology until the start of the American Revolution. It was during the time of war that things became more muddled because fire setting was now part of the military maneuvers adopted by both the Patriot and British forces.

Epilogue

Only the Abolishment of Slavery Dimmed the Fires of Slave Arson

Although slavery was not abolished through active slave resistance in New England, it took a series of landmark judicial cases to effectively end the institution in the state of Massachusetts by 1783. The first of these cases granted freedom to an enslaved Elizabeth “Mum” Freeman from Berkshire County in 1781. Quock Walker from Worcester County received his freedom in the second case in 1783 on the basis of the equality granted in state constitution of 1780.³⁷¹³⁷² And not to forget Belinda, the elderly West African woman who understood enough about the transforming impact of the American Revolution to seek a pension from the Massachusetts legislature in 1782 for her fifty years of servitude to Isaac Royall, a wealthy Loyalist who left behind a substantial estate when he fled to Britain. The Gold Coast woman recalled in her petition for reparations how “armed bands of white men” permanently tore her away from her aged parents at the tender age of twelve. Figuring out that her master’s vast estate would be confiscated by the new republic; Belinda demanded compensation for the half century of her labor that was extracted during her enslavement in the Royall household. Belinda was one among many blacks in New England who understood that independence from England might bring an end to slavery.³⁷³

It is not known how many formerly enslaved persons in New England were manumitted, arranged self-purchase, were freed as children of free white or Indian women or were granted their freedom as a result of their service in the American Revolution in the period before the new nation was founded. However, the 1790 census which reported at least 13,059 free black persons living in New England in the post-war era included the almost 6,000 enslaved persons freed as a result of slavery being abolished in Vermont and Massachusetts beginning in 1770. Another 10,000 would be freed when New Hampshire begins to end slavery in 1784 and the gradual emancipation acts adopted in Rhode Island and Connecticut in the 1780s finally ends slavery in these two states by the 1840s.³⁷⁴

However, becoming free in New England rarely meant escaping poverty, discrimination, or injustice. Lorenzo Greene points out that free blacks “...continued in an inferior status” in communities that proscribed them socially, economically and politically. Custom in New Hampshire and Vermont specifically denied free blacks the right of suffrage and although the 1780 constitution of Massachusetts did not exclude blacks from voting, custom and tradition kept most free black men from voting in this state as well.³⁷⁵ Often warned out of the more

³⁷¹ Ray Raphael, *A People’s History of the American Revolution: How Common People Shaped the Fight for Independence* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001), 372.

³⁷² *Ibid.*, 135.

³⁷³ Belinda recalled living on the banks of Volta River which flows through present day Ghana. “Petition of an African Slave, to the Legislature of Massachusetts,” *The American Museum, or Repository of Ancient Fugitive Pieces, Prose and Poetical* vol. 1, no. 6 (June 1787): 538-40.

³⁷⁴ Another 10,000 plus would be emancipated through gradual emancipation in Rhode Island and Connecticut. Lorenzo Johnston Greene, *The Negro in New England, 1620-1776* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1966), 74.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 298, 302-303.

prosperous New England towns and relegated to the more menial and low paying positions in society, it was difficult for most free blacks to even make a decent living in New England. Free black men and women generally worked as hired domestic servants to local whites, including their former masters and mistresses. Free black men faced stiff competition from white laborers when they pursued skilled positions as barbers and blacksmiths. Although seafaring had long been an option to free and enslaved men in New England, the abolition of slavery in the northern colonies only made free black men vulnerable to being kidnapped and sold into slavery while on the high seas. Some free women worked independently as laundresses out of their homes or by selling provisions along the roadside.³⁷⁶

