



The New York Conspiracy: “These black seed of Cain” (1741)

In 1741, authorities in New York City became convinced that they had uncovered a white-led conspiracy to foment a slave uprising, based principally on testimony provided to them by 16-year-old Mary Burton, a white indentured servant. Initially Burton accused her master, white tavernkeeper John Hughson, of leading the conspiracy, though she later changed her story to make Hughson the subordinate of a new white suspect (a man whom Burton claimed was secretly a Catholic priest). Today, Burton is believed to have fabricated and re-fabricated her accusations to align with the evolving paranoid suspicions of the investigating magistrates.

In total, 20 whites and more than 150 blacks were arrested on suspicion of participating in the purported conspiracy. Many confessed to the accusations against them, thereby escaping the threat of a death sentence. The hunt for conspirators continued until Burton began accusing members of New York’s elite, at which point the investigation was shut down. Still, over 100 people, the vast majority of them black, were burned alive, hanged, banished, or transported to other colonies.

The following selections from the trials of some of the accused conspirators illustrate different ways that Christianity was linked to the subjugation of black people in colonial New York. Quack and Cuffee were enslaved blacks accused of setting fire to buildings at John Hughson’s instigation; they denied the charge but were found guilty and burned at the stake. Hughson, his wife, and their daughter likewise pleaded innocent but were convicted. Hughson and his wife were hanged, but their daughter secured a pardon by confessing and turning state’s evidence.

1. The trial of Roosevelt’s Quack and Philipse’s Cuffee

Closing statement to the jury, by prosecutor William Smith

Gentlemen, the prisoners have been indulged with the same kind of trial as is due to free men, though they might have been proceeded against in a more summary and less favorable way. The negro evidence, in the manner in which it has been produced, is warranted by the act of assembly that has been read to you;^a the law requires no oath to be administered to them, and indeed it would seem to be a profanation of it to administer it to a Heathen in the legal form. You have seen that the court has put them under the most solemn caution that their small knowledge of religion can render them capable of. The being and perfections of an almighty, all-knowing, and just God, and the terrors of an eternal world, have been plainly laid before them and strongly pressed upon them. Unless they were professed Christians and had taken upon them the bonds and obligations of that religion, their word, with the cautions that have been used, I suppose will be thought by you as satisfactory as any oath that could have been devised. But, gentlemen, the court has no power to administer an oath but in the common form, and if Pagan negroes could not be received as witnesses against each other without an oath in legal form, it is easy to perceive that the greatest villainies would often pass with impunity.

^a *Some black witnesses had testified in court against Quack and Cuffee, but they had not been sworn in before testifying, as witnesses normally would have been. Smith is reminding the (all-white) jury that this procedure was consistent with New York law.*

Before I conclude, I cannot help observing to you, gentlemen, that by divers parts of the evidence, it appears that this horrid scene of iniquity has been chiefly contrived and promoted at meetings of negroes in great numbers on Sundays. This instructive circumstance may teach us many lessons, both of reproof and caution, which I only hint at and shall leave the deduction of the particulars to everyone’s reflection.

Gentlemen, the monstrous ingratitude of this black tribe is what exceedingly aggravates their guilt. Their slavery among us is generally softened with great indulgence; they live without care and are commonly better fed and clothed, and put to less labor, than the poor of most Christian countries. They are indeed slaves, but under the protection of the law; none can hurt them with impunity. They are really more happy in this place than in the midst of the continual plunder, cruelty, and rapine of their native countries; but notwithstanding all the kindness and tenderness with which they have been treated amongst us, yet this is the second attempt of the same kind that this brutish and bloody species of mankind have made within one age.^b That justice that was provoked by former fires, and the innocent blood that was spilt in your streets, should have been a perpetual terror to the negroes that survived the vengeance of that day and should have been a warning to all that had come after them. But I fear, gentlemen, that we shall never be quite safe till that wicked race are under more restraint or their number greatly reduced within this city.

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2. The trial of John Hughson, wife Sarah, and daughter Sarah

Sentencing statement, by judge Frederick Philipse

John Hughson and you, the rest of the prisoners at the bar:

You are now brought before this court to receive that sentence which the law has appointed for your offences, though I cannot say the punishment is adequate to the horrid crimes of which you stand convicted. The Roman commonwealth was established some hundred years before any law was made against parricide, they not thinking any person capable of so atrocious a crime; yours are indeed as singular and unheard of before. They are such as one would scarce believe any man capable of committing, especially anyone who had heard of a God and a future state. For people who have been brought up and always lived in a Christian country, and also called themselves Christians, to be guilty not only of making negro slaves their equals but even their superiors, by waiting upon, keeping with, and entertaining them with meat, drink, and lodging—and what is much more amazing, to plot, conspire, consult, abet, and encourage these black seed of Cain to burn this city and to kill and destroy us all—good God! When I reflect on the disorders, confusion, desolation, and havoc which the effect of your most wicked, most detestable and diabolical councils might have produced (had not the hand of our great and good God interposed), it shocks me!—for you, who would have burned and destroyed without mercy, ought to be served in like manner.

And although each of you have, with an uncommon assurance, denied the fact and audaciously

^b A reference to a slave uprising that took place in New York City in 1712. The insurgents set fire to a building, killed almost ten colonists, then fled; but they were quickly located and apprehended by colonial militias. Around twenty black people were executed, some by burning at the stake.

called upon God as a witness of your innocence, yet it hath pleased him, out of his unbounded goodness and mercy to us, to confound your devices and cause your malicious and wicked machinations and intentions to be laid open and clear before us, not only to the satisfaction and conviction of the court, the grand and petit jury, but likewise to everyone else that has heard the evidence against you. All are satisfied the just judgment of God has overtaken you and that you justly merit a more severe death than is intended for you, having, in my opinion, been much worse than the negroes. However, though your crimes deserve it, yet we must not act contrary to law. [...]

I must now proceed to the duty the law requires of me, which is to tell you that you, the prisoners now at the bar, be removed to the place from whence you came and from thence to the place of execution, and there you, and each of you, are to be hanged by the neck until you are severally dead; and I pray God, of his great goodness, to have mercy on your souls.

Source: Daniel Horsmanden, *The New-York Conspiracy, Or a History of the Negro Plot* [...] (New York: Southwick & Pelsue, 1810), 92-93, 123-124, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015082167183>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

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