



The New York Conspiracy: The trial of John Ury (1741)

In 1741, authorities in New York City became convinced that John Ury, a white tutor, was secretly a Catholic priest and Spanish agent and was organizing a slave uprising. The case against Ury centered on testimony provided by Mary Burton, a white indentured servant, 16 years old, who today is believed to have fabricated her testimony to align with the paranoid suspicions of the investigating magistrates. Burton accused other whites of conspiring with Ury, including the family of her master, John Hughson, and a lodger of theirs, Margaret ("Peggy") Kerry.

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. Ury was among those hanged; he disputed all the accusations against him, including that he was Catholic.

These selections from the record of Ury's trial show the role that anti-Catholic prejudice played in authorities' imagining of the plot. The selections include testimony from Sarah Hughson, the daughter of Mary Burton's master. Sarah had already been tried as a conspirator, had denied the charge, but had been sentenced to death (along with her parents, who were hanged). However, Sarah was subsequently pardoned in exchange for confessing to the conspiracy and corroborating Burton's accusations against Ury.

1. Opening statement to the jury by Richard Bradley, attorney general

In order to maintain the charge against the prisoner upon this indictment, we shall produce to you the following evidence, to wit:

That the prisoner was actually concerned in the plot to burn the king's house^a and this city and murder the inhabitants.

That he has frequently been at Hughson's house, in company with Hughson, his wife and daughter, and Margaret Kerry, and with divers negroes, talking with them about the plot and counselling and encouraging them to burn the king's house and the town and to kill and destroy the inhabitants; that the negro Quack, who burned the king's house, was present at one or more of those times when the prisoner counselled and encouraged the negroes as aforesaid; that he advised them what would be the fittest time to set the English church on fire; and that the prisoner, as a popish priest, baptized Hughson, his wife and daughter, and Kerry, and also divers negroes, and told them then, and at several other times, that he could forgive sins and that he forgave them their sins relating to the plot.

^a The "king's house" was the governor's house (so called because the governor was the king's representative). The building had burned down in what authorities came to believe was an act of arson.

That when he was with the negroes at Hughson's house, he used to make a round ring on the floor with chalk, or some other thing, and stand in the middle of it with a cross in his hand, and swear the negroes into the plot and that they should not discover either the plot, or him, or any other person concerned in it, though they were to die for it.

That sometime last winter, he (at Hughson's house) swore Hughson, his wife and daughter, and Kerry, and several negroes into the plot.

That he went by several names, and that when he baptized the negroes or any of the conspirators, he used to tell them he forgave them all the sins they should commit about the plot.

We shall likewise produce to you a letter from General Oglethorpe^b to his honor, our governor, whereby it appears that some time before the plot broke out here, the Spaniards had employed emissaries to burn all the magazines and considerable towns in the English North America, and that many priests were employed under pretended appellations of physicians, dancing masters, and such like occupations, and under such pretenses to get admittance into, and confidence in, families. [...]

Gentlemen, the late dreadful conspiracy to burn the king's house, and this whole town, and to kill and destroy the inhabitants—which the prisoner, as well as Hughson, advised and encouraged and swore many of the conspirators to join and bear their parts in—are crimes of too black and inhuman a nature to need any aggravation; and no doubt the prisoner's engaging, at the peril of his own life, in so destructive, so bloody and dangerous, an enterprise proceeds from his being employed in it by other popish priests and emissaries and his zeal for that murderous religion. For the popish religion is such that they hold it not only lawful but meritorious to kill and destroy all that differ in opinion from them, if it may anyways serve the interest of their detestable religion, the whole scheme of which seems to be a restless endeavor to extirpate all other religions whatsoever, but more especially the Protestant religion, which they maliciously call the northern heresy. And to attain this wicked end, their first trick is, by subtle arguments, to persuade the laity out of their senses by showing them a seeming necessity for their believing as their church believes if they tender their own salvation [...] These and many other juggling tricks they have in their hocus-pocus, bloody religion, which have been stripped of all their wretched disguise, and fully exposed in their own colors, by many eminent divines [...]

Gentlemen, when you have heard the witnesses prove to you what I have alleged against the prisoner, I make no doubt but you will, for your oath's sake, and for your own country's peace and future safety, find him guilty.