Therefore, the spirit of the laws that applied to both enslaved and free persons during the colonial period remained in effect long into the nineteenth century. For example, a 1706 Massachusetts law that outlawed marriage and intimacy across racial lines remained valid for many years to come. This same 1706 law also forbade any black from striking "...any person of the English or Christian nation" on pain of being severely whipped.³⁷⁷ So despite being insulted or physically assaulted at the hands of volatile whites, free blacks were forbidden to retaliate or return force with like force. Thus, when angry mobs of whites attacked free blacks in the streets of Boston in times of economic hardship following American Revolution, the victims had to flee since they could not legally fight back.³⁷⁸ There was no way of escaping these legal restraints in New England, whether the free person was black, Indian or mulatto, male or female. No longer burdened with hardships of slavery, persons of color still faced discrimination, extreme poverty, abusive whites and unsympathetic town authorities. Experiencing the harsh realities of life in freedom made a few free blacks turn to arson to protest the stress-related circumstances of their lives.

Lucy Pernam was a free black woman who made repeated threats of arson before actually setting a fire in Newburyport, Massachusetts in 1782. Born in slavery decades before the American Revolution, Lucy grew up as a slave neighboring Newbury. Like the other fifty persons of color living in Newbury in the middle of the eighteenth century; Lucy most likely came to Massachusetts by way of the vibrant maritime trade carried on with the West Indies from the adjacent seaport now called Newburyport.³⁷⁹ Having married Cook, a fellow slave of her master, John Little, Jr. on September 28, 1745, Lucy was a widow by the time she reached young adulthood.³⁸⁰

Lucy's early life in slavery was not unlike the female slave arsonists discussed in Chapter Three who grew so frustrated over their life situation in slave owning households that they set deadly fires. Living in Essex County in 1749, Lucy would have heard about the young enslaved girl, Nancy of Sudbury who set fire to the house of her master Philip Rowell and to the barn of neighbor, Jonathan Osgood.³⁸¹ There is no evidence that Mr. Little had other female domestics

³⁷⁶ Free black men had more opportunities to work as farm hands and as mariners on local and distant voyages. *Ibid.*, 305.

³⁷⁷ Acts and Resolves, Public and Private of the Province of the Massachusetts Bay, vol. I, Chapter 10 (December 5, 1706), p. 578.

³⁷⁸ Greene, *The Negro in New England*, 304.

³⁷⁹ Bounded by the Merrimac River on one side, Newburyport was incorporated as a town separate from Newbury in 1764. Joshua Coffin, *Sketches of Newbury, Newburyport and West Newbury, 1635 to 1845* (Boston: 1845), 27.

³⁸⁰ *Vital Records of Newbury, Massachusetts* – <http://ma-vitalrecord.org/MA/Essex/Newbury/aMarriageOt.shtml>

³⁸¹ For further discussion of the case of Nancy of Salisbury see page 12 in Chapter Three.

his home so after performing an array of domestic duties in her master's household, Lucy still had to perform the wifely duties of a married woman.

Lucy endured the stress of slavery and widowhood after the death of her first husband. This stress would decrease somewhat after she married her second husband, Robert Robin, a free black laborer and land owner in Newbury sometime before 1755. Robert sold a portion of the unimproved land he owned in frontier New Hampshire to purchase Lucy's freedom sometime during the marriage.³⁸² Inheriting the remainder of her husband's estate of land, cash and goods valued at £202 upon his death on February 1, 1761 Lucy was in a better position than most free black women in her community. Thus, Lucy had financial assets when she was married for the third time to a free black man named Scipio Pernam.³⁸³ Both she and her inherited property came under Scipio's control at the time of their betrothal because coverture was the law of the land.³⁸⁴

Unsurprisingly, this property was a source of friction between the free black couple. Scipio, for all intended purposes, admitted to beating Lucy for making repeated demands for money. Unable to access her own funds, the marriage grew even more turbulent after Lucy took to night walking and experimenting with prostitution. So, in addition to being whipped by Scipio for her wayward ways, the town authorities in Newburyport also apprehended this 'sometimes lady of the night' for her promiscuous behavior and her violations of the 9:00 p.m. curfew law applicable to both free and enslaved Africans. The punishment meted out to Lucy included being flogged and thrown into jail or being sent to the House of Correction. Not unlike her life in slavery when she, as all other slaves, was vulnerable to beatings by domineering masters, Lucy found herself subjected to continued physical abuse even as a free person.

Believing she was unfairly targeted by town officials in Newburyport, Lucy often made loud and boisterous threats "to burn down the town."³⁸⁵ Just as the officials focused on blacks as the suspects in suspicious fires during the colonial period in New England, these authorities focused on Lucy's threatening behavior while looking the other way when it came to Scipio's regular spousal abuse. He could get away with physically assaulting Lucy because both black and white husbands alike had wide latitude to discipline unruly spouses. Unfortunately, women were only given legal protection when the abuse physically threatened their lives.³⁸⁶ Free to treat his wife as he pleased, Scipio took his mistreatment to an unimaginable level. Like the master who could not control an unruly slave, Scipio sold his legally free wife Lucy to a local resident who after witnessing her out of control behaviors sold her to someone in New York.³⁸⁷ Having lived through the trials of slavery during the early part of her life, Lucy's strength and resilient spirit helped her survive enslavement for a second time. This free woman of color did not rest

³⁸² Catherine Adams and Elizabeth H. Pleck, *Love of Freedom: Black Women in Colonial and Revolutionary New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 55.

³⁸³ *Vital Records of Newbury, Massachusetts* – <http://ma-vitalrecord.org/MA/Essex/Newbury/aMarriageOt.shtml> *Ibid.*

³⁸⁴ As a *femme covert* or covered woman, a woman's property became the husband's except for real property brought to the marriage. Although still owned by the wife, the real property came under the management of the husband. Carol Berkins, *Revolutionary Mothers: Women in the Struggle for American Independence* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 5-6.

³⁸⁵ Catherine Adams and Elizabeth H. Pleck, *Love of Freedom: Black Women in Colonial and Revolutionary New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 56.

³⁸⁶ The laws in Massachusetts punished a husband for undue severity toward their wives. *Ibid.*, 55.

³⁸⁷ Men sold their wives in England as a form of informal divorce. *Ibid.*, 58.

until she found her way back to freedom in Massachusetts. Always able to find the community resources she needed, Lucy secured legal counsel and divorced Scipio once back in Newburyport. Unable to gain custody of her daughter in the divorce, however; Lucy spent fruitless years trying to obtain alimony payments from a non-compliant Scipio.

Frustrated and angry about these continuing difficulties in her life, Lucy resorted to her former refractory ways. Finding it increasingly hard to contain her rage, Lucy exhibited these abnormal behaviors for the next fifteen years while living between Essex County and Boston. At the onset of the American Revolution, she was imprisoned in Boston with thieves and prisoners of the war for swearing and threatening to burn down that town. Warned out of Boston after the war, Lucy found herself back in prison in Newburyport until released to an individual paid to house her. Unsurprisingly, her threats of arson were eventually realized when she was charged with burning down a widow's barn full of hay in Rowley, Massachusetts in 1782. Resourceful as ever, Lucy found an attorney who helped her obtain an acquittal of these arson charges. Even after the acquittal, Lucy continued her incendiary ways. While bound in chains, the black female arsonist set fire to the hay in the prison cage that confined her in Newburyport in 1787. It is not known whether the sturdier cage built to contain Lucy remained her prison until the time of her death in 1793.³⁸⁸