* * *

2. Testimony of Mary Burton

I have often seen [Ury] in company with Hughson, his wife and daughter, and Peggy, and several

^b James Oglethorpe, founder of the colony of Georgia. Two years earlier, Oglethorpe had helped put down the Stono Rebellion, a slave uprising in South Carolina, which the English believed had been fomented by Spanish provocateurs from Florida.

negroes, talking about the plot—burning the fort first, then the fly, and then the dock. And upon some of the negroes saying that they were afraid of being damned for being concerned in the plot, I heard Ury tell them they need not fear doing of it, for that he could forgive them their sins as well as God Almighty and would forgive them. They were to burn the whole town and to kill the people. Ury was to be captain of a company of negroes, and he was to begin the fire where he lodged.

That when they were once together above stairs—Ury, Hughson, his wife, and Peggy—they called, “Mary,” and I went up. But when I came upstairs, Ury had a book in his hand, and bid me go away, and asked me what business I had there, and said they did not call me, they called Mary Hughson. And he was angry and shut the door to again; and I looked under it, and there was a black ring upon the floor and things in it that seemed to look like rats, I don’t know what they were.

That another time, I heard him talking with the negroes—Quack and others—about the plot, and [he] turned the negroes out of the room and asked me to swear. And I said I would swear if they would tell me what I was going to swear, but they would have me swear first. And Hughson and his wife went and fetched silks and gold rings and offered them to me in case I would swear; but I would not, and they said I was a fool. And Ury then told me he could forgive sins as well as God. I answered I thought it was out of his power.

That one night, sometime about New Year, I was listening at the door of the room upon the stairs, where there was Ury, Hughson, his wife and daughter Sarah, Vaarck’s Cæsar, Auboyneau’s Prince, Philipse’s Cuff, and other negroes. And I looked through the door and saw upon the table a black thing like a child, and Ury had a book in his hand and was reading, but I did not understand the language. And having a spoon in my hand, I happened to let it drop upon the floor, and Ury came out of the room, running after me downstairs, and he fell into a tub of water which stood at the foot of the stairs, and I ran away. When they were doing anything extraordinary at nights, they would send me to bed.

* * *

3. Testimony of Sarah Hughson

I know [Ury] and have often seen him at my father’s, late in last fall chiefly. I have seen him there at nights in company with negroes, when they have been talking of burning the town and killing the white people. I have seen him make a ring with chalk on the floor, which he made the negroes stand round and put their left foot in; and he swore them, with a cross in his hand, to burn and destroy the town and to cut their master’s and mistress’s throats. He swore Bastian, Vaarck’s Cæsar, Auboyneau’s Prince, and Walter’s Quack. He swore them to keep secret, not to discover him or anybody else, if they were to die for it. I have heard Ury and the negroes talk of burning the fort; and he said if that did not do, they were to begin at the east end of the town, with a strong easterly wind, and that would go through the whole town.

He asked me to swear to the plot and said that I should have all my sins forgiven if I kept all secret; and he swore me on an English book, and my parents and Peggy were by. And he swore Peggy, too, and I heard him tell her that all the sins which she had committed should be forgiven

her; and he told her that priests could forgive sins as well as God, if they would follow their directions.

That he used to christen negroes there. He christened Cæsar, Quack, and other negroes, crossed them on the face, had water and other things; and he told them he would absolve them from all their sins.

Source: Daniel Horsmanden, *The New-York Conspiracy, Or a History of the Negro Plot* [...] (New York: Southwick & Pelsue, 1810), 289-292, 295-296, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015082167183>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

Excerpts edited and annotated by John-Charles Duffy. Footnotes in the source publication omitted. Additional paragraph and sentence breaks inserted. A subject-verb agreement error corrected, and a probably miswritten determiner emended (*this honor* → *his honor*). Spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and typography (italics) modernized, Americanized, or otherwise emended for readability. The use of lowercase for *negroes* and for *popish* reproduces the usage of the source publication.

These edited excerpts from the trial record are intended for *teaching* purposes only. For *research* purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.



© 2021 by John-Charles Duffy. Except as otherwise noted, this work is made available under the Creative Commons Attribution–NonCommercial–ShareAlike 4.0 International License, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.

All rights are reserved for the flag-shaped “Empire and American Religion” logo; if you alter this work, you may not reproduce the logo. Use of the Creative Commons license icon is subject to the Creative Commons Trademark Policy.