With the abolishment of slavery in the state of Massachusetts, reports of fires being set by black persons in this manner appears to have declined precipitously across New England. The decrease in these incidents appear related to the movement toward ending slavery even if it was only on a gradual basis. The American Revolution and the founding of the new nation gave enslaved blacks in New England a hope that freedom was on the horizon. As early as 1765 during the Stamp Act protests, young enslaved men were involved along with sailors and young white boys in burning the *Maidstone*, a British boat that was docked in Newport.³⁸⁹ Of course, there were also the occasional unexplained fires that may or may not have been accidental. This was the case in March, 1788 when a fire was discovered in a wooden building in Boston where 40 to 50 Negroes had congregated for undisclosed reasons. Enslaved blacks in New England stole away from their masters and the demands of work to interact socially during an occasional frolic.³⁹⁰ The intermittent fires that took place during the post-Revolutionary period sometimes occurred in conjunction with the crime of theft. In 1792, a mulatto man from New York named Dick Gould confessed to setting fire to an unoccupied private residence that he burglarized in Middletown, Connecticut.³⁹¹ In March of 1797, Doctor Lathrop reported in a public lecture in Boston that a former black servant of Samuel Goldsbury broke into his home and stole pieces of plate and other articles before setting a fire to the occupied residence.³⁹²

Many of the incidents of slave arson that occurred during this later period were witnessed in northern states where slavery continued to rear its ugly head until way into the nineteenth century. New Jersey, the lone northern state that did not end slavery until the Civil War, had a continuing problem with black arsonists from as early as 1741 when several slaves were burnt at

³⁸⁸ *Vital Records of Newbury, Massachusetts* – <http://ma-vitalrecord.org/MA/Essex/Newbury/aBurialsOt.shtml>. *Ibid.*, 54-60.

³⁸⁹ *Newport Mercury*, June 10, 1765, Issue 353, page 3.

³⁹⁰ While the newspaper article does not explain why so many blacks gathered at this old house, it can be assumed that the gathering was social in nature. *American Herald*, March 3, 1788, Vol. 7, page 3.

³⁹¹ *The Argus*, March 30, 1792, Page 2.

³⁹² *Doctor John Lathrop's Discourse Delivered at the Public Lecture in Boston*, March 16, 1797, Page 22-23.

the stakes for setting fire to eight barns to as late as 1788 when a young black boy set fire to his master's barn.³⁹³

The state of New York where over 23,000 persons of African descent remained in bondage in 1790 had its own share of slave arson fires.³⁹⁴ A most destructive fire that burned down a significant portion of Albany, New York in 1793 is an example of an arson event perpetrated by enslaved blacks during the post-Revolutionary period.³⁹⁵ Although slavery was legally over in Massachusetts in 1783, the institution was very much alive in colony of New York when this devastating fire erupted.³⁹⁶ Not unlike New England's small slave population, only 600 enslaved persons of African descent toiled as domestic servants, farmhands in hemp and tobacco fields, fishermen and iron, mill and lumber workers in the city of Albany.³⁹⁷ When the British gained New Netherland in 1664, not only was the name of the colony changed to New York but a harsher system of slavery was immediately put in place.³⁹⁸ The English enacted the Duke Law in 1665 which subjected Africans to lifetime servitude thereby closing off former avenues of emancipation that were available under the Dutch. Other laws prohibited blacks from visiting taverns and selling goods to residents of the town. A severe law in 1705 punished runaways with death for running more than forty miles from Albany to Saratoga Springs. After the 1741 Slave Conspiracy in New York City enslaved persons in Albany could no longer retrieve water from city wells or the Hudson River nor could they meet in groups of three while running errands.³⁹⁹ Was this law enacted because of fears of enslaved persons poisoning the water or to deter the planning of acts of resistance when slaves met at the town's wells? Jill Lepore's classic work *New York Burning* suggests that enslaved persons planned acts of resistance in New York City in 1741 at wells in downtown Manhattan.⁴⁰⁰

The slave arson incident in Albany was similar, in some respects, to the incident that involved the Codman slaves in Charlestown in 1755. Both fires were ignited by an enslaved trio consisting of a man and two women. Whereas Mark relied on Phillis and Phoebe to provide live coals in the Codman fire, it was Pompey or Pomp who solicited Dinah (aka Dean) and Bet for

³⁹³ *Boston Evening Post*, May 11, 1741, Issue 301, Page 1. *The Berkshire Chronicle*, November 27, 1788, Issue 30, Page 2.

³⁹⁴ "Schedule of the Whole Number of Persons in State of New York," *Albany Gazette*, July 25, 1791, page 2.

³⁹⁵ Don R. Gerlach "Black Arson in Albany, New York: November 1793," *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 7, no. 3 (Mar., 1977).

³⁹⁶ A Gradual Emancipation Act freed enslaved children born after July 4, 1799 but kept boys in indentured servitude until age 28 and girls until age 25. All enslaved persons were finally freed in New York by 1827. Edgar J. McManus, *Black Bondage in the North* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1973), 177.

³⁹⁷ The 1790 census indicates that there were 572 enslaved blacks out of a total population of 3,498 in city of Albany while there were 3,929 enslaved blacks out a total of 75, 921 in the county of Albany. Bradford Verter, "Interracial Festivity and Power in Antebellum New York: The Case of Pinkster." *Journal of Urban History*, vol. 28, no. 4 (May 2002), 398-428. Oscar Williams, "Slavery in Albany, New York, 1624-1827, *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History*, July 2010, vol. 34, no. 2, 157-158

³⁹⁸ Half-freedom was a modified system of manumission instituted in 1640 whereby Dutch West India Company slaves were freed and allowed to work for themselves. Their freedom was contingent on their working as wage laborers when the Company needed them and their paying a yearly monetary tribute to the Company. *Ibid.*, 72-73.

³⁹⁹ Oscar Williams, "Slavery in Albany, New York, 1624-1827, *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History*, vol. 34, issue 2 (July 2010), 161-162.

⁴⁰⁰ See page 14 of this chapter for a more detailed discussion of the New York Slave Conspiracy of 1741.

that role in Albany.⁴⁰¹ Pompey's comment that he did not believe "...he could sneak the coals out of his mistress' kitchen" demonstrate the important role that enslaved women played in retrieving coals to set fires.⁴⁰² Both Mark and Pompey needed the assistance of female bondservants to put their arson plans into action. While it is believed that Phillis, Phoebe and Mark carried out their schemes to end the harsh treatment of a rigid slave master, the evidence suggest that Dinah, Bet and Pompey were driven by monetary gain. They were reportedly promised a gold watch to set fire to Leonard Gansevoort's stable. It appears that the enslaved trio in Albany was easily recruited to commit an act of arson against an unknown white individual with only a promise of monetary compensation. It is not unreasonable that enslaved blacks held a great deal of animosity against whites in general, especially those who were wealthy and prestigious. Thus, it did not take much convincing to solicit their participation in such a fiery scheme. This arson scheme was said to be the brainchild of a white individual or individuals named Bessbrown or Sanders who were political rivals of Leonard Gansevoort, a merchant, Federalist and the First Judge of Albany County.⁴⁰³ Remarkably, the white individual or individuals who solicited Pompey were never identified or prosecuted during the trial.

The fire in Albany raged uncontrollably for at least eight hours devouring dwelling houses, stores, stables in the portion of the city bounded by Market Street and State Streets as well as Maiden and Middle Lanes. Finally extinguished by the next morning, a large part of the city was left in ruins with damages estimated to be between £100,000 and £250,000.⁴⁰⁴ When the embers finally died down the officials went into action arresting a number of enslaved persons, including those mistakenly targeted as suspects. In addition, a 9:00 p.m. curfew was enacted for all blacks and mulattoes within the city. Like enslaved persons New England during the previous century, bondservants in Albany were now subjected to fines and imprisonment if they did not provide a reasonable explanation for being out past 9:00 p.m.⁴⁰⁵ Those enslaved in Albany were consequently subjected to more repressive laws as a result of the fire of 1793.

Outlawing Pinkster celebrations later in 1811 would only add to the stringent treatment of enslaved persons in Albany since it put an end to an African-centered cultural event that had been enjoyed by blacks and whites in the community since early in the eighteenth century.⁴⁰⁶ Slaves in Albany were also subjected to a gradual emancipation law that kept many of them in servitude from 1799 to 1827. Sarah Levine of the University of Pennsylvania provides examples

⁴⁰¹ Pomp was owned by Matthew Visscher, Dinah was owned by Voulkert Douw and Bet was owned by Philip Van Rensselaer of the wealthy Dutch family who settled in Albany in the 1600s. Oscar Williams, "Slavery in Albany, New York, *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* Vol. 34, Iss. 2 (July 2010), 156.

⁴⁰³ Don R. Gerlach, "Black Arson in Albany, New York: November 1793," *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (March, 1977), 304.

⁴⁰⁴ Since there were only two fire engines for this city of 5,000 residents, men, women and children formed bucket brigades bringing water to and from wells or pumps in order to contain deadly conflagrations. Joel Munsell, *Collections of the History of Albany from its Discovery to the Present Time*, Vol. II. *Ibid.*, 305.

⁴⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰⁶ Pinkster Day, a syncretized celebration which combined African and Dutch cultural elements, was enjoyed by Albany from before the English takeover in 1664. The four day event which featured African drumming, dancing and circus like tent shows was a welcome break for the enslaved population. A highlight of the activities was the grand entrance of King Charles, the designated African ruler of the Albany slave community, who joined in with the drumming and dancing after collecting tributes from blacks and whites alike. Bradford Verter, "Interracial Festivity and Power in Antebellum New York: The Case of Pinkster." *Journal of Urban History*, vol. 28, no. 4 (May 2002), 398-428.

of two young black females who were accused of arson in 1811 while being held in servitude as a result of gradual emancipation laws in a chapter of her unpublished dissertation. Charlotte who reported having tried to run away because she was whipped was found guilty of arson and imprisoned for twelve months after setting fire to her master's barn. While nine year old Rose, who had been torn from her mother and also beat by her master, confessed to "...taking a stump of fire out of the kitchen and carrying it to Mr. Haines's stable."⁴⁰⁷ Young black servant girls in New York were not the only individuals setting fires during the antebellum period of the nation.

In his lecture in Boston in 1797, Dr. Lathrop took note of the occasional fires in New England as well as the "...late devastations by fire, in several of the southern states...occasioned by some wicked persons."⁴⁰⁸ The doctor was correct to conclude that slave arson remained where slavery was left intact in the country. With a slave population of over 100,000 persons of African descent in South Carolina in the 1790s, the principal seaport town of Charlestown was plagued with recurring fires believed to be set by recalcitrant slaves during most of the eighteenth century.⁴⁰⁹ In fact, the town was swept up with fire from 1779 to 1798. The article discussing the fire in 1779 reported that "...an attempt had been made several times to set Charlestown on fire."⁴¹⁰ The attempts by enslaved Africans to destroy Charlestown would not end until slavery was finally extinguished by the bloody Civil War in 1865.

Without question, slaves continued to set fires in other southern states including North Carolina where whites expressed a fear of fire during an insurrection planned in 1792 and Virginia where a rather serious slave arson fire took place in Richmond in 1796 and in Fredericksburg in 1799.⁴¹¹ And not to forget the fires allegedly planned by the disciples of Gabriel Prosser in Richmond, Virginia during the slave conspiracy that never took place or the attempts to set Petersburg, Virginia on fire even when armed guards patrolled the town in 1820.⁴¹² The fires that ignited in Huntsville, Alabama and Augusta Georgia in 1829 were also thought to be the work of black incendiaries. States in the upper south did not escape the vengeance of roaring flames because fifty blacks were arrested for setting two houses on fire in Cambridge, Maryland in 1830. Slave arson was also a societal menace in the southwest where fires of a malicious design destroyed property worth \$300,000 in New Orleans, Louisiana in 1830.⁴¹³

Unlike the slave states in the United States, it took massive slave insurrections to finally destroy the institution of slavery in the West Indies by 1833. Starting with the most well-known and successful slave insurrection waged by almost a half million revolting black and colored inhabitants in San Domingue who used fire throughout the rebellion to destroy extensive numbers of sugar plantations and sugar cane fields across the island from 1791 to 1804. In

⁴⁰⁷ Sarah Levine-Gronningsater, "Delivering Freedom, Gradual Emancipation, Black Legal Culture and the Origins of Sectional Crisis in New York, 1759 – 1870, Unpublished Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, page 17-18,

⁴⁰⁸ Dr. Lathrop expressed the fear that these incendiaries were relocating from the south to Boston, *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁰⁹ There were only 35, 576 whites living in South Carolina in 1792. *Massachusetts Spy*, March 22, 1792, vol. 21, Issue 990, Page 3.

⁴¹⁰ The two black arson suspects were burnt to death while the two white suspects were hung. *The Independent Chronicle and the Universal Advertiser*, June 17, 1779, vol. 11, Issue 565, Page 3. Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, 217-218,

⁴¹¹ *The Weekly Museum*, August 11, 1792, Issue 222, Page 3. Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, 217-218.

⁴¹² One hundred and thirty were arrested and forty-nine were condemned to die. Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, 271.

⁴¹³ *Ibid.*, 281-282.

regards to the reporting of the rebellion in the United States, news accounts indicating that “the negroes still burning and destroying the country,” were repeated in newspaper articles during the entire rebellion.⁴¹⁴ Surely, the slave rebellion that began in Barbados in 1816 which was crushed by the local militia and British troops after 4 days of combat must have included incidents of slave arson.⁴¹⁵ And the deadly rebellion in Jamaica led by Samuel Sharpe in 1831 which started out as a peaceful labor strike and evolved into a deadly rebellion which burnt sugar cane fields, houses and warehouses worth millions of dollars. Over two hundred enslaved Africans and fourteen whites lost their lives during the Jamaican rebellion of 1831 while 700 Africans were subsequently arrested and 138 were executed. Although British troops put down the rebellion after ten days, complete order was not restored until 1832. Such a deadly slave revolt undoubtedly led to the abolishment of slavery in the British West Indies by 1833.⁴¹⁶ Thus, the message comes forth loud and clear that slave arson remained an obtrusive societal problem across the Atlantic world, including in New England, as long as chattel slavery denied persons of African descent their basic rights and liberties. Thus, the ending of slavery in New England beginning in the 1770s brought a noticeable decline in the fires set by African Americans. Unfortunately, it would take a very bloody Civil War to totally end slavery in the United States. The death knoll that sounded for American slavery in 1865 brought an end to the use of arson as a weapon of slave resistance

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⁴¹⁴ *Massachusetts Spy*, February 16, 1792, vol. 20, Issue 985, Page 3.

⁴¹⁵ Other slave arson incidents took place in Barbados including that of a black domestic servant who set fire to her bed before running away in November, 1815. Hilary Beckles, *Natural Rebels: A Social History of Enslaved Women in Barbados* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 164, 171.

⁴¹⁶ *The Abolition Project* (Hertfordshire, UK: East of England Broadband Network, 2009). www.abolition.e2bn.org

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Rhode Island Historical Society

Malbone Family Collection, 1728-1828 (#MSS-549)

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Appendix A: List of Slave Arson Fires in Colonial New England, 1657-1797

1657	unnamed Indians and Negroes	Hartford, CT	
Oct, 1677	Joseph & Salvadore found not guilty of setting fire	Providence, RI	
July 12, 1681	Mariah, Chefaleer & Cuffee charged for burning two houses	Roxbury, MA	
July 14, 1681	Jack, African servant of Samuel Woolcot	Wethersfield CT	
Sept. 14, 1685	Indian jailed for burning Medfield Mill	Marlborough, MA	
Nov. 6, 1705	Rochester executed for firing Mrs. Savage's house	Boston, MA	
April 1, 1709	Slave girl Sabina blows up house & kills Magistrate Saltonstall	Haverhill, MA	
June, 1722	Indians burn several houses and sloops	MA	
April 2, 1723	Diego, African servant made two attempts	Boston, MA	
April 15, 1723	African servants pursued but escaped	Boston, MA	
April 15, 1723	African servants pursued but escaped	Boston, MA	
April 22, 1723	African servant absconded before arrest	Boston, MA	
July 4, 1723	Slave woman executed setting fire to house with occupants sleep	Boston, MA	
May 6, 1723	Five blacks and one white jailed for burning Mr. Bridge's barn	Boston, MA	
October 1723	Wicked instruments set fire to Mr. George Shore's houes	Boston MA	
November 1723	Negro boy confessed to setting Mrs. Yale's house on fire	Wallingsford, CT	
Feb. 2, 1730	Reuben escapes from jail and sets fire to the jail on his return	Salem, MA	
Aug. 9, 1730	African servant set fire after causing death of his master's son	Malden MA	
Nov.4, 1730	Indian Julian accuses enslaved Jeffrey of setting fires	Bridgewater, MA	
Oct. 14, 1734	Answer jailed but acquitted for setting fire to Isaac Bemis house	Boston, MA	
June 7, 1736	African servant jailed for setting fire to the Copeland house	Boston, MA	
Sept. 28, 1741	Kate & African boatswain arrested for Snowden house fire	Charlestown, MA	
April 27, 1747	African servant blew up Holmes house after assault with a knife	Newport, RI	
March 22, 1748	Nancy burns house of master and barn of neighbor	Salisbury, MA	
Feb. 13, 1749	African servant absconded after setting fire to Midway Mtg house	Boston, MA	
June 26, 1749	Young enslaved girl dropped a live coal in gunpowder	Boston, MA	
1749	Phillis & Mark set fire 6 yrs before poisoning Codman	Charlestown, MA	
1749	Four fires set by "young slave women set on by slave men"	Charlestown, MA	
Feb. 13, 1753	Hired slave set fires and commits suicide after knife assault	Newport RI	a
Jan. 24, 1760	African woman burned ropewalk, two barns & wanted to get house	Middletown, CT	
Feb. 2, 1762	Fortune set fire to Hazard warehouse and burns Long Wharf	Newport RI	
July 30, 1764	African servant dies after blowing off Mr. Brandigee's roof	Rocky Hill, CT	
June 10, 1765	Negro and white boys joins sailors to burn British ship, <i>Maidstone</i>	Newport, RI	
1766	Hazard kills horse, poisons coffee & sets house on fie	Gardiner, ME	
Sept. 14, 1767	African woman accused of willingly burning the Ingersoll house	Great Barrington, MA	
Feb. 6, 1769	Indian woman arrested for setting fire to Jeremiah Miller's barn	New London, CT	
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July 29, 1771	14 year old African boy confessed to killing animals in a barn	Fairfield, CT	
1772	Caesar sets a couple of fires	Newbury, MA	
March 22, 1772	African servant Primus sets several fires after attacking wife	Newport RI	
Feb. 15, 1773	African boy burned Thos, Randall barn; tired of tending creatures	Stonington, CT	
Oct. 28, 1777	Report of fire set by enslaved man of Parson Theophilus Hall	Wallingsford, CT	
1787	Free black Lucy Pernam sets fire to jail cage	Newburyport, MA	
March 3, 1788	Group of 40 to 50 blacks cause a fire to ignite in a wooden building	Boston, MA	
March 30, 1792	Dick Gould, a mulatto sets sets fire to unoccupied during burglary	Middletown, CT	
March 16, 1797	Servant of Samuel Goldsbury sets fire to an occupied during a the	Boston, MA	

